

EU Leonardo Mobility project 'Social Pedagogy - Learning in Practice'

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PREPARATION

My interest in social pedagogy has evolved slowly and tentatively over the past few years: I was aware that 'social pedagogy' was becoming a concept of practice that was now being mentioned in social work literature, and that there were plans for a pilot study looking into the approach and its transference into fostering. This interested me professionally, and my motivation to apply for the mobility was driven by further reading that suggested a pedagogical approach provided an understandable framework that could be utilised by practitioners and carers alike. Personally I was also aware of the concept of pedagogy as my husband is a teacher and discusses his career in terms of the 'Curriculum for Excellence' which expands our concept of learning to the social and emotional. I was also fortunate as both my children's schools had taken this framework in a very dynamic interpretation and communicated to parents in terms of a pedagogical, holistic approach: The head teacher of my daughters' primary school had spent time in Norway and had come back with ideas about learning and experiences not confined to the classroom. She had presented research indicating that a holistic approach to a child and their ability to learn appeared to create academic and emotional success and well being. Therefore, when the opportunity arose through the EU Leonardo Mobility project I was keen to gain practical experience and obtain a first hand understanding of if and how pedagogy could influence, enhance and/or improve my practice within the field of social work.

Pedagogy is like a cloud...nothing to get hold of - Essex Pedagogy Pilot project

My learning objectives for my two placements were centred on the desire to gain a good, solid understanding of the key concepts of pedagogy. Reading both the host services manifestos that I was due to visit I believed that skills of communication, resolution of conflict and development of authentic relationships were the key factors which may help me give an additional dimension to my work. Previous reading had at times left me feeling that there was a 'vagueness' in the approach, as in the above quote, and as a predominantly concrete thinker I was anxious to take something tangible from the experience. Reflecting on my motivation at that time I also wanted to bring back something for my colleagues that would give pedagogy a credible acceptance.

With regards to cultural preparation I researched Denmark and its culture via the internet. Information was readily available and I had a sense of what I was going to encounter in Copenhagen.

Retrospectively I would have liked to research historical and political aspects of the country as they were very influential in the countries psyche and gave a framework, context and expectation on and of pedagogues. Language preparation was daunting; Danish presented as challenging for me. I tried to over come this with the use of several Apps which gave basic phrases and words. I thought that possibly learning a new word each day was a more sensible approach than tackling the linguistic hurdles of grammar and syntax. Through this I mastered basic phrases of introduction and conversation, the weather (typically British I know!) and many unrelated words from my daily challenge e.g. directions, numbers, countries etc. It was fascinating to see many similarities and historical connections within the two languages although pronunciation of which where often diverse i.e. the Danish for cloud is 'sky'- is that why we refer to sky?

MOBILITY

My sense of Denmark was a country which had confidence and pride in itself. The individuals I met were articulate, with a sense of citizenship that was egalitarian and inclusive and not at all threatening or dogmatic. I am in no doubt that there are social problems and the country appears to be coming to terms with the impact of immigration and the global recession which has had serious political and social repercussions over the past few years. However overall, as a predominantly socialist thinker I experienced a sense of unity, respect and inclusion which was liberating and almost spiritual. The physical experience of living in Copenhagen was one of safety and calmness; as a stranger walking about in a large city never once did I feel threatened. Morally I was continuously met with situations where my sense to protect and 'control' where challenged through the environments I worked in and in the interactions I had with individuals; experiencing a culture that was able to communicate in a non threatening manner created a huge learning experience for me.

The country has defined itself for the past 70 years on socialist principles and is 'complete' in its development and acceptance. Without over politicising this reflection I believe the conditions to fully replicate this will never be able to happen in the UK; in Denmark there appears to be an utter and cross generational acceptance that high taxes are paid by all, but in turn this funds systems that are geared to empower citizens and workers through their education, professions, family life and wage. Their employment and educational systems put the family at the heart of their policies so employees have the right to 2 years paternity/maternity leave and flexibility in working arrangements were parents will share childcare responsibilities by adjusting their working hours around their children. Like all countries presently there are stresses and Denmark, like all nations, is struggling with this. How I saw this impact on pedagogical practice was an increased pressure on agencies' to evidence outcomes in their services and to increase their capacity.

