



# The Diverse Practice of Social Pedagogues: Case Examples From Denmark, Scotland, and Germany

Christina Surel<sup>1</sup>, Sarah Douglas<sup>2</sup>, Andy Finley<sup>2</sup> and Alexandra Priver<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ThemPra Social Pedagogy C.I.C., United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup> Sycamore Services, United Kingdom

## Guest Editors' Note

As a holistic way of working with children and young people to develop their learning and wellbeing, their inter- and independence, social pedagogy is widely practised across many European countries. While the ways in which it is practiced will differ — depending on the cultural context and setting — there are also common threads that connect the social pedagogic traditions found in several countries. Hämäläinen (2003) suggests that 'social pedagogy has a certain perspective of its own [which] cannot be reduced to a set of simple pedagogical methods, but should be understood as an educational orientation in which the world, people, society, social problems and social work are observed through "social pedagogical" glasses, as it were' (p. 76).

■ **Keywords:** social pedagogy, practice, residential child care, kindergarten, family support.

The aim of this article is to illustrate what a social pedagogical lens on practice might look like and how social pedagogues work. Given the broad interest of *Children Australia's* readership, the article outlines a range of social pedagogical perspectives from different countries and various settings: Christina Surel gives examples of Danish pedagogic practice in a kindergarten for 3 to 6 year olds; Sarah Douglas and Andy Finley offer an insight into working social pedagogically in a Scottish residential care home for children aged 5 to 12; and Alexandra Priver outlines social pedagogic family support in Germany.

Naturally, these brief examples cannot fully convey the complexity of social pedagogy and do not take account of social pedagogical practice with disadvantaged adult groups and the elderly. Instead the excerpts intend to highlight the diversity of social pedagogy as an overarching framework for engaging with children, young people and families in order to support children's upbringing. They also convey that, irrespective of who we work with or what we do, social pedagogy lies first and foremost in the way in which we engage and interact with other people, in how we see, think about and treat them. What makes practice social pedagogic lies in the connection between 'head, heart, and hands' as one of the earliest thinkers on

social pedagogy, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, stated — in the ways in which theory meets ethics meets practice.

## Social Pedagogy in a Danish Kindergarten

By Christina Surel, Danish social pedagogue

Social Pedagogy is a developed ability to read a situation in all its complexity and act upon it appropriately. It can be both situations in the here-and-now and in the long-term. It requires knowledge, experience and close relationships with the children and young people you work with, as well as reflection, openness to team work and feedback. The aim of these case studies, all of which concern children attending a kindergarten in Denmark, are to introduce social pedagogical thinking within a Danish context. It is about looking for opportunities for children's development, rather than stigmatising them. It calls for awareness in the social pedagogue, awareness that society and cultural thinking at a certain time might not meet the needs and support the abilities within a child.

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

### Danish Case 1 — Otto

Otto is 6 years old. He is often very absorbed in drawing soldiers, weapons and war. He talks while drawing, and loves telling you what is happening in his drawing, if you ask him. He makes some fantastic and detailed drawings. He can sit for several hours concentrating on his work, but then, all of a sudden, he leaves and seeks contact with the other children in the room, joining them in their games. His way of contacting other children is fast, violent, and seemingly with no sense of propriety. He jumps into the middle of other children's playing, takes their toys, slaps them and becomes quite noisy. Often Otto's style of interacting is rejected by the other children. And all of a sudden, Otto loses desire and patience with his intention, and returns to his drawings.

After having observed this a couple of times, I wondered 'how is it possible to create a connection between Otto's preoccupation with war drawings and his desire to play with other children?' I talked to both my colleagues and to Otto's parents and came up with an idea. I bought a box with plastic toy soldiers and placed them in the room, among clothing and other material that could serve as the terrain. I found some thread and paper to make parachutes for the toy soldiers. This caught the attention of both Otto and the other boys, and shortly thereafter seven boys were in the process of playing with the soldiers. They negotiated how many soldiers each one of them could have, how the game should unfold and any other issues that came up in the process. The game continued for several days. It was a pleasure to see Otto playing with the other boys, sharing his good ideas of what could happen next in the game.

