

EU LEONARD MOBILITY PROJECT
'SOCIAL PEDAGOGY – LEARNING IN PRACTICE'

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PREPARATION

I first became aware of the term pedagogy through studies that I had undertaken and became intrigued with a particular theoretical model for working with young people. Vygotsky's model, 'zone of proximal development' felt very accessible and applicable to the work undertaken within residential child care (1962). Vygotsky described his theory using the analogy of staff providing a 'scaffold' to support young people in their development, whereby staff will identify a developmental need in the child and create opportunities, planned or unplanned, for the child to explore and learn for themselves. These opportunities should be gauged at a level that will be achievable for the child but also will present a challenge. It would be the role of the worker to then provide support or scaffolding around this to aid the child in their learning/developmental process. The mental image of providing scaffolding for a child to cling on to while building them up has remained with me since.

The word Pedagogy has become increasingly more common with in Scotland and particularly within the sector of residential child care. The 'curriculum for excellence' and 'Getting it right for every child' (GIRFEC) reflect the values of pedagogy both in terms of providing opportunities for development and learning but also collaborative practice. Since undertaking my studies I have been preoccupied by notions of professional identity of residential child care workers and how we communicate the work we undertake with our colleagues from other fields. I was aware that the training of pedagogues in Europe was such that when qualified they then took the skills that they had learned and applied them to a sector of the workforce where they wished to work, or could find employment. I reflected on my own frustrations when trying to articulate and give insight to professionals from other sectors about the work undertaken in our services but also the frustration that I found trying to understand what other professionals were trying to communicate to me. It also struck me that when such occasions arise that communication and understand appeared to be easier with front line practitioners who spend a lot of time with the child i.e. class room assistants, family support workers, social work assistants.

When the opportunity to take part in the mobility arose, it was from this thinking that I choose to apply, 'I need to see this for myself'. If professionals from all sectors have a 'common third' to work from, in terms of pedagogy, then how does this aid in the development of the child and bring better service delivery from those tasked with meeting their needs? (for more on this read, 'Social Pedagogy and Inter-Professional Practice', 2012). I was also curious to watch the Pedagogues putting theory into practice but felt like that I would just absorb that in Denmark, aware that the cultural differences had to be part of the meaning making process for me and as such read the theoretical models that I was presented with such that I could question the pedagogues when on placement. In short, I was aware of forest kindergarten and that 3 year olds are given 6 inch knives to cut wood and wished to avoid going with a particularly British attitude of "what are these crazy Europeans all about?"

When accepted on the mobility I attended a two day training course and met with or colleagues for Lancashire. At this we were introduced to some of the key theory that

underpins Pedagogy such as the learning zone model (Senninger, 2000) and the common third. Both of these appeared to me to complement Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. We also explored the three P's of a Pedagogue and the head, hand and heart approach to engaging young people, the basis of relationship building encapsulated in the term 'Haltung'.

Placements on the mobility were then chosen and our buddies assigned accordingly. Our buddy system paired us with one of our colleagues from Lancashire and they would be our support on placement during the mobility and in preparation for the mobility.

In the lead up to the mobility I revisited these theoretical models but was more pragmatic in terms of preparation. I spent time getting to know the map of Copenhagen and the rest of my time was dedicated to ensuring that I was proficient at speaking Danish. As such I enlisted the help of one of the young people in the service I manage. Both the young person and I realised that our targets on this front may have been somewhat ambitious and decided to fine tune some key phrases:

Jeg hedder George, hvad hedder du?

I am George, who are you?

Jeg taler ikke dansk!

I don't speak Danish!

The second of these phrases was particularly useful during the mobility, however did on occasion pose a problem where the young person and I had practiced it so much that some of the residents of Copenhagen appeared not to believe me asking, "You don't speak Danish?" However this was usually resolved very quickly with my next attempt at cross cultural communication.

MOBILITY

The design of the mobility was particularly significant to the context of the work we undertake as residential child care workers. This was never hidden in any way from all the participants but became very evident from our arrival in Copenhagen. The parallels between our group and a child being received into a group care experience could not have been more poignant. I mention this not to denigrate, in any way, the experience of children who are looked after away from home, but I feel that it should be mentioned as part of setting the scene for our experience. Unlike on a holiday where you still have loved ones to support you through the stresses of travel, getting lost in a strange town or struggling to negotiate the local supermarket, our only support was in effect a group of strangers (actually in many ways worse, as they were in fact colleagues with all the dynamics that this entails).

