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'Positive recognition' as a preventive approach in child and youth welfare services

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Abstract

The public welfare services provided to children and young people in Finland have proved insufficient and costly. Some concerns have also been voiced about the ways in which measures intended as supportive end up labelling their recipients as 'problem youth'. In response, alternatives to the dominant 'early intervention' paradigm have been developed, with emphasis on preventive support for children and youth in general. In line with these policies, this article introduces the idea of 'positive recognition', developed in our recent study. Drawing from recognition theories, and in collaboration with professionals working with children and youth, we have developed a theoretically informed practical approach to fostering children and young people's wellbeing at large, as part of everyday professional practices in institutional and non-institutional settings, and explored its potential in the prevention of social problems and marginalisation among children and youth. The paper provides a brief overview of the theoretical background of positive recognition in the context of social pedagogy, introduces how the approach can be implemented in professional practices with children and young people, and discusses the potentials of these alternative welfare practices to social pedagogy in Finland and beyond.

Keywords: children; youth; positive recognition; prevention; recognition; wellbeing

Introduction

In Finland, social and welfare legislation carry a strong emphasis on preventive services, which currently are being integrated into a new level of regional government to be established between the state and municipalities in 2019 (situation at the moment of writing). As part of this major change, child, youth and family services are being rethought in the context of a broad governmental reform programme to address child and family services (henceforth LAPE). The programme provides further support for large-scale prevention, placing children, youth and their families at the centre of welfare services (LAPE, 2018). This means moving from sectored service provision offered separately to different demographic groups towards more comprehensive social and health care services coordinated in a cost-effective way.

Echoing social pedagogical concerns about the prevalence of too individual-oriented approaches to social problems (Coussée et al., 2010), the LAPE strategy stands in contrast to the early intervention paradigm. Early intervention has dominated the provision of Finnish child and youth services for the past three decades or so, including the individualisation of problems (identification of need for support based on the distinction between normal and deviant development and behaviour), and knowledge hierarchies (service providers' professional knowledge outweighs service recipients' mundane knowledge). While in the Finnish context early intervention has been interpreted a bit differently from, for example, the UK and the US, where the paradigm has entangled with the establishment of neoliberal welfare practices (Hendrick, 2003; Houston and Dolan, 2008; Parton, 2006), it has generated problem-based and individualising institutional cultures also in Finland (e.g. Harrikari and Satka, 2006; Eriksson, 2016; Satka, 2015).

The current governmental reform suggests a further shift from correction to prevention, and with emphasis on families it aims at the de-individualisation of welfare questions and giving respect to people's own understanding of their life situations. This view is familiar in social pedagogy that has often been regarded as a counterforce to psychologic-therapeutic practices emphasising individuality and susceptibility to risk (Hämäläinen, 2012a; Slovenko and Thompson, 2015). The vulnerabilities, challenges, resources, and agencies of children and youth are not considered merely personal characteristics (or development and behaviour) to be treated and corrected, or supported and enhanced in the specific context of service provision. Instead, their everyday environments and communities are identified as the main source of youthful life opportunities and challenges, and thus as the key focus and context for preventive welfare services. According to Houston and Dolan (2008), such holistic view on wellbeing and resilience, and a focus on the respect and appreciation of difference, should be at the heart of all social and pedagogical work with children and young people (also Warming, 2015, 2018; Thomas et al., 2016).

Anticipating and sharing many of the aims of this emerging paradigm, we have worked to develop a theoretically informed, practice-oriented approach that we term *positive recognition* (Kallio et al., 2013; Häkli et al., 2015; Korkiamäki et al., 2016). This article introduces the approach and considers its potential in social pedagogical practice with children and young people. The first two sections portray the theoretical framework, including how theories of recognition have influenced social pedagogical research. Then we explain how the idea of positive recognition was devised as part of our research, and discuss the key role that co-development with professionals and practitioners played in developing the idea. This is followed by an introduction of the positive recognition approach. We conclude by discussing the opportunities it may offer to social pedagogical research and practice.

