

Social Pedagogy in Practice

Nurturing children's learning and well-being

SYLVIA HOLTHOFF & GABRIEL EICHSTELLER, DIRECTORS OF THEM PRA SOCIAL PEDAGOGY COMMUNITY INTEREST COMPANY

'All clear,' said Pippi at last, slamming the oven door after the last tins with a bang.

'What are we going to do now?' asked Tommy.

'I don't know what you're thinking of doing,' said Pippi, 'but as for me, I'm not one who can take things easy. I happen to be a turnupstuffer, so of course I never have a free moment.'

'What did you say you were?' asked Annika.

'A turnupstuffer.'

'What's that?' asked Tommy.

'Somebody who finds the stuff that turns up if only you look, of course. What else would it be?' said Pippi [...]. 'The whole world is filled with things that are just waiting for someone to come along and find them, and that's just what a turnupstuffer does.'

'What sort of things?' asked Annika.

'Oh, all sorts,' said Pippi. 'Gold nuggets and ostrich feathers and dead mice and rubber bands and tiny little grouse, and that kind of thing.'

Tommy and Annika thought it sounded a great deal of fun, and at once wanted to become turnupstuffers too, though Tommy said he hoped he would find a gold nugget and not a little grouse.

'We'll have to wait and see,' said Pippi. 'You always find something. But we'll have to hurry up so other turnupstuffers don't come first and take away all the gold nuggets and things that are waiting hereabouts.'

The three turnupstuffers set out. They thought it was best to begin hunting around the houses in the neighbourhood, because Pippi said that even if there were little grouse deep in the woods, the very best things were almost always found near where people lived. [...]

Tommy and Annika watched Pippi to see how a turnupstuffer should act. She ran from one side of the road to the other, shading her eyes with her hand, and searching and searching. Once in a while she crept on her knees, and stuck her hands in through a fence, saying in a disappointed voice, 'Strange! I was sure I saw a gold nugget!' [...]

They went on. Suddenly, Pippi gave a wild shriek.

'Well, I never saw the likes!' she cried, picking up an old rusty cake tin out of the grass. 'What a find! What a find! One can never have too many tins.'

Tommy looked rather suspiciously at the tin and asked, 'What can you use that for?'

'It can be used for lots of things,' said Pippi. 'One way is to put cakes in it. Then it will be one of those nice Tins With Cakes. Another way is not to put cakes in it. Then it will be a Tin Without Cakes, which isn't quite as nice, but it would do well enough too.'

She inspected the tin, which really was quite rusty, and had a hole in the bottom.

'It looks as though this one is a Tin Without Cakes,' she said thoughtfully. 'But you can put it over your head and pretend it's the middle of the night!'

And she did just that. With the tin over her head, she wandered through the neighbourhood like a little tin tower, and she didn't stop before she fell on her stomach over a wire fence. There was a terrific crash when the cake tin hit the ground.

'There, you see!' said Pippi, removing the tin. 'If I hadn't had this on me, I would have fallen face first and knocked myself silly.'

'Yes, but,' said Annika, 'if you hadn't had the tin on you, why, you'd never have tripped over the fence...'

But before she had finished speaking, another shriek came from Pippi, who triumphantly held up an empty cotton reel.

'It seems to be my lucky day today!' she said. 'What a perfectly sweet little reel to blow soap bubbles with, or to hang on a string round my neck for a necklace! I want to go home and do it now.'

Astrid Lindgren – Pippi Longstocking (1949)

An Introduction to Social Pedagogy

In her world famous children's stories Astrid Lindgren has illustrated what makes children rich: Pippi Longstocking may not be financially affluent, but she possesses richness in far more important respects. She has a rich fantasy, imagination and creativity, she draws on a wealth of practical solutions and skills, her treasure hunts and adventures have made her an expert in all matters, and what is precious to her has no price, only value.

Although she is a literary character, Pippi symbolizes what the Italian pedagogue Loris Malaguzzi has termed the 'rich child'. According to him, the founder of Reggio Emilia, children have 'a hundred ways of thinking, a hundred ways of playing, a hundred ways of talking' (1983). And like Pippi, they have a hundred uses for everything.

"Children are the true connoisseurs.

