

Candles and Care

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Abstract

A group of Scottish care leavers visited Denmark to undertake a comparative piece of research looking at the similarities and differences between care and leaving care provision in the respective countries. They interviewed Danish young people in two projects for care leavers and visited a range of other projects for young people in care.

Whilst the lived experience of the two groups was broadly similar in relation to common themes of loss, stigma and levels of support in making the transition into young adulthood, the researchers found that the quality of relationships with staff/carers for the Danish young people was often better. The number of placement moves whilst in care was much lower for the Danes. The overall material and nurturing provision for Danish children and young people impressed the researchers.

Key words: care leaver; social pedagogy; young person research

Reflections by Scottish care leavers on the Danish approach to the provision of services for young people in care.

Over the past few years the residential child care sector has been introduced progressively to the concept and practice of social pedagogy. Academics including Mark Smith (see page 15) have written about social pedagogy in the Scottish context (Smith, 2009) and training organisations such as Thempra have undertaken practice based training with a variety of agencies in Scotland. A number of these initiatives have been evaluated (Milligan 2009, Vrouwenfelder, Milligan and Merrell 2012). Part of the training for some agencies has included staff members undertaking study visits to countries that practice social pedagogy, including Denmark (Thempra Mobility Project 2012).

When the proposal of a visit to Denmark by the staff and students was initiated the conversation developed into a proposal for a visit that would include care leavers who would undertake their own research into care experiences in Denmark. It was felt that this would be an innovative addition to the visit as to date our understanding of social pedagogic approaches is very much a practitioner and academic informed perspective.

The Robert Gordon University has for more than ten years hosted in association with SIRCC/CELCIS a residential child care pathway social work degree course. This course also offers an ordinary degree in social pedagogy. The course has, for more than seven years, utilised a range of inputs into the teaching from young people with experiences of care and leaving care. It was decided in 2011 to organize a study visit for students, staff and young people to Denmark. This took place in September of 2012. Four young people were supported financially by CELCIS and Aberdeen City Council to undertake some research of their own into the Danish care system.

The young people were drawn from the group A Voice of Reason that works with the Robert Gordon University and the Debate Project, supported by the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum and Who Cares? Scotland. They met together four times before the study visit in order to get to know each other and work on their research questions. IRISS, Creative Scotland, CELCIS and the Robert Gordon University hosted these meetings as well as offering other support including Danish translation from a staff member at IRISS. The final meeting involved a Danish-style meal and a finalisation of the study visit objectives.

At the end of the preparation period the group had a set of research topics and questions and had already made links through Facebook with social pedagogues and young people in the Danish projects.

The Danes had organized excellent self-catering accommodation in a residential hut in the woods beside the beach. It had a welcoming fire and lots of lovely food, as well as candles which the Danes burn everywhere. Most welcoming. In addition there were four social pedagogy students assigned to drive the group around under the benevolent supervision of their former lecturer.

The itinerary included visits to two projects for care leavers (Himmelblå and Baglandet), a youth house (Ungdommens Hus) that young people use to hang out in and get involved in a range of creative activities, some children's homes and a nature playground on a beautiful island off the coast of Esbjerg.

The research involved interviewing 12 Danish care leavers and speaking with a variety of staff and social pedagogy students in the three settings. The young people also made their observations of life in Denmark during the visit. The research questions had been translated into Danish and supplied to the interviewees. The students were also on hand to help with translation. Many of the Danish young people had good conversational English. Some of the interviews were video and audio recorded to enable the young people to revisit and interpret them on their return to Scotland.

There follows the young people's research findings and their personal reflections on the visit.

Julie Ann

Before going to Denmark I was really excited to see how the care system worked and what is different from Scotland.

During my time in Denmark I went to two residential schools. I was totally blown away by the surroundings and atmosphere. From walking in the front door the sense of a family setting was very obvious, the warmth and the love that I felt were overwhelming. Walking round the home I never once got the sense that it was a children's home. Every child's room was decorated to their taste and was full of toys etc. We got shown the loft which was packed with different things. We were told everything in the loft belonged to the children who stay there and who stayed there in the past. The whole motive for this was when a child lives at

home, when they leave they leave some of their things still with their parents; and why should children's homes be any different?

Within the homes there were photos on the walls of the children who stayed there but also of the children's families. When speaking with the staff members who were working, the question about Christmas came up. It blew me away that sometimes at Christmas if there are any children in the homes the staff take them to their own homes to celebrate Christmas with their family. I found this totally amazing!