Stjerneskuddet

My first placement was at Stjerneskuddet, an after school facility which provides care for 5-10 (Stjerneskuddet) and 11-14 year olds (Stjernesklubbe) in two separate locations, in addition to a youth club which is focused on many of the older Muslim youths who are disaffected in the area. The educational day is shorter than in the UK therefore every parent is entitled to after school care and it is viewed very much as a component to a child's day, again reinforcing education as a holistic process. The youth club started as an evening facility for all youths in the area but has been encouraged and funded to engage with what the authorities see as the sector in need of re engagement within their community.

Conversations I had with several of the practitioners spoke of their belief that aspects of their society had been put under strain due to immigrants coming in and not having engaged with their systems of care and education until later on in life and/or not taking full opportunity of what can be on offer. I experienced no hostility towards immigration, and it was very much welcomed by my colleagues (several of whom were from different ethnic backgrounds), but the majority articulated a belief that to become citizens who were confident, contributed, respected etc you had to engage with the systems of care and education from the start of your life. I interpreted this not as a hostility towards immigration but rather a pride in their systems and faith that it works which is a very different view to the UK. Last year there were riots in this area and it is a matter the country is trying to resolve and I sensed that many of my hosts were at a point of transition and reflection about this matter.

Through my experiences, and that of my colleagues, it is clear that the care and education systems in Denmark invest in early years services in a way which encompasses aspects of development and care that we are aware of and yet in the UK still deliver in a fractured manner. The Danes recognise the need for people to engage themselves with others to gain recognition and a sense of contribution, how we develop and form is crucial in our early years therefore expectations to explore, learn and function within a group is supported through their systems and staffing. This in turn is delivered through services that are individualistic in their approach but which set the foundations for resilience in their young i.e enabling a child to grow up as a self responsible person who takes responsibility for their society. All services I encountered appeared to understand the need for holistic education and self determination and I was impressed that there was a standard baseline of practice ethos that appeared in all our placements which created uniformity in understanding of the child and approaches used which I found refreshing i.e. no matter which placement we were in our mentors spoke in similar terms and recognised the same key aspects of child care – a common and accepted dialogue of what was required of them.

My reason for choosing Stjerneskuddet as a learning venue had been based on the desire to experience the choices given to the young people, especially when I read that the older youths were able to opt out of the club. This definitely interested me in terms of safety and risk assessment.

My first two days were at the 5-10yrs facility. Stjerneskuddet is the oldest after school facility in Copenhagen and is 70 years old, demographically the area is a diverse ethnic mix and has now

become very fashionable. This has put pressure on housing stock and the areas affluence has increased as more well off families are moving in, attracted by the facilities and the fact that it's considered to have the best schools in the City. This has resulted in an increase of racial tensions and minority youths have been accused of engaging in anti social behaviours.

Upon entering Stjernesuddet I was struck immediately by the environs of the club; it was located on the entire first floor of a tenement complex (housing is extremely expensive in Copenhagen and most people live in apartments). This meant that within the club intermittently there were entrance halls and stairwells for all the other apartments which were freely accessed by all residents and their visitors. My pedagogue mentor was interested to hear about how our schools are completely separate buildings with tight security. The Danes very much see schools and other institutions (the Danes refer to services as institutions) as part of the community and integration is actively sought. The Stjernesklubbe was based in our equivalent of a secondary school, and the classrooms were located on the second floor of a large Victorian building whilst the floor above was the largest dental practice in Copenhagen, which again meant a flow of visitors unconnected to the school using the same entrance facilities. This was initially a disconcerting concept for me and a source of embarrassment as I have been frustrated by how elements of social work practice in the UK have become so risk adverse and yet here I was conforming to a fear of 'what if...'. My mentor was happy to discuss this with me and through the mobility a sense of trust and understanding of this developed. The Danes very much embrace a sense of community and within that term an acknowledgement of safety, and see schools and other institutions as part of the community.

