Contextualising the findings - the Orkney Social Pedagogy Evaluation

Evelyn Vrouwenfelder

Abstract

CELCIS, formerly SIRCC, has funded a series of ThemPra social pedagogy courses for residential childcare staff across Scotland. ThemPra is a small social enterprise consisting of German, English and Danish social pedagogy trainers. Their 10-day courses facilitate experiential and reflective learning, combining grounded childcare theory and social pedagogy principles and practice. Orkney local authority ran this course in 2011, co-funding delivery for a multi-agency group of 18 staff. CELCIS commissioned the Orkney training evaluation and the subsequent report was published in March 2012. The article provides a summary of the key findings which were captured over a period of 6 months. It also describes 'what happened next' in Orkney and considers this in terms of academic writing on learning transfer and sustainability of evaluation outcomes. A key aspect of the article is the link between the methodology of the course and its subsequent outcomes. The full report can be accessed through this link:
www.celcis.org/media/resources/publications/Social-Pedagogy-Report-web.pdf

Key words: evaluation; learning transfer; sustainability

Background

CELCIS, formerly SIRCC, has provided pilot social pedagogy training courses in Scotland in partnership with ThemPra, a social enterprise set up to promote social pedagogy in the UK through training and staff development. Prior to the Orkney initiative, the audience for these courses consisted solely of residential childcare workers, in line with SIRCC's remit at the time. Selected unit teams or representatives from across Scotland were put through the 10-day training which was fully funded by CELCIS. Some of these programmes have been evaluated internally by organisations but unfortunately results have not been shared publicly. In Scotland, two evaluations have been completed and published: the Sycamore training evaluation (Milligan, 2009) and the Orkney training evaluation (Vrouwenfelder, Milligan and Merrell, 2012).

Between February and September 2011, 18 multi-agency staff from Orkney participated in the ten day social pedagogy training. Participants included representatives from social work, residential childcare (RCC), through care and aftercare services, community education, peripatetic early years' support teaching and fostering and adoption services, plus primary head teachers, deputy head teachers and a number of guidance and principal teachers. Senior education and social work staff at Orkney council wanted to increase the capacity of their teams to collaborate and thereby provide a higher level of care and educational support to vulnerable children and young people in their care.

CELCIS commissioned an evaluation into the impact of the 10-day training on the practice of staff as well as interagency working.

According to Thempra (2013) the 10-day social pedagogy course aims to convey social pedagogical concepts and principles in ways that are both meaningful and relevant to participants' practice. The course is therefore designed holistically to enable experiential learning, support individual and group reflection processes and to create dialogue by drawing on participants' knowledge and experience. Over the 10 days participants explore the historical and philosophical roots of social pedagogy in continental Europe and how these have shaped social pedagogues' concepts of children as 'rich' in potential. Connecting theory, ethics and practice, the course places particular emphasis on enhancing well-being and happiness, creating holistic learning opportunities, developing authentic relationships and supporting empowerment.

Introduction

The aim of the article is to share some of the impact of the social pedagogy course on participants' practice and in particular their inter-agency collaboration and communication. It also explores some of the different contextual aspects that may have influenced the findings and are important to take note of. Apart from looking at academic literature on learning and learning transfer, the article in particular highlights the link between the experiential and reflective element of the training and its subsequent successful outcomes. Words that are italicised in the article refer to key social pedagogy principles. Definitions of these words can be found in the research report on page 15. www.celcis.org/resources/entry/social_pedagogy_and_inter_professional_practice_evaluation_of_orkney_island

Methodology

The research consisted of three stages. In stage 1, participants filled out a baseline questionnaire before the start of the course (January 2011). The course was then given in blocks of three days in February, March and April 2011. The second stage was a series of focus groups and individual interviews held six weeks after the course (June 2011) whilst in the final stage at six months after the course a second round of interviews and focus groups took place (October, 2011).

Responses from a subsequent follow-up day for the participants and a social pedagogy strategy development day for managers at different levels were recorded as part of the research. Both took place in October 2011. The purpose of the strategy development day was to inform and consult with senior managers from health, education and social care on social pedagogy. This was organised by the education and leisure department of Orkney Council alongside staff from ThemPra.