Also in one residential home everyone is going on holiday and the staff members' families are going as well. The whole thought for this was simply because the staff want the children to feel part of a family and feel what it's like to be part of a family. This totally blew me away just how much a family is important within these homes. Every child in care strives for a family and in my opinion Denmark was spot on! Once a year the staff members' families would come to the home and they would have a family day, and in another place one lady's family is going on holidays with the children from the home. All lovely things and I wonder why they are not happening in Scotland!

It was a lovely environment to be in care. The support seems to be so much more in Denmark and if I could change the times back I would live as a care child in Denmark.

I asked young women specifically about their experiences within the care system. Here is what I found out:

1/ How do you think it is different in the care system for boys and girls?

Within the care system in Denmark the girls said they have it a lot easier than the boys.

2/ What do you think are the main issues for females within the care system?

Young girls within in the care system look for love, a lot often in the wrong places. One girl I spoke to said to me that because of the lack of love often the girls will look to a male to fill that space and often saying no is the hardest thing for a girl to do.

I think that within the care system in Scotland it is similar; a lot of girls who have been looked after feel so unloved that we tend to go looking for love and we then can find ourselves in situations that are not good for us. Love is something a lot of girls both in Denmark and Scotland struggle with and therefore I think this needs a lot more teaching on.

3/ As a female do you think you have been supported with growing up as a woman?

Everyone is different. There are so many demands on girls just because they are in the care system. There was no time to just be a child. We had to grow up fast. For one of the girls, her support only came when leaving the care system.

Again, both within Scotland and Denmark, girls have to grow up very fast when in the care system. Girls are taught how to look after themselves and look after their own place from a

young age. I'm not saying this is wrong but I am saying that why shouldn't children in care be a child for the time they are meant to be a child instead of making them grow up so fast? Let children have a childhood instead of being pushed into being an adult so young.

I also, on the other hand, think it's great teaching a young person the responsibilities of growing up, as they will know what they are doing when it comes to getting their own home.

4/ Do you have any female role models within the care system?

Within one of the projects a social pedagogue called Lisbeth was a big inspiration to the young girls. She was like a mother to the young people and that was very important to the girls.

One of the girls said that everyone who she came in contact with made some sort of impact upon her life.

Another girl said she chooses role models with traits that she would want to have as well.

Another female I spoke to had said that a lady called Kay was her role model; she was like a friend, a mother to me. She supported me and helped me with my issues. For five years she was there for me. Things would have been different if Kay had never worked with me. She took a real interest in me. She showed me she cared, she cried with me and helped me open up to her. She was my inspiration.

5/ if you could change one thing from your time in care what would it be?

One thing one of the young people would have changed would have been that she went and saw a counsellor sooner. The young woman committed an assault and as part of her sentence she was referred to a counsellor. She had wished she had seen the counsellor sooner as it would have possibly prevented her behaviour.

Another young woman said to me that she wished she had got more help in the placement. It would have made a big difference to her.

6/ Are there more boys in the care system than girls?

No

7/ Is there more teenage pregnancy within the care system?

One of the girls said that it was more fashionable to get pregnant so young.

Once again I believe that young girls want to be loved and therefore I believe that a lot of young girls would think that having a baby would be one of the best ways to feel love. But is the age of 15 the right age to become pregnant for love?

8/ What are some of the positives of being in care?

One young person told me that one of the positives was that she did not have to live at home anymore and that she did not have all the trouble that came with living at home.

Another girl said that she was not even 20 but she knew everything there was to know about practical things like doing the laundry and grocery shopping and how to handle economic situations. She can cook and clean. She had a friend who does not know these things because she never had to do it. When a bill comes in the mail the friend breaks down, not knowing what to do, but the young person in care knows how to handle the situation. She feels ready for an adult life and for the real world to come because she is prepared.

9/ What are some on the negatives of being in care?

Nearly every girl told me that she felt that she was looked at differently because she was in care. She felt she was not normal. One girl also told me it is a negative to have to live with the fact that your family is your family and that will never change.

10/ What are your hopes for the future?

One girl said to me that she just hoped to get a sweet man, a home, a car, a driving licence and that's my dreams, just to live a normal life. Another girl said to me that that she hopes to get an education and hoped to be a social worker or a nurse. Another girl said to me that she just hopes her dreams come true.

