The Art of Being a Social Pedagogue:
Developing Cultural Change in Children's Homes in Essex

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As one of the first organisations in the UK to pioneer social pedagogy within its residential service, Essex County Council began working together with ThemPra Social Pedagogy in September 2008. This article describes some of the ways in which social pedagogy influenced the culture and practice in the local authority's children's homes. In contrast to other evaluations, most notably Berridge and colleague's (2011) evaluation of the English government's social pedagogy pilot project, this paper draws on narrative material gathered over the 3-year project in order to provide insights into attitudinal changes amongst staff teams, to highlight how practitioners developed their understanding of social pedagogy and to offer examples of how teams improved their practice and culture throughout the project. By describing social pedagogic practice as an art form we aim to outline the holistic, dynamic and process-orientated nature of social pedagogy that distinguishes it from the procedurally driven, outcome-focussed practice which has been heralded by new managerialism (Petrie et al., 2006; Smith, 2009). An abridged version of our full project report (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2012), the article focuses on four areas relating to the art of being a social pedagogue: Haltung, relationships, reflection, and culture.

Key words: *social pedagogy; residential child care; cultural change; systemic change; training*

The Narrative of the Essex Social Pedagogy Project

When, in the summer of 2008, Essex County Council's decided to launch a 3-year pilot project to develop social pedagogy within its children's residential services the bigger picture of social pedagogy in the UK looked very sketchy. The year before, the National Centre for Excellent in Residential Child Care (NCERCC) and the Social Education Trust (SET) had explored the potential contribution that social pedagogy could make to England's residential sector. It concluded that 'participants welcomed the appreciative, holistic child-centred approach social pedagogy offers and felt that the possibility of creating real changes for the young people in residential child care' (Bengtsson et al., 2008, p. 4). And at around the same time the Government had announced in its White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* that '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' (DfES, 2007, p. 58).

This, along with research by the Thomas Coram Research Unit suggesting that the care experiences for young people looked after by social pedagogues in Denmark or Germany were far more positive than those for their English counterparts, convinced Essex to embrace social pedagogy. The strategy which we jointly designed emphasised that social pedagogy was to be the framework for developing cultural change based on existing good practice: it would therefore actively build on, and value, existing practice in the homes and support teams in further developing their practice. Through a series of short courses, team development support, practitioners' involvement in service development and strategic change, the overall strategy aimed to engage everyone within the system and to encourage them to take responsibility. A key factor that emerged was communication and an ability to overcome the many challenges to communication within a complex system by creating 'feedback loops' that aimed to get the different parts of the organisation more into dialogue with each other. These feedback loops, which ensured that information was not merely 'cascaded down' the hierarchical ladder, emphasised that organisational learning around how to develop social pedagogy depended on collaboration and shared ownership across all levels of the organisation. The narratives of how social pedagogy resonated with the cultures in the different homes were particularly important in maintaining momentum throughout the more challenging phases of the project by reminding those involved of small and significant achievements.

In his analysis of the Government-funded social pedagogy pilot project's evaluation report (Berridge et al., 2011), Smeeton (2011) argues that the impact of social pedagogy can be best captured through narratives. As evidencing outcomes for the highly transient group of young people in care is notoriously difficult, 'the better measure of social pedagogy would be in trying to gauge any changes in confidence, competence and perceptions of self-efficacy of the residential workers adopting it' (Smeeton, 2011). Narratives convey meaning not just through the stories people tell but also in the way they tell them, the words and metaphors they choose, the examples they draw on to bring their stories to life. This is why, for the purpose of this paper, we have decided to focus on telling some of the stories about the Essex social pedagogy project that seemed to us worth sharing. Naturally, there are many more stories that could be told, many bends in the road of the 3-year journey which we undertook with this project and many junctions that could have taken us down a different route. But this is not so much a step-by-step route description as it is an attempt to paint a picture of what happened on the journey and how it changed the landscape of residential child care in Essex.

The changes in the landscape emerge most clearly if seen from a range of perspectives, and for this reason we have aimed to bring together a number of perspectives– from practitioners working directly with the children and young people in care and collectively developing a social pedagogic culture where care and education meet, their homes managers embedding social pedagogy within their leadership style and the overall vision of the home, and us as the facilitators concerned with creating learning opportunities, forums for reflection and probing how social pedagogy was being woven into the fabric of the organisation at these different levels. Additional perspectives from the project manager and Head of Service are included in the full project report (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2012). In combination these different perspectives offer a well-rounded insight into the many processes that have shaped this project. And whilst they will inevitably be coloured, their subjective aspects are what made this project worthwhile – the personal involvement and emotional investment of many professionals throughout the organisation were necessary in order for change to be transformative and beneficial for the children and young people in the children's homes.

Considering that, 'although the literature on organisational development and change is voluminous, there has been remarkably little empirical research on change in the public sector' (McNeill et al., 2010, p. 9), we are hoping that this article – and the full project report it is based on – can offer some inspiration for other organisations by illustrating the potential of social pedagogy to have a transformative effect on care practice. If we have somewhat glossed over the manifold challenges that had to be overcome, the mistakes that were made and the avenues that remained unexplored,

it is not to deny their existence. They were a necessary part of the learning and development processes, a vital sign that complex change is messy, imperfect and perhaps over-ambitious. Yet, whenever things got difficult, it was the vision of what we had collectively set out to achieve that helped people through the challenging parts of the process, the small achievements that were encouraging and made greater success possible. For this reason we wanted to ensure that our focus was on the positives and might prove a source of reflection and inspiration for readers to find ways of developing social pedagogy within their context, thus keeping the spirit of the Essex project alive.

