



An Introduction to Social Pedagogy

SOCIAL PEDAGOGY – DISCOVERING YOUNG PEOPLE’S POTENTIAL

‘The term pedagogue derives from the Greek, and refers not to the teacher, but to the watchful [...] guardian whose responsibility [in antique Greece] it was to lead (agogos) the young boy (paides) to school. [...] The adult had the task of accompanying the child, of being with the child, of caring for the child. This is a kind of ‘leading’ that often walks behind the one who is led.’ (van Manen 1991: p.37)

WHAT IS SOCIAL PEDAGOGY?

Social pedagogy offers a holistic way of working with children, young people and families in ways that support their well-being, learning and growth. At the heart of social pedagogy lies a belief that each person deserves to be treated with dignity and possesses unique inner richness and potential, which we can help them unfold. To do so requires meaningful and authentic relationships that enable us to recognise a person’s potential, their qualities, strengths and interests, and to create learning situations in which children and families can experience their resourcefulness and develop new abilities. This is why social pedagogy is often translated as education in the broadest sense of the term, as connecting head, heart and hands.

In much of continental Europe and other countries like Brazil, there is a strong tradition of social pedagogy as an academic discipline and field of practice. Social pedagogues tend to work in a variety of educational and care settings, starting from the early years, through to schools, residential care, play and youth work, community and family support, social work, addiction work, prisons, support for people with disabilities and care for the elderly. At first sight, some of these settings may not seem to have much in common. Yet, there is a shared ethical underpinning, an understanding that in any of those settings we can make a positive difference not just for the individuals but actually for society as a whole if we create an environment that enhances well-being, supports learning, human growth and social inclusion through empowering relationships. In this sense, social pedagogy seeks to find educational solutions to social issues by connecting individuals to society.

The appeal of social pedagogy lies in the fact that it is more than just an approach to practice; it is an ethical orientation that can be applied to the whole organisation and the wider socio-political context. Its holistic orientation seeks to ensure that every person within society is treated with dignity and feels enabled to unfold their potential.



'Social pedagogy has provided a liberation in my thinking and very much connected me to why I became a foster carer in the first place. Although I still have lots to learn, social pedagogy is really starting to change my thinking about whole life education, myself, other people and ultimately to what it is to really put our foster daughter front and centre and help her to be all she can be.' (foster carer on Head, Heart, Hands programme)

HOW HAS SOCIAL PEDAGOGY DEVELOPED IN THE UK?

Unlike in many European countries, developments around social pedagogy are relatively new in the UK. Whilst there has been over 20 years of research into social pedagogy, the first pilot project aimed at developing social pedagogy in residential child care practice was set up in 2007. Since then more and more children's homes in England and Scotland have begun using social pedagogy as an overarching conceptual framework. Yet, from early on, there has been recognition that social pedagogy should not just be limited to residential settings and could help raise the status of residential child care by being applied more widely. In 2013 The Fostering Network launched the *Head, Heart, Hands* demonstration programme introducing social pedagogy into foster care. More recently there has also been interest in early intervention and family support services, a government-funded pilot with two Camphill communities for adults with disabilities, creative arts projects drawing on social pedagogy, and an emerging curiosity within social work more widely, early years, schools, youth work and youth offending.

At the same time as these pioneering efforts have started to illustrate the potential of social pedagogy, various universities have developed course modules in social pedagogy as part of degree programmes in youth and community work, social work or working with families. There are also currently two existing BA qualifications in social pedagogy, with more under development.



WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGY?

Research by the Thomas Coram Research Unit suggests that 'social pedagogy provides the policy and professional education framework for residential care in Denmark and Germany, where young people "do better" than in similar institutions in England, and the major factors in accounting for outcomes were characteristics of the staff and their approach to practice'. In these two countries rates of looked-after young people completing secondary education are twice as high compared to the UK, numbers of looked-after young people and care-experienced adults in the criminal justice system are significantly lower and health-related outcomes are better too. Many of these differences are also due to differences in the wider care system: countries with a strong social pedagogy tradition are oriented more towards supporting families whereas the UK system has taken a much narrower child protection orientation.

Evaluations here in the UK suggest that social pedagogy can make a substantial difference to frontline practice, organisational culture and the wider care sector. Children's homes that have developed a vibrant social pedagogical culture have generally seen the following improvements:

- for children: improved engagement with education and increased educational attainment, improved relationships with staff and peers, a higher sense of involvement and increased happiness

and well-being leading to significant reductions in physical restraints, vandalism and absconding as well as improved placement stability.

- for staff members: improved well-being and motivation, better relationships with young people, colleagues and other professional groups due to increased confidence, feeling encouraged to be themselves, bring in their own interests and creativity, higher levels of trust and autonomy, and an increased ability to reflect.
- for teams: a more positive, non-judgmental culture in the home, increased sense of ownership for the home's values and vision, improved communication and multi-agency working, and higher staff retention.

