



# SOCIAL PEDAGOGY

## DISCOVERING HUMAN POTENTIAL

*A Briefing Paper by ThemPra Social Pedagogy CIC*



## SOCIAL PEDAGOGY - DISCOVERING EACH PERSON'S UNIQUE POTENTIAL

*'The term pedagogue derives from the Greek, and refers not to the teacher, but to the watchful [...] guardian whose responsibility [in antique Greece] it was to lead (agogos) the young boy (paides) to school. [...] The adult had the task of accompanying the child, of being with the child, of caring for the child. This is a kind of 'leading' that often walks behind the one who is led.'* (van Manen 1991: p.37)

### What is social pedagogy?

Social pedagogy offers a holistic way of working with individuals, groups and communities across the age range in ways that support their well-being, learning and growth. At the heart of social pedagogy lies a belief that each person deserves to be treated with dignity and possesses unique inner richness and potential, which we can help them unfold. To do so requires meaningful and authentic relationships that enable us to recognise a person's potential, their qualities, strengths and interests, and to create learning situations in which children and families can experience their resourcefulness and develop new abilities. This is why social pedagogy is often translated as education in the broadest sense of the term, as connecting head, heart and hands.

In much of continental Europe and other countries like Brazil, there is a strong tradition of social pedagogy as an academic discipline and field of practice. Social pedagogues tend to work in a variety of educational and care settings, starting from the early years, through to schools, residential care, play and youth work, community and family support, social work, addiction work, prisons, support for people with disabilities and care for the elderly. At first sight, some of these settings may not seem to have much in common. Yet, there is a shared ethical underpinning, an understanding that in any of those settings we can make a positive difference not just for the individuals but actually for society as a whole if we create an environment that enhances well-being, supports learning, human growth and social inclusion through empowering relationships. In this sense, social pedagogy seeks to find educational solutions to social issues by connecting individuals to society.

The **Diamond Model** is one of the most powerful concepts in social pedagogy. The metaphor of the diamond visualises its central underpinning principle: As human beings we are all precious and possess a wealth of skills, abilities, talents, knowledge and other resources that make us rich in very unique ways. There is a diamond within everyone of us. 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 how we can support people to uncover and recognise their potential, to draw out their inner richness. This enables them to feel more resourceful and empowered to create meaningful change in their lives. The appeal of social pedagogy lies in the fact that it is more than just an approach to practice; it is an ethical orientation that can be applied to the whole organisation and the wider socio-political context. Its holistic orientation seeks to ensure that every person within society is treated with dignity and feels enabled to unfold their potential.



*'Social pedagogy has provided a liberation in my thinking and very much connected me to why I became a foster carer in the first place. Although I still have lots to learn, social pedagogy is really starting to change my thinking about whole life education, myself, other people and ultimately to what it is to really put our foster daughter front and centre and help her to be all she can be.'*  
 (foster carer on Head, Heart, Hands programme)

How has social pedagogy developed in the UK?

Unlike in many European countries, developments around social pedagogy are relatively new in the UK. Whilst there has been over 20 years of research into social pedagogy, the first pilot project aimed at developing social pedagogy in residential child care practice was set up in 2007. Since then more and more children’s homes in England and Scotland have begun using social pedagogy as an overarching conceptual framework. Yet, from early on, there has been recognition that social pedagogy should not just be limited to residential settings and could help raise the status of residential child care by being applied more widely. In 2013 The Fostering Network launched the *Head, Heart, Hands* demonstration programme introducing social pedagogy into foster care. More recently there has also been interest in early intervention and family support services, a government-funded pilot with two Camphill communities for adults with disabilities, creative arts projects drawing on social pedagogy, and an emerging curiosity within social work more widely, early years, schools, youth work and youth offending. The below map shows many of the organisations that have drawn on social pedagogy as an ethical and conceptual framework.

At the same time as these pioneering efforts have started to illustrate the potential of social pedagogy, various universities have developed course modules in social pedagogy as part of degree programmes in youth and community work, social work or working with families. Since 2017 there is also a Social Pedagogy Professional Association, which holds the standards of proficiency for social pedagogy and the standards for education and training in social pedagogy. You can find out more about SPPA at [www.sppa-uk.org](http://www.sppa-uk.org)



## What has been the impact of social pedagogy?

Research by the Thomas Coram Research Unit suggests that ‘social pedagogy provides the policy and professional education framework for residential care in Denmark and Germany, where young people “do better” than in similar institutions in England, and the major factors in accounting for outcomes were characteristics of the staff and their approach to practice’. In these two countries rates of looked-after young people completing secondary education are twice as high compared to the UK, numbers of looked-after young people and care-experienced adults in the criminal justice system are significantly lower and health-related outcomes are better too. Many of these differences are also due to differences in the wider care system: countries with a strong social pedagogy tradition are oriented more towards supporting families whereas the UK system has taken a much narrower child protection orientation.

Evaluations here in the UK suggest that social pedagogy can make a substantial difference to frontline practice, organisational culture and the wider care sector. Children’s homes that have developed a vibrant social pedagogical culture have generally seen the following improvements:

- **for children:** improved engagement with education and increased educational attainment, improved relationships with staff and peers, a higher sense of involvement and increased happiness and well-being leading to significant reductions in physical restraints, vandalism and absconding as well as improved placement stability.
- **for staff members:** improved well-being and motivation, better relationships with young people, colleagues and other professional groups due to increased confidence, feeling encouraged to be themselves, bring in their own interests and creativity, higher levels of trust and autonomy, and an increased ability to reflect.
- **for teams:** a more positive, non-judgmental culture in the home, increased sense of ownership for the home’s values and vision, improved communication and multi-agency working, and higher staff retention.

Many of these outcomes can also result in significant financial savings for organisations and local authorities through costs avoided in the short, medium and long term. More importantly though social pedagogy can help make a big difference to children’s care experience. A young person interviewed by the Who Cares? Trust summarised that, in Essex, ‘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.’

For other sectors, the benefits of applying a social pedagogical perspective have not been researched as well. However, anecdotally there is plenty of examples from social work, social care and education settings about how well social pedagogical principles, theories and methods fit with practice.

*Please feel free to get in touch with us to find out more about our work and discuss how we can support your social pedagogy journey.*



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