

Social Pedagogy in Britain – further developments



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There are few terms in social work jargon that capture the British curiosity more, lead to more frowns and inspire more fantasy than ‘social pedagogy’ – the responses range from ‘I’ve never heard of it but want to know all about it’ to ‘that’s like teaching, isn’t it?’ and occasionally the more creative ‘pedagogy? Does that have anything to do with feet, like pedicures?’ And although the usual attempts to explain social pedagogy in passing paint a very sketchy picture of the wide-ranging academic field that has developed across continental Europe over the last centuries, many people remain curious or even intrigued by a holistic humanistic approach to working with children and young people (as well as other groups within society) that resonates strongly with their personal attitude and values. Social pedagogy, it seems, is not offering an entirely new approach but rather comes as an enhancement, an overarching framework that brings into coherence existing approaches in practice, providing a clear direction and aim.

Background

From conversations with longstanding practitioners and academics it appears that social pedagogy has already been ‘floating’ around in British discussions around the children’s and young people’s workforce for several decades, often with reference to the ‘social educator’. The first two fundamental steps which put social pedagogy on the fast-track in terms of a structured introduction into the British residential child care sector were the research activities of the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) at the Institute of Education, University of London, and activities at the government-funded National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care (NCERCC).

Over the last decade, TCRU has conducted various comparative research studies detailing the differences in residential care practice across Europe and particularly in Germany and Denmark. Their extensive research demonstrates the benefits of working with a pedagogic approach for looked-after children’s positive care experience and outcomes (for an overview see Petrie et al., 2006). Based on the findings from these studies, NCERCC initiated in early 2007 a pilot project to introduce social pedagogy into residential homes. This project provided opportunities for residential child care professionals to explore social pedagogy in relation to their practice by participating in a six-day training or by having a social pedagogue work alongside staff in a children’s home.

At around the same time, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) announced in its White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* (2007): ‘In order to explore ways to improve the quality of care on offer, we will fund a pilot programme to evaluate the effectiveness of social pedagogy in residential care.’

Since then there has been increasing discourse and activity in exploring how social pedagogy could contribute to the British government’s agenda of improving the quality of life for children in care. And whilst all eyes are on children’s homes in Germany and Denmark and why social pedagogically cared-for children are doing so much better in education and future life, one important factor is often overlooked: the social construction of childhood in care. The way the care system works, who is admitted into care and how; the use of foster as opposed to residential care; the amount of investment into children in care, into their education and into the professionals working and living with them – all these are constructed in a way that reflects how society thinks about and perceives children in care.

In this sense, the fact that a country like Denmark achieves better outcomes for children in care is not purely down to social pedagogy. Rather, social pedagogy is symbolic for Danish societal thinking about children: Denmark is often cited as one of the countries where children are the happiest and enjoy high levels of well-being (see Bradshaw et. al, 2007). This is reflected in its residential child care system, too. Hegstrup (2007) explains that those working in a children's home in Denmark are highly qualified and very experienced professionals at the peak of their careers, as only those are considered good enough to work with the most disadvantaged children in society.

This shows that what is important for practice is not only the individual professional working with a child but also the context: the institution or organisation that looks after children and issues particular guidelines or ways of working for its professionals, and the societal-political framework that has a wider impact on the way the public care system works (for example the referral process or the preference of fostering over residential homes) and on national policies and spending. In order to make sustainable improvements for children in care, these three levels (the pedagogic practice of each professional, the institutional framework and the societal-political context) have to be reviewed and addressed. Social pedagogy, therefore, is not merely how individual practitioners should work, it is also how the team, the organisation and the wider system need to function as an interlinked system, based on similar principles, philosophies and visions.

Constructing a British Social Pedagogic Approach

As an academic discipline, social pedagogy has evolved in close relationship with society, depending on how a given society thinks about children, their upbringing and education. Mollenhauer (1964) therefore described social pedagogy as a 'function of society'. With this in mind, it is impossible to simply transfer social pedagogy from one society to another. Rather social pedagogy in Britain needs to be constructed in dialogue with professionals, building on their existing practice, inspiring them with different ideas, and underpinning their practice with pedagogic thinking, theories and concepts.

Constructing social pedagogy in this understanding is not about changing current practice – or even claiming that it is inadequate and needs to be demolished. It is about improving what works, adding to it, and giving recognition to what is often undervalued. After all, social pedagogic thinking is not entirely new to the UK. Many approaches such as life-space, restorative justice, or therapeutic care build on similar notions about learning and well-being. In consequence, social pedagogy resonates with many professionals and makes much sense to them.