Many of these outcomes can also result in significant financial savings for organisations and local authorities through costs avoided in the short, medium and long term. More importantly though social pedagogy can help make a big difference to children's care experience. A young person interviewed by the Who Cares? Trust summarised that, in Essex, 'social pedagogy has made a big difference. Things are easier to do and there's a better relationship with staff. We have campfires, family barbeques, we go on holiday together. It's beautiful here. I see this place as my home, not a children's home.'

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AIMS OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGY – THE DIAMOND MODEL

The Diamond Model symbolizes one of the most fundamental underpinning principles of social pedagogy: there is a diamond within all of us. As human beings we are all precious and have a rich variety of knowledge, skills and abilities. Not all diamonds are polished and sparkly, but all have the potential to be. Similarly, every person has the potential to shine out – and social pedagogy is about supporting them in this. Therefore, social pedagogy has four core aims that are closely linked: well-being and happiness, holistic learning, relationship, and empowerment.

WELL-BEING AND HAPPINESS:

The overarching aim of all social pedagogic practice is to provide well-being and happiness, not on a short-term needs-focused basis, but sustainably, through a rights-based approach. While the terms ‘well-being’ and ‘happiness’ are sometimes seen as one and the same, in our understanding they are notionally different: happiness describes a present state whereas well-being describes a long-lasting sense of physical, mental, emotional and social well-being. In combination we can get a holistic view of a person’s well-being and happiness. Importantly, well-being and happiness are very individual and subjective: what causes happiness is highly individual. As a result social pedagogic practice is very context-specific and highly responsive to the individual rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.



HOLISTIC LEARNING:

‘Learning is the pleasant anticipation of one’s self’, according to the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (cited in Kahl, 2001: p.110)¹. In this sense, holistic learning mirrors the aim of well-being and happiness – it must be seen as contributing to, or enhancing, our well-being. Learning is more than what happens at school, it is a holistic process of realizing our own potential for learning and growth, which can take place in every situation that offers a learning opportunity. Holistic learning is a life-long process involving ‘head, heart, and hands’ (Pestalozzi). Social pedagogy is about creating learning opportunities, so that people get a sense of their own potential and how they have developed. As we are all unique, so is our potential for learning and our way of learning and development.

RELATIONSHIP:

Central to achieving these two aims is the pedagogic relationship. Through the supportive relationship with the social pedagogue a person can experience that someone cares for and about them, that they can trust somebody. This is about giving them the social skills to be able to build strong positive relationships with others. Therefore the pedagogic relationship must be a personal relationship between human beings – social pedagogues make use of their personality and have to be authentic in the relationship, which is not the same as sharing private matters. So the pedagogic relationship is professional and personal at the same time, thus requiring from the social pedagogue to be constantly reflective.

¹ Kahl, R. (2001). Lernen ist Vorfreude auf sich selbst. *Pädagogik* 1, 110-113.

EMPOWERMENT:

Alongside the relationship, empowerment is crucial in order to ensure that an individual experiences a sense of control over their life, feels involved in decisions affecting them, and is able to make sense of their own universe. Empowerment also means that the individual is able to take on ownership and responsibility for their own learning and their own well-being and happiness, as well as their relationship with the community. Social pedagogy is therefore about supporting people's empowerment, their independence as well as interdependence.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES:

In order to realize these core aims, social pedagogy has to be about providing positive experiences. The power of experiencing something positive – something that makes someone happy, something they have achieved, a new skill they have learned, the caring support from someone else – has a double impact: it raises the individual's self-confidence and feeling of self-worth, so it reinforces their sense of well-being, of learning, of being able to form a strong relationship, or of feeling empowered; and by strengthening their positives the person also improves their weak sides so that negative notions about their self fade away.

Due to its inter-disciplinary roots, social pedagogy offers a conceptual framework that can help guide holistic practice. As an academic discipline, social pedagogy uses related research, theories and concepts from other sciences to ensure a holistic perspective. This means that in realizing those core aims there is a lot of inspiration to be taken from what research and concepts tell us about related areas. All four aims point at the fact that social pedagogy is about process. Well-being and happiness, holistic learning, relationship, empowerment – none of these are a product that, once achieved, can be forgotten. This is why it is important to perceive them as fundamental human rights that we all constantly need to work on if we want to ensure that nobody's rights are violated or neglected.

This perspective of social pedagogy means that it is dynamic, creative, and process-orientated rather than mechanical, procedural, and automated. It demands from social pedagogues to be a whole person, not just a pair of hands. It is therefore not surprising that many professionals in Essex and elsewhere have taken a keen interest in social pedagogy and have found it possible to relate both at a personal and professional level to its ethical orientation and ambition to provide children and young people with the best possible life experiences.



NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION

Nonviolent communication is based on the work of the American psychologist Marshall Rosenberg. It emphasises how we can engage with other people in a way that avoids judgments and conflict by expressing feelings and needs. Through this, Rosenberg argues, we can empathise with each other and connect with other people as equal human beings, recognising our commonalities rather than our differences. Essentially, nonviolent communication is underpinned by the idea that we all have the capacity to be compassionate with others but often don't have the language that allows us to understand each others' emotions and needs. Violence and conflict happen as a result, when we try to meet our needs but can't find a way of doing this in a manner that recognises or understands other people's feelings and needs. For example, we might complain about a child's teacher's 'inability' to encourage our child to engage more in class and think that the teacher is simply incapable or lazy. Our response is perhaps motivated by our anxiety that our child won't learn as much or will find the class boring and misbehave. Most likely, though, the teacher will have the same anxieties, not just for our child but for all children in the classroom. And the teacher's reality might be that they feel unsupported in working with a big classroom full of children, all of whom have different needs and learn in different ways. Therefore, if we realise that we actually feel similarly to the teacher and have the same needs, we can avoid accusing the teacher of being incapable (or worse) and instead think about constructive ways forward.



Within social pedagogical settings, nonviolent communication is intended to achieve several aims: to help children understand their own feelings and needs and how these might influence their behaviour (for instance, what they are thinking and feeling when they are angry and lash out), to show children that we care about them by empathising with their emotions and giving them emotional support, to deescalate and resolve conflicts in a way that enables children to understand how others might be feeling. All of this serves to strengthen the relationship between the social pedagogue and the child and set in motion important learning processes for the child. To highlight this, here is an example from a Danish nursery called The Green Giraffe, which uses nonviolent communication on an everyday basis. The summary was written by a Scottish residential child care worker, who spent 4 days at The Green Giraffe:

'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 Steve would make an observation on the child's actions from his position in the room and not 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 Steve had to repeat these same calm, mild mannered, positive, suggestions every day to countless kids year after year.'

When using nonviolent communication we aim to share our observations, how a situation might make us feel or how we guess it makes somebody else feel, what needs of ours are related to that as well as other people's needs, and we make a request:



- 1. Observations:** Very often we evaluate, judge, interpret what other people do and are tempted to say things like 'don't be so naughty' or 'he is a bully' or 'she is so inconsiderate'. When looking at these statements carefully, it is easy to see that they don't tell us much about how the other person has behaved and what really happened – and they certainly don't offer a concrete suggestion of how somebody else should behave, what we would like them to do differently. It is therefore important to distinguish observations from interpretations, to say things like 'I asked you to leave the chocolate bars on the table but when I turned around you took one' or 'when he called his little sister a coward she started crying' or 'she went to get herself a cup of coffee without asking her colleagues whether they would like one, too'.
- 2. Feelings:** Sometimes our judgments make it obvious how we feel, or at least we think they do. But very often we don't talk about how something affects us. It's important to distinguish between what we think and how we feel, to dig deeper and find out perhaps why we have angry thoughts when someone tailgates us in their car and that these angry thoughts were brought on by our feeling scared and vulnerable. That then allows us to express our feelings in a way does not imply judgment or blame ('you reckless idiot should learn how to drive!') but shows how we are emotionally affected by a situation ('when you changed lanes right in front of me I got really scared and felt in danger'). This is more likely to get a compassionate response from someone else instead of leading to escalation.
- 3. Needs:** Behind every human behaviour is a positive unmet need – the need to be loved and the need to belong might prompt us to be generous and kind, but the same needs might also cause a young person to join a gang. So might the need for safety or the need for structure. Nonviolent communication argues that we all have the same human needs, that needs are universal, but we have developed different strategies of how we meet our needs. And if we are not aware of others' needs it is easy to put our own needs first, without regard of others. This is why it is important to express our needs, to guess what somebody else's needs are and to ask, for example 'could it be that you're smoking in your room because you're feeling upset that your mother didn't have time for you and have a need to relax?'
- 4. Request:** In order to show appreciation and help somebody else understand what we would like them to do, it is important to make a request, for example to say 'it is okay to walk here in the corridor' rather than 'don't run in the corridor'. Note that this is not a demand, not an attempt to force somebody, however subtly, to do something we want out of fear, guilt or shame. Rather we want others to really understand and show compassion or consideration for our feelings and needs. So instead of saying 'I'm disappointed that you haven't made your homework yet', which would make a child feel guilty or ashamed, we would perhaps say 'it's really important to me that you do your homework, because I really want you to do well in school. I guess you might be feeling exhausted and want to relax now, so would you be happy to do your homework in half an hour?'