The theoretical basis of positive recognition

Drawing from interdisciplinary debate on the ethics and politics of recognition, our research is inspired by the works of Charles Taylor (1994), Honneth (1995), and other scholars working on theories of recognition. As an ideal, recognition refers to socially embedded constitutive relations between individuals and groups that bring about favourable outcomes. Simply put, by recognising each other correctly, people can act against harmful distortion in social relationships and thereby make life more ethical. Showing how deeply recognition resonates with wider social and community issues, the idea has gained foothold in identity political research, including the study of gender politics (Hines, 2013), racial politics (Snyder, 2012), class politics (Sayer, 2005), and sexuality politics (Connell, 2012). In our own work, recognition

has appeared a useful concept in considering the wellbeing of children and youth from a democracy theoretical point of view, with emphasis on recognition as an influential collective dynamism in peer relations as well as in their relationships with adults, professional settings included (also Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2016). More specifically, our point of departure to youthful wellbeing is in the study of political subjectivity and agency, and the contextualities of mundane political life (Kallio and Häkli, 2010, 2011; Häkli and Kallio, 2014, 2018).

Contemporary theories of recognition are inspired by Hegel's idea of the 'struggle for recognition' as outlined in his Jena lectures (Honneth, 1995). For Hegel, social life is profoundly intersubjective as people depend on mutual recognition for their existence. To exist, an individual self needs the presence of another conscious self, both of which seek to affirm a self-image in the other (Schaap, 2004). The struggle for recognition is, hence, at once the source of individual autonomy and the foundation of sociality, and the struggle in itself a productive force conducive to societies' moral growth (Honneth, 1992). These ideas were picked up by a group of social theorists in the early 1990s, whose work has established a lively debate on the ethics and politics of recognition (e.g. Honneth, 1992, 2004; Habermas, 1993; Seligman, 1993; Taylor, 1994; Fraser, 1995).

Hegel's philosophical model sought to describe the formative process leading to 'ethical life', characterised by the absence of misrecognition. Similar ambitions can be found in theories of recognition, motivated by attempts to convert certain forms of injustice that build from unintended practices of misrecognition or purposive acts of disrecognition. One of the key theorists, Taylor (1994), has proposed that,

> Identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. (Taylor, 1994, p. 25)

Recognition hence does not refer to simple due respect or courtesy. Rather it is a fundamental human need that, when unfulfilled, may lead to serious grieving and result in identity political conflicts (e.g. Connell, 2012; Hines, 2013; Sayer, 2005; Snyder, 2012). From a slightly different perspective, Honneth (1995, 2007) describes the struggle for recognition as a form of ethical life, embedded in the 'entirety of intersubjective conditions that can be shown to serve as necessary preconditions for individual self-realisation' (Honneth, 1995, p. 173). Ideally, people realise themselves in terms of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem that result from undistorted recognition of love, rights and solidarity – spheres of social interaction that Honneth identifies as the three modes of recognition (Honneth, 1995, p. 129).

While providing important new avenues on the study of social ethics, recognition theories have also generated critique pointing most importantly to the problematic ramifications of individualizing identity-based recognition (Fraser, 2000; Grosz, 2002; Garrett, 2010). At stake here is the degree to which recognition seems to require that all encounters across difference were to be subjected to pre-existing systems of identity, meaning and value (Stark, 2014). To avoid such a categorical reading of recognition, some have called for intersectional approaches that help to move beyond identity categories, which in Markell's (2003) perspective would mean a turn from recognition to 'acknowledgement'. Others have sought to broaden the scope of recognition by stressing the importance of contextuality and experience (e.g. Houston, 2008). Bringing this idea into the context of youth, Noble (2009, p. 877) has argued for 'a more nuanced articulation of their lived experiences that engages with the complex sociability of their lives'. Such sensitivity to the importance of family and other everyday communities, we argue, is an important corrective to recognition theories' tendency to emphasize processes of identification, and holds potential for the development of less individualistic and more preventive welfare services. These ideas are well in alignment with the social pedagogical research that we turn to next.

