

Mara Westling Allodi, Johanna Lundqvist, Elisabet Lundström, Lise Roll-Pettersson, Jenny Rosendahl, Eva Siljehag and Rano Zakirova Engstrand

9 Play for children with disabilities: the users' needs in the Swedish context

9.1 Background

The task assigned to the Working Group 4 within the EU COST LUDI Network was to contribute to a mapping of the users' needs on the topic on play for children with disabilities.

The members of the Working group 4 including representatives from Finland, Italy, Lithuania and Sweden contribute to the description of the users' needs by mean of a mapping of available literature on this topic, from the respective countries. The members from the other countries in the LUDI network were also invited to participate to the mapping of the users' needs from various contexts.

In this report the results from the mapping of policies and studies from the Swedish context are presented.

9.2 Aims and method

The aim of this study is twofold: firstly the aim is to give a short description of the policy context of Sweden, which is relevant for the topic of "Play for children with disabilities", through a presentation of the legislation and the policies; of stakeholders, the national and local agencies and authorities with responsibilities in this field; and of other non-governmental organizations. Secondly, the aim is to perform a mapping of the users' needs concerning Play for children with disabilities, which are emerging from available research from relevant disciplines, reports and investigations made from the authorities and organizations that have responsibilities in this field, and other relevant stakeholders in Sweden. The content of the mapping effectuated are the users' needs, the barriers and the facilitators that are described in the identified reports.

The data collection followed a procedure in several steps. The information about the stakeholders, agencies, authorities and organizations was made by means of open web searches with combination of terms as disability, impairment, children, youth, adolescent, play, leisure time, in the Swedish language (funktionsnedsättning, funktionshinder, barn, ungdomar, lek, fritid). Once the organizations and the

authorities were identified, the publications available on the web-sites were title- and summary- checked. If the content were judged potentially interesting for the purpose of the mapping, the publication was collected in a shared web BOX folder (Westling Allodi 2015a) that would be available for all the participants in the mapping; about 30 publications were collected. Databases for scientific publication in English (SCOPUS, EBSCO) were also searched for relevant publications with the same search terms and with the addition of search terms about users' needs of play, children experiences, parents' views etc. A Swedish publication database for scientific publications and thesis was also searched with the search terms "lek för barn med funktionsnedsättning" (play for children with disabilities) resulting in 10 student thesis. The publications were checked by the first author and a certain number were assigned to master-, PhD students and colleagues that were invited and agreed to participate to the mapping. The group of reviewers consisted of seven people from the Department of Special Education at Stockholm University, all of them with large experiences as researchers and/or educators of childhood, disability and special educational needs. The reviewers contributed with a number of one to four data extractions to the mapping. Fifteen reports are included in the mapping.

At the same time, a web survey was developed with Survey & Report, a tool available at Stockholm University, which was employed in the data collection (Westling Allodi, 2015b). The content of the survey on users' needs were discussed with the member of the LUDI WG4. The final survey contains 19 questions, including: name of the reviewer, type of publication, reference, information on number of participants, their age and disability, methods of data collection, users' needs, barriers, facilitators, recommendations, evaluation of credibility, ethical issues and bias. The participants in the mapping accessed the documents assigned on the shared folder and performed the review answering to the web survey. The results were summarized in a web-report (Westling Allodi, 2015c).

9.3 Description of the Swedish policy and context

The legislation that concerns the topic of play for children with disabilities comprehends various Acts: the Education Act (Skollagen, 2010:800) the Social and Health Act (Socialtjänstlagen), and the Support and Service Act for persons with disability (1993:387). The Swedish government has adopted the UN Declaration of Rights for persons with disability (SÖ 2008:26). The Swedish Parliament has ratified the UN Convention of the rights of the child in 1990, but the convention is not yet incorporated in the Swedish legislation, although the issue is the object of an inquiry.

The *national agencies* that are involved in the services and development of practices on the topic of play for children with disabilities are:

- National Agency of Education (Skolverket, 2015) is responsible for the curriculum for preschool and school, the official data collection on resources and results, the

development of in service training for teachers, the publications of guidelines and other reports and materials for schools.

