

## **EU Leonardo Mobility project ‘Social Pedagogy – Learning in Practice’**

*Participant report by Dougie Gould*

In November 2011 my employer (CareVisions) posted an advertisement offering a ‘once in a lifetime’ opportunity to residential workers with an eye for adventure. As I read the advert I became more intrigued as I knew very little about Social Pedagogy or Denmark. This did not deter me however and my instinct told me that the mobility might be right for me. I had travelled and lived abroad before and had come to value the process of discovering new places and peoples on my own. 6 weeks before the trip I got the call to say that my application had been accepted. I was delighted with the news and set about preparing for my journey. I knew that I was in for an adventure but I could never have imagined just how amazing, fulfilling and inspiring a journey I was about to commence.

I had been asked to think about what specific learning objectives I had going into the trip. After consideration I decided to focus my attention on the following areas:

I hoped to learn about Danish culture and society, specifically, through the medium of the arts. I was interested to see how pedagogues in the early year’s placement (attending in week 1 of the mobility) create opportunities for the young children to experience this ‘Danishness’. I would look out for activities such as art projects, gym classes or story telling to inform me. I hoped that through my observation and participation in these sorts of activities (whether organised or spontaneous) I would gain insight into the Danish experience of childhood.

I wished to learn more about Marshall Rosenberg and his theory of non-violent communication, this being one of the core theories guiding the practice of pedagogues in my early years placement.

I wanted to know if there was a culture of confident practice. Did pedagogues believe in what they were doing and did they invest more of themselves as a result?

I sought to discover if there was a difference between Danish and UK views on ‘the child’ and their capabilities and if so, how would it affect practice. How does the pedagogue create opportunities for the child to take appropriate risk on a daily basis?

Also, are Danish pedagogues facing the same challenges as UK practitioners on a daily basis or are our cultures just so different that the two just cannot be compared?

And finally, can ‘love’ exist in the pedagogic approach? And how is this expressed?

These questions would form the background from which I would base my observations during my placements. I could not have imagined however, just how intense and all consuming an experience the mobility would be. My initial questions and expectations only scratched the surface of what was to be two weeks of challenge, insight and growth. In this report I will attempt to express to the reader just how deep and meaningful an experience this mobility has been for me. I will reflect on my preparation for the trip, give my impressions of Danish culture and life, describe some of my

experiences and key findings gained from my two placements, and conclude with a look to the future.

With a mere six weeks to prepare for the trip (I was accepted onto the mobility as a late replacement for a colleague who had pulled out) I set about my preparations. Through membership of the Residential Childcare Network (found at <http://www.residentialchildcarenetwork.com>) I was able to access the resource folder that contained a multitude of downloadable material, from introductory lessons to case studies and more, on social pedagogy. My ability to study the subject was enhanced further by several insightful resources forwarded on by the Mobility organisers Gabriel Eichsteller and Charlotte Firing through their organisation 'ThemPra Social Pedagogy'. Telephone and email communication with these highly trained and motivated professionals helped me greatly to focus my preparations effectively and put my mind at rest regarding a number of organisational issues. I also purchased the book 'Non Violent Communication' (NVC) by Marshall Rosenberg that I cannot recommend highly enough and that I will discuss in detail later in the report. Fortunately I managed to source a Glasgow based Danish tutor through 'Live Language Glasgow'. They offered me the option of private tuition during one-hour sessions at their collage in the Glasgow's West End not far from my home. The native Danish instructor helped me through some of the basic words and phrases over 4 very useful sessions. This time spent with the tutor gave me a real confidence boost for what was the very daunting prospect of living abroad for two weeks. Although I was later to discover that the majority of Danes spoke excellent English I was grateful that I knew a few words as it helped me adjust to the culture change and especially when communicating with the young children on my nursery placement.

Six weeks flew by and although I felt like I had done all the preparation I could in the time given I'm not sure six years could have prepared me for what was in store. Upon my arrival at our hotel in an affluent suburb just north of Copenhagen's city centre myself and my fellow residential workers on the trip went for a walk to explore the city. Upon our exit from the apartments we nearly lost half the group who, thinking they were overtaking each other on the sidewalk, had in fact stepped right in front of some speeding cyclists! One of them yelled something as they passed by which I like to think was "Welcome to Denmark!" but maybe not.