In a sense, the above mentioned social pedagogy pilot project by NCERCC was the first endeavour to explore what a British approach to social pedagogy could look like. As part of this project my colleague Sylvia Holthoff and I developed a six-day training course for 12 professionals in the North-West of England. The training was designed to initiate a dialogue with them and explore together several key areas of social pedagogy in theory and practice: reflective practice, using personality – the pedagogue's role and values, communication, building positive relationships, holistic education, group dynamics and group work, children's rights and concepts of children, as well as participation, empowerment and ownership. The emphasis was on creating learning opportunities for participants that enabled them to grasp social pedagogy with head, heart and hands, so in exploring the themes we used many creative and practical activities that were then reflected and linked back to participants' practice. This meant that participants were seen as the 'translators' of social pedagogy and their experience of how to apply pedagogic concepts into their own residential practice, how to make sense of social pedagogic thinking in their context was a crucial indicator of how social pedagogy can be adapted to British conditions.

To assess how social pedagogy has influenced participants, we met with them a year after the training and asked them to write a short statement about social pedagogy and their practice. Participants noted several benefits that they could see in social pedagogy, primarily around feeling reaffirmed in their beliefs and philosophies whilst recognising that social pedagogy can aid them in improving their practice even further:

“Social Pedagogy has reaffirmed and also reassured [our children’s home] that we are heading in the right direction in terms of the pedagogic practices that we undertake on a daily basis. It has allowed our staff team to continue to work in driving home the methods we use to deliver quality childcare, and this is reflected in the attitudes of the workers and young people alike. Although we have some way to go, Social Pedagogy has allowed us to identify areas of improvement, and empowered us with skills and knowledge to attain our long term goals.” (assistant homes manager)

Throughout the training it became clear that raising participants’ self-confidence by valuing their practice is central to the quality of their work:

“The training in Social Pedagogy has given me new tools within my practice but more importantly reaffirmed what I already believed in. Social Pedagogy to me is a way of working alongside the young person to achieve positive outcomes with the young person being far more responsible for that outcome. The worker becomes a tool to be used to empower the child, to walk alongside rather than lead the way. In East Lancashire those who attended the training have been able to return with the holistic approach Social Pedagogy has given us and build on already good foundations, also to begin a conversation throughout locality children’s homes talking about the ideas behind Social Pedagogy.” (assistant homes manager)

The training also showed that participants often had a good practical understanding of many pedagogic key areas, but were inspired by concepts and theories behind them, which revived their dedication and gave them opportunities to bring in more their own personality and creativity:

“Social Pedagogy, for me, is a holistic way of looking at the care that we provide for the young people that we look after. The areas of it that stood out for me were participation, the 3 P’s and the Common Third. I feel that participation is already a high priority for me, as I believe the young people I look after have a right to take part in the decision making process about their lives. The training on Social Pedagogy confirmed this for me.

I found the concept of the 3 P’s very interesting as I feel that this is an area which is sometimes hard to balance. Through learning about this, I have been able to think about myself in terms of the professional, personal and private and how aspects of these can help form a learning relationship with the young people as well as carry out all the other aspects of my job.

The Common Third is an area of Social Pedagogy that I have developed further where I work. We have spent more time together as a group as a result and this has helped the young people and the staff to bond and work more closely.” (homes manager)

There was also consensus within the group that although social pedagogy is very complex it is also so simple. In a way it does not need much:

“The realisation that having a ‘sense of community’ within the home, where each of us (staff and young people) have the same goals, works so well and everyone seems happier.

Much of this has been brought about by using the ‘common third’. Although we have always undertaken activities with the young people, staff have become more involved in these and are sharing the fun.

The learning style that was used throughout the training was excellent. It enabled a group of strangers to build good positive relationships very quickly. The exercises were not only fun to do, everyone joined in and felt safe and there was a purpose behind them. This kind of learning should be brought into residential training along with the theoretical material that

was shared throughout the training.

Most of all I think the experience gave me a chance to look at myself as a residential worker and review and reflect on my own practice and how I interact with others.