- The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen, 2015) is responsible for guidelines and support materials for the Health and Social services providers, the evaluation of services and analysis their outcomes, for instance concerning persons with disabilities and their families, and also the definition and diagnostics criteria of impairments and disabilities.
- The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (Specialpedagogiska Skolmyndigheten, 2015) has a responsibility for the development of learning materials and resources for children with disabilities as alternative communication tools. SPSM runs the special schools for children with multiple disabilities, gives support and consultation to the staff from the various municipalities in matters that concern the children with disabilities that attend regular schools, organizes workshops and training for teachers, publish reports and guidelines on special educational needs.
- The Swedish School Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen, 2015) evaluates regularly the quality of the preschool and schools in all the municipalities, by means of inspections, surveys, audits; it investigates also particular issues, and complaints, for example concerning the lack of adequate support to children with special educational needs.
- The Swedish Agency for Participation (Myndigheten för Delaktighet, 2015) works to ensure that the disability policy has an impact on “all the corners of the society” develops guidelines, disseminates knowledge, publications and materials to increase accessibility and participation and reduce various types of barriers in the society; the agency evaluates regularly how other agencies are developing praxis and routines to guarantee access and participation for persons with disabilities.
- The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden (Barnombudsmannen, 2015) is a national agency with the mission of monitoring, and pushing the local authorities to apply the Convention on the rights of the child; it may propose changes to laws and ordinances and reports regularly to the government.
- Equality Ombudsman (Diskrimineringsombudsmannen, 2015) is a national agency with the mission of combat discrimination in the society on the basis of sexual differences, age, and for ethnic, religious, or disability reasons. It investigates citizens’ complaints on these matters.
- the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil society (Ungdomsstyrelse, 2015) is a national agency that is concerned with the needs and welfare of children and youths and the organization of the civil society, such as associations for leisure activities.
- The Public Health Agency of Sweden, (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2015) has a responsibility for the development and evaluation of the health and wellbeing in the population in a broad framework, including monitoring and taking initiatives

for reducing the risks for disadvantaged or vulnerable populations, publishing evaluations, guidelines, participating in international comparative studies (WHO), collaborating with universities in research projects. The Public Health Agency of Sweden works also to identify and highlight public health issues where effective interventions can be made.

The various agencies perform investigations, evaluations of practices, collect the views of users, publish guidelines for practitioners, and contribute to the further training of teachers and other professionals.

There are a vast number of service providers that are involved in providing play opportunities to children with disabilities. The social services and educational services in Sweden are decentralized to local authorities, the 290 municipalities. The Health services are decentralized to 21 Regions. Another actor is the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL).

Besides the public providers, there are also private providers of services (as for example independent schools) but all the providers are coordinated by the local authorities and they are funded with tax revenues, at least in the case of educational and health services. The municipality may develop own policies on these matters, for instance in order to improve the accessibility of playgrounds, or increasing the leisure activities for children with disabilities (e.g. culture, music, arts, sports, see e.g. Nacka Kommun, 2015) in public or private associations, that are accessible for children with disabilities.

The Health services in the various regions offer also provisions to facilitate play for children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families: Habilitering (2015) (Child Rehabilitation services) offers support and consultation services of various kind to families of children with disabilities and Lekotek (2015) offers activities to support play activities for children with disabilities. Places where there are enhanced opportunities to play and where the families may borrow toys may also be organized by parents' associations. The quantity and quality of the provisions offered in the various districts and regions however may vary.

There are also many associations and non-governmental organizations that take initiatives in the field of children's rights, children with disabilities, parents' organizations, and disability and rights organizations: for example, Lika Unika (Equal Unique) and Funktionsrätt (2019) a federation of 39 organizations for persons with various disabilities and diseases; and Foundations (e.g. Stiftelsen Funka). The topic of play is recognized in the media. The Swedish television has produced films for teachers and parents on the topic of play for children with disabilities in preschool (UR, 2009).

Play for children with disabilities may be a topic for various professions: preschool teachers, special needs educators, leisure time educators, teachers in physical education, occupational therapists, psychologists, and therefore may be treated in the study of early interventions, language and speech therapy, special educational

needs, inclusive education, developmental psychology, psychomotor development, neonatology, disability studies, assistive technologies, ICT, etc.