Effecting Cultural Change – A Social Pedagogical Strategy

'Social Pedagogy 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.' (Eichsteller, 2009)

Organisational culture plays a key role in any strategic change process. 'Culture isn't just one aspect of the game – it is the game. In the end, an organisation is nothing more than the collective capacity of its people to create value', according to Gerstner (2002, p. 182). Culture does not only prove crucial from a business perspective – Gerstner is usually praised for rescuing IBM in the 1990s – but seems even more important given the philosophical perspective within social pedagogy, its focus on developing human potential through relationships. For these reasons, we envisaged that a social pedagogy change process meant, first and foremost, embedding social pedagogy within the organisational culture.

McNeill and colleagues suggest that 'the concept of organisational culture refers to 'shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing' within an organisation (Thompson et al., 1996, p. 647): these reflect deeply entrenched traditions, habits, values, beliefs and norms' (McNeill et al., 2010, p. 9). The hypothesis at the heart of this project was that most residential child care workers have chosen this profession for a reason: they want to make a difference to the lives of children in care, and this should be somehow reflected within the organisation's non-formalised values, beliefs and norms. The challenge was therefore to draw these out and strengthen practitioners' ethical orientation towards their work, thus nurturing a positive culture of care within the different organisational settings - within the wider organisational culture there are a number of sub-cultures, with each home having its own distinct culture. Not only would this approach strengthen positive aspects within the organisational culture, it would also encourage staff members whose values and beliefs might not benefit children in their care to rethink whether this was the right job for them and be supported to find less people-focussed alternatives.

Change strategies usually happen within a complex organisational context, in which they are embedded within a force field of a multitude of other strategies, restructuring efforts, government policies, and hidden agendas exercising influence and potentially distorting the change process. With increasing financial pressures within the social care sector in recent years, this force field has become more powerful and had a visible impact upon the social pedagogy change strategy for Essex's Residential Service, most notably through the Council's cabinet decision in late 2010 to begin to close down its seven mainstream children's homes. Although this decision was made as part of Essex County Council's wider agenda to become a commissioning local authority, the implications for the social pedagogy change strategy were enormous and altered the overall aim of the project for year three. Where the initial perspective was directed at creating self-sustainability for social pedagogy within the homes in the long term, we ended up supporting teams through their transitions and exploring with them how they could use social pedagogy within this phase of uncertainty as well as beyond, in the hope that their pioneering expertise would have unforeseen benefits wherever they might be working afterwards. In this sense the Essex social pedagogy project is still very much alive.

The Art of Being a Social Pedagogue – Perspectives from the Homes

Social pedagogy, it could be argued, is all about *being* – about being with others and forming relationships, being in the present and focussing on initiating learning processes, being authentic and genuine using one's own personality, and about being there in a supportive, empowering manner. As such, social pedagogy is an art form: rather than being a skill that can be acquired, social pedagogy is expressed through the professional's *Haltung* (our attitude or mindset). In other words, social pedagogy is not so much about what is done, but more about how something is done. This perspective of social pedagogy means that it is dynamic, creative, and process-orientated rather than mechanical, procedural, and automated. It demands from social pedagogues to be a whole person, not just a pair of hands.

Implementing social pedagogy into residential practice in Essex children's homes therefore had to convey to the professionals within the teams the art of being a social pedagogue, to inspire and nurture the social pedagogue within them. And it had to address wider systemic aspects to ensure that practitioners are expected as well as feel empowered to be social pedagogues. For this reason the project consisted of direct work with practitioners and their teams in training seminars and on team development days as well as more strategic aspects, most notably developing social pedagogy change agents, setting up a cross-service strategic development group and a practitioners' network.

Figure 1: The Social Pedagogy Tree (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2009)

The art of being a social pedagogue can be illustrated by many practice examples we have come across as part of our engagement with Essex children's homes, and we hope that this narrative will provide greater insights into what it means to be social pedagogical, so that readers can explore and re-think how their practice connects to social pedagogy. To visualise how the many aspects fit together and that they depend on, and reinforce, each other, we have developed the model of the Social Pedagogy Tree (see figure 1). This illustrates that teams need to 'grow' social pedagogy over time within their own environment, which requires careful and continuous nurturing. The development processes outlined below aim to describe some of the 'seedlings' that emerged in the children's homes and demonstrate their progress in different areas. As the environmental conditions varied between the homes, each setting developed their own social pedagogy culture at their own pace, which meant that the processes described below cannot be generalised across all homes but are rather intended to paint a picture of what is possible when developing social pedagogy in practice.

Haltung in practice

As mentioned above, fundamental to social pedagogic practice is the social pedagogue's *Haltung*, which roughly translates as ethos, mindset, or attitude. In German, *Haltung* describes how a social pedagogue brings her own values and beliefs into professional practice. Expressed in her interactions and how she encounters others, her *Haltung* therefore tells us something about her concept of children.

In this sense, *Haltung* connects the professional to her most fundamental values and ethos. It requires from the social pedagogue that she is constantly mindful of how these inner beliefs find a way of expressing themselves in the outer world, for instance in her relationships with children and the degree to which she is authentic and congruent, but also in her interaction with adults, be they colleagues, other professionals, or parents.

