



The Implementation of Social Pedagogy from the Perspectives of Practitioners

A Collection of Reflections

In recent years the exploration of social pedagogy has increased considerably within services for children and young people, especially for children in care. Connected to this is a widespread interest in and curiosity about how 'frontline' practitioners could make use of a holistic and overarching concept that defies definitions and does not come with a 'how-to guide'. So how have UK professionals who have participated in our social pedagogy development courses actually embraced and integrated social pedagogy into their practice? This paper aims to give a short insight into the professional and personal development of some of these participants, who went on a further learning path and submitted assignments which were in turn assessed through ThemPra and the University of Lincoln. To establish an ongoing process of reflection and to enable them to trace their learning, it was a requirement for all course participants to keep a reflective diary. These recordings were the baseline of the assignments, illustrating how practitioners have perceived the input from the course and how they have constructed their thinking and practice from there onwards.

To structure the contributions from the assignments, they have been categorised under the three main elements that are always present in a pedagogic setting, focussing on the main elements of the situation described: The child or young person, the pedagogue, and the task.

Regarding the child, this would mean: What has changed for this child in their everyday life and what does this change mean for their further development?

Looking at the pedagogue, the main focus is on: How do professionals now reflect upon their practice, how do they make use of their learning, and how do they utilise the social pedagogic models?

And finally regarding the task: What is now actually seen as an educational task? How is it now approached? What impact has this change had on the children, colleagues and the overall atmosphere?

The following assignment extracts all originate from residential care professionals in Essex County Council, who ThemPra has been working with very intensively. These examples demonstrate both how social pedagogy is different as well as similar to practice, so while they may not necessarily be new to professionals they demonstrate how social pedagogy underpins best practice, affirms practitioners' confidence and their understanding of a situation, and thereby has a positive effect on the children and young people. The excerpts were also chosen in a way that transcends residential child care – we hope that other groups of professionals will find them interesting and relevant for their practice too.

We would like to thank these course participants for what we believe are valuable insights into social pedagogic practice. And we hope they will inspire other professionals to explore the potential of social pedagogy and to critically reflect on their own practice, as these participants have done. Enjoy reading!

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The Child / Young Person

“The third core element¹ of working as a Social Pedagogue is that I should enable children to empower themselves. This involves making assessments in partnership with users, not on their behalf (Biehal, 1993). In my role as a Pedagogue I feel that this element is important as children should have a say in all aspects of their lives especially in important decisions that involve them (Wolff & Hartig, 2007).

For example we had a meeting at a child’s school regarding his education plan and what we were going to do to help him access education at his pace. Taking the Pedagogue way of thinking I took the child along to the meeting so that he could hear what could be done to help him and so that he could hear it first hand. At the meeting one of the professionals that attended was not happy that the child was at the meeting as she felt she couldn’t talk as freely as she would like. Whilst I understood that it was hard for her to convey what she thought without offending the child I felt that it also stopped her from thinking of the child as just a problem and had to make her think of him as a person as she could see him. I found that the child got a great deal out of the meeting as, when we both discussed it afterwards to make sure he understood what had been said, he seemed very happy and instead altered the plan to suit him better. The original plan involved a few more steps in the arrangement to get the child into school but the child decided to skip some of these steps and move straight to being at the school. I could see that the child felt empowered by this decision as he knew that no one was making him do this and that it was solely his decision, by being at the meeting he could also see how many people were prepared to help him and offer him support to achieve this goal. On reflection I was glad that I had taken the child to the meeting as it had given him the empowerment he needed to make the first steps in re-attending school. (Reflective Diary, September 2009).

This element also focuses on the need for children to be allowed to participate in areas of their lives (NCERCC Development Pack, 2009) and their right to be able to participate (Vrouwenfelder, 2006).”

“What I have learned through my recent reflection is that if you enable the children to attempt to resolve their own conflict a solution is often found. It might not always end in the way that you would have expected or hoped. However, the process is important as it gives them the beginnings of developing the tools that will take them into adulthood. [...] By me handing over the authority to the group to participate in [the resolution], the process was an empowering experience for all the children.”

¹ Referring to the Diamond Model by ThemPra (see www.thempra.org.uk/concepts_diamond.htm)

“On first arriving at the Camp all the young people (and adults) were very keen (anxious) to get settled into their cabins, and were less concerned, as a whole, about the activities available and other children arriving. They also immediately squabbled about bunks and who had the best cabin.

I also remember witnessing the same thing at [a previous] Camp: Initially, and at [the previous Camp], I had put this down to competitiveness mixed with anxiety, and even sought to redirect them and get them prepared for the first activity. However, on reflection I was able to consider this in terms of the Learning Zone Model². I was able to respect that, by the young people ‘merely’ leaving their home to come to camp, they had already left their comfort zone, and I could consider their encroaching anxiety as a sign that they were approaching their panic zone. Therefore, I understand that their need to identify their cabin and bunk (and possibly start squabbling) were attempts to relieve their anxiety and recreate their comfort zone.

