



Key Concepts in Social Pedagogy — or How to See Everyday Life in Children’s Residential Homes From a Social Pedagogical Perspective

Sylvia Holthoff¹ and Lotte Junker Harbo²

¹ThemPra Social Pedagogy C.I.C., United Kingdom

²School of Continuing Education, VIA University College, Denmark

“Now I can actually play soccer with the young people without fearing that my colleagues think I am escaping the paper work.”

These were the words from a participant in a social pedagogy training course in England a few years ago. This understanding emerged through in-depth discussions and activities around key social pedagogical concepts, such as the ‘common third’, the ‘3Ps’, the ‘zone of proximal development’ and the ‘learning zone model’. In this article we will explore how a joint activity, for example, playing soccer, can be seen as a pedagogical activity and with what intentions it is undertaken to make it pedagogically purposeful.

A plain observation of the photograph (Figure 1, next page) would state that it shows a man playing soccer with four children on a lawn next to a pig yard. Three of the four children and the man wear shorts and T-shirts. One of the children is wearing trousers and a sweatshirt. Two of the children and the man are running, one child is standing upright, looking behind the camera, one stands still, leaning forwards. Based on an observation like this, an activity like playing soccer does not hold that much meaning and our participant in the social pedagogy training course might be right about his colleagues thinking that he is escaping paperwork when playing soccer.

When interpreting the earlier image (Figure 1) from a social pedagogical perspective, using the ‘3Ps’, ‘common third’, ‘learning zone model’ and the ‘zone of proximal development’, we get an opportunity to see other aspects of experiencing things like playing soccer together and how social pedagogues draw out these aspects.

With this article we aim to give a short insight into what, from our point of view, lies at the centre of social pedagogical work and that the different concepts this academic discipline provides can be seen as the translation from its theory into practice. The development of the introduced concepts is based on the aspiration to provide us, as social pedagogues,

with clearly defined tools that enable us to be self-responsible, autonomous practitioners who work in a team context within the values and norms of our organisation and wider community. It is also the aim of this article to draw out the interrelations and reflexive nature between the different concepts and how they gain value and impact by being contextualised with each other.

In our work of introducing and implementing social pedagogy within the United Kingdom (UK) social sector



ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Sylvia Holthoff, Director, ThemPra Social Pedagogy C.I.C., Ueckerstr. 12, 17373 Ueckermünde, Germany. E-mail: sylvia@thempra.org.uk



FIGURE 1

Using soccer as a pedagogical activity.

practice it has often been echoed by participants that the following concepts relate really well to what they are doing and provide them with a clear indication of how to translate theoretically underpinned principles, such as ‘building strong and positive relationships’, into their everyday practice. With this reflection the participants have conceptualised one of the main aims of social pedagogy: The aspiration of jointly developing the theory and practice of professional social interactions to provide an understanding and tool that enhances and promotes the development of the individual and communal wellbeing.

This perspective on social pedagogy is also shared by the authors of this article. Although coming from different countries and having diverse societal and cultural backgrounds, both share the same stance towards their social pedagogy practice and theory. This overlapping identity and understanding is based on a fundamental concept of *Haltung* that consequently gives all practice and theory a strong orientation. *Haltung* is a moral and ethical position that the person takes and which runs through the person’s personal and professional life and is evident at all times in their actions and opinions.

The notion of *Haltung* also leads to reflection, which is one of the core elements of social pedagogy. Reflection from a social pedagogy perspective is based on intensive observation of practice related social interactions and our personal and private response to these. Through reflection the practitioner is able to develop a practice and stance that is not solely led by emotions but takes the wider circumstances of

the situation and theoretical aspects into account. The process and outcome of reflection are much valued by the practitioners and their organisation, which becomes evident when regarding the amount of time that is dedicated to this in the daily routine. In the following paragraph we are referring to a model of reflection that considers the different perspectives of the practitioner with regard to their practice.