*What's precious to them
has no price, only value."*

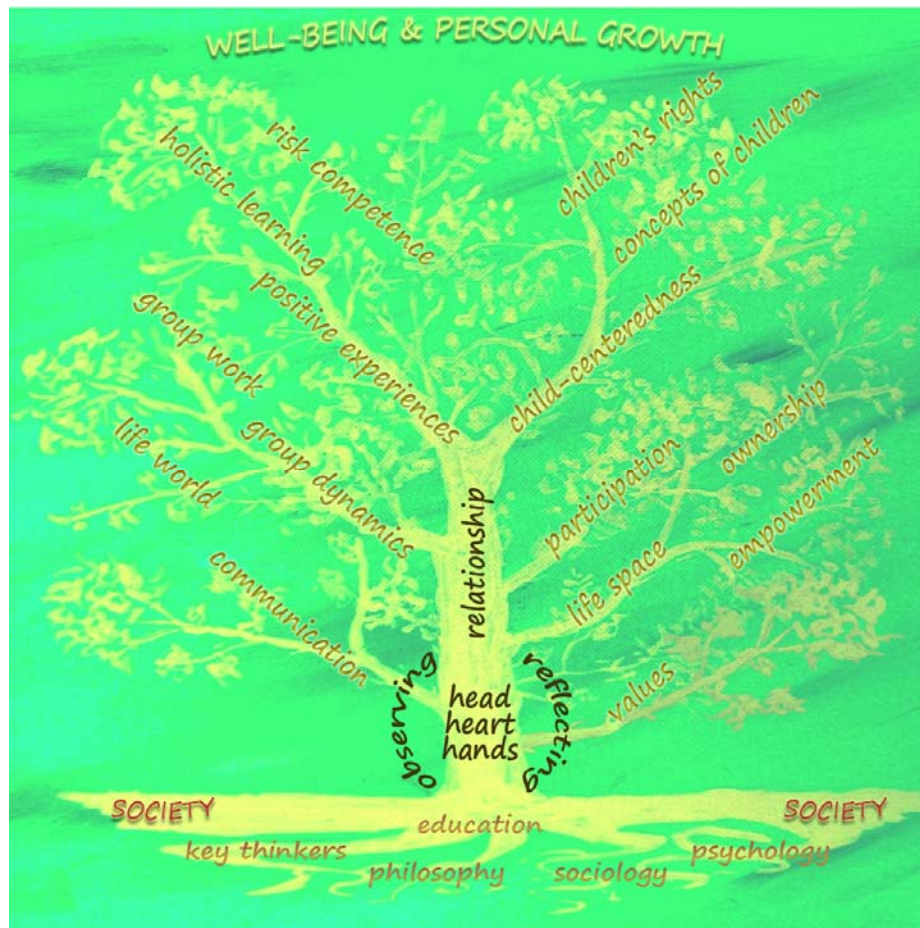
(Bel Kaufman, Russian author)

It is this richness in children that social pedagogues aim to nurture, encouraging children to be 'turnupstuffers' and explore the world with all their senses. This follows the motto: 'It is not possible to teach; but it is possible to create situations wherein it is impossible not to learn'. Children are born learners, they are curious to discover and have the fantasy to imagine and get immersed in the worlds they create. Social pedagogues understand how vital all this is for the development and well-being of children, so social pedagogic practice is very child-focussed and relationship-centred.

Social pedagogy views learning as a life long process which takes place as much in every day life as in traditional educational settings. Related to the concept of "life space" it aims to utilise as many opportunities for learning and development every day life can offer. In this context learning is understood in a very broad sense and can encompass, for example, to learn to cope with the tensions of group conflict or to repair a puncture.

Social pedagogy is the theory and practice of working with children and young people as well as adults in many different settings. Social pedagogues can work with the families of newborn babies, giving them practical advice on children's upbringing; they work in day-care settings, in schools as support for those students who might have problems in their families or with friends and want help; social pedagogues can be found in play work, residential child care and youth work; they support communities and people facing social exclusion through unemployment, substance misuse, inadequate housing or due to their ethnicity; and they work with older people, in residences and hospices.

As a result, social pedagogic practice varies depending on the setting and the group of people – but it is underpinned by core values and humanistic principles, which emphasise people's strengths, the importance of including people into the wider community, and aim to prevent social problems.



For this purpose social pedagogy draws on theories and concepts from related disciplines. The different social pedagogic practices are connected by a similar body of sociological, psychological and educational theories that have to do with learning, well-being, relationship-building, and empowerment. In this sense, social pedagogy can be seen as a bridge between sociology, psychology and education, combining these three into a new, distinct and multi-dimensional shape which ensures a holistic perspective. As result social pedagogy offers an overarching conceptual framework that can guide professional practice.