Similarly, we had brought with us several personal items for each of the kids (as is common practice for us, and me, in my private life), such a duvets and pillows and personal effects, which they were also keen to find a new home for. The importance of this is easily identifiable when considered in terms of their comfort zone as being an area of familiarity, and therefore more easily re-creatable with items of considerable familiarity.

(Excerpt from reflective diary completed 19/08/09 reflecting on various events throughout the Camp based over 17-19/08/09)

The importance of one’s comfort zone is that it gives space to reflect and recover, and provides a sense of security (Thompson & Thompson 2008). Often young people who have experienced trauma may develop a reduced capacity for learning as anxiety and fear can too quickly overpower their ability to maintain their normal pattern of behaviour and they will exhibit signs of having entered their panic zone. It is therefore important that, when offering opportunities to take risks and explore (entering their learning zone), individuals do not feel isolated and cut off from areas of comfort, such as a personally set up ‘homely’ bunk.”

“Through group meetings and active listening we have focused on finding out how the children feel and have empowered them to make decisions alongside the adults. The children were able to verbalise that mealtimes were particularly difficult for them, so together we looked at ways that would make mealtimes easier for them. Since these discussions the adults have been working alongside the children to lay the table; instead of instructing them to do it, we share the task and the responsibility of the chore. In the discussions it was agreed that the food would be on table so that the whole group could be served together rather than having to queue up in the kitchen which prevented the group from eating at the same time and could be perceived as “institutionalised”. Children also felt that the adults often left the table

² Senninger proposes that each person has a comfort zone, a learning zone, and a panic zone. See www.thempra.org.uk/concepts_lzm.htm for more details.

regularly to answer phones or to do other tasks, so it was agreed that the adults would remain at the table until dinner was finished. Then the whole group would share the task of clearing the dinner things together.

The feedback from the children has been very positive, they feel that their views and feelings have been listened to, and this has also been reflected on how the mealtimes have changed, enabling the children to have more positive experiences of mealtimes and more quality time with the adults to help build and maintain positive relationships. The children have also expressed that they feel more valued and that their thoughts and feelings are being taken into account by the adults.”

“I now give great emphasis to using the ‘Common 3rd,³’ approach to building relationships with the young people. Seeking out opportunities via a seemingly endless scope of activities will allow for valuable bonding between two individuals or groups. By giving way too much attention to non-urgent administrative duties I was attuning myself to the office atmosphere of disillusionment. Some staff members frequently use this space to air their grievances regarding the young people and it is easy to become drawn into that negative culture. To remedy this I decided to utilise my time more effectively and get out of my own comfort zone. Since I was no longer a Key Worker I made the most of building up positive relationships with all the young people. I remarketed myself as accessible and traded admin for activities with a sense of urgency! This helped tremendously towards influencing a positive atmosphere in the home, boosting my own morale and that of others. As I grew in confidence I found myself directly challenging or preventing negative practice by planning and agreeing intended outcomes of a shift with my colleagues and the young people.”

“I was quite surprised initially that he answered my question, and at first I did not understand why. Was it not a normal thing to do to ask children I work with what they expect from their relationship with me? As I continued to write, the answer I came to was: No, it wasn’t normal working practice and yet it should be.

During link sessions or just ordinary conversations I ask my key children lots of questions such as, what activities they like to do, what more could I be doing for them that they may not think I am doing for them at the moment, and lots of others. Something about that question made our relationship completely transparent and non-hierarchical, as it should be. When I initially asked him I could see he found it a strange question and yet his eyes appeared to sparkle, which is something that is rare for him. I wondered at this point what he had picked up unconsciously in his mind; although he found the question unusual he was pleased to be asked it.

³ Further details about the Common Third are available on www.thempra.org.uk/concepts_c3.htm

This exercise appeared to have a good effect on the reciprocal relationship with my key child in allowing a more honest and open relationship to develop. In the future I will always ask this question to all young people I work with, so they do not see me as just another adult who thinks they know best about the things young people are looking for in their relationship with adults.”

The Pedagogue

“Up until now I have used reflection as a means to look at a situation that has not gone so well. I now see reflection as a lot more holistic and consciously think about how I approach this. I realise that to develop and grow it is also important to reflect on what goes well too. For me this is a new concept that I hadn’t considered before. [...]