Employing recognition theories in social pedagogy

Recognition theories have recently started to attract interest in the field of social pedagogy. The concept of recognition seems to resonate with some of its core ideas, such as social justice, inclusion, participation, the emphasis on empowering relationships, and a holistic view of growth and development

(Cameron, 2004; Coussée et al., 2010; Hämäläinen, 2015; Petrie, 2011). As the roots of social pedagogy partly trace back to Hegel, this is not surprising (Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017; Smith et al., 2017). Also, much of the social work research applying recognition theories deals with looked-after children and young people who, indeed, are at the focus of social pedagogical practices in Western Europe. Smith et al. (2017, p. 1607) find that the idea of recognition foregrounds these practices because it emphasises social, political and community contexts as sites of human development. Social pedagogy, hence, is an example of 'applied recognition theory' that Houston and Montgomery (2017) highlight as an emerging field of research and practice.

Recognition theories, particularly in the form proposed by Honneth, are regularly cited in German social work and pedagogy literature (Smith et al., 2017, p. 1614). In countries like Denmark, where the social pedagogical tradition is well established into practice, several institutions emphasise recognition as a significant facet of their orientation (Warming, 2015, p. 249). Echoing this, Lausten and Frederiksen (2016, pp. 93–94) define recognition as the very basis of social pedagogical work in Denmark, as expressed in love and care for looked-after children.

In Finland, social pedagogy is a rather new but relatively well-known framework for practice. Drawing from both German and Latin American traditions, and influenced by Nordic collaboration, it has established itself as an applied academic discipline in social and educational sciences, and currently the concept frames study programs in several institutions of higher education (Hämäläinen, 2012b; Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016; Hämäläinen and Kurki, 1997). The concept of recognition, however, has not explicitly featured in the theoretical or practical development of the field. As a suggestive exception, Foster (2012) social pedagogically oriented research on 'dance animateuring' presents 'pedagogy of recognition' as a theoretical perspective for overcoming inequalities and undermined identities. Although not explicitly placing their argument within social pedagogy framework, recognition has featured as an appealing pedagogy in Finnish comprehensive and vocational education (Heikkinen and Huttunen, 2002; Hanhela, 2014), and as a plea for more dignifying social work (Ikäheimo, 2008; Niemi, 2014, 2015; Pirhonen and Pietilä, 2015; Turtiainen, 2012).

In (a relatively scant) Anglophone social work literature, recognition theories have been referred to as providing a potential framework for exploring elements of good quality relationships, particularly between children and young people and their care professionals (Smith et al., 2017; also Garrett, 2010; Ridley et al., 2013). Smith et al. (2017) draw from Honneth's theory for developing an alternative approach to the overly dominating attachment theory in child-care relationships. Based on her research in Denmark, Warming (2015) stresses the potential of social recognition in overcoming the individual-oriented approach to pedagogical work and children's development. According to Thomas et al. (2016, p. 517), '[r]ecognition theory offers a powerful tool for normative evaluation of how a social institution [. . .] should be organised so that everyone enjoys the recognition due to them'.

As practice-oriented scholars in social pedagogy, Lausten and Frederiksen (2016, p. 90) seek to identify 'tangible counterparts of Honneth's concept of recognition'. Their study reveals how the senses of security and social support act as moderating factors for 'love' among Danish children living in out-of-home care. Thrana (2016, p. 74) distinguishes between parental, educational and compassionate love and states that compassion, warmth and understanding in children's welfare settings signal that a worker wants to 'look beyond the behaviour and allow young people [...] to be seen'. Such recognition, she claims, is 'exercised because people have an intrinsic value as human beings' and is therefore not dependent on the distinct emotional bonds in professional settings (Thrana, 2016, p. 74). Social support and the experience of affectionate care are stressed also by Houston and Dolan (2008, p. 466) who aim to 'bridge the leap from the principles of justice to the realities of practice' by adapting and extending Honneth's framework and linking it to theories of social support. The underlying argument is that care, manifesting itself in social support, is a central form of recognition in social relationships.

While most social pedagogical thought on recognition focuses on building loving and caring relationships between children and young people and care workers, Honneth's facets of 'rights' and 'solidarity' have found their social pedagogical counterparts in a strengths-based perspective (Houston and Dolan, 2008) and promoting a child's position in wider social structures (e.g. Warming, 2015). Ridley's

(Ridley et al., 2013) study emphasises the importance of relating to children through topics central to them and having a 'normal conversation', along with paying attention, being prepared to hear difficult things, acknowledging children's own perspectives, and treating them as individuals. These rhyme with others' suggestions of being valued 'for who one is' (Thomas et al., 2016), the importance of being met in an encouraging way (Paulsen and Thomas, 2017), and the appreciation of personal traits and contribution to the collective (Warming, 2018).