In my role it is important to look for new opportunities for Otto based on his strengths and interests instead of stigmatising him for being different. For me this means involving him more in games with other children, starting with games he might enjoy and be good at, and also channelling his drawing talents in other ways. Actually that is what Otto is seeking after being preoccupied with his drawings for a long time. After concentrating for so long, he needed some action. Offering him opportunities that build on his interest and imagination helps him engage with the other children in a constructive way. In the long term, the aim is for Otto to start playing more with the children in general, for example, when they're playing other games — at least that's what I am encouraging in him. And I also believe that the best way to work with him in this phase of having a keen interest in war and soldiers is by drawing on his interests, by supporting his integration within the group and ensuring he is not marginalised. Being in an ongoing relationship with Otto, knowing his family context and being able to follow and support his growth is also really helpful. A next step could be to challenge his drawing skills by nurturing his interest in other themes.

In my context, social pedagogy is about increasing opportunities for participation. If a child does not have the opportunity to be part of the community, with the skills and competencies he or she has, it is the pedagogue's task to find new opportunities for the individual child as well as the group of children. This can be done independently, in dialog with the child, with colleagues or the parents. From this perspective the child does not have a problem — social pedagogy has a challenge.

### Danish Case 2 — Tjing

I once acted as intensive pedagogical support for a little boy of 4½ years, who came from China. Tjing was gifted, was very good at Danish and full of joyous energy — too much energy, some would say. He was driven by his impulses and had little sensitivity to the effects of his actions. He had a hard time concentrating, so having just started making a puzzle he would leave to play with cars, and shortly afterwards he would go towards other kids, wanting to play with the toys they were playing with. In Tjing's presence other children were often angry or sad.

One day some children were arguing in the hallway and one of the children began to cry. A child in my room yelled, 'Cassandra cries! It is Tjing, it is Tjing.' But that day Tjing was not in kindergarten.

The situation provided me with a good opportunity to gather the children and talk about how we think of each other. It was not a big or long discussion but another moment to get the group to be more sensitive towards others, to be more reflective. Furthermore, it was a fine situation to reflect on in the staff-group as well, to review our everyday practice, to question if we see what was going on, or if it could be that our eyes — like the child's in my room — were sometimes coloured by special patterns. We are presented with many situations like that every day — situations waiting to be turned into opportunities for reflection and, through that, for learning. And finding and making use of them is really rewarding for me, as well as for the children.

## Social Pedagogy in a Scottish Children's Home

*By Sarah Douglas and Andy Finley, Sycamore Services*

### Introducing Social Pedagogy at Sycamore Services (Sarah Douglas)

In 2008, Sycamore Services in Scotland began its social pedagogy journey with a nine-day course. The 16 staff in the pilot group came from a range of services: domestic, cook, admin worker, and the handyman within Sycamore Services, including foster care, education, family support workers, with the majority being residential workers. The concept of having all services included in the training course ensured the value of every interaction and the development of a shared philosophy. Although many aspects of Sycamore Service's practice had already been

very similar to social pedagogy, the concept has become more embedded with each member of staff utilising their individual skills/experience to provide opportunities for learning during each interaction to promote growth and development. We aim to highlight the ways in which we now relate our practice to social pedagogy by offering three examples:

#### **Scottish Case 1 – Developing Trust (Andy Finley)**

On the course, we experienced social pedagogy with head, heart and hands. While all participants were from Sycamore Services and most of us knew each other in some capacity, we had a lot to learn about each other, and we had to build up relationships and trust. During the training course we did several experiential learning activities that involved some of us wearing blindfolds and having to completely put our trust into people with whom we were not so familiar. When we reflected on these exercises, it made us think about how it might feel for a child or young person coming to Sycamore Services for the first time — that sense of helplessness, fear, no trust, feeling anxious. I have always known that for a child this transition must be so daunting, but this exercise gave a real feel of just how scary this would be. I have always treated any child coming into Sycamore Services with nothing other than respect, warmth, openness and made them feel welcome, but I think that following my experience of social pedagogy I now think more deeply about how they might be feeling and I offer them empathy and reassurance.

We have recently had a new child move into our home and unfortunately I was on holiday at the time of his arrival, so I was not on hand to greet him. When I started back after my holidays I met Kenny for the first time. He was very shy and did not communicate with me verbally or make any eye contact. I respected that it must have been very overwhelming meeting all of these new people, being in a strange place and feeling all alone, so I waited for an opportunity to try and engage with him when things were a bit quieter and there were fewer people around. When the opportunity arose I spent some one-to-one time with Kenny, and I used my experiences of social pedagogy to engage with him and empathised with how he may have been feeling. I offered him reassurance that I would be here for him to discuss his thoughts and feelings whenever he felt it was the best time.