Many of the participants on our social pedagogy courses and team development sessions therefore described social pedagogy as being about who they were, that it felt like a skin rather than a jacket. This is important, because it suggests that social pedagogy lies within them and cannot be taken away as a jacket might. That makes developments and change processes more sustainable and substantial.

This is the central reason why social pedagogy resonated so well with the teams and why they developed their practice in many ways. Social pedagogy reaffirmed professionals in their practice, allowed them to personally and professional connect to social pedagogy with their own head, heart and hands, and could provide them with a language and understanding of relationships that enabled them to focus more on dialogue and interaction with the children. As a result, teams found a new sense of confidence, which became apparent in their day-to-day care practice and in the way they talked about their work.

All teams highlighted that being genuine and authentic was very important to them, not only because it felt better to them, but more importantly because it allowed the children to see staff as real people with natural personalities, not just paid carers. This was beneficial and role-modelled what the teams wanted to see in the children: that they have their own identity and feel comfortable to explore and find out who they are.

One way in which some teams aimed to convey their positive concepts of children was by introducing a 'golden book'. Unlike most other paper work, which was designed to record incidents, the golden book was conceived to have a place in which to write down valuable experiences. Whether child or adult, anyone could write into the golden book and thus record the positive events of their day, share their feelings or gratitude for having been supported or part of an activity. In this sense the golden book was an excellent tool to capture some of the many great things that happen in children's homes every single day and to demonstrate that teams valued these highly. By providing a complementary history to the official records, teams created a collection of memories that they and the children could return to and reminisce about, that encouraged children to reflect and hold on to the positive memories, and reminded them of good times when they might be feeling less positive.

Reflecting and dialogue in practice

'Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise theory becomes simply 'blah, blah, blah' and practice, pure activism.' (Freire, 1998, p. 30)

The emphasis of social pedagogy on *Haltung* and 'ethics as first practice' (Moss, 2006; Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011), which requires from social pedagogues to use their personality and their own ethical orientation towards the world as part of being a professional, means that reflection and reflective dialogue within the team are paramount. Reflection allows social pedagogues to relate their theoretical understanding to practice situations as well as draw on their self-experience in

ways which can benefit the children in their care. With its coherent conceptual framework, social pedagogy can support and guide reflection upon practice, as teams have found.

This value of reflection was discovered by most teams, both for staff individually but also collectively. Reflection was seen as offering an essential wealth of learning opportunities for the team, and the reflective dialogue with colleagues had a very positive impact on the further development of practice, with in-depth reflective processes enabling teams to identify areas of development. Teams found that analysing different situations and people's perspectives on them equipped professionals with a wider range of ways in which to respond, made them more proactive in addressing issues before they might escalate and helped them realise how their own behaviour and communication might impact upon a situation.

In most cases, teams developed reflection structures which recognised that reflection is not just about talking about bad practice, but that it can be very insightful to unpick an example of very good practice in order to understand what made it so successful and in what other situations this can be applied. Thus achievements are being more appreciated and celebrated, not just taken for granted. This understanding made reflection much less intimidating to practitioners and put the emphasis on identifying the learning potential both within good and not-so-good situations. Many teams commented that there was now more dialogue and communication within their team, that reflection was now a constant process enabling them to be more innovative, to try out new ideas and fine-tune them through observation and reflection.

As part of this process, many teams were developing a clear ethos allowing colleagues to challenge each other in a valuing, constructive way concerning their practice, role and the structure of their home. They found it possible to work through the different levels of understanding of social pedagogy as a team, to overcome differences in perceptions, and to see this as potentially beneficial as it could widen their individual perspective of a situation. There was more support in the team for each other and an openness to question things in an appreciative way. Some members of staff were even confident enough to have an argument or discussion in front of the children, feeling confident to role-model how to constructively resolve differences in opinions. This allowed practitioners to deal with differences of opinion in a safe, open and honest way, addressing issues at the time and directly between each other.

Many professionals also stated that they had become more self-reflective as individuals as well. They questioned what they could do and what their responsibility was, and they reflected on their own impact upon a situation. This allowed them to take more responsibility for their own decisions and helped them feel encouraged to use their own experiences – their own head and heart – to make good decisions. Even if something went wrong they felt they could reflect on it and learn. This reduced the blame culture and led to a relaxed atmosphere wherein mistakes were more seen as part of the learning process.

How teams incorporated reflection into their culture varied from home to home. Some teams made time for reflection in designated reflective sessions; others built it more into team meetings. Some teams also changed their supervision structure towards being more reflective, with a focus on relationships and support, positive feedback and progression in personal and professional development. A few teams also built a specific part into the handovers from one shift to the next. In these cases, part of the handover consisted of a structured reflection on the previous shift or a debriefing. This made the actual handover of key information more balanced and focussed on planning the following shift more constructively, which positively impacted on how professionals approached the next shift.

Several teams commented that as a result there was more shared ownership and positivity, a clear willingness to invest in new ideas: 'The whole team is problem-solving now', according to one group that said this had previously been seen as the seniors' responsibility.

Developing relationships

'Every kid needs at least one adult who is crazy about him.'
(Bronfenbrenner, 1977, cited in Smith, 2005, p. 3)

Relationships are at the heart of social pedagogical practice. The Danish concept of the 3Ps illustrates that social pedagogues bring together the *professional* self, the *personal* self, and the *private* self. The *professional* is about being constantly reflective and observing, thus being able to relate theories to practice and find possible explanations and responses, for instance for someone's behaviour. The *personal* emphasises using one's own personality and creative skills, being authentic, and building strong, positive and personal relationships. There is, however, a difference to what is the private self – this consists of things that are only shared with close friends or family, but should not be part of practice as they do not have any benefit to children and young people.