While social pedagogical traditions have engaged with theories of recognition to some extent, we find space for expanding on these perspectives. In particular, we propose a recognition theoretical approach enlivened by co-creative collaboration with professionals who may find new resources for their work in its active employment – an objective that we designate with the term 'positive'. To this end, we have sought to generate a practice framework that can be employed in different societal contexts and institutional settings, by professionals and volunteers working with children and young people from various disciplinary and organizational backgrounds. The rest of the article describes how we have developed the idea of positive recognition as a form of thought and practice.

Positive recognition as the premise of child and youth welfare

The basis for 'positive recognition' is built on longstanding research on children's political subjectivity and agency (e.g. Kallio and Häkli, 2010, 2011; Häkli and Kallio, 2014, 2018). The practical approach was developed in two research projects: *Preventing children's marginalisation through place-based participation* (2010–2013) and *Early recognition in curbing the marginalization risk of children and youth* (2013–2015), where a broad understanding of mundane politics and children's active roles as political being-becomings directed our work. We set out to ask, *how recognition works as a professional asset in welfare services*, and further, *can positive recognition be used in challenging situations as a specific tool?*

The first project located ways of preventing welfare problems through the management of marginalisation risks.[1] We recognised a need to improve the social standing of those who fall under the risk of marginalisation, and suggested broad inclusion in community activities as means to enhance wellbeing. To this end, we studied mechanisms causing marginalisation and evaluated policy strategies aiming at the improvement of youthful participation, drawing from theories of recognition. One of our main findings was that 'the voice of the child' often remains unheard in participatory practices, despite the fact that giving 'voice' to children and youth is a typical policy framing (Kallio et al., 2015). Thus, significant groups who might benefit from early support in preventing their marginalisation fall outside the scope of participation. We thus suggested that an approach aiming at a better inclusion among children and youths is needed.

In the second project, we started to develop research-based tools for the early support of children and youth. These aimed at turning negative development trends positive through participatory inclusion of the not-yet-marginalised. We began by paying attention to the empowerment of children and youth as a preemptive measure curbing the risk of marginalisation and thus decreasing the need for targeted individual intervention. Instead of seeking to widen the scope of early intervention measures, we deemed them the *last* resort that should be *preceded* by policies and practices based on the *positive recognition* of children and young people as actors capable of maintaining, continuing and repairing their everyday social relations and communities together with their caring networks (Kallio et al., 2013). Here we follow the feminist care ethics tradition, drawing from Fisher and Tronto's (1990) theorisation (Kallio and Bartos, 2017; Bartos, 2018; Kallio and Häkli, 2018).

Our findings propose that preventing undesirable and harmful developments requires supporting the spontaneous engagements of children and youth (Häkli et al., 2015). Their everyday practices with significant others are not distinct from inclusion or exclusion at broader scales, but represent tactics through which inclusion is created from their own starting points. Positive experiences in everyday environments involving affectionate relationships may hence contribute to broader resilience against difficult circumstances and increase engagement in the society. Along with familial ties, friendships are important drivers for such development (Korkiamäki, 2016; Korkiamäki and Kallio, 2018).

Hence, to complement early intervention policies aimed specifically at groups readily identified as marginalised, we have developed positive recognition as an approach that aims at a broader acknowledgement and empowerment of children and youth in their everyday lives. Importantly, this work has involved 'co-creation' with professionals from different fields and institutional contexts. As part of our second project, we invited 37 professionals to work with us, mostly coming from pedagogy (kindergarten, school, public administration) and social and youth work (in practical/administrative positions). They all worked with children and/or youth, or with childhood and youth issues in public administration. We held five all-day workshops with them, aimed at bringing practical and scientific knowledge into a dialogue. Between and after the workshops (recorded, transcribed and anonymised), the participating professionals commented on the ongoing knowledge production and kept a journal from their daily work for further elaboration. In addition, ten professionals participated in a writing project, where they reflected upon the idea of positive recognition through personal experiences. These columns and short articles, combined with research-based texts, led to the publication of a book that portrays the practical approach of positive recognition in an easily accessible format (Häkli et al., 2015). We have since continued the co-creation work with professionals in our present projects that seek to develop positive recognition further, as a research-based practical orientation.