I attempted to engage with Kenny for four days without any real success, although I continued to relay the same message to him that I would be around for him if he wished to participate in any discussion, play etc. Kenny continued to suss me out before finally deciding the moment was right for him to say a few words to me. Although it was not a full-on conversation, it was a step in the right direction, and I acknowledged how difficult this must have been for him even to say a few words to me. Again I reinforced to him that I would continue to be around for him whenever he needed me. Kenny is still in

the process of building up trust with me, but we are having more frequent informal chats and I can see in his body language and facial expressions that he is beginning to feel more at ease around me. This can only be a positive for him as trusting adults has been a very difficult part of his life. Helping Kenny to build relationships will improve his wellbeing, self-esteem, self-worth etc. He is beginning to flourish, and although it is very early days I am confident that our relationship will continue to grow.

#### **Scottish Case 2 — Geo-Caching as a Common Third Activity (Andy Finley)**

As a practitioner I have always used activities to engage in a positive manner with the children with whom I work and have had many great experiences over the years with plenty of fun and laughter. I made sure that when I turned up for my shift I was prepared for any event that should come my way, I would always have suitable clothes and shoes for any weather so I could participate in any activity. Following my participation on the social pedagogy course, what I did differently in terms of engaging with children was to take into account the power of the 'common third' (see Holthoff & Harbo, pp. 214–218 in this issue). The common third allows using activities more purposefully as a way of engaging with a child on an equal basis, developing our relationship and learning together by doing something we both enjoy and are interested in.

In order to find common interests with one boy at our home, Ryan, I sat down with him and explained to him that I would like us to spend some quality time together doing an activity of his choice. Ryan told me that he had heard some children from school talking about geocaching. This was something I had never heard of before, so from the outset it was something that I was keen to learn about. I asked him what geocaching was, and he explained to me that it was like treasure hunting. You look at a web site on the Internet to find out where the treasure has been hidden and then you follow clues in order to locate exactly where it is. The treasure is in a box, and once you have discovered it you can take one item from amongst the treasure as long as you replace it with something else. There is also a book in which you can leave a message for fellow geocachers.

This was a great experience from start to finish which left Ryan feeling very pleased with himself as he had taught me all about geocaching. His self-esteem went through the roof — you could see it in his face all smiling and proud of himself. In terms of our relationship I feel that this was a massive step forward for us both. The whole experience allowed Ryan to feel empowered and gave him self-belief and self-worth. It reinforced to him that if he is given opportunities and is listened to then he is more than capable of achieving in his life. Following this I encouraged Ryan to take this idea back to the home and introduce geocaching to the other children and staff. He took this in his stride, and now geocaching is a regular

activity in which all of the children participate. It is a great opportunity to get out into the fresh air and have loads of fun hunting for the treasure. Maybe for the first time in his life Ryan is feeling valued as a human being.

Using the common third has definitely played a valuable part in building my relationship with this boy. I continue to encourage all of the children to think about activities that they would like to try along with any staff member so as to create a bond and build on relationships in a positive, exciting manner.

### **Scottish Case 3 — Cooking (Sarah Douglas)**

The children who live within our residential service are enjoying the learning from the cook with regard to preparing different foods, perfecting the use of different utensils, including sharp knives, and most importantly enjoying the experience of new tastes. As the children share a pivotal role in menu planning, they are more enthusiastic about trying new foods, which has been a huge culture change. The other evening we had children asking for seconds of roasted butternut squash that had been diced through a colourful salad. Not one young person complained about the thought of eating 'yucky salad'. Our cook is an example of someone who can embrace the philosophy of 'education in its widest sense' and support children in broadening their horizons in ways that make them feel involved.

## **Social Pedagogy Family Support — a German Perspective**

*By Alexandra Priver, German social pedagogue*

Social Pedagogy Family Support (SPFS) in Germany is an intensive form of support for families to prevent family breakdown or the need to take the child or children into care; or to support families through difficult times, for instance the death of a family member or illness. SPFS is clearly described in Germany's Child and Youth Services Act (1990) and is based on the idea (and law) that parents have a right to be supported in the upbringing of their children. It makes available intensive, direct, long-term support for these families in their everyday life — a support which comes to them. SPFS is usually set out for a period of one to two years, with 2 to 3 visits per week.