Although nonviolent communication does not just apply to working with children it has particular relevance in this area. It gives us a language to show children how we can live together respectfully, how we can take responsibility for our actions and empathise with others, so that they feel they are equal to us as human beings.

THE 3 PS

THE PROFESSIONAL, PERSONAL AND PRIVATE PEDAGOGUE

Building trusting and authentic relationships with children is very important in social pedagogy. Through relationships we can show children that we care, role model how they can have positive relationships with others, but also learn a lot about who they are. Without relationships we wouldn't be able to really know a child, find out what they are thinking about and how they see the world. And without that we would not be able to help them, to support their development. After all, every child is very unique, and we can only appreciate their uniqueness if we know them well, if we look for their hidden talents and find out what brings them joy or causes them sorrow. For children themselves, these relationships are also very important, and they want to know who we are as a person, not just what we do as a professional.

This can often cause challenges for professionals about what it means to be professional and to what extent we are able to be personal. Social pedagogues would argue that we can't be professional without being personal, so we have to be both. What we must avoid is not the personal but the private self. Especially in Denmark this distinction is referred to as the 3 Ps: the professional, the personal and the private self of the social pedagogue.



The **professional** self is fundamental, because it ensures that the relationship with a child is both professional and personal. It helps us explain and understand a child's behaviour, for example to know that a foster child might refuse to go to school, not because he can't be bothered but because he has had traumatic experiences in education before. So the professional self draws on our knowledge of the law, of relevant policies, and of research, practice evidence and theory connected to our field of practice. The professional self makes the relationship with a child purposeful, because as professionals we will have particular aims for the child, for example for a foster girl to get along well with her siblings. In this sense, the professional self frames the relationship and ensures that we never lose sight of those aims, that everything we do has a purpose.

The **personal** self is about how we engage with the child in a way that shows them who we are, so that we can develop a better, more genuine relationship with them. By actually being who we are and using our personality, but also showing our flaws, we can encourage children to be who they are and not to feel inferior to us. Using our personal self in a social pedagogical way requires a lot of professional reflections (which is where the professional self comes in): we have to know what we aim to achieve through the relationship, how the relationship may help the child, why this requires us to be authentic and how we can ensure that this is beneficial to the child. For example, if a boy has just lost a parent we might choose to talk about someone we have lost who was dear to us, how we have felt and how we have coped with the loss. This might help the child see that he is not the only one who has been in such a situation and has felt very

sad, and it might provide a chance to talk about how we can support him through this difficult period, how he might want to commemorate his parent.

The **private** self sets the personal boundaries of what we do *not* want to (or feel unable to) share with a child and should therefore not be brought into the relationship. The private self is who we are with those closest to us, our own family and closest friends. The private self draws the line between what is personal and what is private, and where we draw the line needs to be our own decision. It is fine to choose not to share some of our own experiences that have shaped who we are, especially if we haven't fully processed them or feel that sharing them would not be helpful to the child. For example, if we are still feeling depressed about the loss of someone dear to us, then sharing this with the boy mentioned above could be very unhelpful for both of us. It is also important to understand that often the private self has an effect on how we engage with a child, for example that we'll avoid talking to the boy who has just lost his parent, which might make him feel even more alone, or unconsciously doting on a girl who reminds us of our daughter. Therefore we need to reflect on our own behaviour and recognise when our reactions to a child may have something to do with what is part of our private self, and to be open to discuss this in professional supervision so that we can gain a deeper understanding of our private, personal and professional self and improve our practice.

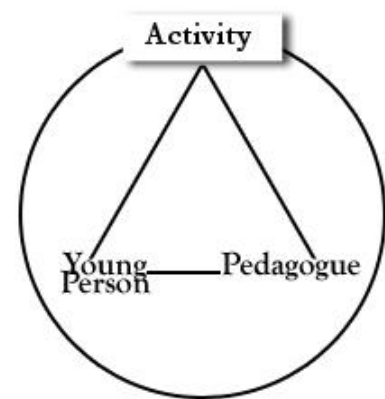
The 3 Ps are all constantly in play during practice, meaning that we need to constantly reflect on how our work impacts on our professional, personal and private self. Especially in situations where we show our vulnerabilities, we must consider how it might affect our private self so that we respond in a professional and personal manner. But the 3 Ps is not just a useful model in challenging practice situations but can be applied more broadly, as this example from a German youth worker shows:

'One of the boys in the youth group was always acting out and drew everybody's attention to him through his behaviour. I decided to give him attention for positive behaviour instead and we ended up playing table tennis. I am pretty good at table tennis and he showed a keen interest and was eager to beat me. Using the 3 Ps I reflected that professionally I wanted us to get along well, to have a better relationship, to have an opportunity to find out more about him by just talking. I also wanted him to get better at table tennis. The personal self was about using the opportunity to talk a little about myself, my family and find out more about him and his family. I also wanted him to feel liked for who he is. I also reflected on how I could best work with his sense of competitiveness – he was desperate to beat me and enjoyed getting close to it in a couple of sets. The private self in me would normally have responded with being very competitive myself, so I had to keep that in check, because my professional aim would have been undermined. I wanted him to have a success experience but one that he'd worked hard for and could feel a sense of accomplishment about. In the end we played for about two hours before he beat me. We bonded really well and he was very proud of himself. Also his behaviour significantly improved and he engaged far more than he had previously.'



