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Creating an Evidence Base to Support the Development of a Holistic Approach to Working with Children and Young People in Derbyshire: A Local Authority Case Study on the Integration of Social Pedagogy in Children and Young People's Services

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Creating an Evidence Base to Support the Development of a Holistic Approach to Working with Children and Young People in Derbyshire: A Local Authority Case Study on the Integration of Social Pedagogy in Children and Young People's Services

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THEORY

PRACTICE

RESEARCH

Improving outcomes, particularly those relating to educational attainment for children in care, remains a ubiquitous challenge for local government. Some European countries use social pedagogy as a conceptual framework to improve the outcomes for children. As part of its aspiration to embed a holistic mind-set for staff and carers working with children, Derbyshire County Council has practiced social pedagogy within its children's residential homes since 2010, resulting in positive changes for staff and young people. In 2013 the University of Derby was commissioned to scope the content of the Council's workforce development approach, to explore the idea that social pedagogy is a promising approach, not just in children's homes but also in wider services. The scoping project included surveys and interviews with a range of children's services workers, including those from social work, child and family support, residential and fostering services. The research identified that, where social pedagogy underpins the activities offered to vulnerable children and those in residential care settings, the outcomes for these groups are improved. There is a growing appetite for a programme of workforce development in social pedagogy, however any such programme should be inclusive and offered at different levels. Furthermore, the principles and concepts should be embedded in the existing roles of a range of practitioners working with children and young people. Ongoing research with Derbyshire's children's services workforce will contribute to a growing body of evidence, which supports the development and application of social pedagogy to improve the experiences of children and young people in the county.

Key words: social pedagogy; workforce development; residential child care

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Background

Improving outcomes, particularly those relating to educational attainment for children in care, remains a ubiquitous challenge for local government. However, robust evidence relating to the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving educational outcomes for children in care is lacking (Brodie et al., 2009). A conceptual framework which has been adopted in some countries in Europe to improve the outcomes for children is that of social pedagogy, which has its origins in the nineteenth century. Lyons & Hueglar (2011) note that the development of social pedagogy across Europe has followed different traditions, making it a difficult concept to define for a UK audience, so they define it broadly as an element of education that includes informal learning processes that contribute to human development. Petrie et al (2006) describe it as 'education in its broadest sense' and 'bringing up' (p. 3) children in a way that addresses the whole child. Kyriacou et al (2009) describe social pedagogy as referring 'to the theory and practice underpinning the work of those professionals involved in supporting the personal development, social education and overall welfare and care of the whole child' (p. 101). Others have attempted to define it according to the areas of practice that it represents. From a more continental perspective, Eichsteller & Holthoff (2011) argue it contains four areas of practice:

- A multi-dimensional and holistic understanding of well-being;
- Learning from a standpoint of the 'competent' or 'rich' child, where education does not impose but facilitates children's capacity to think for themselves;
- Authentic and trusting relationships between professionals and young people that acknowledge and work with both the authoritative and affectionate, as well as retaining a sense of the private; and
- Empowerment or promoting active engagement in one's own life and within society, and as such is fundamentally concerned with children's rights and developing the skills for living in a democracy.

Berridge et al (2011) note that researchers from a European tradition indicate that social pedagogy is not an approach or profession or a set of techniques that can be easily learnt but a perspective that pervades all areas of practice involving the welfare of children. This provides a distinction between social pedagogy and many other approaches to workforce development – its emphasis on values provides an ethical framework for organisations and for practice. As argued by Coussée et al (2010), 'social pedagogy can contribute to a set of shared values and skills across the child-centred sectors' (p. 794). Social pedagogy is also a conceptual framework closely linked to mentoring in that it underpins personal empowerment and change management (McGowan et al, 2009; Morgan, 2012). Paget et al (2007) concluded that social pedagogy as a conceptual framework should underpin the work of all individuals working with children and young people, particularly where mentoring or supportive relationships are being developed. In this sense, social pedagogy could apply equally to youth workers, teachers, child care and play workers, community workers, youth justice, counsellors and guidance workers as well as to members of social care teams and foster carers. They also note that social pedagogy can underpin work with adults as well as with children and young people.

The appeal of social pedagogy for English children's services is well demonstrated by Petrie et al (2006) in their exploration of the social pedagogic approach for workforce training and education. Within the study, they compare children's residential care in England with that of Germany and Denmark. Their findings suggest that staff turnover, recruitment and retention caused the greatest concern in England and least in Denmark. Their findings also suggest that better life chances, such as lower teenage pregnancy rates, engagement in criminal activity and young people not in education, employment or training, were associated with the professionalised workforce and reflexive and child-centred approach of Denmark and Germany. Social pedagogy appeals to the ambitions of children's services departments both in terms of outcomes for children and young

people, but also of addressing cultural and procedural barriers to service improvements. However, research into the impact of a pilot which employed European social pedagogues as workers in English children's residential homes concluded that this had not always resulted in social pedagogical approaches permeating practice throughout the homes, and as a consequence the impact had been limited (Berridge et al, 2011). As such, future social pedagogy developments would require a deeper permeation of practice and organisational culture to achieve a greater impact.