I also have started to realise, through my reflections, that I need to take a deeper level of ownership of my actions and to question what I am feeling – to give myself the time to ask myself the question, ‘why I am I feeling this and what does it mean?’ This has enabled me to question some of my responses to the children’s requests and actions. “For example, one of the children asked me to get him a flip chart out of the art cupboard. There was a lot of activity going on around us at the time. I responded immediately with ‘no, not now’. I was able to recognise my feelings at that moment, which was agitation. I reflected back to him that I have said ‘no’, but I don’t know why I have said ‘no’, only that I feel agitated at this moment and can see that he also feels agitated, because I have said ‘no’. I became aware that it was only a flip chart and questioned why he can’t have this. It became apparent to me that I felt agitated as the children had a lot of items from the art cupboard and in my opinion the lounge was starting to look messy. I thought that what was messy for me was in fact a creative activity for the children. What I was able to do was to acknowledge my feelings and talk this through with the child”. *(Excerpt from the Reflective Diary)*

Fast-forwarding on to recent events, and once again my fourth key child, Sam⁴, has no school placement. I am, however, fully committed to accommodating her needs by including her and others who are off school in a variety of tasks during the day. She is very unsettled by the idea of a new school and has been out of the educational loop for some time. During a school day Sam and I went out for some key time together, which involved a simple walk and lunch out. Being sensitive to her feelings towards school I chose not to raise the issue; however, Sam seemed settled enough raise it herself. We talked about how her trampolining classes went, and she explained what moves she could do and how she would like to continue with this. She then talked about school, as she had witnessed 3 young people refusing to attend this morning. I explained that consistent refusal of things like education and health appointments may result in a placement

⁴ Name changed for reasons of confidentiality

being reviewed, and that she should try and take advantage of the support that is being offered and to not let herself be influenced by the choices made by others. I sensed we both felt comfortable chatting and therefore shared my own personal experiences of school, both positive and negative. Her response was: 'Well, I'm not wearing a uniform!' I gave her a big hug and said 'We will cross this bridge when it comes to it but believe this to be a vast improvement on previously refusing to attend school whatsoever.' We then planned to celebrate by baking a cake when we got home. I intend to inform the staff team of this development at the coming meeting and request that consideration is made to plan a variety of tasks that will provide stimulus throughout the day. (*Reflective Diary 10.09.09*)

The opportunity presented itself to act on my initiatives and this took place during a team meeting. I had put an item of School Refusal on the meeting's agenda, and I talked to the team about when the young people refuse school their expectation is not to be given time or opportunities to discuss this in a relaxed environment. I explained the difficulties of currently having two young people without school placements and how planning needs to happen to keep them stimulated. The same should also be made available for those not at school as a platform to engage them as per the Common Third Pedagogy approach. I mentioned that if the young people are continually dismissed there are consequences. Often they get more and more agitated and tend to push the boundaries by creating their own distraction of winding staff up intentionally. I highlighted a recent event which culminated in two young people being arrested. The team's reaction was very positive, and we agreed that we need to find a new way of working and should attempt to try new methods to re engage them with school'. (*Reflective Diary, 16.09.09*)

Sam is now looking forward to starting secondary school and has been proudly showing off her new school uniform. For me, a valuable learning experience has taken place. Employing the technique of reflection has certainly enriched my practice and given me the confidence to convey my ideas with conviction; and, equally important, Social Pedagogy has helped tremendously towards re-establishing my enthusiasm. It has provided a framework within which to challenge and support events and experiences that occur within the life-space of the home. Using head, heart and hands to share this life-space holistically and therapeutically is, as I emphasised earlier, simply common sense.

I love the Pedagogical way of reflective practice; I see it as essential to the work. Mullins (2006 pg 348) and De Janasz (pg 32) use the "Johari window" as a simple model for looking at self insight, and the reduction of hidden behaviours, through self disclosure and through feedback from others. The "Johari Window" is the window of opportunity. In a crisis unit the young people display all kinds of behaviours, as do the staff reciprocally in their relationship with the young people. If there was more time for reflection rather than just being reactive to the young people's behaviour ... for example a child breaks a window, so what will the sanction be? Staff are missing the communication from the child and straight away resorting to a sanction.

“The Pedagogue is a practitioner . Who they are as a person plays a major part in how they fulfill their role. The Three P’s⁵ plays a major part in how they then work with the young people. The first one, **Private** or privacy: I agreed with the statement and wrote in my diary that I agreed because I thought that one of the Pedagogues’ roles was to draw out the child, not to impart information which could distract them from seeking insight into themselves into seeking insight into someone else. **Personal**: This to me is the pivot of the three P’s. Reflection: Asking questions such as ‘where is the child at this moment in time?’ ‘Where does the child need to go?’ ‘How can I/we progress towards this?’ ‘Am I providing developmental opportunities for the child?’ ‘Am I moving too fast/too slow?’ ‘Do I need group support to give an over view?’ ‘Does the child need a new face who could broaden their developing skills more effectively than you?’ Total transparency and honesty with self is needed. No matter how good we are at something (or how good we think we are), there may be someone else whose unique skills may be just the trigger needed. **Professional**: This also is where reflection is crucial in order to remain objective. When a young person is displaying disruptive behaviour towards you or other people it allows you to key into where they are coming from and why they are acting in such a way.”