Across the children's homes, social pedagogy impacted very positively on relationships. Staff teams recognised the importance of building closer, stronger and more equal relationships with the children and within the team as the basis of their practice. In this process they found a more reflective approach as outlined above very helpful, as it provided guidance to help them keep a balance between the professional and the personal in ways that supported children's sense of feeling cared about and their ability to build positive relationships with other people.

Through the introduction of social pedagogy and ensuing changes in policies, practitioners felt that they were allowed to be more human, to give something of themselves, with the 3Ps providing a framework for doing this safely and appropriately. Staff noted that bringing more of their self into work meant that they could have a more human side, thus showing children they were there because they cared, not just because they were being paid. It appeared that this was clearly noticed and generally emphasised by children in care as hugely beneficial as it allowed them to develop their own identity, to feel loved for who they are and by extension to care about others.

One team reported that a young boy had just come into the children's home, away from his family for the first time. He felt very homesick and found it especially difficult to settle at bedtime. One care worker therefore decided to tell him about her own experience of going to boarding school as a girl, how she had felt and what had helped her gradually overcome her homesickness. Through the conversation the boy and the care worker developed a connection, and her personal life-story helped him realise that he wasn't the only child in the world having these feelings and that he was cared for by people who cared about him and wanted him to feel at home here.

Such relationships did not just happen by accident but required a constant effort. Teams put a lot of emphasis on getting to know the children and taking time to really understand their thoughts, feelings and experiences. This provided them with a better insight into the children's inner and outer world, an opportunity to empathise and 'be more in touch with them'. One care worker, for example, told us that a girl at this home for children with disabilities liked to scream at her mirror image. The only way to interact with her then was to adopt her form of communication, so the care worker stood next to the girl and joined in, which seemed to create an instant connection between them, judging by the girl's response. In that situation it was also very important to the care worker to emphasise that screaming along was about meeting the girl in her life world, not about making fun of her.

In all homes there was a strong emphasis on using the Common Third, a Danish concept highlighting the potential of engaging together in an activity which connects both the adult and the child, helps them develop their relationship on a more equal and genuine level and lets them learn together. Teams recognised that sharing an activity as a Common Third helped create a positive and creative space wherein relationships can thrive and care workers can enjoy spending time being with the children. In these situations both are meeting as equal human beings connected by a shared interest in something, be it playing golf, baking a cake, chatting while watching a movie, taking the dog for a walk, sharing a passion for motorcycles, or riding a bike. The actual activity

matters less than the opportunity which it provides for growing together and learning from each other, sometimes even with the child teaching the adult.

The power of the Common Third made teams realise that it is one of their key roles to create an atmosphere in the children's home wherein relationship-building can take place, with virtually any situation containing that potential. The gradual process of developing relationships led to many positive experiences, which encouraged practitioners to bring in more of their personal experiences and stories. They noticed that they were talking with the children more openly and were not afraid to share something that was personal and might really make a child think. They commented that they did not just share more about what they liked but also who they were, thus demonstrating a deeper understanding of the personal aspect of the 3Ps. Importantly, this went along with structural changes to what could be shared in order to get more of a team consensus. Whilst not every care worker wanted to share personal things – and the decision what to share should ultimately rest with each individual – team conversations about the kinds of things they considered worth sharing often helped overcome hesitancy or uncertainty about where to draw the lines between the professional, personal and private self.

The emphasis on building relationships generally had a very positive effect on the culture within the homes. Teams emphasised that there was more emotional warmth but also more physical contact, with a culture of side-hugs having been replaced by a 'culture of cuddles'. It was no longer frowned upon to give a child a cuddle when the situation was right. The children appeared to feel happier and reassured as a result, as this made relationships real and genuine rather than robotic.

Better and more genuine relationships did not just improve the atmosphere in the homes and the quality of care, but were also reflected in the care plans, which in some homes began to convey the in-depth knowledge staff had of the children. As all staff could contribute to care plans whenever they discovered a new side to a child, e.g. what might upset or scare them, the care plans became a living document rather than a file gathering dust.

Several teams emphasised that increased respect between children and staff and more meaningful relationships had also led to fewer incidents: 'When you're having a difficult time [with a child], it's the relationship that holds it', as one care worker stated. This explains why many homes achieved a notable reduction in physical restraints, violent episodes, damage to the property, arrests, placement breakdowns, assaults and sanctions. One team stated that they could not remember when they had last had a strategy meeting due to a young person going missing, which had previously been more common: 'Now they always come back home'.

One assistant homes manager summarised that: 'Social pedagogy has enabled me to speak confidently about the relationships I have with the children and how it is important to be authentic within these. Children are seen as children and not defined by their past experiences. Our relationships with the children are personal and each participant gives something of themselves to enable the attachment to grow. It is only by residential workers showing the children that they are worthy, loveable and valued human beings, that they can then go on to develop and grow into adults that have a chance at maintaining loving healthy relationships'.