My tasks for the two days I was at Stjernesuddet were to agree who was supervising each area of the club, collect the younger children from school and as I was there to learn, I was permitted to observe/ take part in all facilities that were available. In Stjernesklubbe which had more the feel of a youth club, it was to be available to the older children and facilitate activities e.g. table tennis, music a drama project.

My first learning encounter came through the simplest tasks - returning to the club with the youngest children after they had been picked up from school. Unbeknown to me my mentor had instructed the two 5 year olds at the front of the line to take responsibility for the group and to help them cross the road, although not a major road my instinct was to automatically take on this task and stop the children whilst I checked for on coming traffic. My mentor explained that I was not to do this as he had already delegated responsibility which was duly taken up by the two children. My discomfort was palpable and the desire to take over was strong! The urge to intervene was present yet this simplest of situations helped me frame a context of how the pedagogues worked – the concept that children are competent and resourceful and capable and should be afforded trust and opportunities. Thus the interaction between adults and children is intrinsically equal within the context of a task and within this the practitioner has confidence within their risk management of the situation. This is a critical juxtapoint as 'risk' is always associated with social pedagogy to the uninitiated in the UK, which I believe distorts people's perception of what the approach is about and creates the misconception that to be a pedagogue you allow children to do what ever they want; juggle with knives, jump off high walls, set fire to things. Social pedagogy for me is behaviourist in its

essence but draws upon established and respected learning theories where mental wellness is gained through personally responsible choices. Culturally this is a very challenging learning opportunity for foster carers in the UK, and I appreciate for those who have not witnessed pedagogical practice it appear as metaphysical. I am a parent who did fret at the possible 'dangers' for my child and sanitised aspects of their care i.e. paper scissors, a non spill cup...just in case. It's certainly not about dismissing dangers and risks for children, but it is revisiting our understanding of what environments we need to create for self actualisation which may require a personal and cultural shift. The ethical orientation of this requires us to create relationships that preserves the other and creates conditions for dialogue, whereas in the UK there are remnants and habits that are authoritarian to education, social care and parenting still. However pedagogical themes are present in most of the literature which influences our social work and education practice such as Maslow, Erikson and Bowlby (to name but a few) that are familiar to carers. For Maslow, for example, esteem is created through engagement that gives recognition and a sense of contribution. Cooper (1985) cited 7 areas that children need from parents; physical care, affection and warmth, security, stimulation, limits, skills learning and autonomy. We are familiar with these -pedagogy is not re inventing the wheel, however I do think the biggest challenge in embracing pedagogical practices is our culture expectation of parents as authoritative, directive figures. For our young people predictability in aspects of their care is critical to a healing environment so we need to be critically objective about this and look at the semantics of security as it should refer to predictability, continuity rather than punitive approaches. In fostering this will require us to be proactive at the recruitment and preparation stage as carers will need to develop an expectation of creating therapeutic relationships with their foster children in a way that possibly requires them to deconstruct their expectations of parenting, this has been a general expectation for some time now in family placement but maintaining and supporting this requires more systemic changes within our services.

I do think this is achievable and will discuss this further in my conclusion.

On arrival to the Stjerneskuddet the children were met with pictures of the staff who were working that day and the location of them all. There was a buzz of energy generated from the children and they all gave the impression of knowing which area they wanted to go in. The majority of the boys headed for outside to the recreation area or to the computers. The computers were a popular choice and there was a booking in system. Again two of the children were asked by one of the pedagogues to assist and monitor the situation. The computer area was calm and not once did there appear to be any conflict. This sense of contentment, calmness has been reported by all my mobility colleagues and you cannot escape noticing its impact when you are present.