The evolving framework of positive recognition[2]

Unlike in most recognition-inspired research in social work and pedagogy, to us the theoretical framework does not stand primarily as a means to identify inequalities and subordination from marginalised children's perspectives. Rather, we emphasise 'the importance of recognition as a basic need for all children and young people' (Paulsen and Thomas, 2017, p. 6). As Bingham (2001), Houston and Dolan (2008; also Houston, 2016), and Thomas (Thomas et al., 2016) have noticed, as part of *preventive* public services recognition is linked with the normal, the everyday, the general. The mundane life of homes, schools, neighbourhoods, virtual forums, hobbies, and work places is where recognition, and misrecognition, takes place, concerning every young person and their 'significant others'. This does not mean overlooking the everydayness of children and youth in challenging life situation or special positions – they, too, have an 'everyday' where life happens. As Warming (2015, 2018) has shown, theories of recognition can help to highlight how the apparently extraordinary life of institutional homes is, indeed, very ordinary to the children and youth living there.

Our interpretation of recognition stresses subjectivity, agency and contextuality. It is about ongoing intersubjective negotiations whereby socially constituting subject positions are acknowledged, accepted, rejected or subjected to further transformation (Häkli and Kallio, 2014, 2018). Its relevance derives from an understanding that this negotiation conditions all human interaction and, as such, plays a fundamental role in how children and youth come to perceive themselves in and through their mutual relations, as well as in encounters with professionals (teachers, social workers, nurses, etc.).

We underline recognition as a form of empowerment and a positive force in concrete human interaction, the success of which can only be judged contextually by the ones involved. In this regard, we do not endorse it as a social ontology, or an all-encompassing philosophy of linear social and moral progress but rather, in line with much of the recognition theoretical research in social pedagogy, a practical orientation in social encounters (Häkli et al., 2015; also Kompridis, 2007; Thomas et al., 2016).

In practical terms, we approach recognition through the *active agencies* that children and youth enact (mostly) intuitively as part of their everyday caring relations, as well as an *informed mode of operation* among professionals working with them. Through its reciprocal character, recognition concerns *all* members of communities, be they self-formed or institutional, which means that also professionals are constantly recognised by each other and the children and youth they work with (cf. Thomas et al., 2016, p. 517). From these starting points, we have formulated an evolving practice-oriented framework of positive recognition with three interlinked facets.

Getting to know (each other)

The first facet of positive recognition is getting to know children and young people as persons in their lived realities. Many professional participants in our project confirmed how it is not self-evident that children and young people are encountered for 'who they really are'. Instead, relying to (the often labelling) categorisations, emerging from institutional accounts and presumptions, remain common. As one example, we learned about a youth work project at school, aiming at educational advance through 'quality leisure time'. The professionals told how they first assumed that spending out-of-school time with classmates would lead to improved school motivation and hence better academic results. In the course of the project, however, they realised that most of the involved youth wished to affiliate with people from beyond their class. Based on these and similar experiences, our participants stressed how important it is to spend time with young people, to find out about their own interests, instead of jumping into quick conclusions based on certain characteristics (e.g. gender) or current life situations (e.g. school success).

Activity-based interaction seems to provide effective means for familiarisation and finding out about what matters to each person. Doing things together – from playing billiard to running errands to holding a jump rope – creates space for informal discussions, where also unexpected matters may emerge. This concurrently offers professionals opportunities to learn about the interests and inspirations of young persons. However, as time issues related to work practices are common, the importance of being 'awake and aware', ready to seize the moment, was highlighted:

> *'Familiarising yourself with the child's world happens unexpectedly, in the midst of everyday routines, as some information, action, thought, or something else evokes a response in the child.'* (Pedagogical professional, written comment)