Key findings from the research

For the purpose of the article selected findings of most significance to those working in residential childcare and social work will be shared. These findings focus on how social pedagogy concepts enhanced communication and collaboration between agencies, in particular the dialogue of residential childcare staff with social work and education staff.

Common language

One of the most significant outcomes of the course was the development of a common language. This common language of social pedagogy translated fluently across professional disciplines as well as between professionals in the same agency. It provided participants with key terms to identify the needs of the child in their own professional context and that of others. Due to improved understanding of who colleagues were and what their role was, it was said to be 'easier and quicker to get to the business of thinking about the young person' (Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* 2012 p. 27).

Examples were given about the impact of the common language on more effective collaboration between schools (both primary and secondary) and social work staff. In a particular example around a child in a primary school both the head teacher and depute head teacher conveyed how the common language as well as other concepts of social pedagogy such as working with *head, heart and hands* and the *common third* had underpinned the planning and intervention process (Vrouwenfelder *et al*., (2012 p.15).

Building relationships and establishing a method of work

The training gave participants a clearer purpose for building and maintaining relationships with children and young people. Even though many said that the concept of 'building relationships' resonated with how they already worked, social pedagogy established this within a method and theory of work. In the words of participants: 'it justified and legitimised it' (Vrouwenfelder *et al*., 2012, p.19). One of the participants suggested that social pedagogy gave; 'meaning to the process rather than just going for the right outcome' (Vrouwenfelder*,* 2011, unpublished*).* For example, some residential staff suggested that even an activity such as baking a cake received a different meaning and became more valuable as it helped build the relationship with young people. A support teacher in a secondary school told of applying the *common third* by spending more time talking to young people about hobbies and affinities outside of school. Building authentic relationships with these young people acted as a catalyst to achieving change in their behaviour and better achievements in school.

Residential childcare staff frequently referred to themselves as the 'parents' for those children whom the local authority held the parental authority. The course affirmed these already existing close relationships with children and young people. They spoke about the long term relationships that they build up with young people through the realisation that for some of the young people, the residential services were the only 'family' they had. Interviewees felt particular drawn to how relationships are conceived in social pedagogy

as both professional and personal. This reflected what they had instinctively felt was the right approach.

Effective multi agency care planning

Residential childcare staff talked about taking a more proactive and in some cases a leading role with regards to advocating for children in their care and ensuring that planning processes were started early enough. The language of social pedagogy offered clear concepts to better manage interagency care plans for young people through the *challenge by choice* concept. The depute manager explained that given the stigma attached to children in care it was necessary to demand the right services for them and for professionals to recognise the commitment they make to provide those services. As lead professional for a young person (Scottish Government, 2008) she would advocate for a firm indication of what the support from other agencies would look like and hold them accountable for these commitments.

Growth in personal confidence

Care staff mentioned a growth in personal confidence, especially when speaking to staff in other agencies or indeed senior colleagues. In the current 'Cinderella' climate of residential childcare, residential staff felt this growth in confidence in particular in relation to their work with education and social work professionals. A better understanding of what other professionals do, what their aims and priorities are, as well as a better understanding of their value base, contributed to this.

Development of mutual understanding between professionals and agencies

Gaining an understanding of differences and similarities in purpose and priorities of the different sectors significantly enhanced mutual dialogue and understanding. As one of the participants said: 'I feel I'm just slightly more aware that everybody's role is equally important. More aware to think beyond my own role' *(*Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* 2012 p.27). Stephens (2013) suggests that 'social pedagogy brings the social into education and the education into the social', thus resolving the separation between education and care. This seems to be what happened during the training. Participants talked about the development of a mutual understanding of the need for a basic sense of health and well-being in children and young people as a pre-requisite for learning. After the course, social care staff would seek guidance from support teachers who had been on the social pedagogy course with regards to children in their care and vice versa. The mutual understanding of each other's roles, values and priorities as well as the aforementioned common language enhanced and expedited the support to young people. 'Key point is that we are all in this together.... And perhaps I didn't always realise this, that teachers do want the best for a child as well. They are in it for the caring as well' (Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* 2012 p.30).