THE COMMON THIRD

*“It is not possible to teach.
But it is possible to create situations,
wherein it is impossible not to learn.”*



The concept of the Common Third is central to social pedagogical practice. Essentially the Common Third is about using an activity to strengthen the relationship between us and a child and to develop new skills. This could be any activity, be it cooking pancakes, tying shoelaces, fixing a bike, building a kite, playing football together, going on a fishing trip together – the exact activity really isn't important as long as it has the potential to be more than merely doing something. The Common Third is about creating a commonly shared situation that becomes a symbol of the relationship between us as the professional and the child, something third that brings the two of us together. It allows us to share an activity in a way that we can both be equal, two people connected by something we both enjoy doing. If we undertake the activity with the intention of enhancing our relationship and learning together, it can become a Common Third, but it would be wrong to assume that all activities are automatically Common Thirds (just like blowing into a trumpet does not automatically create a harmonious sound).



The Common Third also requires us to be authentic and self-reflective, bringing in our own personality as an important resource. It is about finding an activity in which we and the child are both genuinely interested. In this sense, the Common Third suggests a child-centred approach and full participation of the child in every step – the child has to be involved on equal terms in all project phases, from planning the activity (if it needs planning) to evaluating it afterwards and identifying what we have learned.

What makes the Common Third particularly important is that it sees us and the child as learning together. An equal relationship means that we both share a common potential for learning and growth, which makes the opportunities for Common Thirds almost endless: the activities could be not just those that we as the adult might be better in, but also those that the child might be more expert in and can teach us, or even activities that we have both never tried and can thus learn about together.

The Common Third is often not a new idea to practitioners in the UK, but it provides much more focus on engaging in activities with children and emphasises the importance of practical, creative activities for developing relationships. It gives professionals a language to express why this is important and to argue for why it is valuable. The following example from a Scottish fostering support worker illustrates this:

‘I had been supporting a young boy who was in foster care for around two years. We had developed a good relationship over this time and had done some fun activities together. The plan was for him to return home

to his mother, and I was to support him with this transition. Although he was a very energetic, friendly boy who talked easily to adults, he was struggling to open up to people about his thoughts and feelings about returning home. I planned to do a creative project as a Common Third with him to help him think about what he had experienced with his foster carer, what he was looking forward to and also fearful of about returning home and who could help him with this. We discussed this project and planned to build a bridge on top of a board, with all his memories of being with his foster carer on one side of the bridge and his feelings about moving back with his mother on the other side. He liked this idea and asked if we could go to the woods to do it. As this sounded like a great idea, we made plans to do this on my next visit.

It was a lovely sunny day, so we took all the art equipment we needed and a rug and found a big old tree to sit under. We laid out the rug on the grass and settled down to work on the project. He decided to use crumpled up tissue paper to make a river to go under the bridge, so we both got busy crumpling and gluing the tissue paper onto the board, and he then put glitter on to make it look like water. He painted the grass on each side of the river and wrote his foster carer's name on the left side and 'mum' on the right, ready to stick his photos, memories and words on. We both experimented with trying different ways to construct a bridge out of twigs and branches that we collected from under the tree. We ended up making it in papier-mâché, which then needed to be left to dry in the sunshine. He said he'd like to try climbing the tree we were sitting under but said he was a bit scared of heights. With a little encouragement from me he tried climbing on the lower branches first to see how he felt and got quite excited. So we ran over to another tree, which had fallen over and had some big, easy-to-climb branches. I climbed this tree too, which he thought was funny. He went on to climb several other trees, getting higher each time. He was thrilled and said he wasn't scared of heights anymore. At the end of the session when it was time to go back to the car he proudly carried his board with the bridge and river on. He was so proud of himself and said several times "I think we've done really well today"; I of course agreed. He was excited to show his foster carer what we had done on our return and put it away safely for us to continue on my next visit. I reminded him and his carer to collect photos and memories to put on the board next time.