While the mobility represented an opportunity for professional development, on a personal level, I wanted to prove to myself that I could survive on my own in a strange town, physically and emotionally as it had been sometime since I had been in similar circumstances. The reason for adding this into my report is that in many ways I experienced and watched others have experiences that were both challenging and rewarding in all areas of the mobility and gain meaning and understanding through

sharing experiences together. This was not just in placement but the day to day cultural differences that added to the assault on the senses and gave understanding and context to the placement themselves. It may also help the reader understand how I describe, what I took from and the meaning I attribute to the placements themselves.

Key themes/ Learning

Rather than describing the placements and my experiences during my time there, I have chosen to write about key themes that emerged during the mobility and use experiences to help illustrate the points and give comparison to social care in Scotland. The reason for doing so is that many of the questions that I had been left with after my first placement, in the residential unit, were answered during my second placement, the after school club. I believe that this was due to gaining a greater understanding of how the young people in Denmark are raised within the wider social system, and during my reflections, help me to understand my experience of pedagogues that worked in the residential unit and the way they work alongside the young people they care for. However this is merely a small reflection on the experience as a whole.

The first of these is around the social construction of childhood. By this I mean how society perceives childhood and the social norms that are expressed in relation to this, within the national context in which they are set. It is my belief that British society perceives childhood as a time of innocence and as such children need to be protected within this to ensure that they can enjoy this period of their lives for as long possible. While this is an admirable idea, it raises question of whether from the earliest age we de-skill children and are missing opportunities for development of the child? Is this about us, as adults, wanting to feel 'needed' by our children and be able to rescue them from any given difficulty or situation or about us idolising our lost childhood, remembering through 'rose tinted spectacles'?

It appeared to me that the Danish construction of childhood has a perception of respecting childhood as a stage in part of the life cycle of human existence. As such childhood has its own unique challenges that children will master as part of the developmental process. This should not be mistaken as training for adulthood but as part of the leaning undertaken by humans relevant to this stage in their life, and respect afforded to this accordingly. As such there is an emphasis on offering the children and young people experiences, where the young person chooses to engage and will be supported to learn from the experience or supported during the experience by the adults in their lives.

Within the setting of the after school club for the age group 6 – 12, I experienced this on a number of occasion but have chose the following two examples as these particularly stayed with me since my return home. The first was when I visited the arts and crafts room in the club. On entering the room the first thing that I encountered was a tool box that contained a hammer, various screwdrivers, a hack saw and a long saw. These were real, or adult if you like, tools. I then turned to the craft table where 5 hot glue guns, a Stanley knife and various sized scissors (and none of which were those useless plastic scissors I had to use when I attended primary school). My buddy and I were astounded at this and talked about the implications of the safety and managing the risk of the children using these as by that time we were aware that the children came and went within the club from each room and that only one pedagogue was allocated to each room. The pedagogue who was working in the craft room that day walked over and listened to our conversation and we posed our

concerns to her. She smiled and just stated, “just wait and see”. After collecting the children from school they went about deciding where they would spend their time. It was remarkable to see how well the young people managed using these tools, aware of the potential dangers, supporting and sharing advice to keep each other safe. One young boy was becoming frustrated trying to saw the lid of a bottle with a hack saw. I was very concerned that he may cut his finger. The pedagogue approached the boy and commented that it appeared that he was struggling and asked if he would like some help. When the boy replied that he did the pedagogue gave him advice on how he could achieve his goal, but at no point took over and did the task for him. I advised the pedagogue that I had really struggled watching this piece of work and wanted to ‘fix it’ for the boy. The pedagogue stated that I would have been stealing an opportunity for the boy to learn. When I quizzed her about the boy being injured she pointed out that it was unlikely that he had the strength to cause himself significant damage and if he did get a small injury he would be comforted, give first aid and most importantly would not injure himself in the same way again.