Creating a shared culture
'The home seems to be full of laughter and fun' (Home's manager)

A significant measure of developing social pedagogy within each children's home was the extent to which the team had embraced the opportunities to create a shared culture. With increasing confidence teams began to actively reflect on their values and vision in order to arrive at a common understanding of what culture they wanted to set within the home, what norms they valued as part of providing children with a safe and stimulating family environment, and how they could translate this into the every-day life at the home. In this process several notions proved fundamental and are explored below in more detail: life-space, group work, and team empowerment.

Life-space

'The life-space is a mini society in its own right. No matter how well it is integrated with the society in which it is located, it has a cultural life of its own.' (Keenan, 2002, p. 221)

The idea of working in the life-space of the children resonated with teams and helped them recognise the importance of making the residential setting a home for all, with everybody having a sense of ownership and belonging. Where traditionally the terminology in residential care is full of terms reminiscent of manufacturing - such as the 'unit', 'shop floor', or 'shifts' - the themes within life-space create more of an image of nurturing, with attention paid to caring for and about others, having rhythms and rituals, and creating a family-like atmosphere. Teams recognised the importance in developing their homes into a life-space, both by making changes in the physical environment and by supporting children in developing an emotional connection to their home and the people within it. This process of making the place their home led to increasing involvement of the children in more meaningful ways, for instance not just letting them choose what's for dinner but encouraging them to participate in cooking or preparing the meals, or going beyond asking them to choose the decor by then painting the walls together.

On our reflective sessions, several teams highlighted that there was more a notion of having a shared living space, which felt more equal to both adults and young people (less like them vs. us), where they were involved much more and got a sense of the children's home as their home. This was evidenced by a reduction in vandalism, suggesting that the young people felt more ownership and took more care of their environment. Staff said that the young people appreciated what they were doing and felt listened to, which had led to better quality relationships. As one young person stated: 'You're more normal in how you are with young people'. As a result, new children arriving at the home were moving into a culture of different expectations, which felt very different to how it had used to be, more settled (although the dynamic of the group might still go up or down, depending on the children and their needs). Interestingly, young people who used to live at the homes but were still visiting from time to time had noticed and commented on how different many things were now.

In many homes the life-space had become more homely and more shared. There were much more pictures up and they did not get ripped down as often as before, when the children had not felt as much that this was their home. Quite often care workers would mention that the photos, which had been taken at trips or particular activities, did not get destroyed when a child was in emotional turmoil, that plants which had been bought and potted by staff and children together were spared when tempers flared, and that the walls children had helped paint did not end up being graffitied. These were just some physical signs of children's sense of ownership of their life-space. It also became more common for homes to have joint dinners and to make the best of these opportunities to develop more equal relationships. For instance, several homes had previously served dinner by asking the children to line up in the kitchen to get their meals before sitting on one of the tables in the dining room. Very quickly the teams decided to connect the tables so as to have one big table and to put the pots and platters of food on the table as would be normal in most families. They wanted mealtimes to become a valuable group living experience, with everybody coming together and spending time with each other, and they quickly realised that this could only work if the adults behaved in similar ways as was expected from the children. Thus it became a cultural norm that everyone would sit down together until all had finished their meal and that neither children nor adults would get up in between to answer the phone. This worked very well, and the teams found that there were also more discussions with the children about all kinds of things, as would be normal during a family dinner. One team reported that their young people were very curious about the political climate and cost-cutting and were thinking a lot about how the home could save money too, so they were more supportive of doing things that did not come with a large price tag.

Very often children's homes were equipped with playrooms and a generous garden area, which were gradually put to much better and more frequent use. Organic vegetable gardens sprang up

across most homes in a short space of time; summer BBQs became more common, and sometimes the children from the whole neighbourhood would play together in the garden; playrooms in the homes for younger children became less regulated and no longer just a place for an individual child to play with their key worker. Overall, it became evident that teams were putting a lot of thinking and actions into engaging the children in purposeful activities, having fun together and using the life-space as a nurturing environment.

Children's involvement in the life-space also increased through children chairing and minuting community meetings, and learning to resolve their own conflicts rather than having to depend on an adult to do this on their behalf. One staff commented that 'it's not about control anymore, it's about sharing that space equally', 'it feels more that we're living in this family space together and we've all got equal importance'. This was also echoed in a student essay by one participant, who wrote: '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.'

The homes for children with disabilities put particular thought into further developing the use of the indoor and outdoor environment so as to create a child-friendly life-space. One team was finally able to buy a trampoline although they had previously been deterred by 'red tape'. Another team highlighted that they were recognising much more the importance of using activities for building and strengthening relationships, and there seemed to be much more of an enjoyment of sharing the life-space and a sense of one home. The biggest changes had happened in the atmosphere and ethos of the home, for example with the whole team now being involved in problem-solving where this used to be the responsibility of the shift leader, and generally an increased level of understanding and awareness of what happened in the different flats of the house and when they might need support. According to one other team, social pedagogy had helped them make the home a safer place and a 'home away from home', where young people felt more ownership and had friends to interact with.