The Swedish policy states clearly that the children with disabilities and their families have rights to get support and services in order to participate in activities and to develop optimally. The right to leisure activities is recognized in the Social service act. The families may apply for economic support in order to allow the children to participate in such leisure activities. They have right to participate in education and leisure time activities, right to assistance when required and right to receive assistive technologies and equipment, for example to use the transportation services for the disabled. They have right to a priority placement in preschool and must receive the required support and adaptations in school. Summarizing: the legislation and the policies in Sweden, and the welfare resources that are available should give support and make it possible to provide that the children with disabilities would have access to play at home, outdoor, in educational settings, and in various social situations with peers.

9.4 Mapping of the users' needs

9.4.1 The studies included

The documents employed in the mapping were published between 2002 and 2015. They were reports from national agencies (4), local authorities (2) non –governmental organization (1) advocacy disability association (1) PhD dissertation (1) universities (7 student thesis) from various programs: preschool teacher, landscape architect, occupational therapist, outdoor pedagogy and special educational needs.

The users involved in the reports were school children (60% of the reports), young children (46% of the reports) infants and toddlers (20% of the reports). In one report were included youths (defining youth as people of age 13-25).

Seven texts had a focus on a specific disability, while eight other refers to various disabilities. The disabilities that were mentioned were: reduced ability for mobility, vision, hearing and speech; others were deafblindness, cognitive disability, neuropsychiatric disorders (ADHD, autism), Down Syndrome, brain damage, cerebral palsy, allergies.

The exact total number of children involved is not always reported in the texts. Two studies based on surveys collected answers from about 90 thousand schoolchildren and youths. The studies based on interviews collected the views of more than 200 persons (children, parents and staff). Other documents made case studies in 39 municipalities, and in 5 preschools.

The methodologies employed for the data collection were interviews in 2/3 of the cases; and surveys in 1/3. Other methods were: observations, collection of narratives, focus group interview, action research approach, field study, document analysis.

The reports were evaluated based on the method of data collection, analysis etc. as having a high credibility (5), medium credibility (5) low credibility (1) missing evaluation (4). No ethical concerns were raised by the reviewers.

9.4.2 Users' needs

The needs reported by the users are many. The children say that all the children have the right to play and to have leisure time. To do that there is a need of making physical adaption to the *playgrounds*, so that they are accessible to children with disabilities. The playground should be adapted to the fact that children with disabilities may need support from adults in order to participate in certain activities. It should be possible for parents with disabilities and elderly grandparents to support young children in their play. In an overview, only 8% of the outdoor playgrounds were adapted so that children in wheelchair could participate. There is a need of a long-term planning of changes, of the development of guidelines, and of the use of the expertise from professional in making the adaptations. There is a need of more knowledge about the importance of play and a need of accessible places for children to play in. There is a need to take in consideration the *child perspective* when taking decisions. Children want to come to playgrounds every season, year around.

According to another report (Skogman, 2004) the play of children with disabilities needs to be supported by the existence of accessible and delimited settings with particular purposes, the support from an adult in play, for example enabling and initiating play with peers, and structured play activities.

The needs of the children with disabilities are more in general of *having fun*, develop autonomy, take initiative, develop higher self-esteem, and develop skills, feeling to belong to a community, having friends. "We are a lot of very tired parents that pull a very heavy last, trying to activate our children. We shall keep doing this of course, but we need help, - of a good kind - to help our children to be free from us" (mother, in Rinnan, 2007, p. 22). The children with disabilities need to participate in various leisure activities with other children (drama, theater, outdoor activities, scouting, and sports). The participation in leisure activities is highly beneficial to the children in several ways according to the parents: because of the activity itself (fun, enjoyment, happiness, skills, physical training, motor activity, self-esteem), but also because it facilitates relationships, interactions with other people, *making friends*. The engagement in activities is a need for everyone and the children with disabilities should have the right to choose among many choices: the offer of activities is often much more limited for them.

The children report that they need to *experience autonomy and participation* during leisure time, to experience personal growth and develop their identity. The users with disability report that they are passive during the leisure time, and that they do not participate in leisure activities as they would like to. Children with disabilities in an

interview study report that they are alone or have only a few friends. There were some differences among the 20 children interviewed: the children with neuropsychiatric disability (NPD) did not participate in any activities and had no friends, while the other children participated in adapted leisure activities (Handisam, 2014).

