

EU Leonardo da Vinci Mobility Project

**Social Pedagogy in Action
Copenhagen March 4th - March 18th 2012**

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Introduction

In the autumn of 2010 four members of staff from Care Visions residential services were involved in training relating to social pedagogy. This was facilitated by ThemPra Social Pedagogy and supported by the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care. The broad aim of the training was to promote an understanding of social pedagogy, which is a term for the activities undertaken by professionals involved in social and education services in many parts of mainland Europe. The outcomes for looked after children in countries where staff work and are trained and qualified in social pedagogy have been found to be better than those in the UK; as a result there has been a growing interest in this country leading to academic research and a number of pilot projects. Most notably those in England supported by the Department of Education and evaluated by the Thomas Coram Research Institute. At this time Care Visions had set up a pilot project to explore and develop social pedagogy in one service in Dumfries and Galloway. During the training some discussion took place in relation to obtaining funding to visit Denmark, which is widely believed to have the most comprehensive and established approach to service provision based on social pedagogical principles. The outcome of these discussions was an invitation from Gabriel Eichsteller from ThemPra to Care Visions to be a partner in an EU funded Leonardo da Vinci Mobility Project, involving a trip to Denmark to work alongside social pedagogues in Danish institutions to experience the theories related to social pedagogy, dynamically and in real time, being put into practice. An application for funding for the project was made in February 2011 and it was announced in May that this had been successful. The lead partner for the project is ThemPra Social Pedagogy; the other partner agencies are Care Visions, Lancashire County Council Children's Services and Common View, a Copenhagen-based training and development agency set up to provide support for the project by arranging placements and supporting participants on mobility.

Project Design

The project was designed to make provision for 6 participants from Care Visions and 6 from Lancashire County Council to travel to Copenhagen and spend two weeks there working in two different institutions providing services for children. The participants were selected on the basis of their motivation and capacity to engage in the project, derive learning and disseminate this on their return. Of the six participants from Care Visions two were selected from the fostering service (a social worker and support worker), two were residential child care workers, one was a manager of a residential service and one a service manager. Each was involved in preparation training and was obliged to explore the concepts of social pedagogy, components of Danish culture and society and become familiar with the basic of the Danish language independently. Each participant spent one week in a residential child care service and another in either an after school and community based youth centre or an institution providing early years care.

In addition to placements reflective seminars were built into the itinerary at the beginning, middle and end of the mobility. This was to provide opportunities for participants to consolidate learning, explore differences and similarities in approach and make meaning of their experiences. Other aspects of the project were also designed to stimulate learning; each participant was paired with someone from the corresponding organisation with whom they would attend placements and derive support; these were relative strangers, and along with other aspects of the project this was designed to heighten the

sensitivity of participants to what they experienced and support their reflections and learning from a contrasting experience. It was also hoped this would help participants develop greater empathy for young people who are often removed from all that is familiar to them, placed in a strange environment and reliant on people they don't know and who don't know them for support.

The affect of this aspect of the project was profound. Anxieties emerged almost immediately upon arrival in Copenhagen; these were discussed and explored during pre arranged reflective sessions and during informal sessions throughout mobility. Personal experiences were used as a prism through which discourse was developed to disassemble assumptions in relation to the self and professional perspectives and practice and to reconstruct these in a way that integrated learning.

Preparation

In the two years prior to embarking upon the mobility I had some responsibility for developing awareness of social pedagogy, theory and practice within Care Visions and had external oversight of the social pedagogy pilot project that began in August 2010. As intimated earlier, I had participated in a ten day training programme in the autumn of 2010, attended a number of conferences and seminars and read extensively on the subject. There were some aspects of social pedagogy that were relatively straightforward in terms of understanding and appeal; the humanistic and philosophical underpinnings and others that were more difficult to grasp; to what extent social pedagogy was different in practice to our own way of working. Care Visions began to develop services based on a relational approach to working within residential services in 1998. At the time this was perceived as progressive if not radical. I first became aware of social pedagogy as a professional perspective shortly after joining the organisation in 2002. At that time a qualified social pedagogue from Holland was employed by us in one of our residential child care services. There had been some discussion at this time about social pedagogy and one of our service managers had gone across to Holland to learn more about services and the approach to social care there. This long term awareness had allowed me to develop something of a theoretical understanding of the key principles of social pedagogic practice and had stimulated an unrelenting curiosity as to how different things could be in the countries where there is a long established tradition of social pedagogic practice and what elements need to come together to make this work to the benefit of the children and young people who use these services.