From my initial stroll through the city that night, trips to and from my placements on a bike, boat tours and time enjoying the city on days off my impressions of Denmark were of a peaceful, clean and welcoming city. I was particularly impressed with its beautiful architecture. I was informed that Copenhagen had not been bombed during WWII as Nazi Germany had occupied the country as part of an uneasy, yet relatively peaceful relationship (compared with the rest of occupied Europe). As a result the city's buildings were preserved with a consistent building style throughout the entire city. The majority of buildings were no more than six stories high and, matched with the spacious roads, an atmosphere of openness and light created a very healthy and peaceful environment. I also noticed that the Danish focused on the importance of healthy food. The people themselves took great pride in their personal appearance, whether this be in fashion or physicality; therefore their healthy eating was a high priority to most Danes I met.

Hiring a bike for the two-week trip was one of the best decisions I made. It was such an exhilarating feeling to ride through the busy city centre streets at any hour of the day or night in complete safety. I had been told of a "rougher" district of the town called 'Nørrebro' which I should avoid at certain

times of the night and on my own. This of course was a challenge I could not resist and took off there on my bike as soon as I could. To my surprise I did not feel like I was in a dangerous neighbourhood at all. I discovered a lot of very cool graffiti and a multi-ethnic population that reminded me of many areas of my home city of Glasgow. The major difference was the cleanliness of the streets, parks and shop fronts, which by comparison to back home were well maintained and cared for. I had made this journey, as I was keen to discover a flavour for 'working Copenhagen' as compared to the tourist hotspots. What impressed me were these signs of social cohesion and the feeling of a community that remained healthy, happy and connected. For the time being my exploration time had come to an end and with much excitement and wonder and set off to my first placement.

I was to spend one week observing at a nursery in my favourite district of Nørrebro. This nursery shall be referred to here as 'Placement A'. I spent my time with one pedagogue (referred to as 'S') who, along with a second pedagogue and their assistant, was in charge of twelve children aged between two to three-and-a-half. S had ten years experience working with this age group and I was instantly struck by his sharp intelligence, energy and passion for his work. I was to realize that these traits were evident in the majority of the pedagogues that I would observe during my two-week trip. Most of them had over ten years experience in the same place of work and, like S, stated their love for the job and were keen to express their feelings of self worth and that they were doing something that had value. Although fiercely intelligent, S and his colleagues were among some of the most humble people I have met. They were also extremely open, friendly, thoughtful and accepting. I witnessed S and his colleagues practice what they preached and the outcome was one of total peace and serenity within the nursery room.

'The Sun Room' as it was called could not have been more bright and full of life. The twelve or so children used this room as their base and the open floor space and toys were the focus of their play. Just to the side of the main room were two smaller rooms. One contained tables and chairs and was used during mealtimes. The other was a wash and nappy changing room. The final space within the sunroom was a smaller area, walled off from the main room but without a door, where the children could also play. The toys and facilities were simple, functional and well used. The focus appeared to be more geared towards nature and the simple pleasures of life rather than technology and expensive activities. Speaking with S alerted me to the financial constraints that the nursery was facing, however, what struck me was that it continued to thrive and remained a place of excellence. The children were given the freedom of the entire space to go as they pleased and whenever they liked. This included the side room where, once they had entered, they could not be seen. S explained that it was important for the children to be able to get away from the 'hustle and bustle' of the main room from time to time. Many children would take advantage of this space and go off to explore on their own. S stressed that although the child would be alone and out of sight S would always be aware of who was there and would check on them. He went on to explain the routines of the day and stressed that there was very little structure. Upon their arrival the children could do whatever they pleased. If they requested time with the pedagogue or required assistance or support then S and his colleagues would be close by to help. S stated that the pedagogue should "get into the rhythm of the child" and go with this rhythm throughout their day. In practice this could mean that if the child was tired and needed to sleep for most of the day then this was what the pedagogue and nursery would provide. Potentially, a child might sleep, eat and go home without play or much else happening. This was perfectly acceptable. The focus is not on any sort of curriculum or lessons.

Instead the pedagogue is aware of the importance for the child to just 'be' and for the worker to 'go with the flow' respecting the child's needs and desires. I found that this approach created space during the day for the child to be free. Sing along time might take place in the corner of the room however only the children that had a desire to participate did so. The rest were left to play on if they wished. The lack of conflict was amazing. The children appeared to self-regulate to a high degree but in actuality it was the subtle impressions, guidance, and communication from the pedagogue that kept the whole day moving and evolving. The pedagogue was the master puppeteer who never appeared to break a sweat. I got the image of a duck on water; calm and graceful above the surface but with all the leg work going on underneath. It was obvious that S and his fellow pedagogues were always switched on, never stopping for a second, ready to react and maintain the peace and learning.