Even in the large survey from the Agency of Public Health of Sweden (Statens Folkhälsoinstitut, 2014) the children with NPD reported lower physical activities and lower wellbeing at school. Children with medium and high impact disability spend less time with other children, they play more PC- and TV-games, and they have lower self-reported health. Even the parents of the children with NPD reported lower health. The families of children with medium and high impact disabilities reported lower living conditions.

Other studies emphasize the children’s needs for *movement*; they should engage in daily outdoor activities, because they are beneficial for their wellbeing and their development. The children with disabilities need interactions with other children. They need to *have authentic play activities*, not training. The disability appears when there are limitations to participation in play activities.

An important condition to play is *communication*. If the child has difficulties in communicating, the caregivers may need support in developing their understanding so that they can play in a natural way and more freely with the child.

A large survey identified other problematic aspects. Children and youths with disability reported to a large extent than their non-disabled peers that they do not attend leisure activities because they feared that they would be treated badly. They had also lower level of activities, especially boys. They say that they have too much leisure time, that is, *they had too little to do*. Youth with disability reports three times more often that *they have been bullied* or marginalized during their leisure activities. The report concludes that there is a need of increasing the activity level and the participation in a variety of activities for children and youth with disability.

9.4.3 Barriers

The barriers were of difficult kind, as physical barriers, resource barriers, or psychological barriers.

Among the *physical* barriers there are thresholds, uneven surfaces, not adapted play equipment in the playground, and stairs, narrow spaces and bumpy roads, sandboxes that are not accessible, lack of pictorial, visual and tactile signals, fences that block the view when you sit in a wheelchair. An overflow of play materials and toys can sometimes make it difficult for some children to concentrate in one play activity. Too extensive and unspecified play areas may be barriers for children with disabilities.

The *resource* barriers are lack of economic resources, lack of information, lack of knowledge, limited competence and ability in the staff. Shortcomings in the welfare

support system; teachers that do not plan activities for facilitating play with peers are barriers. The lack of economic resources of the family may hinder the child's participation to play activities that are expensive. Lower health and wellbeing, limited relations with other children may be barriers. "When the child has no friends it is a big problem for the family".

The *psychological* barriers are described as negative attitudes, for example when the staff thinks that children with disabilities would imply more work for them. Another example can be the fear of leisure-time leaders to accept in a group a child with disability, maybe due to a feeling of inadequacy. Many leisure-time leaders have no knowledge about how to support children that may be anxious in new situations. The adolescents may start new activities and then drop out because of difficulties as low self-esteem, lack of assistance, or previous negative experiences. The social interactions in educational setting may contribute to exclude children with disabilities, when their peers do not want to play with them. The parents and other adults may tend to overprotect them, impairing their autonomy. The adults may interfere with the play activity contributing to a withdrawn of the child from play. Individual characteristics of the child may be barriers to participation in specific play activities, as visual ability, balance, and sensitiveness to environmental stimuli. The child's may feel insecure for these reasons which can hinder his desire to engage in activities. Another barrier to play was, according to some mothers, the training that they have to do with their child. During the training the experienced a conflict between "to be" and "to act", which could hinder the upcoming of spontaneous playful situations for them.

9.4.4 Facilitators

Various facilitators were identified: changes and favorable conditions in the environment, staff development and attitudes, children's voice, collaboration between service providers and families.

The playground environment may be improved considering various aspects: equipment, land materials and vegetation and related to various activities as climbing, digging, playing with water etc. The preschool environments may be improved with language stimulating activities, by mean of adaptations and by mean of children's' participation in the design of the play environment, through giving importance of child' safety, and organizing small children groups. There are guidelines and legislation that give advice about providing inclusive services and buildings, which should be followed.

A facilitator is that the staff is trained on diversity and attitudes. The staff's positive attitudes are important in order to sustain children's participation in leisure-time activities.

The policy adopted by the local authorities at the municipality level impacts the services that are offered to the children with disabilities: local principles and goals are expressed, clearer guidelines are formulated with practical checklists; accessibility coordinators are employed.