Of particular use was the publication produced by Children in Scotland 'Working it Out: Exploring the benefits of Danish Pedagogy' (Children in Scotland 2010(www.childreninscotland.org.uk/workforce)). This was a montage of accounts of professionals from Scotland who visited various child care services in Denmark to attempt to identify the key factors that contributed to the positive outcomes that are supported by institutions and to use this to develop and improve training and education for social care, education and nursery staff in Scotland.

I along with the other participants also attended two days preparation training for the mobility project in November 2011. This involved a number of preparatory activities including an introduction to the Danish culture and language and a re-familiarisation of the key concepts of social pedagogy. The most important aspect of these preparation sessions for me was the opportunity to meet and get to know our counterparts from Lancashire Council and choosing the placements we would attend. We also met our Danish facilitator, Charlotte, for the first time with little idea of how this relationship would strengthen or the significance of her role as the project developed. I had been involved in the project from the application stage and was to some degree aware of the exciting opportunities the project offered to the participants, but this had felt distant and hypothetical. Discussing the placements, trying out Danish

phrases, looking at maps and making travel arrangements all made the project real, and the excitement and anticipation began to build for me as the date of departure drew closer.

Following the preparation days I began independently researching some aspects of Danish culture and language. I borrowed books from the library and downloaded a language tutorial on both my laptop and iPod. I made several attempts to learn key phrases in Danish but struggled to make any progress, the language is so different phonetically from English it is difficult (impossible in some cases) to work out how a word should be pronounced by reading it. There are also some sounds used in speaking Danish that are completely alien to an English speaking Scot, requiring oral dexterity that cannot be achieved in a few weeks. This did cause me some anxiety; although I was assured that the majority of Danes were accomplished in speaking English I felt it was rude not to make an effort to speak their language while we were in Denmark. Despite my lack of success I never stopped trying, much to the amusement of the other participants, the Danish hosts, the young people I met and the frustration of some of the Danes unfortunate enough to assume I was a compatriot while I was wandering around the neighbourhood or local supermarket.

I met up with my colleagues from Care Visions regularly and we supported one another in our preparations. I also completed a learning contract within which I set my own learning objectives which I review in the conclusion of this report.

Reflections, Observations and Learning

Culture and Society

Danish society appears very egalitarian; the bandwidth of social strata is much narrower than that of the UK. Evidence of this was apparent in the architecture, the way people presented and dressed and in exploration of the values that the Danes hold dear in discussion with them in work and social situations. Emphasis is placed upon social cohesion and responsibility and the instruments of the state are mobilised to promote this and condition children at a very early age. High quality institutional care is at the heart of this, and the citizens not only place a great deal of trust in these but have high expectations of them too. Welfare is a central tenet of this and is not something that is only dispensed to the poor, needy or dysfunctional. Welfare encompasses all of the public services governed by the Kommune; mostly discussed in relation to education and social services. The conventional wisdom may suggest that this will create dependency but the primary role of welfare agencies is to promote development, autonomy and social responsibility from a very early age; as such the effect of this is quite the opposite. Personal freedom is highly valued but is intrinsically linked to responsibility. This was demonstrated within the placements.

Danish citizens pay a high level of income tax; it was suggested that the majority of those in full time employment contributed between 42-63% of their income to the state. This did not seem to generate the same degree of resentment it might in the UK; the belief in the need for high quality public services to maintain social cohesion appeared to ameliorate this. There is generally political consensus for social democratic government whereby the state has a strong role in the day to day lives of Danish citizens. Welfare is conceptualised differently than it is in the UK; this and the associated tax are not seen as a burden but necessary to maintain stability and a much valued way of life. It is also pragmatic, revenue to support high quality institutions needs to be obtained from as many citizens as possible, child care services that parents can trust are a prerequisite to their being able to work and contribute through taxation. This has been challenged recently and the previous government that was of a centre right persuasion embarked on a programme of budget cuts that have had an effect upon the welfare system.