11/ Describe your time in care in a few words.

One young person said to me, difficult but needed. And another said an experience that was hard work. And another said sad, distant, lonely, unloved.

Alex

In Denmark the approach to care for young people is different to Scotland because they have a different approach to 'early intervention'. Their take on early intervention is: act before the problem can escalate to a worse or more serious situation than before, and properly rather than it dragging over several years. In my opinion Danish care overtakes the UK on so many levels because of the family approach to care, whereas here the local authority can't be a parent to the young people.

Similar to Julie Ann's findings, it appears to be the case that birth families are much more closely involved with their children's care. The State regards this as a priority.

Whilst in Denmark everyone is welcomed with open arms rather than the 'waiting till I know you' period is over, like here in Scotland. In the units/youth groups we visited they focused on what the young person wanted and designed their care package around them, not the

unit. The units have a family setting in terms of when you go in the first thing you see is candles lit and they are everywhere and not fake, I might add.

The young person's group in Himmelblå (a Project for care leavers in Esbjerg) wasn't just there to support young people in care but everyone in the setting, including friends of the care leavers. Once again, there were candles but what struck my attention was everyone was smoking inside. Now that's both good and bad because on one side the young people bond with staff in that sense because no-one has to go outside for a smoke all the time, but at the same time people who don't smoke it can be quite a negative situation because the room is filled with smoke and it isn't a nice smell (might explain all the candles).

At the same time the health and safety in the UK is much stricter so maybe that's why we don't smoke indoors anywhere but it's also a positive because there might be younger kids in the same room as the smoke.

I asked these questions:

- 1/ What is social mobility like in Denmark?
- 2/ What is the social deprivation like in Denmark?
- 3/ What are the outcomes like for young people with care experience?
- 4/ What opportunities do the Danish council give the young people in care compared to other young people?
- 5/ How long do young people get support once left care and what kind of support it is?
- 6/ Is there positive discrimination in Denmark for people in care?
- 7/ How much does your through care pay or give you over a period of time?
- 8/ When you leave care are young people more likely to go onto further education or employment?

The responses I got were all quite similar with each young person but I wasn't expecting the difference between Denmark and Scotland. Most of the young people didn't know what social mobility or deprivation was (maybe it was my English) but once I explained it they said there weren't many homeless people on the streets in Denmark and the social mobility is what you make it. If you want to have money you will get an education and a job; if not you will do nothing. They saw it being the same with the outcomes of being in care.

In terms of what the council gives young care leavers compared to other young people there was no difference in support or money. Young people told me that whether you need financial support whilst in care or not you can go to the government and get 5000 kroner, but not all the time. There don't seem to be special rules for care leavers. They can come to the homes like Himmeblå for support and there were young people in their 20s coming along. They can bring their friends and children.

When anyone leaves education they are more likely to go onto higher education to get a better, well-paid job. They have adult colleges that people can go to if they missed their education. The places are free. Some young people also do training courses to learn trades and they can be apprentices.

So as you can see it's quite different in Denmark compared to Scotland. I was fortunate to go on this trip and for that I am grateful.

Murray

Ok so here we go. The first place we went to was Himmelblå. Himmelblå is a youth house where young people can go and partake in various activities and get a lovely meal basically just like a family home with televisions and computers and books and pictures. There is a beautiful upstairs chill-out room with sofas and beanbags and the young people are free to smoke up there and upstairs also happens to be where the research questions took place.

Whilst we were there, there were only females present except for a male staff member but me being a male I found it great to get answers from a female perspective. My questions were as follows

- Did you feel stereotyped within the care system?
- What did you like about your support worker?
- If a young person has behavioural problems is there a scare of being put in a secure or residential unit?
- How much support is there for education whilst in care or leaving care?
- When moving on from care is there any choice in where you go?
- How much consideration is taken into place on when the right time to move on i.e. from care?

The responses that I got were not much different from Scotland's care system although from my personal experience in care I moved around 30+ places but the young females I spoke to were settled in their placements. They said that their foster carers and support workers and social workers were like parents and they would offer advice like a mother or father would to their own child.

They had not heard of young people moving placement more than once and were shocked at my experience.

As like the Scottish care system, the young people have the right to change their social worker, say if they're not feeling good about them, e.g. bad vibes.