Moreover, it is important to show genuine interest, 'begin the conversation from what they choose to talk about' and 'keep asking, in more detail, about the video games or hanging out with friends, or whatever interests them', as depicted by two youth workers. Equally important is reciprocal interaction and the ability and willingness of professionals to engage in relationships open-mindedly and nonjudgmentally. This builds trust and enables to find out what motivates the youth:

> *'If a social worker at school seeks to be supportive to a person whom she doesn't know well, like "you are good at math" or "your family is nice", it remains trivial to the young person if the matter is not particularly meaningful to her/him. You need to get to know each other first.'* (Youth work professional, comment in a workshop)

Acknowledging (what matters)

Knowing the world of the child or youth is key, but as one professional states:

> *'To identify is not enough. We also need the acknowledgement, the appreciation, positively. It turns out completely different when you include acknowledgement in recognition.'* (Expert in child and youth care services, comment in a workshop)

Hence, the second facet of positive recognition builds upon the idea that by getting to know young persons, it is possible to provide due acknowledgement, related to matters that they *themselves* consider significant in their current lives. This aspect is essential in distinguishing positive recognition from early intervention, and from giving general (positive) feedback.

> *'It is not a simple matter to recognise positively, since it matters who the other person involved is, and if the recognition or the feedback seems important – what it means to the other person. To someone a certain matter may be the key, opening up a completely new direction in life. And to others, the same thing may just go over their heads because it doesn't touch anything in them, anything meaningful.'* (Youth work professional, comment in a workshop)

As an act of positive recognition, acknowledgement may be directed towards anything that children and young people consider important in their lives, regardless of how insignificant these matters, events,

aspects, people, artefacts, phenomena, places, et cetera, seem from professional perspectives. Central here is that young persons are seen and heard as they *wish* to be encountered and appreciated (i.e. as who they are), through the unique characteristics and matters they themselves find significant (i.e. aspects with specific importance and meaning). In line with Paulsen and Thomas (2017, p. 168), positive recognition thus 'distinguishes oneself from others [through. . .] something valuable [. . . and is not] merely based on a set of trivial or negative characteristics'. As one of our experts conveyed, '*[t]here are many stories to be told about a single child, and those should be told by the children themselves, to avoid external labelling.*'

Moreover, it is important to notice that acknowledgement need not imply normative acceptance. Sometimes professionals and young persons have differing ideas of what is good and important, or bad and harmful, in the lives of children and youth. Hence, to understand without approving is the challenge professionals sometimes need to meet, as acknowledging significant issues without condemnation can be an important form of support in itself. There are, however, also other means of provision that positive recognition can generate.

Providing support (for contextual agency)

The third facet of positive recognition, emphasising it as a mode of operation, focuses on supportive measures. Our idea of support builds strongly on familiarisation and acknowledgment that, together, help professionals to build trust with and reach out to children and young people from their own starting points. Positive recognition cultivates mutual understanding of what kind of support is appropriate and fitting in which context. This kind of 'house system' where all children and adults are acknowledged and elaborated for their individual difference, abilities and skills, and there is a sense of collective valuing of everyone being treated equally and respectfully and as valuable members of the community (Thomas et al., 2016, pp. 514–515), bears opportunities to positively recognise, not only strengths and resources, but also difficulties and vulnerabilities, and thus support children and youth from their experienced stances.

> '*To most young people it is important to do well in school. With them, it is easy to enjoy success and give positive feedback on learning, and to support and recognise strengths. But if the person's interests are somewhere else, and they somehow disturb learning process, it is not easy to find common issues of pride. Then it is much more challenging to provide recognition, or to put yourself in the young person's shoes.*' (Expert in youth work, comment in a workshop)

One of the strengths of positive recognition is that it allows children and young people more involvement in defining their own situations, in contrast to early intervention models where problems are typically identified by adults. Instead of objects of interventions, here children and youths are perceived as active agents with readiness and capabilities to foster their own and others' wellbeing in their lived realities. This was highlighted by a multiprofessional group of professionals working in an open youth centre:

> '*We are changing our code of operation from "let's organise certain kinds of activities to young people". We want it to be more like "okay, we have the youths who come here and they want to do certain things". And we build the activities from there.*' (Youth work professional, comment in a workshop)

Contextual agency, therefore, is about 'having a say', but also about communal 'living together', where children, young people and adults are empowered as active, knowledgeable and self-respecting members in their everyday environments. As such, agency can be supported through subtler means than an 'intervention'.