During my time at 'Placement A' I was particularly inspired by one profoundly insightful tool/methodology that guided the nursery's practice, "Non-Violent Communication" (developed by Marshall Rosenberg PhD) which has since assisted me in my professional and personal life. One of my most important findings was that the pedagogue should make observations not judgments. Within the context of the nursery this proved to be crucial in achieving its peaceful and harmonious atmosphere. If one child took another child's toy, or ran into another, or caused any other person to become upset or unsafe S would make an observation on the child's actions without jumping to the rescue unless immediate danger was present. This observation would always be factual, "look at what your action has done to the spilled glass of milk" or "Ben, please look at Rosie. How does she look now that you have run into her? Do you think she is upset? Maybe you could apologize and look out for her next time?" The absence of judgments and threats is crucial here. As I watched these mini lessons unfold before me I questioned whether I would have reacted in the same way or if I might have said something like "Don't be so clumsy Ben", or "If you do that again you will not be allowed to play anymore". Especially once I considered that S had to repeat these same calm, mild mannered, positive, suggestions every day to countless kids year after year. I wondered if I could be so patient or if the frustrations might build and energy for the task drop as a result. I spoke with S about my reflections and he agreed that it would be very easy to become frustrated, as with children this age development is only seen over time and with repetition of key lessons. He stressed that it was important to leave yesterday's baggage at the door with regards to any personal frustrations with individual children. Matching this with his vast knowledge on ages and stages of development allowed him to frame the child's behaviour and de-personalise it, thus allowing him to maintain high energy levels and enthusiasm for the task at hand. To remain in the present was crucial and something that he encouraged the children to do also. He was constantly attempting to frame his communication with them so that the focus was on increasing the child's own awareness of their actions and the consequences for themselves and others. He said that he was very well supported by the nursery's management system and in particular supervision. He spoke of how the pedagogic approach encourages non-judgmental attitudes extending from pedagogue to child but also from management to pedagogue. This allowed him to express his stresses, concerns and frustrations without the fear of judgment from colleagues or bosses. He knew that his responsibility was to bring these comments with the desire and focus on a brighter future (not to off-load) and as such problems and challenges could be shared amongst the team with new minds bringing new solutions.

My time in the 'Sun Room' was a beautiful and inspiring experience for me. I cannot begin to explain what it did for my soul. I am thankful for the opportunity to stretch my mind and expand my

learning. Week one had flown by and now it was time for me to experience an entirely different type of organisation. I was to discover that although the organisation and service user group might change, the positive impact of the pedagogic approach remained.

Week two of my journey into the world of the Danish pedagogue and I was on my bike again. This time I travelled just outside the city to observe at a young person's residential unit, 'Placement B'. Upon my arrival I was introduced to the manager (referred to here as 'K') and the pedagogues on shift. After a tour of the building I was taken to K's office where we chatted for most of the day. K was not a pedagogue but had many years experience working in the care setting and managing them. He described how the unit, or 'institution' as he referred to it, cared for up to sixteen young people with a further six young persons residing in the annex at the far end of the building. The six beds in the annex were all taken by older teens and young adults, all of who had spent a period of time in the main building before moving through. The main building contained a basement, communal level (consisting of large galley kitchen, games room, offices, meeting rooms and a small living room) and living quarters for the young people (sixteen en-suit student style accommodations) plus one staff sleepover room. I was surprised to learn that although there were three pedagogues on shift during the daytime only one slept on site at night. This staffing ratio was in stark contrast to my own experience as I work with only three young people with two sleepover staff always on shift. K stressed that this was possible (and safe) due to the young people's ability to self regulate their lives combined with the quality of the staff. Their consistent and positive relationships with the young people have led to trust and respect. The staffing ratio may have been low but the young people who I spoke with all stated that they felt safe and secure during the day and at night in the institution.