Noise levels were calm and yet children were playing freely and being dynamic in their play. Over the days it was clear that staff were very much aware of each child and their needs. My initial sense of their being little structure was in fact not the case. Food was available but there was no set meal time, each child would come to the kitchen area when they wanted to eat and distribution of food was conducted by children, with adults present in the area. Staff took part in activities and responded to requests to join children and ate with the children.

In Stjernesklubbe the facilities were materially good, computers, table tennis, music studio and instruments but as young teenagers there was a greater sense of the young people wanting to be with their peers. Staff located themselves around the kitchen area where food was prepared and responded to the suggestions of those needing assistance or companionship. Behaviourally I witnessed the same patterns as in the UK the only difference being the sense of calmness when it was required of them.

How do I rationalise my observations in a tangible manner? If I were to condense my experience of Stjernesklubdet it was the cultural value of their children, their *Haltung* (ethos) and the communication skills of the pedagogues. Culturally the Danes are able to treat children as resourceful, dynamic individuals not adults in waiting and therefore afford them opportunities that build on their ability to expand their experiences. Children serve themselves; take responsibility for others; play with tools in a confident manner; and for the older children can opt out of the club. It appeared that because they had this responsibility they did not have to gain by conflict therefore the majority respected their opportunities. My lack of Danish did not seem to be a barrier in understanding the patterns of communication and practitioners appeared relaxed and engaging in their manner. The use of linguistic strategies seemed inherent in all the interactions they had with the children and was that of non violent communication. Two boys were running up and down in the corridor and my pedagogue's response to them was to say 'you can walk in this area if you want to', which instantly stopped them running. It was explained 'it's easier to tell a child the things they can do than they things they can't', yet as a technique I witnessed it used effortlessly time and time again.

I certainly witnessed how practitioners work in the 'common third', creating situations where activities are shared, and staff participate in establishing relationships that were accepting. Areas of activities were set for the children and staff joined in. As Vygotsky states, learning is most successful in a social context and staff were prepared and understood the value of their time to engage directly in a manner that was inclusive and equal with the children. This did not mean that adults were dismissed or not used as a point of reference, quite the opposite; there was a sense of respect, mediation and productivity. Whilst writing this report there is an article in the news about David Cameron's desire to create respect in schools, and his solution is to expect children to stand when an adult walks in the room. A short term reactive solution? Incredibly frustrating when you have witnessed such a comparatively 'seamless' approach and in the UK we appear to constantly look for that quick fix solution.

A pedagogical approach doesn't blank out the foibles, neuroticisms, self determination and complexities of development. I found the teenagers at Stjernesklubbe to be just as dismissive and distracted as any teenager I have met. Staff reported that they do on occasion have to deal with issues of bullying. What I did feel was that the interactions and approach of their early years gave them the capacity to re-engage with others more readily, reconnect with their resilient self in a more capable manner which I found very encouraging. When I spoke to an older group of Muslim girls who have their own evening group I found them able to articulate in a manner that saw value in

their education and the approach of the adults around them in their formative years, and in return they saw the value in treating others in the same way.

Allegarden

My experience at Allegarden challenged my understanding further as the unit was supporting youths who were disaffected and not able to live with their own families. Here I found staff who were all able to articulate a common understanding of their role and reflect competently where that young person was emotionally and contextually. The youngest youth was 16 years old so they were all independent and had established social lives, so my interaction with them was minimal. Reassuringly I felt that much of what I saw was similar to the Units within CareVisions; friendly, engaging staff with a commitment to their young people. There were debates around the use of sanctions and incentives which appeared common to care providers in the UK, so reassuringly i didn't feel that they had the solutions for every challenge they encountered.

The geography of the Unit was again unexpected as Allegarden is situated in a residential, affluent area of Copenhagen. The unit was over three floors with an office area on the first, residential accommodation on the second and above a semi independent unit for those up to 23 years old. Where I saw a difference was in the fact that young people were allowed their friends and family to visit anytime and often they would socialise in each others room. Concern around the consequences of this was relaxed, although staff were clearly aware of the dynamics and issues that may arise.

