

The Relevance of Social Pedagogy in Working with Young People in Residential Care

By Viki Bird, Essex County Council and Gabriel Eichsteller, ThemPra Social Pedagogy



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“All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once growing up.” Pablo Picasso

The art of being a social pedagogue

In many European countries social pedagogy has historically evolved as a profession and discipline concerned with holistic education and well-being. As such it has roots in youth work, social welfare, early years, formal education, and care settings. Therefore, social pedagogues usually work in a wide range of settings across the lifespan – working in children’s centres, schools, youth clubs, children’s homes, with disadvantaged groups of adults (asylum seekers, adults with disabilities, drug users, homeless people, delinquents, or whole communities), or in older people’s homes and hospices. Whilst the meaning of social pedagogy in practice will differ depending on the setting and context, there are common principles underpinning social pedagogy.

Social pedagogy, it could be argued, is all about *being* – about being with others and forming relationships, being in the present and focussing on initiating learning processes, being authentic and genuine using one’s own personality, and about being there in a supportive, empowering manner. As such, social pedagogy is an art form: it’s not just a skill to learn but needs to be brought to life through the social pedagogue’s *Haltung*¹ (her attitude or mindset). In other words, social pedagogy is not so much about what you do, but more about the ‘how’. This perspective of social pedagogy means that it is dynamic, creative, and process-orientated rather than mechanical, procedural, and automated. It demands from social pedagogues to be a whole person, not just a pair of hands.

The art of being a social pedagogue can be illustrated by many practice examples we have come across as part of our work with children’s homes in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The narrative of one of Essex County Council’s residential workers, Viki Bird, aims to provide you with inspiring insights into what it means to be social pedagogical, so that you can explore and reflect on how your practice connects to social pedagogy. In doing so, we hope that you can see the potential which lies in social pedagogy, the learning opportunities it offers us all to become even better and realise our own potential.

¹ For a detailed explanation on the notion of Haltung please see <http://www.childrenwebmag.com/articles/social-pedagogy/the-notion-of-%E2%80%98haltung-in-social-pedagogy>

Social pedagogy is not about good practice – it is about better practice. Rather than having a good-enough approach, social pedagogy encourages us to be aspirational, to constantly look for ways to improve our work. After all, it lies within our human nature that we can always learn more, further enhance our well-being and develop even stronger relationships. If we as professionals show such aspirations in our practice we're not only becoming better through our own efforts; we also set a positive example to the children and young people we work with, an example that can encourage them to be more aspirational too.

What becomes apparent in Viki's account is the journey which Viki and her team have been on, their eagerness to question, reflect upon and develop their practice and make things even better for the young people in their care. Social pedagogy has given them a framework, which guides them on their journey and helps them identify areas of development. In this process they have mainly built on the resources and potential within their team, and their ability to relate their practice to social pedagogy as well as their persistence to work on some of the more difficult and challenging issues have led to an impressive journey for the team and the young people in their care. Here is Viki's account, which is based on a presentation she gave at a care leavers' conference at London City Hall²:

Social pedagogy in practice – Viki's journey

I've been asked to share with you a brief insight into social pedagogy and the impact it has on our relationships with the young people in residential care. I'll begin with providing you with a short background of our social pedagogy journey, followed by an overview of how social pedagogy has helped us support young people in developing their identity, build positive relationships with them and challenge social stereotypes about young people in care. These three aspects are at the heart of what's important to young people in our homes and explain why the implementation of social pedagogy has become so relevant to our work.

In September 2008 Essex County Council began to implement social pedagogy across its children's homes. This began with the organisation, ThemPra Social Pedagogy, introducing itself at conferences and visits to our homes, followed by 6-day training courses on social pedagogy, 2-day residential courses to develop social pedagogy change agents, team days to develop a social pedagogic culture and follow-up degree level course work. But it doesn't stop there...

I speak as one of many Social Pedagogy Agents and residential workers who have fully engaged with this holistic and solution-based approach to working with young people, and as one who seeks to enthuse and motivate my colleagues and others across Essex and beyond to recognise the benefits of working with social pedagogy. In my experience social pedagogy enables confidence, backed up by theory and experience to best support young people in our care in their learning and development.