The development of long-sighted collaboration between authorities and services, local actors, and the community are facilitators. In bigger municipalities there might be overarching projects. The key factors for success identified at the local level were: common goals, support from municipal managers, events, and Child Rehabilitation services as key actor.

The leisure activities are successful when they are adapted to the children, not the other way around. The children feel much better when they have friends and when the children without disability are involved too. Will and fantasy are also identified as emotional facilitators. It is also good to let the child choose the activity, to introduce it in small steps and to introduce many activities early in life. A team around the child that has a starting point in the child's wishes and needs is good. Age-grouped activities are also preferable.

Information about which activities that are available should be easy to access for the parents. The staff may also invite the leisure time associations to school to inform about their activities.

Pictures may be valuable tools to facilitate the choice of activities. A collection of 145 pictures of leisure time activities has been created for this purpose by a local Health authority (Rinnan, 2007).

9.4.5 Recommendations

The specific recommendations of the studies reviewed ranged from the practical suggestions about playground materials, to the recommendation to follow the Article 31 of the Convention of the right of the child (1989). There are also other Swedish laws and inquiries that are to be followed: the Final report for the Child Safety (SOU 2003:127), the Planning and Building Act require that all the public places must be accessible, including playgrounds. The professional with competence on specific matters should be consulted.

There are recommendations to develop national indicators that are possible to disaggregate at municipal level about the type of activities and the disability (MUCF, 2014), to made regular national evaluations on the life conditions, and to give national support to the development of policies that can improve the wellbeing of children and youth with disabilities (Handisam, 2014). There are recommendations to the school to focus on the need of children with medium and high impact disability, and in particular NPD, and to the Welfare providers to support their families, follow-up their needs (Statens Folkhälsoinstitut, 2014) and also to give a leisure subvention to the family so that they can afford more activities (Handisam, 2014).

Another recommendation is to incorporate children with disabilities in the planning, the evaluation and development of amusement parks and leisure time centers. The children with disabilities must also receive more information about their rights.

The municipal authorities are recommended to increase the participation of children and youth with disability in leisure activities, to secure the accessibility of arenas, and the participation of children to the community and the autonomy of the users. Training and education about play and disability is recommended for school heads, educators and leaders; other recommendations are to give support to the civil and ideal associations, mapping the children's needs through interviews and surveys. Evaluations of municipal activities and project are recommended, as well as targeted grants to the associations. It is important to enforce policies in the associations so that they welcome all the users (Rinnan 2007).

A common model of promotive, preventive and selective interventions for parents is recommended by Broberg et al. (2014).

9.5 Discussion

The results of the mapping seem indicate that there are some inconsistencies in the Swedish context, between the ambitious policies and the emerging shortcomings in the practices and experiences of children with disabilities. There are many agencies, authorities and associations involved and engaged in these matters, which are performing evaluations and giving suggestions. It seems that the topic of children's play and leisure times is taken seriously by many policy makers and stakeholders. There seems to be a certain degree of knowledge in the field among practitioners, but also a great need of professional development at several levels in educational settings, health care and welfare services.

A reflection is that the available literature and the mapping is representing more the needs of young children, schoolchildren and adolescents than the needs of infants and toddlers. There seems to be less information available on their needs in the Swedish context. This should be an area to develop in educational research.

There is also much more research and reports on the broader topic of leisure time activities, than on the topic of play, probably because the concept of leisure time is an official concept, that is regulated in the policy and in which it is stated that it should be made accessible to all the children and youth. Children and youth with disabilities have right to get support and assistance in order to participate to appropriate leisure activities, but what is done is in many cases not enough, and particularly for certain groups, considering the views of parents on these matters.

Groups that seem to need particular intervention and support are children with Autism Spectrum, ADHD and others similar disabilities, which are reporting

loneliness, and lower levels of wellbeing and participation in play and leisure activities in several independent studies.

This review of existing reports, evaluations and research indicate the need of develop research on the topic of play for infants and toddlers, on the topic of preventive and early interventions to facilitate and support interaction and play and in particular social play for children with Autism Spectrum, ADHD, and other developmental disabilities, in various educational settings.

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