Role of senior managers

During the strategy development day, a number of senior education staff recognised their need for a better understanding of social pedagogy to enhance support for teachers trained in social pedagogy. Even though managers did not envisage having the same 10-day course, they believed that having a similar but shorter course retaining the experiential and reflective elements would be beneficial. Where managers had taken part in the course, staff commented that more time was made available to implement what had been learned and to widen out its impact to more colleagues through team meetings and training days. It was also easier to integrate the learning from the course into supervision processes. Another point made was the benefit of including social pedagogy principles of practice in person specifications when recruiting staff at all levels (Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* 2012 p.40).

Training teams versus individuals

When more than one person had been trained in an organisation or team, the development of social pedagogy, as well as sharing key theories and principles with colleagues and other agencies, was considered easier. Having the possibility of a dialogue with someone who had a shared understanding of social pedagogy when dealing with practice issues affirmed the learning and encouraged more confidence to share this with others. Where managers had been involved in the course, this impact was even greater due to the support and time offered for reflection and learning. A person trained individually reported that the dialogue with colleagues was generally more challenging: 'I feel I just need to keep 'chipping away' at it in the department and slowly the language will start to be clearer to my colleagues.' A participant from a trained team said, 'All six of us are doing it here and that's very different from any other course I've been on. This is really good because we can see a real change in the way we work with young people' (Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* 2012 p. 34).

Contextualising the findings

Smith (2000 as cited in Skinner and Whyte, 2007, p.367-368), in a paper from an ESRC funded seminar, suggests that political and managerial pressure for evidence of what works can '[reveal] an over-simplified and over-certain view of what evidence does or might consist of, and of how it should be interpreted and used'. Due to people always living and working in a wider context, we cannot ascribe all of the outcomes of any course to the course only. As such it is important that we look at other factors that influenced results. The Orkney report made some reference to influencing factors such as the small community context and positive organisational culture which already had a strong focus on the Getting it Right for Every Child agenda (Scottish Government, 2008). Participants were (as they said themselves) 'cherry picked' for the course due to their work remit, work challenges and natural affinity with social pedagogy (Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* 2012 p. 17). Some explained how the course linked with or built upon previous training, influential theorists that they had read about or models for working with children they were familiar with. For example, an early year's peripatetic teacher was very familiar with the early childhood approach in Reggio Emilia which presents a particularly good fit with social pedagogy thinking (Moss, 2011).

Interagency focus – was this new?

The baseline survey asked participants if they had received inter-agency training before. The only incidence given in response was the Scotland-wide child protection training given in 2011 based on concerns identified by the O'Brien Report (Edinburgh and the Lothians Child Protection Committee, 2003). After the social pedagogy course, participants were asked to evaluate the training process in the first instance and asked to look in particular at the inter-agency aspect. Logically, many participants compared the social pedagogy course to the child protection training as this was their most recent point of reference.

Interagency training – does it work?

Debates exist on whether inter-agency training is the best route to increasing inter-agency collaboration and communication. Schenk (1979) suggested, for example, that interagency training provided to general practitioners and social workers was insufficient for mutual understanding and did not eliminate mutual prejudices to the extent that was intended.

On the other hand, Hallet and Birchall (1992) stated that inter-agency working in the area of child protection *can* be improved through training agencies together. This is affirmed by MacRae & Skinner (2011) who report a number of positive changes in inter-agency collaboration and communication after an evaluation of the aforementioned Scotland wide inter-agency child protection training. Schenk (1979) and Hallet and Birchall (1992) seemed to link the impact and/or lack thereof mostly to the professional groupings undertaking the training as well as the topic at hand. In contrast to Schenk (1979), Samuel and Dodge (1981) reported that in a similar inter-agency training between social workers and general practitioners attitudes *were* changed and more sharing and discussion of issues took place in practice as a result. Samuel and Dodge (1981) looked at the impact of the training from a different perspective. They linked the impact of the training to their training methodology and made this a significant contributing factor to the successful outcomes. The methodology revolved around working in small groups and continuous dialogue and reflection between participants. The training also provided a highly self-directed approach and had limited numbers (16).