I spent time with a social worker based at the Unit and gained further understanding of the Danish system. It is very rare for the authorities to use compulsory measures of care, in all the time she was there the social worker could only cite 3 occasions when this had happened. Otherwise admissions have been voluntary. In Denmark foster care is used for younger children whereas for teenagers the options tend to be residential based. I picked up a sense that a replacement family was considered too challenging for many of the older youths and we appeared to be working in a system which was more inclusive of parents.

The social worker was able to explain that they very much try and engage with parents and give them a say within their systems as their philosophy is that even if matters have been difficult and damaging at home at some point these adults may be this young person's support system. The unit works with a narrative approach to the young person's life asking them and others who are important in their life to tell the story of the young person and where they are. Working on a sense of future is similar to our Sanctuary model and was an approach staff were interested in.

It was explained that when a young person comes to the unit the parents are invited to talk about the young person, their upbringing, interests and ambitions. Although we have systems within the LAAC procedures that takes into account a parents perspective this appeared more dynamic in Denmark as there was sense that by encouraging dialogue with parents there was scope for parents

to heal and adjust in a more constructive manner towards their children. This appears a critical area for us to develop still as SCIE research highlights that accommodated children articulate the need to understand why they are in care, to feel that they have some control and be able to maintain relations with birth families.

Building caring, warm, enabling relationships is valued, but there are boundaries within this. The fact that the majority of young people in their care system are through voluntary routes testifies that the balance of care and control can be achieved and be productive to the young person (academic success rates are significantly greater in Denmark for accommodated children). I was able to discuss with my mentors how this was achieved and they were able to cite theories that they use and they were aware that there is a danger in relying on instinctual or natural responses; The Danes work with the concept of positive regard, and the use of self as a way of working that requires them to gain an awareness of feelings, thoughts, motivations and responses that are aroused in themselves through their interaction with others. Through this there is recognition of the 3P's- the professional, private and personal for all practitioners and this is reflected in their professional supervision which happens formally on a regular basis as well informal in daily dialogues. A practitioner's ability to reflect on their practice is a necessity and where a practitioner is within this process is important their supervision appeared more dynamic and creative.

It was explained to me that it is important to create authentic relationships and cited examples of possibly sharing with parent similarities in parenting experiences as a means of creating dialogue. Debates around care and control were lessened as a result as communication was striven to be as open as possible. This was sometimes difficult if there were other agencies involved i.e. mental health. The Unit worked on the principle of being involved as much as possible in any therapeutic approach i.e. being part of the therapeutic session, so that they could reflect and inform the young person.

There are no truths just many realities.

Within this I gained my biggest learning mantra 'there are no truths just many realities'. As a point of reflection I find this very powerful as our views of events and life are hugely influenced by our experiences and its important to recognise that respect has to be given to the others perspective if we are to guide and educate and encourage change in the broadest sense. As a social work practitioner I believe I have always been aware of the impact of my role on others, and although I have carried a statutory obligation within my role I have endeavoured to understand how this may inhibit/ impact on my interaction with that individual. Pedagogical practice focuses on the young person, drawing on a number of theories which provide goals to practice. As an agency CareVisions use the Sanctuary Model, which is a trauma informed practice and I feel complements a pedagogical approach as it requires practitioners to understand the perspective of the young person but also how this affects the practitioner and their organisation. Sanctuary provides a theoretical orientation to pedagogical practice and likewise I feel that the model will benefit from practitioners understanding the key aspects of pedagogy.