The 3Ps

The first concept we would like to introduce is the 3Ps. It is a tool that enables practitioners a structured approach to self-reflection and practice development. It offers three different perspectives on the role of the professional residential worker. They stand for the *professional* social pedagogue, the *personal* social pedagogue and the *private* social pedagogue. These three are always present in practice, and all interactions have to be seen in the light of each of the 3Ps.

The professional perspective on playing soccer together acknowledges all the benefits that social interactions can have for the development of the individual and for the growth of positive group interactions. One of these benefits could be that exercise is good for children and fun exercise even better. But playing soccer, for example, also offers a chance to gather a group of children and to engage them together in a physical way, in a rather structured activity with clear rules.

Within these boundaries of rules the players can test out their strengths and further develop their relationships. In this interaction we, as social pedagogues, have the opportunity to make an impact on the building of positive and strong rela-

tionships within the group of young people and between us and the group. In the situation of playing soccer this could be done by clearly role-modelling values like fair play or a non-blame culture.

With our professional social pedagogic perspective on situations we will observe situations, reflect on the relationships between the group members and ourselves and what we know about the young people's background. In this situation it will also be important to keep the aims in mind, which we and the team of other professionals have set out for the development of the young people. Together with theoretical knowledge (e.g., on group dynamics) this will feed into an immediate response within the interaction of playing soccer. From a professional perspective these responses are not led by a book of rules or guidelines, but by professional judgement. They will always be based on the values and norms of the team/organisation and are tailored specifically to that individual situation.

Within the concept of the 3Ps, the professional perspective is always linked with the personal perspective. This perspective on social pedagogical practice acknowledges the importance of the personal relationship between the social pedagogue and the young person. From a professional perspective, strong and trusting relationships can only be built and continuously nurtured if the social pedagogue is able to offer to the young person an authentic and personal level of interaction. Practically, this means that as social pedagogues we are not a blank canvas that conveys nothing about our life experiences, likes and dislikes, hobbies and so on. We aim to offer to the young person a relationship in which, within clear boundaries, both sides invest emotions and share details about themselves more equally. Taking this, and looking at the scene of the group playing soccer, the personal perspective becomes central to the positive development of the individual and the group culture. Without the social pedagogue using himself and his personality in the interaction, his role would be reduced to a supervising and monitoring level, thus making his role less equal and less relational.

The personal perspective of the 3Ps leads directly to the last main aspect of the concept: the private perspective on professional practice. Awareness of, and reflection on, the social pedagogue's private perspective on practice and the effect this can potentially have on his reactions are key to the impact the social pedagogue can have in his practice. The private perspective is something that should not be present in work with the young people, in the sense that as social pedagogues we should not share information that is private to us. On the other hand, it has to be kept in mind that the private P — for example, our feelings, our emotions and the way we have been brought up — inevitably has an effect on how as human beings we interact. This makes ongoing reflection with colleagues and leaders/managers essential and ensures that the use and awareness of the 3Ps is always centred on the children and young people we work with and benefits them.

Relating this to the game of soccer we may have had some prior negative experiences in connection with playing soccer, but when deciding to play it again, we need to reflect on the effect these may have had on us and how they then might impact on our observation and judgement in this new game. For example, if a young person verbally insulted us in the last game and that made us feel unvalued, then, without reflection, this might lead to us being anxious and projecting private feelings into the new, unrelated game of soccer.

Taking this example it becomes evident that there is a strong interrelationship between the different areas of the 3Ps. Consequently, this means that when using them as a means of reflection we cannot just focus on one area, we always have to view one situation, our emotions and social interactions from all three angles.

With the 3Ps the practitioner is offered a tool that provides him or her with a framework that enables continuous reflection on the different areas of work-related actions and responses in a structured way. Practiced on a long term basis this also is the starting point of a sustainable self and practice development, likewise for the individual and the team.