A left of centre party was recently elected to government at the last elections in September 2011 but the cuts imposed by the previous administration have not been reversed.

The overall perspective of Danish society was positive but this is no utopia. Rates of divorce and alcoholism are some of the highest in Europe, racial tensions have risen and there was some rioting last summer. Denmark has not been immune to world economic crisis and there is a sense that the social ecology and consensus that supports the welfare system was in danger of corruption from a creeping rational neo-liberal influence.

The Placements

All of the placements we worked in were unashamedly described as institutions; this clearly has different, more positive connotations in a Danish context than it does in Scotland. The purpose of the residential service was not recognisable from the external environment. One was a tenement block in a wealthy area in the west end of the city; it was difficult to believe that this would be tolerated at home. Internally they were surprisingly sparse and little effort appeared to have been made to replicate a family home environment and resembled something akin to student accommodation. This led to some questioning as to why it was thought necessary to design residential services to resemble family homes when the young people using the service had difficulty with family life; no conclusions were reached but it did prove an interesting cultural counterpoint. Each of the services had their own systemic model which was central to the ethos and pedagogical practice. In the residential service I worked in the pedagogical method was derived from narrative therapy, a psychotherapeutic approach developed in Australia within which young people are encouraged to develop by creating their own story from which to make meaning of the world and objectify their situation; problems were only seen as such if they were defined this way by the young people themselves.

The nursery kindergarten and afterschool club I attended had developed a systemic approach based upon Marshall Rosenberg's work on non violent communication. This service was based in an ethnically diverse area of the city and the premise of using this approach was to equip children with negotiation and conflict management skills at a very early age to facilitate integration and tolerance.

Allegården

The residential service was equipped to look after and care for up to 13 young people at any given time. There was office accommodation on the ground floor of the building, semi independent accommodation on the first floor, children's accommodation on the second floor and accommodation for young people who had graduated from the semi independent accommodation awaiting housing on the third floor. Young people could come and go as they pleased and those using the independent and semi independent accommodation often stopped by to speak to staff members working in the service for children and young people with higher support needs. The atmosphere was very relaxed and despite the numbers there was little tension apparent between staff members and young people. When we were present two of the young people had vandalised the basement with graffiti. In response to this they were asked to help repaint the basement walls white. There was no insistence that they did so but the idea was promoted as a positive choice. Both agreed to do so but only one of the young people followed up on this; there were no discernible sanctions for the young person that didn't. There were also some issues relating to the use of cannabis in the service, which is freely available in Copenhagen although not legal. This was not condoned by staff members but when it was apparent young people or their friends were smoking cannabis in their bedrooms (they were allowed to smoke cigarettes), staff members intervened and asked them to go outside; if this involved friends then they were asked to

leave. While viewed as a serious issue the staff members dealing with this were careful to intervene in a calm manner and preserve the relationship that they had developed with the young people. There was little drama attached to this, no police involvement, incident reporting or deferring to the on-call manager. This and other issues that came up while I was present led to a number of discussions in relation to legal and regulatory requirements placed upon these institutions and the expectations placed upon them from wider society. It became apparent during these discussions that there was no expectation that the purpose of the service was to impose control on the young people; these were choices they had to make for themselves.

A hearty and healthy meal was prepared in the kitchen every evening. The young people were not obliged to eat their meals at the table, but were encouraged to do so. Many of them would come in from spending time with their friends later than expected or agreed, sometimes very late. As soon as they arrived home they were offered a meal; it was thought more important to welcome the young person home than to communicate disapproval. Healthy routines were supported but bedtimes were not prescribed; more often than not the young people attended school but when they didn't the only consequence was a supportive discussion with a primary carer to ensure they knew what they needed to make an informed choice in future. The chaos and carnage that you might imagine would ensue in a children's home without firm, explicit rules and clear boundaries just wasn't evident, the atmosphere was relaxed, cordial, ordered and warm.