For us in residential child care the framework social pedagogy provides is most importantly seen to complement our already established best practice and not replace it. This is vital to its success, so

² Evaluating the Care System for Young Londoners, organised by the 'Children Living Away From Home' Division of LB Redbridge and the Children and Young People's Unit of the Greater London Authority, 13th October 2010.

individual homes and individual practitioners can adapt and evolve its methods using key elements suited to the current culture and the dynamics of a particular environment.

My personal workplace is in a long-term, teenaged, mixed gender, 8-bed residential home, and this is where I am drawing my experience from. And it is my understanding that the crucial factor in social pedagogy is exactly the 'social' aspect.

Developing positive relationships

By concentrating our efforts towards forging authentic relationships with our young people, we can substantially improve their outcomes. We have therefore wholly taken on board the 'Common Third'³ element, which promotes the use of actively creating opportunities for shared learning experiences within and outside of the home.

The Common Third is best explained by visualising an equal triangle with the young person at one point, the pedagogue at the next, and the task being the third point. We are encouraged, then, to translate every available opportunity when working with our young people as a means of building common ground through shared experiences.

This crucial foundation in relationship building has had a massively positive impact in our home, and this has been achieved by providing learning environments where participation becomes almost a natural desire for all involved.

The resulting outcomes of focusing our attention on our relationships sees more and more of our young people having the confidence to develop their personal relationships with family, carers, friends, teachers, health professionals, and others. Equally this gives them a future outreach base, with which they know they can comfortably revisit us and continue to gain support and guidance beyond their time in care.

Changing approaches to risk-taking

To give you an understanding of how far we've come in a short time I ask you to consider how prior to the implementation of social pedagogy we were almost considered to be 'risk-obsessed' and of having a 'cotton wool' approach to care.

For example, our young people were only allowed to go to the beach if an extensive risk assessment was written, then the area was combed for dangerous objects, and subsequently, if all was ticked and approved ... they were only allowed to paddle in the sea up to knee height anyway! A somewhat limited experience as I'm sure you'll agree.

Yet where we were previously restrained by particularly strict risk-assessment factors such as this, we have now successfully moved towards a growing confidence in our own judgement, by questioning and challenging practice and procedures in order to better socialise and equip our young people in today's society.

³ For further infos on the Common Third please visit www.thempra.org.uk/concepts_c3.htm

Now I personally bounded into my role as a residential worker 3 years ago full of enthusiasm and ideas to generate activities and experiences, which were often considered 'too risky' to undertake. However, by expanding our knowledge and drawing on social pedagogy concepts such as risk competence⁴ we have found we can shift the expectations, norms and procedures to help us provide worthwhile opportunities which enhance our relationships and the care experience.

Supporting young people's inclusion and identity formation

This progressive shift has seen improved inclusion through reviewing and updating the consideration towards risk whilst allowing for the beneficial factors to be given equal priority. I'm not talking about throwing caution to the wind, but simply enabling a confidence to make a professional judgement towards developing our young people's competencies in identifying and managing risks themselves instead of having to rely on adults to do it for them.

From this we have been introducing various new ideas such as having therapeutic campfires in our grounds, embarking on graffiti projects; young people are taking ownership of their home by being involved in the decoration and maintenance; they are planning their own activities for the holidays; we have themed events, activity-based group gatherings and many, many more simple and effective tasks that occur on a group or one-to-one basis. Even a basic washing-up chore becomes a valuable learning opportunity where communication is vital to gaining a deeper understanding of the young people we work with, their inner worlds, what they're thinking and who they are.

We recognise then, the value of quality time spent introducing new ways to engage and communicate with our young people by simply making the most of the time spent in their company. These shared experiences are then crucial to building the firm foundations upon which the relationship can then explore the many issues facing our young people.

In terms of identity we are empowering them with the confidence to develop this aspect by individualising their care plans to convey an in-depth understanding of the whole person, their strengths, their achievements and their aspirations and not just how to manage their behaviour.

A good case in point would be one of our long-term school refusers who had low self-esteem, was insecure with her family's unconventional lifestyle and was continually reminding us 'You don't know what it's like to be a kid in care!' (minus the expletives).

Her transition back into full-time education and the plan to return her back to the family home in the very near future has been the result of extensive work around our relationships with her and her family, and from this, building her self esteem and helping her to feel secure enough with her identity to engage with outside assistance and not remain in the sheltered confines and comfort zone of the care home.