When I arrived the following week he was all ready with his board on the kitchen table and his photos. We began working out where to put what, and he told me about each of the photos and the memories they hold. He also had photos of his mum and her new husband at their recent wedding, along with other family members and told me who they all were. I had some ping pong balls in my box of crafts which he decided he wanted to paint and place on the bridge. I suggested that he put the people who could help him on the bridge, but he insisted that he put two on – one being him and the other being his foster carer. The paint was dripping down the balls and he told me that this was him and his foster carer crying when he has to leave her to go home. I suggested that he write down some of his feelings about going home and cut them out to stick on the board. The only feeling he wanted to cut out was "happy", but he wanted to stick it on the bridge. He said this was because he was happy with the way things were, living with his foster carer but spending several nights a week with his mum. The more we created and worked on this project together, the easier it became for him to realise and open up about his feelings and helped me to understand in what way I could help him to feel better.'

The example shows that when being guided by the child's ideas and excitement we can often achieve a much more meaningful, memorable and positive outcome. By emphasising the importance of both us and the child becoming fully absorbed and engaged in the process, the Common Third illustrates that what really matters is how we interact with children – what exactly we are doing together is just the catalyst for developing our relationship, learning together and sharing a sense of happiness.



THE LEARNING ZONE MODEL

*'If you want to feel secure
Do what you already know how to do.
But if you want to grow ...
Go to the cutting edge of your competence,
Which means a temporary loss of security.
So, whenever you don't quite know
What you are doing
Know
That you are growing ...'*

(Viscott, 2003)



Social pedagogy encourages us as practitioners to see any daily life situation as a potential learning opportunity for a child and thus to gradually nurture children's development. For children learning itself is a hugely joyful experience, stimulating curiosity and connecting them to their physical and social environment. The Learning Zone Model, which was developed by the German adventure pedagogue Tom Senninger, is a helpful model to illustrate how we can create learning situations.

In order to learn we have to explore and venture out into the unknown. We already know our immediate surroundings, which form our Comfort Zone. In the Comfort Zone things are familiar to us; we feel comfortable and don't have to take any risks. The Comfort Zone is important, because it gives us a place to return to, to reflect and make sense of things – a safe haven.



Although it is cozy to stay in our Comfort Zone, we have to leave it in order to get to know the unknown. We need to explore our Learning Zone, which lies just outside of our secure environment. Only in the Learning Zone can we grow and learn, live out our curiosity and make new discoveries, and thus slowly expand our Comfort Zone by becoming more familiar with more things. Going into our Learning Zone is a borderline experience – we feel we're exploring the edge of our abilities, our limits, how far we dare to leave our Comfort Zone.

However, beyond our Learning Zone lies our Panic Zone, wherein learning is impossible, as it is blocked by a sense of fear. Any learning connected with negative emotions is memorized in a part of the human brain that we can access only in similar emotional situations. Experiences of being in our Panic Zone are frequently traumatic, and any sense of curiosity is shut down by a need to get out of our Panic Zone. Therefore, we should aim to get close to, but not into, our Panic Zone.

In the transition from Comfort Zone to Learning Zone we need to be careful when taking risks that we don't go too far out of our Comfort Zone – beyond the Learning Zone – into the Panic Zone, where all our energy is used up for managing/controlling our anxiety and no energy can flow into learning.

Importantly, these three zones are different for different situations and different for each person – we all have our own unique Comfort Zone, Learning Zone and Panic Zone. For example, for a child who has grown up in chaotic family circumstances, drinking out of a dirty cup might be perfectly normal and within their Comfort Zone, whereas sitting down for a meal together might be far out of their Comfort Zone to begin with – for children with different experiences this might be the other way around. Where one zone ends and the other starts is very often not as clearly visible as in the illustration above. This means that we must never push someone else into their Learning Zone, as we cannot see where one zone leads into the next. All we can do is invite others to leave their Comfort Zone, value their decision, take them seriously and give them support so they won't enter their Panic Zone.

Within social pedagogical settings the Learning Zone Model is often very useful to consider when we're aiming to create learning situations for children. It is a simple model that can even be used when talking with children to find out how they might feel about being expected to go to a new school and to explore with them how, with the right support, this might not put them into their Panic Zone but enable them to increase their Learning Zone step by step.

The following example from a residential home for children with disabilities shows how professionals can create positive experiences for children even in difficult conditions. The home had taken some of the children to the seaside promenade on a sunny day. When they walked onto the pier it turned very windy though, and one of the boys with autism began screaming his lungs out and crouched on the planks as he got overwhelmed by the sound and ferocity of the wind on the pier. When the team finally managed to get him away from the pier he was soaked in sweat and exhausted. But rather than avoiding the pier in the future the team thought about how they could gradually help the boy overcome his anxieties, so the first time they revisited the pier they only drove to the car park close to it but stayed in the car with him. The following time they opened the boy's window a little, the next time a little more. Thus he always stayed close to his comfort zone and knew that he didn't have to go a step beyond what he felt capable of.