Initially I sought to resolve these arguments and stop the bickering, laying down rules that I considered to be in the best interest of the group and also enabled staff to better maintain the supervision of the group. I later considered that, as the young people wanted to demonstrate their ownership of their cabins and were able to discuss, or argue (mostly on equal terms) what rules they wished to abide by, I backed off and allowed them to decide for themselves what they wanted to do.

(Excerpt from reflective diary completed 19/08/09 reflecting on various events throughout the Camp based over 17-19/08/09)

Through this process the young people were able to develop their sense of ownership and also feel empowered to make decisions over an important part of their camp experience.

⁵ The Three P’s is a Danish concept – further infos are available on www.thempra.org.uk/concepts_3p.htm

Task

“Pedagogy has enabled me to think more critically about how I use my time when I am with the children. To really experience and share the living space with the children for me becomes ever more important. This means to be fully engaged and authentic in my relationships. One particular incident enabled me to fully appreciate the time and experience I had shared with a young girl:

I was sitting in the playroom with the other children, and we started an activity that involved someone tapping actions on a person’s back and made stories up to the actions. There were four children and two adults involved, and we would take it in turns to be tapped and be the person who tapped. This resulted in a lot of laughs and enthusiasm to continue with each other. Gradually the rest of the group began to leave the playroom, leaving the young girl and myself. We both were still experiencing the excitement of the previous game. We were looking at each other and she stood up and made a silly noise and waved her hands about. I immediately stood up and did the same thing. She laughed and said ‘copy me’, which I did, and then I said ‘copy me’, which she did.

This went on until her bedtime, and each time we would fall down together on the sofa laughing uncontrollably. As she was going up to bed she called out ‘that was good, it has made me so happy, I’m going to go to bed happy tonight’. I remained on the sofa and felt a warm glow inside. I felt happy, and this was compounded when I heard what she had said.” (*Reflective Diary excerpt*)

“Before the team undertook the [social pedagogy] training the term “education” related more to an academic sense of the word. The training has helped us to look at the overall [meaning] of the word and the importance of educating the children in all aspects of life.”

From viewing this in a social pedagogy way I have now learnt that what we were doing was not conducive or at all beneficial to the child. This was also confirmed when the child still refused to attend school. By ‘boring’ the child we were not giving the child any opportunity to want to learn for themselves or offering them a situation in which they could help themselves – and in actual fact [this] was putting them further into their panic zone, making them feel that there were only two sides: school, which they hate, or being bored, sat in a corridor at home. By giving the child worksheets to complete, this was not creating a situation where it was possible for them to learn, and in many instances the child would rather rip up the worksheets rather than complete them.

By taking a Pedagogic stance with this situation I found that the child would respond more by doing things that relaxed them and that when they were in this space they were taking more in

and actually learning. For example, by taking the child to the local shops to buy ingredients for a cooking exercise, they were doing maths and learning life skills without even realising.

When working with a child who is refusing to attend school I now question myself about what it is I should give them to work from and explore other situations I can create that may give them more opportunity to learn. I also reflect more on how they must feel and how their refusing to attend school is telling us something rather than just them being defiant.

For example, one of the children refused to get out of bed and get ready for school. Rather than force him or give him ultimatums about what would happen if he did not get up, I left him in bed and dealt with getting the other children off to school. There is a lot of chaos that goes on in the morning, and I thought that by leaving him in bed it would stop the situation from affecting the other children and possibly stop them from going to school as well. I also thought that the extra chaos may also have a detrimental effect on the child, who was already worried about going to school. I kept on checking on the boy, however, and gave him his uniform, so that he knew that he was not forgotten and that he could get up and get ready if he wished. Once the children had gone to school I went back up to the boys' bedroom and chatted to him about why he did not want to go to school. I recognised that his reasons for not going made me feel agitated, and for personal reasons I felt that I needed to get this child to school. I became aware that the child may be telling me things he thought I wanted to hear to cover up his true angst about school and instead asked him further questions about what he didn't like about school. From our conversation I understood that the child was worried about a certain subject and instead offered to help him with this. The child got up, and when he was ready we started to read through his textbook. The child said he did not want to sit in the classroom within our home, and I could see that this was causing him to become agitated, so I instead offered for us to sit outside and look through it.

What I was able to do was recognise my fears about the child not attending school and allow him the opportunity to want to learn. (Reflective Diary, September 2009)).