The contributing factor here saw us move away from the expectation we should not engage with young people who refuse school in order that it may seem more exciting to remain at home, but

⁴ See Eichsteller & Holthoff (2009), which is available on <http://www.thempra.org.uk/downloads/Eichsteller%20&%20Holthoff%20-%20Risk%20Competence.pdf>

instead using those opportunities as a platform to encourage independence, motivation and self-worth to achieve a positive outcome.

Here it is important to add that carers, social workers, family and the wider community are all stakeholders in a young person's life and we are increasingly inviting opportunities for communication and inclusion in order to enhance their care experience.

We have seen the benefits of inviting all those involved in regular BBQ events, where our young people are fully involved with the preparation and everyone has enjoyed a day of participation in activities and guests have been presented with a showcasing of talent.

This extension of the Common Third doesn't only have a tremendous impact on the self-esteem of our young people but brings about yet another valuable opportunity to forge strong relationships with those involved in looking after them.

Building bridges into the community

Whilst it's fantastic to bring the community in, it's equally important to encourage our young people to go out and contribute to the wider community, and this has been evidenced via articles of achievement being reported in the local newspaper, contributions being made to the Care Matters magazine and project work such as with the local Carnival Organisation, all of which help to promote positive publicity and a sense of acceptance.

A recent example highlights this: one of our young people actually wrote a letter of complaint to a sports organisation after having had his place withdrawn due to the behaviour of another resident at our home who attended the same club.

He challenged their discrimination, successfully and quite rightly, and was sent a substantial letter of apology and invited back with immediate effect. His talents have since awarded him a special mention in the paper for fastest lap time despite being the youngest member of the club! A great outcome, I'm sure you will agree.

But this is just one of many recent examples whereby our young people are confidently contributing to their development and to society by making their voice heard and by making their voice count.

However, whilst we strongly encourage participation by our young people, we cannot do this effectively without increasing our own participation by way of looking at ourselves and consistently reflecting on our practice.

Being professional and personal

The core of our work focuses on the '3Ps'⁵ element of social pedagogy: the *Personal Pedagogue* – what we give of ourselves, the *Professional Pedagogue* – our knowledge and conduct, and the *Private Pedagogue* – our lives outside of work.

⁵ For a comprehensive explanation of the 3Ps, please visit www.thempra.org.uk/concepts_3p.htm

It is through this means that we are able to consider how we as workers can approach our young people and become authentic practitioners by working with their best interests in mind. Through constant reflection on our own experiences in life and not just in the working environment we learn an awareness of how our Personal, Professional, and Private involvement affects our practice and our approach towards our young people.

To convey this better I'd like you to picture, if you will, the London Underground network with the care system being the circle line and the many routes to and from this central hub being different stages in the young people's journey through care. Both the young people and their carers all need maintenance, direction and a network from which to make their journey through care as comfortable as possible.

This network has to cater for the individual traveller as well as transporting whole groups towards positive outcomes and desired destinations. I, for one, strongly believe that social pedagogy provides us with the network to do this.

Concluding thoughts

Given the scope of social pedagogy, I have only been able to touch upon a mere fraction of the wealth of knowledge and evidence that backs up this insightful approach, which can forward our thinking and support us to responsibly consider the future of care. But essentially, social pedagogy encourages us to be an artist and think creatively and imaginatively, to challenge ourselves and overcome barriers to communication within our homes and out into the wider community. It also teaches us to be adaptable and resourceful, which is a necessity in today's current climate. That said, we do, however, have an appreciation for social pedagogy not having a 'magic wand' effect, but indeed a profound effect on positive outcomes nonetheless.

And when I said at the beginning 'It doesn't stop there!', it is vital to recognise that our momentum continues to gather pace as we pro-actively contribute to the practitioners forums within Essex Residential Services, host our own pedagogy team days and reflect on and share our practice as an extension of the training that was initially given. The aim is to become a suitably self-sufficient, holistic, flexible and well-educated workforce within the Children's Service.

So having been provided with a cleverly adaptable framework and a complementary approach to our practice I hope you can appreciate why we are hugely enthusiastic about exploring, evolving and improving our future role in caring for and meeting the needs of our young people.

And finally, we also hope that by sharing this brief insight you have gained an understanding of the relevance of social pedagogy in residential work. If you wish to find out more please get in touch with us (victoria.bird@essex.gov.uk; gabriel@thempra.org.uk) or visit www.thempra.org.uk.