In searching for a more effective approach to improving the outcomes for children in Derbyshire and specifically those in residential homes, members of Derbyshire County Council who remained committed to the potential of social pedagogy secured resources to invest in a programme of workforce development. This article explores the findings from a scoping exercise, which considered a number of options for the delivery of social pedagogy training and development in the Derbyshire County Council Children and Younger Adults Directorate. It also presents the outcomes of this research in terms of policy and aspiration.

Context

Derbyshire County Council has aspired to embed a holistic mind-set for all staff and carers working with children. As part of this aspiration, social pedagogy has been practiced within Derbyshire's children's residential homes since 2010. A pilot, which offered accredited social pedagogy training to nine staff, resulted in new insights into professional practice and a commitment to share new and emerging good practice. As a consequence, in-house training was delivered to over 200 Derbyshire Local Authority workers by the nine members of staff who attended the pilot training. Derbyshire County Council have attributed a number of changes, which have arisen since the onset of these training initiatives, including a reduction in staff absence, improved living and working environments and improved responses from children in residential care – for example, runaway episodes from residential homes reduced from 205 in 2010/11 to 76 in 2012/13. The changes have provided the evidence needed to secure commitment for further investigation and resources.

In 2012, Derbyshire County Council was successful in becoming a *Creative Council* as part of a national programme led by NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) and the Local Government Association (LGA). Through this initiative, social pedagogy was identified as one of the most promising approaches to solving some of the most challenging problems for local government. A recent position statement from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS, 2013), acknowledges that 'where authorities have persevered with the approach initial resistance has been superseded by a light bulb moment when it became clear that this approach can bring improved outcomes for young people and a better, more satisfying, working experience for staff' (p. 5). This mirrors the experience in Derbyshire and supports the idea that social pedagogy is a promising approach, not just in children's homes but also in wider services (Bowyer and Wilkinson, 2013). As part of the Creative Councils journey, the University of Derby was commissioned by Derbyshire County Council to scope the content of the Council's workforce development approach to social pedagogy.

Scoping workforce development in social pedagogy

The scoping project involved a range of research approaches, including a desk based review of literature, conversations with practitioners, managers and foster carers and an online survey. In all, 209 people participated in the research. Table 1 below presents the numbers of participants involved in each research activity. Practitioner and manager respondents represented a comprehensive range of professional backgrounds and roles including social workers, family care

workers, education welfare officers, careers advisers, teachers, multi-agency team members, residential care workers, educational psychologists and fostering team managers.

Table 1: Research participants

Research group	Research activity	Numbers involved
Practitioners	Telephone interview	6
	Focus group	19
	Survey	69
<i>Total practitioners</i>		94
Managers	Telephone interview	1
	Focus group	2
	Survey	31
<i>Total managers</i>		34
Foster carers	Telephone interview	6
	Focus group	12
	Survey	63
<i>Total foster carers</i>		81
Total research participants		209

The results from the research demonstrated overwhelmingly that there was an interest in and commitment to developing knowledge and skills in the area of social pedagogy across all of the participant groups. However, a number of interesting insights emerged during the research and were used to inform the policy and approaches adopted by Derbyshire County Council.

12 of the 80 participants in the research found the term *social pedagogy* difficult to understand, despite being receptive to some of the key concepts that it describes. The findings of the scoping study therefore suggested that the use of the term *social pedagogy* should be carefully considered when developing any future strategy. Views were divided about the use of the term. Whilst it is important for professionals to be able to embed their practice in understood and accepted theory and concepts, it is also possible to recognise that using unfamiliar language is not helpful when developing and embedding a new approach across a range of stakeholders with different levels of education and professional experience. It was concluded that some care should be taken to maximise positive engagement by choosing to communicate the concept using clear and widely understood language.

The research noted that embedding social pedagogy across the workforce will have the most impact if there is a training strategy and framework which includes non-accredited and accredited training for all levels of workers, including the integration of social pedagogical ideas and concepts in any induction activities.

One question that the scoping study addressed was what form of accreditation might best support the development of the workforce. The research indicated that a level 4 accredited award

(equivalent level to the first year of a university degree) in social pedagogy would have the greatest appeal to the maximum number of staff. However, it was also noted that the strategy would need to attend to progression routes into and beyond this level of learning to ensure that the entire children and young people's workforce could be engaged in it.

Embedding social pedagogy in the Derbyshire County Council approaches

The outcome of the scoping exercise was a renewed commitment to social pedagogy as the underpinning conceptual framework for work with children and young people across Derbyshire and particularly those who are considered vulnerable and for those in residential care. This section outlines the policy and practice implications of the decision to embed social pedagogy in the work of the Directorate.

An increasing body of knowledge and practice of social pedagogy in the UK accepts that it is undesirable, impossible even, to achieve the transfer of whole systems of training, qualification and practice from our European counterparts to the UK – a country without a distinct social pedagogy tradition (Kornbeck, 2009). The transfer of policies from one country to another can be fraught with difficulties due to the different social, cultural and economic contexts which exist (Sultana, 2009). However, research points to ways in which social pedagogy as a model could fit with the development of training and services for England (Petrie et al, 2009). Derbyshire is exploring this opportunity, with the ambition of creating a workforce, not of social pedagogues, but of social pedagogy practitioners: staff and carers with an understanding of the principles of social pedagogy, a grasp of the relationship between theory and practice and the capability and passion to continue to learn and reflect on its application to their own working life.

