



UMEÅ UNIVERSITET

Ett meningsfullt liv med arbete?

Högfungerande individer med autism mellan
funktionshinder- och arbetsmarknadspolitik

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A meaningful life with work? High-functioning individuals with autism between disability- and labor market policies

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to study notions of employment among high-functioning individuals with autism (HiA) and their experiences of vocational rehabilitation or work-preparatory programs, and to analyze how these experiences reflect upon the labor market policy's and disability policy's common shared goal of *supporting individuals towards a socially included life with meaningful work*. This study was conducted through ethnographic fieldwork in a private company (VRP) that operated as a service provider for the Employment Service Agency, and a Swedish residential folk high-school (FHS). Both of the organizations provided work-preparative programs specifically for HiA. Three of the four sub-studies are based on qualitative data consisting of individual interviews, focus group interviews and field notes from participant observations. The fourth sub-study represents an analysis of legal documents targeting employment and health in disability policy.

The results in sub-study 1 illustrates that the narratives provided by HiA strongly address the subject position of the citizen-worker. Their suggested ideal jobs were deprioritized in favour of more available jobs on the market. The central incentives to pursue either the ideal, or second-option jobs, can be identified as the personal perception of attaining a sense of meaningfulness through work, which was depicted as central to the sense of self-fulfilment, identity and wellbeing. As the second sub-study shows, the fulfilment of personal ambitions and ideas of meaningful work were not met in the case of the VRP participants. Social inclusion was not experienced as a result of the received service provisions. The results rather indicate a manifestation of the normalisation principle's basic attributes with regard to spatial integration in work-like activities (disability-worker contexts) rather than social inclusion on equal basis with others (citizen-worker contexts). The third sub-study then showcases how social work practices were produced at the intersection of clients' needs and personas and the organizations' conditional premises in FHS and VRP. The analysis resulted in the conclusion that a person-centred approach was lacking in the VRP whereas highly present in the FHS. The fourth and last sub-study focuses on how Swedish disability policy is constructed to meet the objectives of the CRPD regarding active citizenship that is associated with health (engagements in private life, work life, community life, social/family life etc.) and thereby full participation on an equal basis with others. The results suggest that the policy area of employment, implicitly and explicitly, overshadows the policy area of health and intimately associated life-areas that are important to wellbeing.

The conclusions are that FHS and ARP both reflect a strong dedication to provide services that aim towards preparing individuals for *work*. However a more holistic approach in professional practices must be practiced in VRPs if a *socially included life* with a sustainable work-situation for HiA is strived for. With regard to a *socially included life with meaningful work*, the above must be accounted for in addition to individuals' personal perceptions and notions of meaningfulness.

Keywords

Disability policy, ethnographic fieldwork, high-functioning individuals with autism, labour market policy, meaningful work, social inclusion, welfare services.

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