I wouldn't suggest that the way the institution was structured and organised was entirely how our services should be designed or that that decisions made by the pedagogues in response to the presenting situations were the same as those I would have made. Free from the expectation to control and the imperative to promote growth and development nothing was sacred, except the relationship, everything else was negotiable, the environment and interventions were finely tuned and retuned to guide young people to make choices that were positive for them and socially responsible. There was an acknowledgement that young people growing up in institutions were more likely to have to take on responsibility for managing their own lives earlier than those living in families; they would only learn what they needed to if the freedom to explore this was extended to them.

Den Grønne Giraf

This thread runs through the entire welfare and education system: at the nursery, kindergarten and afterschool club I attended children were encouraged to be independent. During my first day there I sat in bewilderment as children, as young as two, poured their own water from a jug, served themselves hot soup from a bowl at the table and afterwards climbed into their own snow suits with minimal adult help before going out to play. The quality of early years care is incredible, activities and play were designed to support the development of the body and mind, when children fell in the playground they were encouraged to get back on their own feet, rarely lifted by carers. Conflict between children was resolved through calm negotiation, it would have been easier to assume that the children wouldn't understand as many were only in the early stages of developing speech. They did and we did even though we didn't speak Danish. 'We negotiate with two years olds here, life is negotiation and it's important to start early', we were told by one of the managers. The atmosphere in the nursery was joyous and happy, the children were encouraged to develop their own personalities and left to make up their own minds about what toys they played with. They sought out adult attention when they wanted or needed this, it wasn't imposed upon them. If they were happy on their own they were left on their own. The very young children took a nap in the morning, they were left to decide when; this often

depended upon their routine at home, the pedagogues could read the children and identified what they needed when they needed it.

I hadn't considered how the early year experiences in schools and nurseries related to the young people accessing services in their teenage years. The similarities in approach and practice were an epiphany to me. This investment in services for children is crucial to the young people who are likely to be looked after away from home later in their lives.

The Pedagogues

All of the pedagogues we spoke to were able to communicate with astounding clarity the key aspects of their role in relation to the young people they cared for, the institution they worked in and the society they served. They were unequivocal in their belief that the relationships they have with the children and young people is of paramount importance and these have to be established before they could effectively support and guide those they were caring for. They understood the responsibilities that belonged to them and those that belong to the children and young people. The pedagogues working with very young children demonstrated incredible restraint in this regard, resisting the temptation to lift children to their feet after a fall or take over when one of them was struggling to push a tricycle up a hill. In the residential services the pedagogues didn't react impulsively to developing situations or fear but authentically communicated care and concern and calmly offered up positive choices. The pedagogues were also conversant with theory and were able to articulate what they were doing and why they were doing it with reference to this, although they were consummately professional this did not detract from the warmth of the relationships and this was evident in the affective interactions we witnessed.

The clear professional identity demonstrated and communicated by the pedagogues was accompanied by a sense of pride in what they did and the positive impact this had on the lives of the children and young people and the role this played in society. They had worked hard to obtain the status associated with being a pedagogue, all had opted for this career over others and none expressed any regret. The capacity to make autonomous decisions in their day to day work without deference to managers was a key aspect of the professional standing of the pedagogues. They are confident and competent enough to make dynamic decisions that best fit the situation and free to do so. The pedagogues are able to embrace children's rights and the associated responsibilities without concern that these represented an impediment to control – this isn't their concern.

All of the pedagogues I worked alongside had an extraordinary ability to communicate with the young people in a person centred and non violent way, even in relation to difficult issues. They worked with parents without judgement and used the same principles in governing these relationships as they did in their work with children. Similarly their understanding of the importance of the associative lives of children was striking; they encouraged young people to identify people with whom they had a significant relationship to support them, they were often invited to reviews and planning meetings and asked for their input, these could be friends, neighbours or relatives, that they were important to the young person was all that mattered.

What was perhaps the most striking characteristic of the pedagogues was their calm, controlled and relaxed manner. These were unpretentious and ordinary people working in an extraordinary way actively crafting the spaces of the children's homes, kindergartens, nurseries and after school clubs, contributing positively to the dynamic, constantly on their game, supporting, challenging and stimulating the young people in their care.