CONCLUSIONS

Trying to condense my learning from the mobility has been more complex than I thought and I have tried to keep my account succinct, as themes and experiences become overwhelming to fully articulate and I get caught up with the micro and macro themes I have encountered. I can appreciate why others have struggled to articulate in definates and categorically define all that is pedagogic. Practice and theory are dynamic within this field, some of which is culturally and politically unfamiliar to us. Certainly the mobility allowed me to appreciate that Danish pedagogues are professional child care workers who have trained for several years in disciplines that are tangible yet fluid, adaptable yet based within theory. As it deals primarily with the intimacy, intricacy and respect of interactions with others it cannot be completely prescriptive in its useage. The theory base is familiar to us and has overlaps with social work, but we need to be mindful that within social work we deal primarily with guidance and probabilities and the desire for outcomes. Social care often struggles with it's identity in the UK and in turn becomes reactive and confused in what it is doing, resulting in pessimism within practice, whereas my sense of Denmark was of a country confident of its approach (although facing it's own challenges and need to develop and balance the consumerism of care).

Like a cloud?...

Returning to my original quote it's something I am able to disagree with as there are skills and theorems that inform social pedagogy. I feel what confuses us are the qualities it then brings to relationships which are seen in terms of soft skills, which often are discredited or seen as less relevant within our systems.

Working with a 'pedagogic lens' I feel is achievable within my agency and within fostering in general; recognising where practitioners are within the process of relationships and allowing them to recognise how the work is impacting on them works well with foster carers. It allows us to create guidance in relationships and helps foster carers understand what they do and the significance of what they do even in the smallest of tasks or exchanges, which is positive. Building warm, caring, enabling relationships helps build resilience, and no one would argue with the strength and importance of this. However, although there are positive moves within our Early Years services towards this, it would be naive not to recognise the cultural differences. Many of the young people we care for in the UK have not had a foundation set by their culture, community or parenting which will affect their capacity to be receptive to this approach. In terms of a UK perspective, we have to be mindful of this and incorporate aspects of training towards pedagogy that recognise the need to build motivation with those that are disaffected and traumatised. We also need to understand their motivation patterns and rejection if we are going to engage.

What resonates and fits with me is: Practising social pedagogy can be understood as a collective term for pedagogical orientated practices based on a professional assessment and carried out in every day, ordinary situations (Jan Storo). If this definition fits best, we need to have value and

expectation on the role of our foster carers and residential workers to allow them to build confidence and skills in our young people so they can *assume* rather than *avoid* life opportunities.

My conclusion is that for my agency there are aspects of systemic change that can promote and foster a pedagogic culture, which I would view as an extension of the Sanctuary Model we have already in place. This in turn will scaffold the personal challenges we require from our foster carers. As I mentioned earlier there are aspects of this that are culturally unfamiliar, however I see Non Violent Communication at the heart of adopting pedagogical practice; how we communicate and express is at the heart of this, and being able to communicate with our young people in a non threatening manner is critical to the healing process.

Training in development, attachment, resilience and trauma is crucial and always an ongoing process for foster carers, however systemic changes that will assist them centre on the use of reflection. Foster carers are required to use a reflective journal; sadly this is often used as a protective tool where carers record 'what's gone wrong' and see it as solely as an extension of safe care. I think by encouraging carers to structure their journals in terms of themselves and the young person it encourages carers to think in terms of relationships, tasks and alternatives. This technique can be further consolidated by the quality of supervision which should encourage carers and workers to think in terms of their professional, private and personal. This is the biggest challenge in fostering as carers expose their private lives when they care for a child. When their 'private' is threatened, placements more easily break down.

Involvement of parents should be considered beyond the LAAC procedure and I realise that this has bearings for placing authorities as looked after children tend to have come through statutory procedures. However looking in terms of a pedagogic approach I think we should consider our capacity to do this. I appreciate the complexities, but as a reparative tool for young people and parents it may be worth further exploration.

My trip to Denmark was enjoyable and challenging, allowing me to gain new perspectives and practicalities in my practice. Overall I would recommend any of my colleagues to apply for this valuable opportunity. The learning experience was more immediate and pro-active than any literature, and the thought provoking experience was enabling for me in ways I had not anticipated.