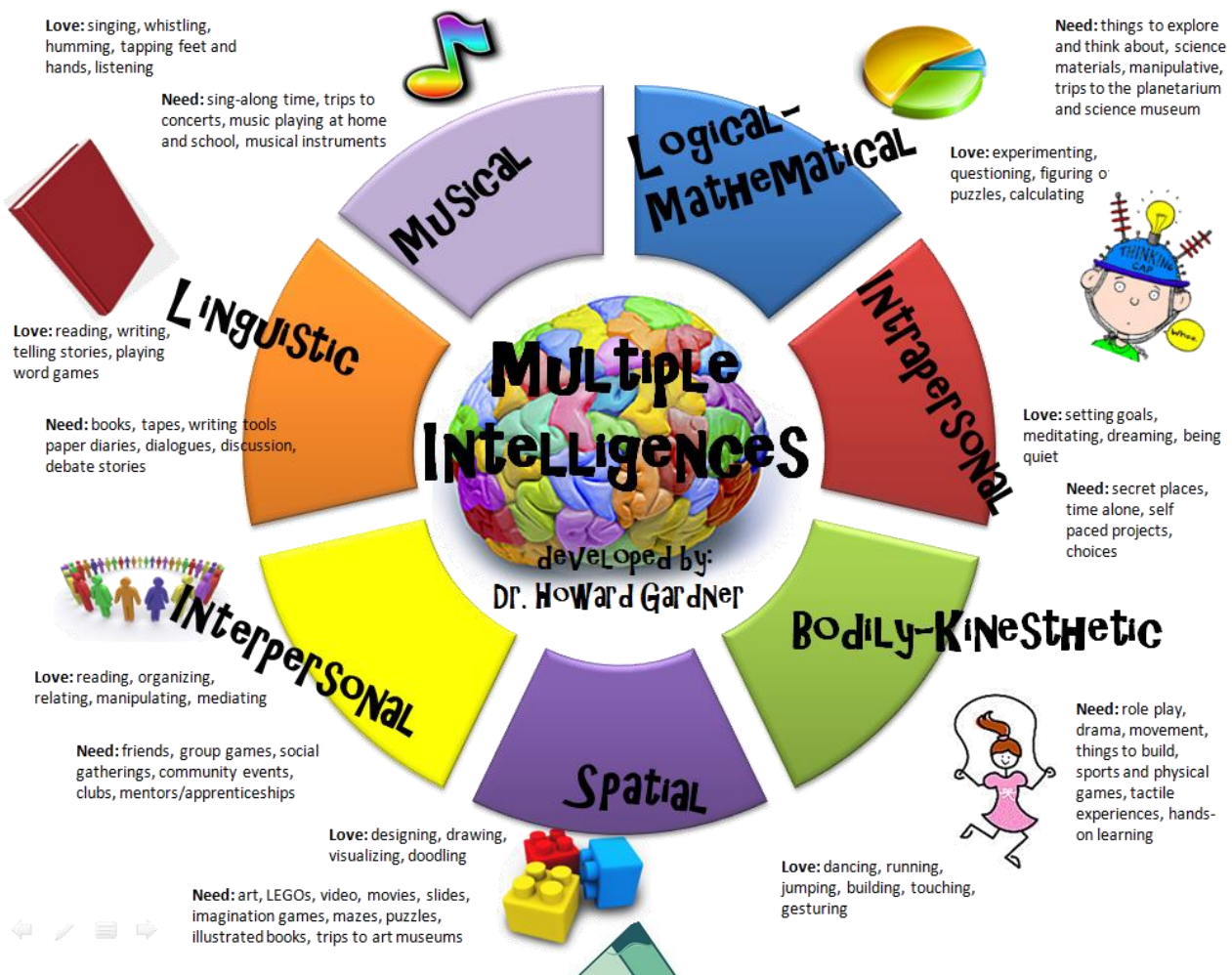
In small steps they got the boy to be okay with the window all the way down, with the door open, with stepping out of the car, then taking a few steps towards the pier on a later visit, until ultimately the boy was fine with stepping back onto the pier. Now the pier has very much become his comfort zone and is one of his favourite places to go to. It would have been easy to avoid the pier altogether, but most likely this would have resulted in the boy's comfort zone shrinking even further – instead the team chose the more difficult but also more rewarding option to help the boy enter his learning zone without the fear of being pushed beyond. By being given the choice of when to go a step further and how much he felt able to challenge himself, the boy was able to expand his comfort zone slowly but steadily – and quite impressively in the end.



MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES THEORY

The concept of Multiple Intelligences was developed by Howard Gardner, a professor of education at Harvard University, and first published in his book *Frames of Mind* (1983). It quickly became established as an important model explaining the different ways in which we learn, think, understand and act. Gardner's main idea is that intelligence has many forms, that we're all intelligent in different ways. Therefore, the common assumption that some people are highly intelligent whilst others are not very intelligent, and that intelligence can be assessed through measures such as the IQ test, is both deeply flawed and unhelpful. It prevents us from understanding intelligence more broadly and from creating meaningful learning opportunities. Sadly, it also means that many children and adults feel judged as 'stupid' or 'bad' for not being intelligent in the narrow way in which we traditionally conceptualise intelligence.