There are no secure units in Denmark so if you act aggressively you will go to court just like adults and if found guilty then you would be put in a juvenile jail like young offenders. These appear to be more therapeutic in their operation than in Scotland.

Education-wise I found that their support mechanisms were spot on and all of the young people I talked to were in college studying, so a big plus there.

The young people didn't feel stereotyped at school or out and about because in Denmark there are lots of people in care, so it's quite common. That's the impression I got.

When moving from care, young people move into a flat very easily, although I'm not sure if they would be capable of maintaining a flat i.e. cooking/ budgeting/ cleaning, but when they are in their flat they will get support from a social worker at least once a week and because they are like family I felt that they had no problems talking to them about any troubles they may have come across, which is very positive.

The second place I went to was Baglandet and the layout of the house was practically the same as in Himmeblå except there was a bed which if care leavers felt tired they could sleep in for a while. Baglandet is a house whereas Himmeblå is a flat, so the house was bigger and I felt there was more space for the care leavers to explore and enjoy.

The feedback from Baglandet was very different and I will explain why. There was a male who I believe was in his late 40s early 50s and this came as a shock to me. He was a care leaver (now a foster carer) and he had a foster son who had also been in care. I think why I was most shocked was because of his age and everyone else was so young but he was a care leaver so he was well within his rights to join everyone else and I felt he was happy to still be a part of something, even if it was just for a meal every week or just to get out of the house.

The agency that runs Baglandet employs only care leavers as project managers and they encourage care leavers to mentor the young people.

As I talked with him about his experiences in care through my questions I found that when he was in care he was stereotyped and he was kicked out of care at 15, I'm sure he said, and forced to find work and at the time there was no help for this and this led to depression. Because there was no social work involvement he had basically been left to his own devices, but this was many years back. I asked him if he'd seen a big change in the care system and he went on to tell me about his son and his experiences and they were more like the experiences of the young females I had spoken to at Himmeblå.

He also spoke about the government and how money talks, so if you are looking to set up a house like this you have to know some high-up people or have a lot of money to back up your project because the government in Denmark would stereotype the young people in care and say things like we can't fund schemes like this for people in care because we will lose money and if fails it will have been a waste of time. They would not give the young people the benefit of doubt. But somewhere down the line there must have been a change and it was for the better because places like Himmeblå and Baglandet give the young people a feeling of worth and also lets them see that if they work they could own places like these and fill them with nice things, so to me it seems good to encourage the care leavers.

Until relatively recently there was a right wing coalition government in Denmark that sought to change the approach to welfare provision.

So all in all my feelings are as follows:

The care system to me seems to be the same but also very different in numerous ways but I think just giving young people the chance to see nice things will make them want to do nice things and have nice things and have big aspirations for the future.

I would also like to say a big thanks to The Robert Gordon University and CELCIS and the Danes for giving me the opportunity to see a different culture and research that I really, really, really enjoyed!

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Julie Ann Arthur

My name is Julie Ann Arthur, I am 23 years old. I have grown up within the care system since I was a very young child. Within my time in care I have been to foster homes, children's homes, and residential school. When I turned 16 I got a flat on my own and since then have been living independently. Life has its challenges but challenges that can be overcome. When I was 15 I joined the group A Voice of Reason. As part of the group we speak to social work students about our experience within the care system.

Alexander Horne

My name is Alexander Horne, I am 19 years old and I started working with the group a voice of reason aged 12. I lived in a variety of care settings up until my 16th birthday. Aged 17 I became employed with Who Cares? Scotland and was involved in delivering the Corporate parenting Training. I have also recently been nominated for a Young Scot award.

Murray McKinnon

My name is Murray McKinnon, aged 26, and I am a young person who has come/been dragged through the care system, lol. I got support up until my support worker left then I got shunned. But from being shunned the group A Voice of Reason helped me pick up the pieces and give me a purpose and feeling of worth by letting me get my point across from my perspective of being in care by talking to groups of students, which I thoroughly enjoy because throughout my time in care I distanced myself away from help and made it hard for

people to help me. Now I realise that social work were trying to point me in the right direction so it's good to be able to give something back to the sector.

Jeremy Millar

My name is Jeremy Millar and I am a lecturer in social work. I worked in residential services for substance misuse, mental health, young offenders and latterly leaving care. Along the way I picked up an OU degree and the DipSW. I draw on years of residential experience to hopefully tell some interesting tales and progress the development of residential child care and social pedagogic approaches.

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