The Learning Zone Model

Reflecting the private perspective is a neverending process that can also lead to the recognition that as social pedagogues we are afraid, or at times too comfortable, to change our behaviour. This leads us directly to the learning zone model (Senninger, 2000), a concept that offers an understanding of the relevance of approaching the 'new and unknown' for our continuous further development and what we, as social pedagogues, need to put into place to make this process possible and positive. This model applies equally to social pedagogues as well as the young people we work with.

At the centre of the learning model is the comfort zone (see Figure 2). It symbolises the area within our actions and behaviours that we are comfortable with and where we feel safe. This might be situations that are easy to approach and handle for us or an environment wherein we feel secure and protected. The comfort zone is something that is important for the human being to have as it offers a safe haven to reflect, digest and recuperate and gives us a source of self belief in our own actions.

What the comfort zone does not offer is aspects of learning and development, which can only be achieved by stepping out of the area of being fully comfortable. By entering the unknown we are required to respond to and interact with situations unfamiliar to us, and in this process we extend the diversity of our actions and knowledge. Parallel to this we also experience that positive learning processes have an ongoing positive effect on the development of our comfort and learning zones. With each positive, encouraging experience of leaving the comfort and exploring the learning zone we get more confident and both zones expand.



FIGURE 2

The Learning Zone Model (Senninger, 2000).

Both zones are highly individual for every person and are not clearly recognisable by others. For example, something that is within my comfort zone might already be in the learning zone of someone else. This also applies to the next zone of the model, the panic zone. The panic zone is symbolic of situations and environments in which we have the feeling that we have no resources to cope and are just focused on survival, not on learning. The panic zone is an area which should never be reached in our pedagogical interactions, as it has traumatising effects and hinders future learning. Furthermore, it is very likely that it will also have a negative effect on our relationship to the young person, as our actions have led the young person into this level. It is here where the reflective practitioner is urgently required, as such situations can be influenced and guided through good professional preparation, observation and empathic responses; and by this an escalation into the panic zone can be prevented.

Taking into consideration that as ‘outsiders’ we cannot assess where the comfort zone and the learning zone end and where the panic zone starts for the other, it is important to leave the ownership for the learning process with the other person. Practically, this means that we need to create a learning setting wherein the individual is tempted and feels safe enough to leave the security of their comfort zone to step into the learning. In situations where, for example, a young person refuses to take this step, it is our role to identify and try to resolve together with them what the hindering factors for their refusal are, rather than to ‘push’ the young person further into the zone of panic. In all of our interactions it is essential for us individually, and as a team, to accept and respect the boundaries that are set by the young person if they do not wish to continue with a certain task or conversation. Furthermore, it is essential for

us as practitioners to reflect which goals we are aiming at for the young person. Are the young person’s interests at the centre of our focus or are we led by our private ambitions?

Linking the learning zone model to our game of soccer we could, for instance, use soccer as a meaningful activity when a young person is moving into our children’s home. Often young people who are new in a children’s home seem to feel most comfortable in their rooms or somewhere near adults. Starting a game of soccer could be one way of inviting the young person into the learning zone, thus giving the opportunity to learn about culture, communication and interactions among young people and staff in that home in a fairly structured situation. Of course, in some situations soccer could trigger panic with some young people, and then we would have to use all 3Ps in the judgement of such a situation to ensure the focus is still in the learning zone and not on overstepping the young person’s boundaries into panic.

The Zone of Proximal Development

Another concept that social pedagogy provides as a tool to use in the judgement of certain situations is the zone of proximal development. This model was developed by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) and describes how learning develops in the interaction between the individual, culture and nature. Vygotsky talks about situations that the child or young person can master and then about situations that the child or young person could *potentially* master — this area of potential forms the zone of proximal development. By this he means that the human being, thus not only a young person, can extend his own learning horizon through socially interacting with another person that has a further understanding in a specific area of knowledge or skill. Most effectively this would take place in a learning setting, where the learner and the learning facilitator have a positive and valuing relationship with each other. Such an interaction can, for example, take place between an adult and a young person, but can just as well be between peers or from a young person towards an adult.