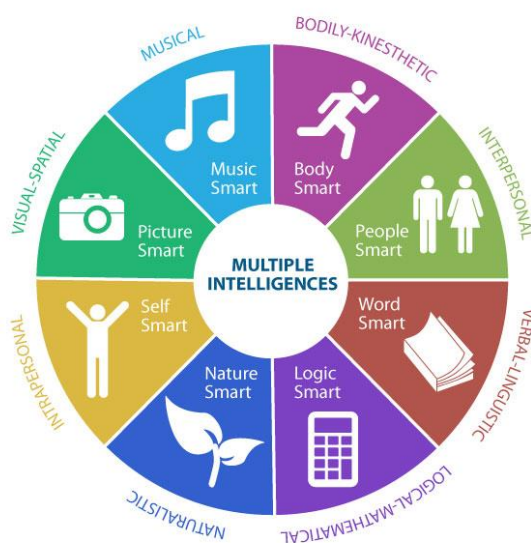
Gardner argues that each person has a unique blend of multiple intelligences, not just one type or level of intelligence. He originally identified seven different intelligences (see image): logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial-visual, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal. The types of intelligence that we possess both affect how we perceive the world (what we might be most in tune with, which senses we might use) and how we prefer to learn (how we have come to understand the world). For instance, a child with a stronger bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence is keen on tactile experiences, might like to touch all the ingredients used in a cake recipe and might most meaningfully learn about aerodynamics with a parachute strapped on so as to physically experience the forces at play. A child with stronger musical intelligence might be more tuned into the sounds around them and might learn a poem much better by turning it into a song.



Gardner suggests that most of us are strong in three types of intelligence, which come most naturally to us. They are likely to influence what we enjoy doing (e.g. playing chess – logical-mathematical, dancing – bodily-kinaesthetic, socialising with friends – interpersonal) as well as how we learn. It is important to recognise that, according to Gardner, all intelligences have equal value. None is better or more desirable or more likely to cause happiness. However, we need to understand our own blend of intelligences and use this to our advantage, because our intelligences provide important clues about how we best learn, what our preferred learning styles are and how we can develop our strengths as well as our weaknesses.

Perhaps the most obvious yet commonly ignored implication of multiple intelligences is that, as human beings, we learn far better and far more effectively if we use our strengths. We'll feel better, more relaxed and more confident as a result whereas the pressure of possible failure and being forced to act and think unnaturally cause stress and have a corrosive effect on our learning. Developing our strengths will make us more responsive to learning experiences that help us develop our weaknesses too. For instance, a child who is interpersonally intelligent might find it a lot easier to develop a weakness in linguistic intelligence and learn French by meeting up with children who speak French or improvise a role play with their friends in French than by reading a book in French – which might be a much better way for a child with strong intrapersonal and linguistic intelligence to learn the language. Neither of these ways are superior and both children could end up doing equally well in French if given the opportunity to learn it in the ways they learn best.

As professionals engaged in children's education (both formal and informal), we therefore have particular responsibility to ensure that learning opportunities reflect multiple intelligences and the diverse ways in which children learn effectively. Gardner's model provides an excellent framework, which has been taken up by many schools and other educational settings, sometimes translated into different areas of being smart (see below). Some schools have gone so far as to design the school environment accordingly, with cozy quiet corners for intrapersonal learners ('self smart' students), social spaces for groups of interpersonal learners, areas where bodily-kinaesthetic learners can be physically active and zones where naturalistic learners can engage with pets or tend to flowers. Even small ways of encouragement can make a big difference: a 'body smart' child constantly fiddling with a pen might find it easier to concentrate if they can form a lump of play-do; a 'picture smart' child might just need somewhere to doodle.



Since Gardner first introduced the 7 multiple intelligences he has further developed the model, which now commonly includes naturalist intelligence as an eighth form of intelligence to describe people who are very in tune with their natural environment, enjoy being outdoors, love gardening or caring for a pet. Gardner has also considered further intelligences, particularly spiritual and moral intelligence, but these are much more complex and therefore also more difficult to measure and evidence.

Finally, as human beings we cannot possibly be strong in all multiple intelligences. In life we need people who collectively are good at different things. A well-balanced world, and well-balanced organisations and teams, are necessarily comprised of people who possess different mixtures of intelligences. This gives the group a fuller collective capability than a group of identically able specialists. We can thus greatly benefit by actively and non-judgmentally engaging with people who are different to us.