Linking the methodology of the training to the outcomes

There are strong similarities between the methodology as used by Samuel and Dodge (1981) and the methodology and consecutive positive findings of the social pedagogy course. The experiential learning approach, as well as the high levels of dialogue and reflection, were mentioned over and over again by participants. Participants said that the learning was at a 'much deeper level' (Vrouwenfelder, 2011 unpublished) than the child protection interagency training. Other quotes were: 'Other training sessions are often more done to you. A delivered thing, rather than active involvement.' 'Here it was theory meeting the practice.' 'We were so much more involved.' 'I suppose you were made to feel more,' referring to the intensity of doing experiential learning exercises together (often in smaller groups) followed by reflection time and dialogue. (Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* 2012 p.20*)*

Samuel and Dodge (1981) considered a focus on the attitudes of individual workers towards each other more relevant to creating mutual understanding rather than detailed didactic input on each other's roles and work. A resonance is heard in this feedback from a social pedagogy course participant when she said:

> a completely different training from others I've had. It was about being actively involved with each other. Focus was to learn to work together as a team, rather than just listen to what others were telling you and it was valuable because it was mixed agencies. When I came out of this training I did know a lot more about all these other people and what they were doing out there. (Vrouwenfelder *et al*. 2012, p.18)

It was noticeable during the focus groups and follow-up day that the course had forged strong relationships between the different professionals that participated and in fact seemed to have created an almost 'inter professional team' during the training process. As one of the participants said: 'the length of time you were together with these people for the nine days. You had to develop and form into a group' (Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* 2012 p.18). Even though Samuel and Dodge (1981) suggest that the small participant numbers make it difficult to generalise the findings, the number of participants on the course actually bears resemblance to the ThemPra social pedagogy course. A deliberate maximum of 18 participants is set as this is most conducive to the learning process.

The benefit of reflective learning

Group reflection is another central aspect of the social pedagogy course. Many participants mentioned that they particularly wanted to integrate this more into their own day to day practice. In the light of reviewing the link between the methodology and the findings it is worth asking what it is about reflection that supports learning – particularly deep learning - and what the benefit is of reflective learning over didactic learning? Houghton suggests that deep learning involves:

> the critical analysis of new ideas, linking them to already known concepts and principles and leads to understanding and long term retention of concepts so that they can be used for problem solving in unfamiliar situations (as cited in Ingelby, Joyce and Powell, 2011 p. 82).

Houghton goes on to say that deep learning promotes understanding and application for life.

To answer these questions about the links between reflection and learning, Lowe and Kerri (1998) undertook an experiment with two groups of learners (student nurses) to explore whether a reflective learning approach would lead to a higher level of deep learning than more conventional didactic methods. The approach of the research undertaken was that the same material was taught, but in one group a more didactic approach was followed whilst in the other a reflective approach to the learning was taken. Lowe and Kerri showed that there was no significant difference between the levels of learning achieved,

but what did become clear was that the group learning by reflective methods achieved at a higher level and more quickly than those taught through more conventional didactic methods. Whether learning was also retained better in the long run was not covered, although this could be assumed as part of the deep learning result (see definition). There seem to be similarities in the outcomes of the learning situation described by Lowe and Kerri and the ThemPra course. The findings tell us that the social pedagogy course had a significant impact on participants, both personally and professionally in a relatively short amount of time due to the extensive amount of personal and critical reflection. As one of the managers suggested, 'the self-awareness, the reflection and the use of self, they are the three things that I think were well learned by everyone here' (Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* p.18).

Putting learning into practice (transfer of learning)

Burke and Hutchins (2007 as cited by Macrae and Skinner p.984) suggest 'there are seven factors in the characteristics of learners that are moderately or strongly associated with the transfer of learning. These are the cognitive ability to undertake training; sufficient self-efficacy; the motivation to learn; that the training or learning is perceived as useful or valuable for the role; that the learning or training is perceived to assist in career planning or pathways; a learner's openness to experience; and the perceived organisational commitment to staff learning and development.'