Consequently, to Vygotsky all kinds of psychological learning and development take place in social interaction — as he says: ‘what children can do today in social interaction they can do on their own tomorrow’ (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87).

With Vygotsky’s model of relational learning we can emphasise the importance of active participation by us as adults. Following the example with the new resident in a children’s home, it is of major importance that as adults we participate in the game of soccer, as at this point and time the positive social bond we hold with the young person is for him the catalyst enabling him to participate. Besides providing a bridge to social interaction, it is in situations like this where the person who is more in the role of learning also is able to learn real and concrete life skills, as in this case maybe how to score a goal from a difficult angle.

More generally, Vygotsky does not see the adult as the only person who is in the position to mentor others. He also recognises the wealth of learning provided in a situation in which a young person mentors another person, being either a peer, younger or older, in something they are more familiar with than the other. Talking more of the same language and having a more similar life-world perspective, a peer might even achieve more as a mentor than an adult who has a less equal relationship to the learner.

Although on first sight this concept seems to be something that is mainly focused on the learning of one party, taking a more differentiated look it becomes evident that the process of accompanying someone in a learning process as a mentor also provides the opportunity for development. The mentor experiences that their skills and experience are valuable to someone and that they are trusted as a person to pass this knowledge on.

The Common Third

Another social pedagogy tool that is relevant when professionally and actively engaging with young people is the common third. Through this concept we can recognise the potential of soccer as a way of getting to know the young person (and the group) better. The common third underlines the joint active focus on something of shared interest, for example the aforementioned game of soccer, or cooking, going for a walk, sewing, mending a bicycle, cleaning; in fact any kind of activity. Sharing such activities is not merely about aiming at an end product like a well-prepared meal, a well-fixed bicycle or time well spent. The common third highlights that doing 'something' together is a brilliant opportunity to get to know each other, to develop strong relationships. The important thing here is the process, not the product. Keeping this in mind is essential for the setting or atmosphere, which as practitioners we want to create around such situations. Interactions where the common third is at the centre of focus should be underpinned by a strong sense of equality between the participating parties, by awareness that all parties are sharing the same life-space and that the common third should be something enjoyed by all involved.

Using soccer and our new resident as an example again, the game could offer an opportunity to develop relationships; that is, between us as social pedagogue and the young person. We might not be the best of soccer players and can use this as a possibility to share uncertainty and to ask the young person for ideas or help. Playing soccer often also provides good laughs and a chance for young people and adults to see each other in less formal settings. In a broader, everyday perspective soccer, as a common third, could offer a regular opportunity for the young

person and the social pedagogue to have a break together and an informal, non-therapeutic way of checking 'how things are'. As with most of the concepts introduced here, the common third is often just the first 'stepping stone' towards developing sustainable strong and positive relationships and has a strong developmental and dynamic aspect. For example, from playing soccer together in an informal way the group could develop a more structured approach and perhaps agree on meeting on a regular basis every week, or they could discover further common interests and pursue these jointly.

Soccer — Plain Fun or a Pedagogical Tool?

Our intention with this article is to show that soccer — or other daily activities — can be seen as both an enjoyable way of spending time *and* as a pedagogical tool to achieve personal growth and development for young people in care. By analysing practice through the lenses of the 3Ps, the learning zone model, the zone of proximal development and the common third our participant in the social pedagogy training course and his colleagues began to see playing soccer as a valuable part of their everyday practice and could express the importance in doing so.

When looking at the construction of everyday life and specific activities it should actually be the young people we should talk to for guidance in our decisions, as they are the experts for their lives and are giving a clear message what has most value to them: the member of staff who actively spends quality time with them, not the one who spends most of their shift time in the office.

Billy, a 15-year-old boy who lives in a residential home and who has experienced the change to a more social pedagogy focussed everyday life, seems to know what is good for him:

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. (Who Cares? Trust, 2010, p. 21). □

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