My time with the teenagers of Placement B was very special. They were an inspiring group of confident, open-minded, intelligent and healthy young people. For the most part they spoke near perfect English and were extremely capable when it came to expressing themselves verbally in their second language. They were a multi ethnic group with differing hobbies, interests and value systems, as you might expect. What struck me the most was that there seemed to be a genuine level of respect granted to everyone including the staff. Genuine equality. During one conversation two young people explained to me how they were finding it difficult to get on with one pedagogue in particular; however they respected him as a human being and strived to seek common ground. My observations of these youngsters bore witness to this testimony. They spoke of their troubles in life and what challenges lay ahead for them. Many of these stories were very touching and hard to hear, much like the troubled lives of the young people I have cared for in Scotland. Their honesty and strength of character shone. What I sensed most of all was that this institution was a place of hope. The young people all spoke of positive futures whether with family or friends or on their own. They seemed still connected with the outside world, still positive and not bitter about their past, very matter-of-fact and reflective, like they had learned from their past mistakes or those of family members and were determined to strive for a better future. The energy of these youngsters blew me away! I wondered how many of them go on to lead successful lives by society's standards. K spoke of former residents with whom he still had contact with and many of these stories had positive outcomes. I am fully aware that I could not get the full picture during my brief time there however I do believe that this sense of 'connectedness' that I felt was something special. This did not feel like a place full of marginalised youths with little prospect of a bright future. Instead it felt like a

hub of youthful energy, full of life and free of judgment, still with infinite possibilities around the corner. The pedagogues' role in this, it seemed, was crucial.

Not bound by reams of daily case notes, risk assessments or care plans (these were present, however minimal compared to my Scottish experiences), the pedagogue is free to make connections and build relationships with the young people. They are given the responsibility to make judgment calls based on instinct plus three-and-a-half-years study (to degree level) in social pedagogy. There is no pressure to try and replace a lost or missing parent (consider the deliberate use of the term 'institution' instead of 'home'). Instead their primary goal is to befriend the young person, gain their trust through consistent acts of care and compassion and create a positive community. Just to 'be there' when needed and, if not, to know when to give the young person the space they desire. Many of the pedagogues said that, if the young person did not want their help, then it would not be forced upon them. In this way, the pedagogue was not there to 'rescue' the young person and potentially then take on their stresses (evidence of this working is the consistent presence of pedagogues with ten or more years working in the institution, and still smiling!). Only when a solid relationship has been built or at the child's request will the pedagogy offer advice or become involved in the young person's life. This system creates what I imagine as 'breathing space' in the pedagogue/young person relationship. This reminded me of Placement A and S's remarks about getting into the flow of the child's day as being vital.

Speaking with K only solidified my impression that this approach worked for them. He pointed out that there had only been one incident of restraint in the last year and that in general these situations very rarely occurred. K spoke again about how the space and freedom granted to the young people resulted in them being able to look after themselves for the most part. He enjoyed his work and talked about his team's longevity and positive evolution. Both K and the pedagogues pointed out that (like Placement A) they can all talk about their stresses, concerns, thoughts and ideas during weekly team meetings in an open manner, free of judgement and on an equal platform. They believe in the process and that it is valuable to get to the new learning as a team. My time at the 'institution' had come to an end. I never thought this word could conjure up so many positive thoughts and memories.

This trip has challenged many of my most comfortable and deeply held beliefs in an incredible way. To go on from this experience and make sense of my learning back home will be a huge challenge but on that I relish. I know that if I can continue to progress my learning then the intense positive feelings I have now will continue to flourish and bear fruit.

I feel so much more confident and awake now! My emotional stability has reached new levels and I have a peace of mind that has grown during this period of intense learning and growth. I feel more assured in my practice as well as more confident in my colleagues and their potential. I plan on learning more about Marshall Rosenberg's theories that have really struck a chord with me. The possibilities for developing my own practice using "Non-Violent Communication" as a guide seem endless to me just now, and so powerful. I have recognized just how much 'judging' I do on a daily basis in work and at home. I may make observations of young people's behaviour in my mind but more often than not I only verbalize the judgments. So from now on I will strive to check my frustrations at the door and remind myself that the pedagogue should never judge and always observe. In this way a more positive atmosphere and relationship can form between the child and

the worker, as conflict will naturally occur less often. I feel more confident now that I have this tool, something that I can use right now, that seems so simple to apply. I must remain in the present, conscious, in my practice to avoid slipping into the old habit of negative judgments. I must be open to my colleague's ideas, and always open to the possibility that the young people in my care could be capable of so much more if they have adults in their lives accepting them as they are, lovingly support them, and strive to promote self-awareness.

I have been inspired to get healthy! I am going to listen to more music, re-connect with my yoga and meditation practice, play football and eat well. I will take pride in my nation's art and culture. Representing my country abroad was such an honour and I forgot how beautiful and amazing the place I call home is! Thank you, pedagogues and young people of Copenhagen for restoring my energy and positive spirit. I have so much to offer the young people in my care I from now on I will strive to stop doubting them and myself.

*Lev længe og blomstre.*