The origins of Social Pedagogy

Social pedagogy derives from the Greek terms for 'child' (*'pais'*) and 'to lead', or 'to bring up' (*'agein'*). The prefix 'social' emphasises that education and upbringing are not just about individuals but happen in a social context and include working with society as well as the individual.

Throughout the last few centuries, social pedagogy has become deeply rooted within societies in continental Europe. It can be seen as an "organic system" which interacts between, the development of a society, its impact on the individual and which social structures this society has to establish to ensure on going substantial and positive growth of this individual within society.

Social pedagogy has emerged and developed as a way of answering three core questions:

- What constitutes good education and upbringing? And how can we achieve it?
- What should be the relationship between the individual and society? How can we ensure that individuals see themselves as part of society?
- What can we do to prevent or overcome social problems and inequalities? How can we ensure that nobody feels disadvantaged?

As an academic discipline, social pedagogy describes how society is thinking about these questions. Therefore, social pedagogy looks slightly different in a country like Denmark or Sweden, which emphasise solidarity and have a highly-developed social welfare state, compared to a country like Germany, which places less emphasis on prevention and equal distribution of wealth.



The Diamond Model

One of the most fundamental principles underpinning social pedagogy is the notion that every human being has intrinsic value. We are all precious and possess a rich variety of knowledge, skills and abilities. But as with a diamond, not all of this richness is necessarily visible: not all diamonds are polished and sparkly, but all have the potential to be. Similarly, every person has the potential to shine, and social pedagogy is about supporting people in setting free their potential.

This is a little bit like being a ‘turnupstuffer’ in the way that Pippi Longstocking describes: it requires seeing the potential beneath the façade, to see with the heart rather than just with the eye, and to be vivid and inspiring enough so that others start seeing the treasure too. In order to do this social pedagogy follows four core aims that are closely linked: well-being and happiness, holistic learning, relationship, and empowerment.

*“It is only with the heart that
one can see rightly;
what is essential is invisible
to the eye.”*

*(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, French
writer)*

Well-being and happiness:

The overarching aim of all social pedagogic practice is to provide well-being and happiness, not on a short-term needs-focused basis, but sustainably, through a rights-based approach. While the terms ‘well-being’ and ‘happiness’ are sometimes seen as one and the same, in our understanding they are notionally different: happiness describes a present state whereas well-being describes as a long-lasting sense of physical, mental, emotional and social well-being. In combination we can get a holistic view of a person’s well-being and happiness. Importantly, well-being and happiness are very individual and subjective: what makes us happy is very different from person to person. As a result social pedagogic practice is very context-specific and highly responsive to the individual rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

Holistic learning:

'Learning is the pleasant anticipation of one's self', according to the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. Understood in this way, holistic learning mirrors the aim of well-being and happiness – it must be seen as contributing to, or enhancing, our well-being. Learning is more than what happens at school, it is a holistic process of realizing our own potential for learning and growth, which can take place in every situation that offers a learning opportunity (and there is something new to learn in nearly every situation, if only we look for it).

Holistic learning is a life-long process involving 'head, heart, and hands', as the Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi described it. Social pedagogy is about creating learning opportunities, so that people get a sense of who they are and what they can achieve. As we are all unique, so is our potential for learning and our way of learning and development.

Relationship:

Central to achieving these two aims is the pedagogic relationship. Through the supportive relationship with the social pedagogue a person can experience that someone cares for and about them, also that they can trust somebody. This is about giving people the social skills that enable them to build strong positive relationships with others.

Therefore the pedagogic relationship must be a personal relationship between equal human beings – social pedagogues make use of their personality and have to be authentic in the relationship, which is not the same as sharing private matters. In a sense the pedagogic relationship is professional and personal at the same time, and this requires from the social pedagogue to be constantly reflective.

Empowerment:

Alongside the relationship, empowerment is crucial in order to ensure that people get a sense of control over their own life, feel involved in decisions affecting them, and are able to make sense of the world around them. Empowerment also means that we are able to take on ownership and responsibility for our own learning and our own well-being and happiness, as well as our relationship with the community. Social pedagogy is therefore about supporting people's empowerment, their independence as well as interdependence.