Within the context of the after school club for older children I had a similar experience in relation to watching a music video in the computer area of the club. A pedagogue had called me over to watch the video. The content of which had made me feel particularly uncomfortable due to, what I would describe as, an adult horror content. The pedagogues who were there then engaged the young people that had downloaded the video in a conversation about the content and used this to discuss how they could keep themselves safe. When I advised that I did not feel that it was appropriate for these young people to be watching the video the pedagogue pointed out that the young people would find a way to watch videos of this nature and by turning the computer off it would only make them more determined to access it elsewhere. Within the after-school youth club they had an opportunity to have a discussion with the young people and to educate them and given they had chosen the subject matter, through the choice of video, they were more likely to engage.

At the residential unit we spoke with a very bright and articulate 21 year old young woman that was currently residing in the through care after graduating from the main area of the residential unit where she had resided from her mid-teens, alongside 3 of her peers that lived beside her. She initially talked about some issues that had taken place in the main unit recently and that she felt that the pedagogues were doing nothing to help the young people there. This appeared to be a source of frustration to her. I asked her about her experience of being received into care and spending a significant period of her life being supported by the pedagogues. I commented that many of them had been working with her for a significant period of her life. The young woman commented that when she was first received into care her life in many ways became worse as she began to take drugs, have unhealthy relationships within her peer group and would not return to the unit, none of which she had done before coming to the unit and that she felt that this was due to her having so much freedom. I asked her how she had made the changes in her life that had made her the young woman she was today. She stated that one night when out with friends she had a bad experience and she realised that she had to make changes in her life. At this point she sought support from the pedagogues and they were able to help her make the changes in her life that she wanted. I asked her if she felt that the young people in the main unit may also need to decide to make changes in their lives and then ask for support from the pedagogues so they can help them to make change just like the process she had went through. She thought about this and replied “yes, but if only they (young people) knew what they (pedagogues) could do for them.”

I recounted this conversation with one of the pedagogues in the unit. They asked what my thoughts were following the conversation. When I had reflected on the conversation I had a real sense that the young person had to go through the experiences that she did in order for her to be able to seek support from the pedagogues when she was ready. The pedagogue replied that this was the case but that while the young person was going through this difficult process, time was spent building a trusting relationships between her and the staff team on a day to day basis, so when she was ready to ask for help she knew where to turn to get support, “building relationships and trust is the most important thing we do.” I advised that I understood this but struggled with the fact that a young person could be allowed to put themselves at risk and that some of these behaviours within the Scottish context would mean the young person would have restricted access to friends in the community. The pedagogue questioned that unless the young person was living their lives then where were the opportunities for them to learn.

The second key theme was in relation to the professional identity of pedagogues and this was something that I had a particular interest in before the mobility. Before the mobility I had been curious, as mentioned earlier, as to how the role of pedagogy as an established profession within the context of child care as a whole could be a useful model for Scotland to consider as a means of aiding collaborative practice between professionals and particularly within the context of residential child care, and other agencies we work alongside.

In Scotland the level of qualification required to work with young people in the settings that I experienced in the placements that were part of the mobility, are at a significantly lower level in comparison to that of the degree level that is undertaken by qualified pedagogues. The qualifications within Scotland are also designed such that persons wishing to work in these areas specialise in their studies to the chosen profession in which they wish to work from the beginning of their studies. As mentioned before in Denmark all pedagogues, no matter which area they work, undertake a general pedagogue degree and then specialise to the area where they wish to work. It was clear to me that this creates what could be described as an ethos to which all pedagogues commit towards when working together and with others.

My first experience of this was during the team meeting held in the residential unit. The focus of the first section of the meeting was a reflective session which was held following a particularly difficult shift which had led to a young person’s placement being ended. Although the meeting was being held in Danish it was clear that there were differing views and feelings about the placement being ended and in the nature that it did. Despite this the staff team all had an opportunity to air their views and work through this to get a shared understanding of what had happened over the placement. This is not to suggest that this good practice does not take place in Scotland and in fact when I spoke with the unit manager after the meeting I was able to tell him what everyone round the table’s opinion was of the situation. When he asked how we knew this, my reply was that I had been in many similar meetings and had been each one of his staff member at one time.

Later I spoke with two of the pedagogues who had expressed different views at the meetings. I told them I was very impressed at how they had managed to contain their emotions and resolve the conflicting views as a group. The first pedagogue stated that while he did not agree he could respect where the others were coming from and that he knew that part of his feelings about his relationship with that particular young person was also an influence on his views. He went on to say that he has to

respect his colleague's views as a fellow professional and their experiences of that young person. I commented that it was the 3p's in action and we all agreed.