The evidence from their research also suggests there are three aspects involved with the impact of training in the workplace. They are "that the work climate and managers are receptive to and supportive of learning transfer; that there is supervisory and peer support; and that participants are given opportunities to perform and test out their learning' (ibid p.984).

In the case of Orkney, these aspects were in place at the time of the course and for a period thereafter. The participants talked about being 'cherry picked' for the course and were highly motivated and well supported by the local authority. Whilst this may provide a bias in terms of the outcomes (given that most of the participants had a mindset that was already conducive to social pedagogy), we could also conclude that all participants therefore positively fitted the earlier mentioned factor of motivation to learn and ability to undertake the course as well as having openness to new experiences. The length of the social pedagogy course makes it quite an investment for managers and as such it is understandable that participants were chosen who were assumed to have the ability to put the training into practice, and who worked in settings where the newly acquired skills would be most helpful for clients.

Bing, Kehrkahn, & Short (2003, as cited by Burke and Hutchins, 2008, p. 108) make the important comment that 'unless grounded in a reasonable level of support, any performance improvement practice is likely to be fad-driven, resulting in spurious and inconsistent results.' In Orkney, the local authority and in particular the senior manager took a proactive role after the course, setting up interest groups around social pedagogy and actively pursued avenues to provide support and keep the learning at the forefront of people's minds. The manager continues to promote social pedagogy across other departments in the local authority and among managers of staff that participated in the course. Burke and Hutchins (2007) emphasise the importance of supportive management

structures for longer term impact of training. In Orkney, the management development day that accompanied the follow-up day of the course posed the question how social pedagogy could play a more central role across departments and how training could be offered to managers to ensure that adequate support could be given to those that attended the course.

Orkney Council has recently undergone a significant restructuring. Some staff have left their posts or moved into different posts. This makes it difficult to monitor any further impact of the course. Baldwin and Ford (1988 p. 64) state that for transfer of learning to take place: 'learned behaviour must be generalised to the job context and maintained over a period of time on the job.' Given the structural changes in the local authority, some of this transfer of learning or training impact may therefore be in jeopardy as the reorganisation took place very quickly after the training. However as one of the senior managers in Orkney was quoted: 'reflection has been learned well by all those involved in the training' (Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* p.34). Because of the depth of the training experience seen across participants' responses, one can't help but wonder if the learned *haltung* or *mindset* (Vrouwenfelder *et al.,* 2012 p.15) will remain with people wherever they go.

Conclusion

There is substantial evidence of improved practice and inter-agency working in line with the principles of social pedagogy following the 10 day ThemPra course. From the participants' responses we can conclude that the experiential and reflective nature of the training methodology is particularly central to this. These findings seem especially pertinent to the Scottish Government Consultation on the Common Core of Skills, Knowledge & Understanding & Values for the Children's Workforce in Scotland held in May 2011. This consultation looked in particular at promoting inter-agency working and training. Any training for the children's workforce in Scotland should take note of both the findings and the process that has led to them. Social pedagogy should logically be central to this.

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End notes
1. The only other publicised evaluation on social pedagogy training in Scotland is that by Milligan (2009) of the training in Sycamore. As mentioned, other internal evaluations have taken place but were not made public. It has therefore unfortunately not been possible to compare and contrast the findings of the research any further with reports of a similar nature.

2. Despite the restructuring, Orkney Council has remained active in the development of social pedagogy and is currently part of the Head, Heart, Hands programme led by The Fostering Network and delivered in partnership with ThemPra, Jacaranda and Prof. Pat Petrie. The programme trains foster carers in social pedagogy and aims to create

systemic change within the six demonstration sites. For more information on the Head, Heart, Hands programme please go to: www.orkney.gov.uk/OIC-News/a-brighter-future-for-children-in-foster-care.htm or www.fostering.net/head-heart-hands

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