Group work

'There is much to be gained by encouraging groups of young people to work together to share experiences, to explore feelings, to support each other, to use information and to design strategies to enable them to manage their lives. Groupwork provides a forum for young people to develop and learn more about themselves by sharing experiences with others who have similar issues and concerns, thereby enabling them to make informed and positive choices in their lives.'
(Westergaard, 2010, p. 100)

Social pedagogy's emphasis on engaging in activities and experiences together, as equals, reinforces the notion of life-space by bringing the individual children and adults together and actively developing a family culture in which every person plays a valuable role. With increased confidence amongst staff to work more with the entire group rather than on a one-to-one basis, group work became a method more frequently used in the homes. Teams aimed to facilitate opportunities for the young people to develop more positive relationships with each other by undertaking activities together with everyone, for example going to the local park to play games, having karaoke nights or spray-painting a graffiti wall. Through these situations workers were encouraging the young people to think about the rest of the group and what their wishes might mean to others – for example when one young person wanted to go to Chelmsford and be picked up this might have a knock-on effect on what the others could do. Overall several teams reported that there was more dialogue with the young people and between them. Events such as a joint activity holiday at an outdoor centre, which was undertaken by all homes together, further created opportunities for young

people to develop relationships with their peers from other homes by jointly engaging in group activities.

One short-break home for children with disabilities decided to put much more attention to the group aspects by aiming to arrange bookings in a way that the group of children would share similar interests or have commonalities that would enable them to interact more with other children and make friends. They found that this dramatically reduced negative behaviour and made for a happier environment in which both children and staff enjoyed themselves more and could do more things together rather than having to keep some children separate from others. In this as well as other large homes that were divided into flats, group activities also began to take place across flats, so that small groups of children from different flats could engage in particular activities together and get to know children from other flats a little more, thus having access to, and seeing themselves as part of, a bigger peer group. This approach proved very successful on many levels and also seemed to make life easier for workers, which in turn benefitted the children.

Another noteworthy example of engaging the entire group of children and adults in a project designed to improve both the physical and social life-space was given by one residential worker in the Essex newsletter: 'We did a small, ongoing project on finding out about the Chinese Zodiac. I drew a circle on the wall and one of the young people researched the Chinese Zodiac. We made a table of the years relating to animals. The children and their friends in the neighbourhood drew the animals relating to signs and we added them to the display. All staff, young people,
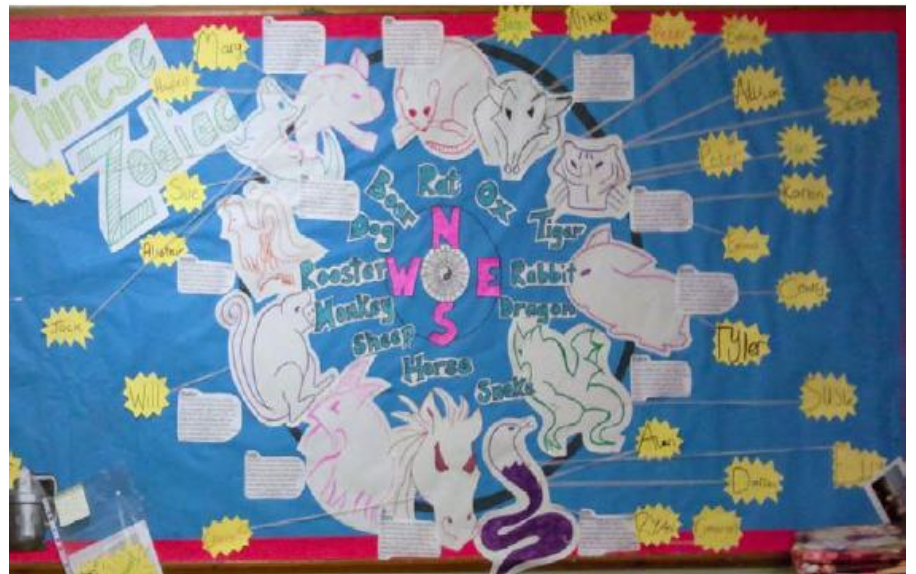

Figure 2: The Chinese Zodiac wall at a children's home

domestics, gardeners and night staff (in fact anyone who came in the building!) had a name card made for them. We used wool as arrows to point to animals. This encouraged lots of interacting and conversations between staff and children, especially at mealtimes, about which signs people were. Many staff had not a clue which sign related to them and the young people were so happy to find out. After a week or so people began asking what the different signs meant on the Chinese Zodiac. So we again went to good old "google" and found out the meanings associated with different signs. These are now attached to the board as well. The board has been up for 4 weeks, the children are still enjoying asking people what sign they are and reading out the meanings. The children have begun to reflect and identify themselves and staff in some of the meanings associated with particular signs. For example children have said things like, 'oh that's true, I am like that sometimes' or 'that's not true because I'm not like that!' This has also encouraged the children to use the laptops for research purposes rather than games! Over the weeks this project has been of continual interest; even now new names are still being added.'

Team empowerment

The third aspect that had a significant effect on the culture in the homes was a sense of empowerment amongst many residential care workers both individually and, importantly, as a team. Empowerment came to be seen no longer as something that teams should be given by their

senior managers but as something that they could achieve for themselves, a process in which they built up increasing trust in themselves and others and in which they found a stronger voice able to articulate the importance of their work and its contribution towards the wider vision. This was, for instance, seen in residential child care workers questioning some decisions of social workers in ways that were appreciative and sometimes made it difficult for the social worker to argue against, or in both professionals working more closely together and valuing each others' contribution and knowledge. Similarly, teams became more confident to find solutions for children's education where they were not attending school and to provide temporary opportunities for alternative educative experiences.