It struck me after this experience how much reflection had taken place by all team members before coming into the meeting and the fact that they all worked to the same theoretical model (the 3p's in this case) in doing so made this process easier and more manageable for all.

Another example of pedagogy as an established profession and able to articulate the role in the children and young people's lives came at the after school club. A pedagogue came out of the office and approached me in the café area of the after school club. He advised me that he had just received a phone call from a teacher from the school and that she had been asking if it was possible that a homework group be set up at the club for some of her pupils. The teacher went on to explain that some of the pupils were not completing their homework and that this was a cause for concern. The pedagogue stated he had to tell the teacher that this would not be happening. He explained to the teacher that he was not willing to set up a homework class as the club was a place for the young people to undertake social learning where the focus was on negotiating, resolving conflict, learning together and sharing with or supporting one another. The pedagogue argued that these skills were as important to the young people as academic attainment and laid the foundation for them in later life to help manage relationships in the family, work and the community as a whole. He went on to say that the club itself was set up in such a way that the young people had access to various types of play and that they spent time learning from one another and, should they require it, support from an adult. He also pointed out that if a child did wish to do their homework then this was okay too.

When reflecting on this situation I was taken by the fact that the pedagogue was able to articulate the role the after school club plays in the development of the young people and was clear about this being respected by another professional.

The role of the pedagogue and the work they undertake, in raising the Danish children and young people, appears greatly valued within Danish culture and is illustrated by the commitment shown through the high taxation paid by the citizens. I was reminded that it takes a community to raise a child and in this sense the social care system in Denmark appears committed to this.

My final thought during my time in Denmark was in relation to trust between adults and children. The children in Denmark have pedagogues in their lives from an early age and all through their growth and development, are nurtured by these professionals who work to a shared ethos at each stage of the child's life. I consider this to be perhaps one of the main benefits to the children. While some young people may have a chaotic or even abusive family life, the pedagogues can have a positive relationship with these children from an early age, allowing them to trust adults within their social spaces. The consistency in approach brought about through studying the general pedagogy degree and the ethos that defines the role, gives predictability to young people that they may not experience in other areas of their personal lives. Should a family break down, the children may not be as damaged as they have experienced other positive relationships with adults outside the family environment.

The residential institution that was part of my first placement could accommodate up to 17 young people and had 4 staff on shift at anytime with only 1 staff sleeping over at night. It was clear to me that the young people staying in the service were not as vulnerable or traumatised as the young people I work with in Scotland where such staffing levels would be unmanageable. This is perhaps reflective of where the young people in Denmark are, able to take better responsibility for

themselves and know how to seek help and support as they require it, as despite the difficulties in their lives they have been raised as, and are part of the community, where they are supported to do so by the pedagogues in their lives.

FUTURE

Since returning home and being unable, at this time, to change governmental, professional or educational policy, I have been focused on sharing the message of the importance of the children and young people learning from experiences that they have. That is to say that the process of learning from can be more important than the outcome. What may be perceived as a failure can in fact be the building blocks to future success. As part of this I have also had to work hard at not trying to 'fix' things for the young people but be a support in the process. This has proved challenging as I have had to consider whether the fundamental question of what I perceive as a failure for the young person may in fact be viewed by them as a success and surely they are best placed to know and not I.

I will finish with one final reflection. On returning home I was clear that I was going to work on ensuring that I would support the young people to learn through experience and try to ensure that I was not stopping them from having these out of a need to protect them from when things go wrong. I thought this was going to prove relatively easy as I had been working on this before the mobility. I was proved wrong before I had even returned to work by my daughter. I had brought her home Lego as a present from Denmark. I watched her as she intently followed the instructions to build a tree. As she began to struggle I had to fight back the urge to take over and despite the fact that I was getting frustrated was resolute that unless she asked for help I would not give it and if she did it would be advice and support but I would not do it for her. Eventually she overcame this and began to put the small red pieces that represented apples on the tree. I was so proud of myself for not taking over this leaning opportunity but then pointed out that one of the apples had been put in the wrong place showing her on the instructions. She looked up and said, "I know Daddy! But that where I wanted it to go." She was right.