> '*Support refers to communication that follows from acknowledgement and leads into action. When an issue is raised by children, the adult can challenge an individual or a group to act for it. This kind of action can be planned in advance but, to me, positive recognition is more about seeing the potential in what arises in different situations.*' (Pedagogical professional, written comment)

Conclusion

Through this article, we join in the current discussion on the need to reorganize welfare services for children and young people, as featured in the ongoing LAPE process in Finland. Striving to emphasize preventive measures from a universal welfare perspective, this process calls for cost-effective general measures for advancing all children and youth's wellbeing and preventing youth marginalisation. To facilitate a practical work orientation that may help in meeting this demand, we introduce the concept of positive recognition, with the aim to strengthen dignity, inclusion and acknowledgement as bases for everyday practice in children and young people's mundane environments. Its key implications for policy and practice include care and respect in personal relationships, participatory inclusion, and the acknowledgement of equality and difference in everyday communities.

The premise for *positive* recognition is that human capacities to care, respect and give acceptance are meaningful resources for agency in many different contexts of private and public life. Furthermore, as people may feel accepted and included in all kinds of situations, environments and communities, these experiences can be promoted practically everywhere. Bearing this in mind, professionals working with children and young people may *actively* work towards encounters that overcome labelling categorizations and instead take their potentials and social relationships as the starting point for providing support. This practical orientation was emphasised by the professionals participating in our study, many of whom found that positive recognition helped them to acknowledge, communicate and promote the value of respectful, youth-centred and community-oriented approaches in their work.

While positive recognition is a practice-oriented approach directed at all children and young people, and emphasising the prevention of marginalisation, individuals with specific problems may also benefit from the appreciation of issues that stand out as important to them. Leaning on the dynamics of familiarisation and acknowledgement, support can be provided in tailored ways that fit a young person's preferred identity, without making the person stand out as a target of intervention. These practices are mobilised within communities that are meaningful in the everyday lives of children and young people, instead of being siloed into separate projects or environments, in line with the LAPE objectives. This advances the continuity and integrative capacity of the practices and may cultivate the idea of positive recognition in mundane communities.

In leaning on recognition theoretical thought, we wish to take a normative stand towards the power-knowledge relations that tend to place children and young people in subordinate positions and dependent roles. However, in talking about *positive* recognition, we acknowledge that recognition may sometimes be withheld deliberately or inadvertently, and sometimes dis- or nonrecognition aligns with social power hierarchies. Emphasising strengths indiscriminately may also hide and complicate structural inequalities and justify individual responsibility over one's own wellbeing (Houston, 2016). It is clear that there are many structural and system-level problems in welfare service provision that cannot be remedied by means of recognition as they require different political measures altogether (e.g. Garrett, 2010; Spolander et al., 2016). Whereas the dominant social pedagogical work on recognition focuses on applying Honneth's theory to institutional care of children and young people in need, the idea of positive recognition makes a broader use of this theoretical and practical thought, bringing it closer to the Latin American tradition of social pedagogy. This may spur further discussion on whether recognition theory "could enable an approach that better locates individual experiences within wider social structures, challenges power dynamics that perpetuate oppression, domination and exploitation, and furthers societies that are more equal, humane and peaceful" (Gupta et al., 2018, p. 4; cf. Bartos, 2018; Kallio and Häkli, 2018).

Empowering children and young people in their communities of importance is vital to their wellbeing and to the prevention of youth marginalisation. With the positive recognition approach we suggest an alternative way of thinking about and communicating the wellbeing and marginalisation of children and youth, and present a theory-informed, practically co-created orientation for their universal support by individual and collective professional means. In the reformed service landscape it helps to strengthen the pursued focus on prevention, and gives practitioners means to carry out communal prevention of child and youth marginalisation. It is about understanding, exposing and engaging with communal dynamics as the

core of everyday social pedagogical practice wherever children and young people lead their lives.

Notes

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