Positive Experiences:

In order to realize these core aims, social pedagogic practice has to be centred around providing positive experiences. The power of experiencing something positive – something that makes us happy, something we have achieved, a new skill we have learned, the caring support from someone else – has a double impact: it raises our self-confidence and feeling of self-worth, so it reinforces our sense of well-being, of learning, of being able to form a strong relationship, or of feeling empowered; and by strengthening our positives we also improve our weak sides – negative notions about our self fade away.

All four aims point to the fact that social pedagogy is about process. Well-being and happiness, holistic learning, relationship, empowerment – none of these is a product that, once achieved, can be forgotten. This is why it is important to perceive them as fundamental human rights that we all constantly need to work on if we want to ensure that nobody's rights are violated or neglected.

Social Pedagogy in Practice

Like explained above social pedagogues work with a wide age group and can be found in all areas where people are professionally concerned with the welfare and education of other human beings. As a result the practical methods in all these settings will differ slightly, depending on the target group. Therefore, within the general discipline pedagogy we can distinguish various approaches. Some of these are named after key thinkers like Fröbel or Montessori who have created a very specific pedagogic concept for the context of their work, while others are named to reflect the medium they are employing, such as play, circus, music, or theatre pedagogy.

Despite these differences in approach, what all pedagogies have in common is the way of thinking, the philosophy, the attitude with which different methods are used. This is what makes practice social



pedagogic: 'social pedagogy is not a method, nor even a set of methods. As a discipline it has its own theoretical orientation to the world. An action is not social pedagogical because certain methods are used therein, but because some methods are chosen and used as a consequence of social pedagogical thought.' (Hämäläinen, 2003) This is a subtle but crucial difference: social pedagogy is not so much about what we do than about how we approach practice, with what attitude and aims.

The photo above highlights this. A rope tied between two trees does not make a situation pedagogic – what does is the underlying rationale to create a learning situation in which children can develop their sense of balance, support themselves and others in a group, strengthen trust by doing that and gain a sense of their own competence and mastery because there is not an adult holding their hand, helping them, doing it for them rather than with them, preventing them from getting hurt. They are being allowed to experiment for themselves, including being allowed to risk misjudging it and falling off and getting injured, which is a normal part of the learning process. The focus is not on preventing them getting hurt, it's on the value of giving them an opportunity to learn, develop relationships, be happy and feel well. This is what we mean by saying that it is not what you do that is pedagogic, it is how and with what intention you do it and the value placed on how children learn and develop through holistic experiences that makes an activity pedagogic.

The following case study by the Danish social pedagogue, Lotte Harbo shows how much Danish social pedagogy values the core social pedagogy aim of creating opportunities to build diverse and strong relationships and how this can put into practice on a everyday basis. This is done by providing a day structure, where the children and practitioners at all times have the opportunity to interact and to develop their relationship further.

Pedagogy in Danish daycare centers for children aged 3-6

“In the last few years the development in English nurseries has been towards a play-led practice. In that way practice has many similarities to the practice in Danish day care centres. The difference might be in the significance that is put into relationship building- between the children, between adults and children and between the adults. The structure of the day is, amongst other things, aiming at supporting the development of relationships. When looking at the daily structure, defined and put into practice by different Danish day-care centres, it is remarkably alike. The days are structured to ensure that the children have time to play, either individual, in small groups or in the large group consisting of all the children belonging to one of the rooms¹ in the day-care centre. The great idea behind scheduled playing time is that children develop different competencies when playing. Most often the pedagogues leave it to the children to choose who they want to play with and what and how they want to play. As a consequence, the children to a large extent decide their social relations themselves. In my understanding this is based on the idea that children thrive and develop in self-chosen relationships.”

Daily structure in six geographically spread Danish daycare centers, chosen from a random google search:

6.30am: Daycare centers open
6.30am-8.00am: Breakfast and welcoming the children in one of the rooms. A calm start is valued, so there will be story reading, drawing or what else the children like to start with, individually or in small groups.
8.00am: Children and adults go to their “own rooms”.
9.00am: Gathering with all children, talking about different themes, i.e. the upcoming weekend, what the week brings or how things are in the group, does everybody feel well or is there something that needs to be addressed in dialogue in the group.
9.30am-11.30am: The children play, alone or in groups. Often more structured things like going to the gym, the forest, the swimming pool, playing music or doing arts and crafts are placed here, before lunch, since all children are present.
12.00pm: Lunch. The Danish Government has recently decided to serve lunch for all children, aged 0-6 in daycare centers. The lunch is paid by the parents.
12.30pm: After lunch all children and adults go outside to play in the day care center’s own playground. Here children play on their own or in groups.
2pm: A small meal brought from home.
2.30pm: The children play until the parents come to get them.
5.00pm: The daycare centers close.