Whilst some workers dismissed social pedagogy as not having much fundamentally new to offer, most professionals took a more positive perspective and recognised the potential of social pedagogy to create the kinds of changes they genuinely welcomed. Very often teams noted that social pedagogy had given them permission to do what they believed in and had freed them up to do things with and for children, for instance go on a trip to London's Hyde Park, go swimming at the beach on a sunny day, bring a worker's own puppy into work, or take a young person along to a family trip to the zoo. It was often the small situations that signified big changes and showed practitioners' confidence: for example, one team decided against having their internal Christmas party and instead did Secret Santa with the children and had a shared Christmas lunch with them. Workers were doing this and much more to promote their children's inclusion in several aspects of the home life and were looking at engaging with each individual in order to do more with them, where previously they would have focussed mostly on doing things with their key child rather than 'interfering' by engaging too much with a colleague's key child.

In this process practitioners became more confident in bringing their personality into their work and in feeling professional in the ways they were doing this, understanding and reflecting upon the 3Ps (see above) to keep a balance. They were more involved and authentic to themselves, which had positive effects on the children. From the children's feedback, they felt more listened to and felt that staff had started to listen better and to act more upon what the children had to say. They also felt more cared for, for instance by being supported around issues like bullying. Staff noted that they would tell children now that they loved them, and felt a sense of achievement by comments from a new child saying 'it's good to be home' when coming back from school.

One home described confidently: 'We're a family now, and that makes every part equally important.' Through social pedagogy teams had become more confident to refer to themselves as a family in the widest sense. When picking up their children or going shopping together or being at the GP the children would now call the workers their 'auntie' or 'uncle' when asked: 'is this your mother' (or father). Previously the children and adults had felt uncomfortable answering these questions and had been concerned about being labelled. They recognised that their role was not to replace the children's parents but that they still were an important part of the child's family, of the proverbial village which it takes to raise a child.

Empowered staff teams are less concerned about exercising power and control over children than they are about sharing these with the children. Several homes recognised that their role needed to be about behaviour support rather than behaviour management, that sanctions and punishments usually accomplished the opposite of what they wanted and often taught the children much less than restorative approaches could. Restorative practice (see Hopkins) therefore increased in many homes and provided the children with ways to better understand their own behaviour and how it impacted on the people around them. The experiences were overwhelmingly positive and often convinced even those practitioners who had initially been sceptical. Many homes relayed back to us that the children were often much stricter with themselves than were the adults and that these situations provided much scope for learning about their own and others' feelings as well as what they could do to make amends. Professionals also recognised more the efforts children put into the restorative process and that they might still be unable to say 'I'm sorry' but could show their regret in other ways, which had to be valued. Interestingly, workers in many homes also stated that they

themselves had begun to say 'I'm sorry' and acknowledge their own human shortcomings, whereas previously they had been concerned that this would undermine their professional position. Now they found that it usually did the exact opposite and nurtured an empowering culture where it was okay to get things wrong and say sorry.

Nearly all teams felt that they had more ownership in developing their practice and as a consequence felt encouraged to take over more responsibilities where previously they had done only what the structures dictated. They also tended to feel more heard within the wider service and valued the platforms created for practitioners to network and reflect upon their practice beyond their homes, for example by participating in the 6-weekly meetings of the Practitioners' Network and the support sessions for Social Pedagogy Agents.

Making Sense of Complexity – Concluding Thoughts

The intention of this paper was to provide some insights into the most comprehensive attempt to date to systematically introduce social pedagogy into the organisational culture of a large-scale residential service in the UK. Given the project's complexity we made the conscious decision for the purpose of this paper to focus on drawing together some of the narratives which illustrate how social pedagogy has affected, inspired and empowered professionals and what achievements are possible where leaders and teams embrace social pedagogy and draw out its potential. We do not suggest that these achievements have come easily or that Essex's social pedagogy journey has been smooth – without challenges to overcome any accomplishment would feel undeserved, and we wanted to convey through the narratives a genuine sense of what the achievements felt like and why they were important to teams. Obviously, these are subjective reflections, but that does not make them any less valid from a scientific point of view as narratives can aptly capture the meaning-making processes, self-perceptions and motivations of individuals. They convey a passion about caring for children which cannot be quantified and expressed in numbers, and we hope that these insights will inspire readers – not to imitate what practitioners have done in the children's homes in Essex but to explore themselves how they could draw on social pedagogic theories and principles in order to further develop their practice and the culture within their own organisations.

The Importance of a Whole-Systems Approach to Social Pedagogy

Most significantly, in order to successfully develop social pedagogy in practice, social pedagogy must be reflected throughout the entire organisation. Its values and vision must be congruent with social pedagogical principles not just in terms of what they are but also how they are owned by employees and brought to life in interactions. Therefore, the Essex project was jointly conceived as a long-term systemic change process that would address and support all elements within their residential service in developing social pedagogy. This included training courses and team development sessions aimed to enable practitioners to relate social pedagogy to their own unique context in ways that complemented existing practice and instilled a sense of ownership and empowerment within them. Furthermore, the project created a strategic development and implementation group as well as a practitioners' network to provide opportunities for ongoing dialogue and reflection on how to further embed social pedagogy across the entire service and beyond.