Some contemporary thinking in the UK identifies the need not for social pedagogues as a separate professional group as in European settings, but a UK model which recognises the specific cultural nuances and is expressed as a mind-set adopted by all rather than a specialist profession (Paget et al, 2007; DCSF, 2008; Stevens, 2010). Given the diversity of concepts associated with social pedagogy, Cameron and Moss (2011) identify that the term *pedagogies* may be more appropriate. The need for further research and exploration in this area is also identified, to explore further the potential for social pedagogy to inform policy and practice in the UK, and that work with researchers, academics, practitioners and social pedagogues is required to develop a model of social pedagogy that can work in the UK context (Smeeton, 2011).

The embedding of social pedagogy within Derbyshire will be enabled through a programme of workforce development. This will include growing the currently provided in-house two-day social pedagogy training to include a bespoke degree level module in social pedagogy by the University of Derby. Training will be targeted at all those who work with children and young people in care, including foster carers, social workers, residential staff, youth workers, personal advisors and family support workers, with 100 people from across the spectrum of the workforce completing the course in the first two years.

In addition to workforce development, a programme of research will be undertaken to determine any inconsistencies, ambiguities and contradictions in the behaviour of staff, provide the opportunity to explore interests and understand relationships for those developing learning and practice in social pedagogy.

As the approach develops and is evaluated, the Council will be mindful of key issues from the literature. These are likely to include 'Haltung' (Eichsteller, 2010?), broadly understood as a personal and professional, ethical stance or attitude. In some UK explorations of social pedagogy approaches, this has been found a useful concept to describe the shift in practitioner's personal resourcefulness (Smith, 2012). It will also consider and explore social pedagogy within the framework of workforce development, which forms part of the local authority's strategy to improve

outcomes for children in care by enabling changes that influence the lives of young people. The evaluation will also explore the extent to which practitioners feel that 'it is about how to work with the process of change, how to find resources together with the client to think of oneself in new and ground-breaking ways' (Storø, 2012, p. 26).

In addition, the knowledge and application of the concept of the *Common Third* will be examined in order to understand how practitioners are using such theory within their social pedagogical practice. As Storø (2012) identifies, social pedagogy is not only about doing – the action must be connected to theory, and the trained professional should always have the possibility, and the obligation, to consult theory to find the best possible action in every situation.

The cultural approach to risk in local practice and provision will also be explored, as it has been acknowledged that social pedagogy has the potential to challenge bureaucratic and risk averse practice (Berridge et al, 2011). This is particularly poignant for children's services at present following the Munro review (2011). The findings of the review indicate that anxiety is an important factor in determining the practice of those working in social care. The false hope of eliminating risk has contributed to an increase in defensive practice, which can result in the interests of children and young people being overlooked. The Munro report (2011) notes that it is major challenge to all involved in child protection to make the system less 'risk averse' and more 'risk sensible' (p. 60).

Also, any sense of organisational cultural change will be explored in terms of how practitioners view the profile and importance of education in support for young people in care (Hämäläinen, 2012), together with how policy, regulatory and inspection frameworks nationally and workforce development strategy and policy locally either support or create barriers to the successful application of social pedagogical approaches.

Over coming years, the learning from the Derbyshire approach can complement, support and inform the UK social pedagogy knowledge base. By sharing the learning journey with programmes such as the *Head, Heart, Hands* demonstration programme led by the Fostering Network, UK social pedagogy can evolve collaboratively, in response to emerging understandings of how approaches can be most effectively deployed. Practice methods and beliefs are inextricably linked with the social, economic, political and cultural contexts in which developments of social pedagogy exist. As such, exploring the role of the local authority organisation, its culture and its leadership, including management and supervision, will form a critical element of the learning to be obtained from this, as from other, critical evaluations of UK programmes. In doing so, hopefully, the understanding of and commitment to social pedagogy across the UK, particularly in a time of economic challenge for local authorities, will continue to grow.

Conclusion

Derbyshire County Council Children and Younger Adult's Directorate has been undergoing a social pedagogy learning journey since 2010. Local research has identified that, where social pedagogy underpins the activities offered to vulnerable children and those in residential care settings, the outcomes for these groups are improved. Research suggests that there is a growing appetite for a programme of workforce development in social pedagogy, however any such programme should be inclusive and offered at different levels. The principles and concepts should be embedded in the existing roles of a range of practitioners working with children and young people. As a result of these insights a new accredited programme is being developed, which will be offered to 100 practitioners drawn from across the range of the children's and young people's workforce. This new approach will be the focus of new research which monitors the impact of the training on the behaviours of practitioners and the outcomes for children. By researching the impact of the training and development strategy, Derbyshire will be able to contribute to a growing body of evidence

supporting the development and application of social pedagogy to improve the experiences of children and young people in the county.

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