From the social pedagogy perspective the practitioner and what he/she has to offer to the relationship with the young person and other team members, is viewed as one of the main resources in the pedagogic process. In his role as a pedagogue the practitioner needs to be aware of himself, his fears, his beliefs and he needs to know how he can “use himself” to enable further development. To support the practitioner in this task and to ensure that his practice is coherent with the conceptual social pedagogic framework, they are encouraged to continuously reflect their practice, by themselves and within the team.

Social pedagogy is not necessarily new to the UK, and it is not about doing everything differently, because there is no ‘miracle medicine’ when it comes to working with people. What may work with one child or with one group does not necessarily work with the next one. We need to be flexible but consistent with regards to our values and attitude. This is why social pedagogy is so important. We believe it can give practitioners an overarching framework filled with practical concepts which build on your best practice and expertise. They can be used to reflect on what you are doing with a pedagogic perspective and explore for yourself how you can make best practice even better. Social pedagogy also focuses on the use of a positive language that can help professionals argue why sometimes simply being with a child is more important than doing an activity, why focussing on the process is so valuable if you want to achieve good outcomes, why high quality practice takes time, etc.. Rather than looking for differences between professionals, social

¹ The rooms are called ”stuer” which roughly translates to “living rooms”.

pedagogy stands for something that unites us, that we all believe in. Social pedagogy could bring together professionals working with children in different contexts by offering a coherent framework that values the different contributions within the children's workforce and considers the holistic well-being of the child as a shared responsibility to which we can all contribute.

Practical Applications

Speaking to long term practitioners and academics it seems that Social pedagogy has already been "floating" around in UK discussions of children services for over a decade. Regarding the previous pilot project (2006) from the National Centre for Excellency in Residential Child Care, the two current long term projects which have been commissioned by the DCSF and the Essex County Council department for children in care and other social pedagogy learning courses, it seems that at this point in time the most practical development of social pedagogy in the UK is taking place within residential child care. Yet, as social pedagogy is a service overarching discipline it has already reached out to other areas e.g. education. Most of these participants noted several benefits that they could see in social pedagogy, primarily around feeling reaffirmed in their beliefs and philosophies whilst recognising that social pedagogy can aid them in improving their practice even further. A head of education from a Scottish organisation expressed his learning experience in the following way:

"I have recently met with the school Headteacher to discuss the young person's development. Both the Headteacher and the school's Educational Psychologist are delighted at the progress he has made. They acknowledged that there have been a few social and behavioural issues to address, however, they saw this as a positive and related this to points I had made in our meetings. This made me realise the impact that Social Pedagogy has had on my style as a practitioner within the context of education. In reflection I believe the 3 P's have played an important part in my development and have enabled me to contextualise what has brought me to be the person and practitioner that I am. ... It identifies the professional, personal and private dimensions to the role as a social pedagogue and how they are inter-connected...This does not only apply to my organisation, I feel that I brought a part of that philosophical view to the interactions I had with the mainstream school environment. "



How social pedagogy can be put into practice in an UK educational setting and what impact this has on all parties involved, becomes evident in the following case study from a home in Essex. It gives a brief glimpse of how young people, who up until then have shown little interest in learning, can be "drawn" into a learning opportunity by social pedagogy underpinned practice. At this point, many might say that life is not all about having choices and "interesting" and "fun" learning opportunities. Yet, if there is a young person that seems not interested in what you have on offer, you can either invest a lot of energy of running after them, sanctioning them etc. or you can start looking for something that they are personally interested in and where their heart gets engaged. The following example shows that if you are able to create such an

activity, young people will participate willingly. By doing this, relationships between the peers and with the staff are able to evolve further and a more open culture of communication can be nurtured.

The Chestnuts and the introduction of Social Pedagogy.