Through counselling and intensive work together with the family, the social pedagogue looks for solutions to the family's everyday problems and difficulties, which could have to do with low income, housing difficulties, mental or physical health problems, alcohol or substance misuse, family breakdown, or a lack of access to relevant services. While SPFS is usually initiated following concerns about a child's wellbeing, it aims to support the whole family instead of focussing only on the child. Therefore, it provides very practical support aimed at identifying together with the parents where things are going wrong in their everyday life (neglect, abuse), how to change these and

what they can do to maintain these changes without external support.

### **German Case**

A family is known to Social Services due to concerns around neglect. The local school has raised concerns that the youngest boy, Tom (age 10), wears dirty clothes, appears very unhygienic and is isolated in school because of this. Even though this has been raised with his mother, the situation still hasn't changed.

As the social pedagogue assigned to the family to provide support, I now meet the child and his family and, if possible, other people close to the family. I start to build a relationship with the family, which means that I visit them in their home, take a seat and accept the offer of having a hot drink — I will not judge their life, but accept the cup of tea even if the cup looks very dirty. I take the time to meet every family member and to hear their story, even if that means I need to come back on an evening because the father works late. The relationship has to be built on trust that I (my team and the service) want to support them and understand that they have tried to be the best parents they can be, without them having to fear that I will blame them and may remove their child.

As I get to know the family more, I find out that both parents suffer from long-term depression. The father has had a disability from birth and the mother struggles with her physical ability as she is overweight. The family has no extended family and no friends. And while being with the family, I can see that Tom does a lot for his parents: he gets sent by both parents to get them things, and I can see how many of his parents' emotions and worries he is carrying, too. But I can also observe lots of love and affection between the family members. I am beginning to get a clearer sense of the family's lifeworld — what reality is like for them — which is essential in order for us to explore together what needs to change. This is an ongoing process and therefore constantly reflected upon and discussed.

After I have spent some time together with the family, the parents have started to recognise through the many conversations how much their son has been involved in their worries and in domestic tasks that should not be done by a child. It has been a difficult time for the parents to see that their little boy has started caring for them, where it should have been the other way around. Subsequently, the family has developed a list together to sketch out Tom's tasks in the house, taking his age into account, and the parents' tasks.

His parents and I have also encouraged Tom to spend more time out of the house with other children, time when he is not worrying about his parents. Tom has chosen to try one after-school club and he has agreed with his parents that the money for his birthday was spent on horseriding lessons. He has also started visiting a group of children who have a similar carer's role for their parents, at the Young Carers Project.

Through the support work, the parents have identified when they have had happy times together, and I have encouraged the family to have some positive time together — a picnic in the park, a games evening — and to schedule them in regularly in their family diary. I have been supporting both parents in domestic tasks, showing them how to keep on top of bills and paperwork, how to cook healthy meals even on a low budget; we have been shopping together and have jointly explored what further support they can get from other services (health service, etc.).

After 18 months the family and I agree that the support from me can now come to an end. Tom and his parents have achieved a lot in that time. Tom had a very good transition into secondary school and, for his mother, this meant a fresh start with new teachers and staff who were aware of the past issues without Tom's mother feeling judged by them. Tom has integrated well in his new school, has continued with his hobbies and keeps on visiting the Young Carers support group. Both parents have been able to jointly maintain the household, which has subsequently meant that Tom can bring friends with him and the family is generally open to having visitors again. Tom's mother has joined a group for women with depression and eating disorders, where she has gained a lot of support. For Tom's father it was difficult to accept that he

may need support with his feelings and worries. But the overall positive achievement of his family has lifted his mood, and this has had a positive effect on his work where he appears to be much happier.

Being a social pedagogic family support worker has been both demanding and rewarding. Throughout the entire time with the family, I have had to practice a high level of reflection. Through self-reflection I have critically examined my interpretations and assumptions, my values and feelings; and reflection on the intervention has taken place in supervision, team counselling as well as with the family and other professionals involved.

The key competence for a social pedagogue supporting families with complex needs is an ability to act and adapt to the very different and constantly changing family situations. Social pedagogues need knowledge of institutions and organisations in the community to (re-)activate families' social networks, link them with schools and after-school clubs, youth clubs, help them access parenting support groups, therapeutic support, parenting classes, adult educational courses, self-support groups, sports clubs, community centres and many other organisations that help them gain a sense of being a well-supported part of their community, of having everything they need to enjoy everyday life. □