Naturally, social pedagogy provided an element of challenge to existing organisational thinking and practices, most notably cultures of distrust, risk aversion and change resistance. Our approach ran counter to what many practitioners were used to as we wanted them to define what social pedagogy could mean for them and refrained from telling them what to do. They were provided the opportunity to lead the change rather than be dictated by it, and much work went into supporting

and enabling them to take on this role, to become social pedagogy agents and social pedagogic leaders irrespective of their formal position. Such cultural changes are never really accomplished but require continuous nurturing, and in this sense 3 years are a somewhat short period. After all, distrust, risk aversion and change resistance often have deep roots and should be accepted as understandable responses based on previous experiences. By valuing and embracing those who were initially sceptical of social pedagogy and unconvinced that it would make much of a difference, we frequently succeeded in including them in the change process, and often those who had been most resistant at the outset of the project became some of the most active culture carriers once they had had an opportunity to explore the meaning of social pedagogy in their own ways, experience the positive ways in which it had affected relationships, and develop trust in others' motivations.

As Berridge and colleagues (2012) summarise, in providing high-quality residential child care 'effective leadership is key; staff coherence and consistency are important; and […] these can be enhanced by a common philosophy or theory' (p. 94). Many of these key terms, however, are not value neutral, and it is their ethical dimension that seems highly significant. Leaders whose words and actions were ethically grounded in social pedagogy seemed to achieve much in transforming cultures and practices within their homes; and many teams realised that consistency in a social pedagogic understanding was highly value-based as it required their practice to be congruent to their own values and their shared vision rather than to consist of robotic responses.

The Art of Being – Social Pedagogy in Practice

From a social pedagogical perspective, care practice is about the art of being with children. By describing practice as an art form and as concerned primarily with 'being', as opposed to 'doing', the focus is directed towards who we are as adults. What we do in practice – the methods we choose – is an expression of our personal and professional identity and ethos, without which they run the risk of becoming meaningless. If we engage with a child in an activity without any genuine interest, without wanting to develop a better relationship and simply be there with them, we will have missed an opportunity to create something special. Social pedagogy provided residential workers in Essex with a clear focus on relationships. By using their own head, heart, and hands in order to fully engage with children and build strong relationships they demonstrated that they genuinely cared about the children. Developing authentic and supportive relationships was of course not new to practitioners, but the difference which social pedagogy seemed to make was that it provided a framework to conceptualise and reflect upon how care workers could bring in both personal and professional elements of their self whilst still having the best interest of the child at heart. Their understanding of social pedagogic concepts such as the 3Ps (the professional, personal and private) and the Common Third (using activities to develop relationships) helped them appraise what they had to offer as persons and attributed great value to relationship work. In many cases this had a transformative effect on the cultures within homes, which became increasingly more defined as relational spaces, as a shared life space for everybody within the home.

The confidence which participants gained from the social pedagogy courses provided a number of further benefits: Where practitioners had previously considered their role to be just about care, social pedagogy widened their understanding of the contribution they could make in other areas, such as health or education. Many homes took very positively to social pedagogic concepts highlighting learning and well-being as core aims; and following the maxim that, whilst it is not possible to teach, it is possible to create situations in which it is impossible not to learn, professionals within the care homes actively initiated such opportunities and recognised the learning potential inherent in many small everyday-life situations.

The change in mindset also resulted in teams developing a can-do attitude and taking on many challenges in order to improve their culture and practice. In incremental steps teams tackled some of the easier challenges first, such as getting a round table in the dining room in order to create

more of a shared atmosphere, before using their increased confidence to address more profound issues, such as turning around the blame culture within parts of the organisation. In this process they often recognised that collectively they essentially had all the resources needed to overcome such barriers, for example to establish a reflective culture where difficult conversations could be held constructively or to change neighbours' negative views about the home. These are no small achievements and show that social pedagogy had set free lots of energy in many teams, which motivated them to continue their social pedagogy journey.

As each team had its own unique culture and personalities the social pedagogy journeys looked distinctly different from home to home, with each being supported to relate social pedagogic concepts and principles to their particular context. At the same time they were systemically connected through joint social pedagogy training courses and the practitioners' network as a forum to share the different experiences and develop social pedagogy as the overarching conceptual framework and vision reflected in all home in their own unique ways. We do not suggest that all homes equally embraced the opportunities afforded to them, and often the extent to which teams developed social pedagogy depended on the home's leadership, the activities undertaken by the social pedagogy agents to create cultural change, but also on the depth of reflections in which teams engaged as this seemed to determine their ability to develop their practice and explore the potential of social pedagogy as a framework for doing so. For some homes, the project could not have come at a more opportune time, and there social pedagogy quickly provided the desired foundation to bring about positive changes by giving homes a greater sense of freedom, responsibility and ownership. One home, for example, went from being rated by Ofsted as 'inadequate' to 'outstanding' over the course of 18 months by fully embracing social pedagogy as the cultural foundation and indefatigably developing relationships – between each other as professionals, with the children in their care, and with the outside world (other homes, social workers, schools, police, reviewing officers, etc.). The difference could not only be felt when walking into the home, it was visible in every young person we encountered there – and it was also reflected in paper work such as care plans, which conveyed a sense of practitioners genuinely knowing the young person.

In this home and in most others, social pedagogy made a real difference through its effect on practitioners. Making a real difference to the care experiences of just one child who has never before felt she had a home or an adult who really cared about her is truly priceless. And we should not forget that many residential care practitioners work towards this every day. By valuing their important contribution and relating social pedagogy to who they are, what they do and how they do it, the Essex project has had a profound impact on many lives in ways that have made all the struggles and frustrations feel insignificant in the light of its achievements and benefits. The testimony of one young person, reported by The Who Cares? Trust, reflects the difference made collectively: '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.'

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