“My name is Mark and I work at The Chestnuts Children’s home as a learning support assistant in the attached school. The Chestnuts is a crisis and assessment unit for young people aged between 12 and 16 years old. Many of the young people living at the home come in with very low attendance records at their mainstream schools and some have been excluded and have spent considerable amounts of time out of school. Historically the school at The Chestnuts has worked as closely to the National Curriculum style of structured lessons as possible and has only differed in it’s expectations on behaviour, but now with the introduction of Social Pedagogy and it’s approach we have broadened the activities and the in which they are offered to the young people. The Chestnuts school now focuses on the challenge by choice approach and is able to offer a range of practical activities, where the residential staffs are able to take an active role in completing with the young people. Meaning that instead of telling the young people to learn this or the other, we try to create tempting opportunities for learning which are close to their personal interest and where they can get practically engaged. We have for example made such an experience by inviting the young people to participate in making a vegetable patch for their home. As a result the majority of the young people were eager to participate and were taking more ownership of their education. The young people are noticing the change in their relationships with the staff and each other as they are often working together on activities that neither has experienced before. As a result the young people are more relaxed and less challenging when it comes to planning their day. I also feel that due to the changing relationships that we as teaching staff now have with the young people they are more willing to talk to us about the problems and anxieties that they are facing outside of the classroom.”

Social pedagogy can be applied in any setting that contributes to the aims outlined in the diamond model. Rather than asking whether practice is social pedagogic or not, it is more helpful to explore to what extent it is social pedagogic:

To what extent is it underpinned by similar values, concepts and principles rather than by procedures?

To what extent do we work towards enhancing children’s well-being, providing them opportunities for holistic learning, building caring and authentic relationships, and enabling children to empower themselves?

Most of this has very little to do with resources, as we ourselves are the greatest resource – it requires from us that we see ourselves as role models, as equal to children, as involved in our work with head, heart and hands. This is as simple as it is complex, as easy as it is difficult, and it is the reason why constant reflectivity is so central to social pedagogy. And, to add more oppositeness, it is why social pedagogy can be flexible and consistent.

Strategically organisations benefit from social pedagogic approaches, as it encourages the practitioners well being and stability along with improving children’s experiences and outcomes.

Summary

Social pedagogy has a long standing history on the continent and is a continuously evolving, eclectic academic discipline, which draws on related disciplines, such as sociology, education, psychology, to provide an overarching framework to all services that concern themselves with human welfare and education. The development of social pedagogy stands in close relation with the society it is based in and has there for a different focus in every country. As a concept, social pedagogy is founded on humanistic values and a positive image of children as active agents and competent human beings. Social pedagogy practice is concerned with human beings' learning, well-being and inclusion into society. It is the theory and practice of working with children and young people as well as adults and offers the practitioner practical methods and models to structure and reflect.

Practitioners from the UK, who have participated in a social pedagogy learning course and who applied their learning too practice, stated that social pedagogy offers them a coherent framework which allows them to make best use of their professional, personal and practical expertise. Additionally to that it also had a positive impact on improving the young people's wellbeing and personal and social development.

Authors

Both authors are directors of the community interest company ThemPra Social Pedagogy, which is based in the UK. The name of the company stands for a strong connection between Theory and Practice of Social Pedagogy. In our understanding, theory meets practice for one single purpose: we believe that children and young people deserve the best and we are dedicated to improving their life experiences through holistic and child-centred services. Sylvia and Gabriel have developed and facilitated the first social pedagogy seminars in the UK, which were part of the pilot project run by the National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care and funded by the Social Education trust. Currently ThemPra is supporting local authorities, such as Essex county council, and organisations in implementing social pedagogy into parts of their services.

Gabriel Eichsteller has studied Social Pedagogy, social work and sociology of childhood in Germany, Denmark, and the UK. In his home country Germany, Gabriel gained experience and inspiration by working for a play bus, a local children's bureau, and for the Centre for Childhood and Adolescence Studies at the Protestant University of Applied Sciences Freiburg. Before becoming a ThemPra director, Gabriel managed two participation projects of The Children's Society in South London

Sylvia Holthoff completed her studies of pedagogy for people with special needs in Germany in 1997. Since then she has gained experience in residential care, youth work, enviromental education and in international projects. She has qualified as trainer for experiential outdoor activities. Sylvia is currently a freelance trainer and facilitates training for social pedagogues, residential care staff, teachers, and others.

Contact details

ThemPra Social Pedagogy Community Interest Company www.thempra.org

Gabriel Eichsteller gabriel@thempra.org.uk +44 7552 518096

Sylvia Holthoff sylvia@thempra.org.uk +49 39771 25724

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