The Children

At every age and stage of development the Danish children we met appeared more autonomous, more confident and better equipped to make choices than their UK counterparts. Integration and inclusion is promoted within institutions through high quality services that work to engender a healthy attachment between the adults working there and the children attending. This ensures that even if the children have not enjoyed a functional family experience, their experiences within institutions will have helped them develop a healthy view of the world, within which they feel safe and confidently develop their own identity. They were allowed to be playful, curious and take risks, within reason, without rebuke or censure. It was commonplace to happen across children humming or singing away to themselves as they happily played and invented new ways to explore the world. Children are not conceptualised as 'adults in training' and are allowed to make sense of the world on their own terms; formal education is deferred until they are seven years old and even then the extent of the formality is limited to what they can manage. This isn't just a case of indulging children and allowing them to enjoy their early years before the necessity of mundane routine kicks in; there is evidence that children who enter education later actually perform and achieve better in the longer term.

There was lots of reflection about how this apparent difference in the children and young people could be attributed. There is no doubt that the early years care they received was a contributory factor as was the prevailing child friendly culture – some of the children we met had only been in Denmark for a few years and known only institutional care since they arrived – so these factors can't fully explain the phenomena. Children are placed in a different frame in Denmark, they are much more likely to find approval, acceptance and understanding and this evokes more positive responses, choices, behaviour and outcomes for them.

Findings and Future

It would not be possible or desirable to wholly transplant the Danish approach to child care to Scotland. We have a different culture, society, expectations and legal and regulatory responsibilities. But we can learn a great deal from continuing to explore the way the Danish services are designed and managed, the practice, associated theory and value base.

Social pedagogues were not superior to ourselves, they had perhaps been more thoroughly engaged in practice development and learning before entry into their chosen profession. Many of the approaches, systems and perspectives we witnessed during our placements are in evidence in our own services. The key tenets are perhaps not as universally held and our proficiency and skills are not as finely tuned as the pedagogues we worked alongside, in terms of direct engagement, theory based practice, developing and maintaining relationships and understanding the whole child. Far from getting things badly wrong within Care Visions we do many things very well; it is acknowledging that we can always do better, strengthen and deepen our learning, rehearse and share good practice and improve how we involve young people in decisions about every aspect of their lives amongst many other things. The ongoing implementation of the Sanctuary model will undoubtedly support these developments and a continued conversation with social pedagogy and further exploration of the experiences of those who have had and those who will have the benefit of participation in the Leonardo da Vinci Mobility Project will give oxygen to the concepts of non violence, social learning and responsibility, shared governance, growth and change, open communication and emotional intelligence. These are central to the approach of the pedagogues we worked with and were exemplified wonderfully in practice.

My participation in this project has provided me with opportunities for learning and development well beyond the limits of the two weeks spent in Copenhagen. The combined elements of an immersive experience in an holistically pedagogical working environment, while residing in a foreign country and adapting to the cultural differences intensified and accelerated the process of meaning making. Reflections that begun during the mobility experience have been unerring, relating to self and practice, themes include;

- A deconstruction and examination of established practice, beliefs and assumptions with a keener perspective on how these affects service users
- How relationships are central to effective intervention and support of service users
- How day to day interactions and activities can be designed to promote the development of young people
- Risk competence and how young people can be supported to take risks in a manner that supports learning and development
- The importance of supporting autonomy, choice and independence at the earliest opportunity in a child's life
- The importance of positive early years experiences for children and how this can be supported within services to create stability and ameliorate the impact of negative experiences
- How non-violent communication is used in practice to support behaviour change while preserving the relationship
- The importance of the associative life of young people and the need to preserve and support this throughout the episode of care
- A conceptualisation of children as active participants in society and their own lives
- The importance of recognising the strengths of young people and supporting them to define problems and solutions to these in their own way
- The primacy of development over control
- Developing a range of responses to issues and a willingness to creatively work to resolve problems rather than referring to prescriptive or procedural responses.

This was a transformative experience; the memories, learning and relationships have had, and will have, an influence on all aspects of my life for many years. I probably came back from Copenhagen with more questions than I did answers; that I'm happy about this reveals more about the potency of the mobility experience than anything else.

Danny