I believe that in all aspects of your work if you keep the concept of ‘head, heart and hands’ uppermost in your thoughts you will have the comprehensive skills needed to be an effective residential worker.” (homes manager)

It must also be highlighted that participants unanimously thought that social pedagogy is compatible with their practice, that they can make use of it without having to change the system – but that wider changes could make their practice even more successful:

“I feel that one of the big advantages of pedagogy in my unit has been how it has allowed us to develop the staff team. It has aided us in changing the culture of the team and develop people’s strengths. This has been done mainly using ‘challenge by choice’, the use of comfort zones [in the learning zone model] and the Common Third; all these have created fantastic dynamics within the group and have in certain ways transpired onto our group of young people, who in turn have responded with amazing positive outcomes for themselves. All I can say is that pedagogy is an amazing tool for staff and young people and bridges the divide (which is sometimes there) and can run along current policies and procedures and surpass some of them.” (assistant homes manager)

Convinced by the benefits of social pedagogy and encouraged in their work, many participants also decided not only to improve their own practice but to promote social pedagogy further, amongst their colleagues, within the organisation and their region:

“Having the opportunity to undertake the social pedagogy pilot scheme has been an enlightening experience. Encompassing a sound theoretical context, alongside a very hands-on experiential training experience has, I believe, given me a greater insight into the benefits of a pedagogic approach. As a senior manager I feel resourced with new tools and an enthusiasm to see a positive change in how residential service provision will be viewed as a service of choice with trained and respected staff. I will continue to disseminate this approach within my organisation through training and information sharing and hope that on a national level social pedagogy will remain high on the agenda.” (senior manager)

The experiences of practitioners participating in the NCERCC pilot demonstrate that social pedagogy complements practice in many respects and finds much to build on. Importantly, many residential practitioners share the same philosophy, the same motivation of making a difference for children in care, and often core aspects of a social pedagogic approach are already in place, e.g. participation. The opportunities that social pedagogy brings for residential child care should therefore not be seen as devaluing current practice. Instead, social pedagogy offers ‘freshness’ – a critical reflection of one’s own practice strengthened with grounded theory, a new language that conveys a positive concept of children, and a new perspective in re-defining residential child care.

Implications for the Further Development of Social Pedagogy

The experiences from the NCERCC pilot project as well as from training professionals in other organisations suggest that at least four aspects are central in order to successfully construct a social pedagogic approach within organisations:

1. Training

One of the main conclusions from the NCERCC pilot is that a mixture of intensive training, followed by direct practice support within the children’s homes seems most beneficial for social pedagogy to be taken on board. The training provides positive learning experiences, giving participants ownership and responsibility for making sense of social pedagogy within their unique working context and taking on board enriching new concepts or perspectives. This provides an ideal basis to support them further in implementing changes within their

homes, thus maintaining the momentum and enthusiasm they have developed during the training and helping them in the process of including their colleagues in understanding social pedagogy.

2. Involvement

If social pedagogy is to make a real difference it requires the support of everyone within a team and an organisation. This is why a critical mass of the workforce needs to gain a thorough understanding of social pedagogy if we want to create sustainability and empower those who are keen on taking social pedagogy into their practice by ensuring that they have support within their team in order to make desired improvements. Generating a critical mass is necessary at every level – within a team, an organisation, residential child care in Britain, and even the country's entire children's workforce. It is important that all staff share a basic understanding and are involved in any changes. The construction of British social pedagogy has to be a grassroots movement, not a government policy.

3. Implementation

Social pedagogy is a holistic approach, and this means that its implementation should ideally be a holistic one, with social pedagogy becoming part of every level of a system. In our experience practitioners have been very open towards social pedagogy, embracing its philosophy, concepts and ideas, and working hard on applying them in their work with children. However, their practice is often regulated in ways that set boundaries to bringing social pedagogy fully into practice, for instance through risk-averse policies. It is not enough that fieldworkers are making use of social pedagogy – organisational policies, strategies, leadership, legislation, regulations, etc. have to reflect social pedagogy too. Irrespective of our position, we all can contribute to taking social pedagogy forward, starting with our own practice.

4. Networking

Networks are crucial for maintaining momentum and generating a critical mass, and these need to be nurtured both within organisations embracing social pedagogy and at a national level by linking those that are interested in taking social pedagogy forward. With increasingly more organisations exploring social pedagogy through the recruitment of social pedagogues from abroad, commissioning training in social pedagogy or buying in social pedagogy consultancy, the circle of professionals engaging in the construction of a social pedagogic approach for Britain becomes wider. This means there is great potential to learn from each others' experiences of how to put social pedagogic theory into residential practice. For this purpose a virtual network has been set up on www.socialpedagogyuk.com and England's section of the International Federation of Educational Communities (FICE) has been revived in an attempt to create a practitioners' forum for social pedagogy in England.

With Essex County Council working together with us over the next three years on a social pedagogy implementation strategy, with the DCSF pilot project about to start in early 2009 and with various other organisations and local authorities exploring how social pedagogy relates to their current way of working, it appears that there is a lot of ongoing activity in adapting social pedagogy for residential child care in Britain. The two long-term projects exploring the benefits of social pedagogic practice in detail mean that social pedagogy seems to have a positive future ahead.

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