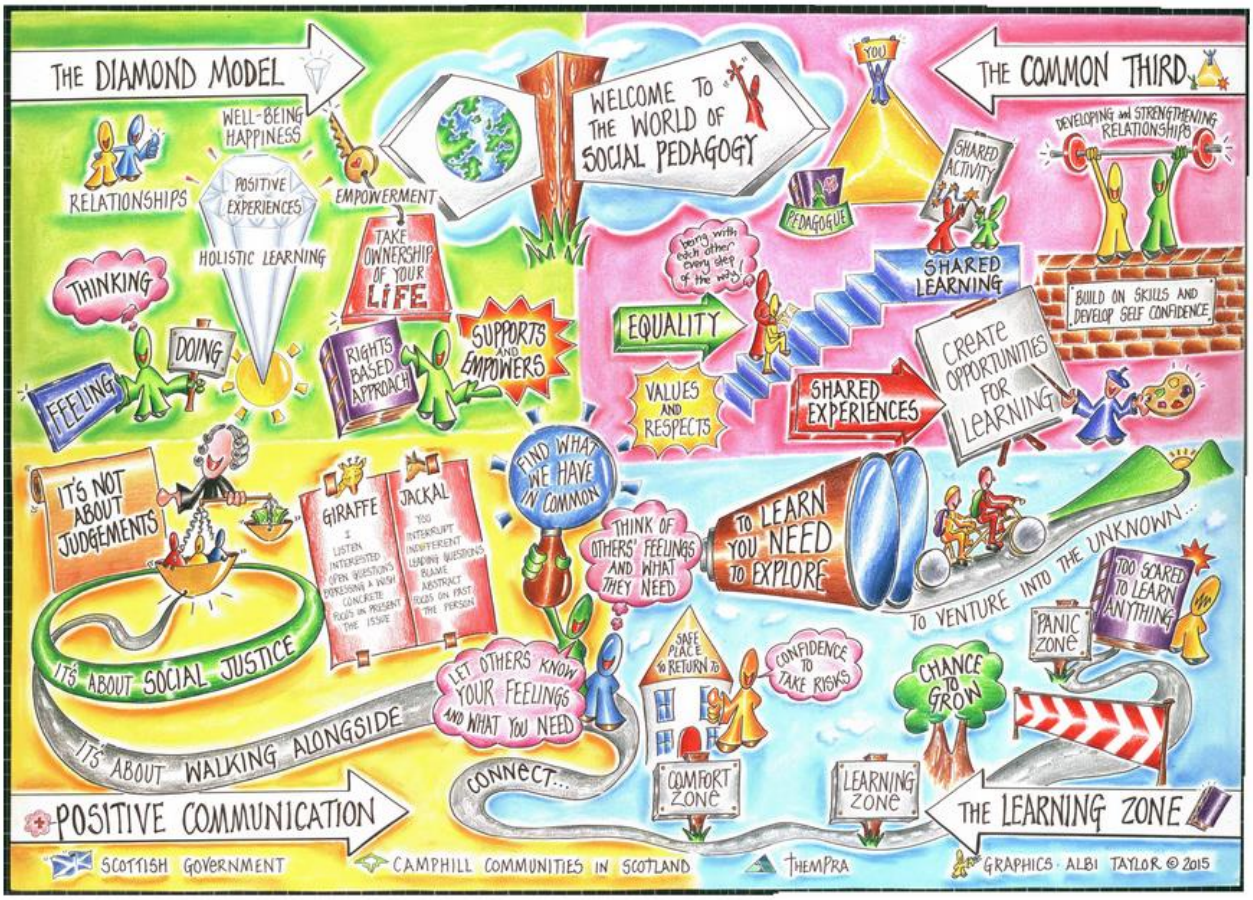
INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PEDAGOGY



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SOCIAL PEDAGOGY - DISCOVERING PEOPLE'S 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 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

AIMS OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGY - THE DIAMOND MODEL

The Diamond Model is one of the most powerful concepts in social pedagogy, a values-led approach to relationship-centred practice that aims to support people to flourish and feel socially included. 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. In facilitating these kinds of positive experiences, social pedagogy has four core aims that are closely linked: well-being and happiness, holistic learning, relationship, and empowerment.

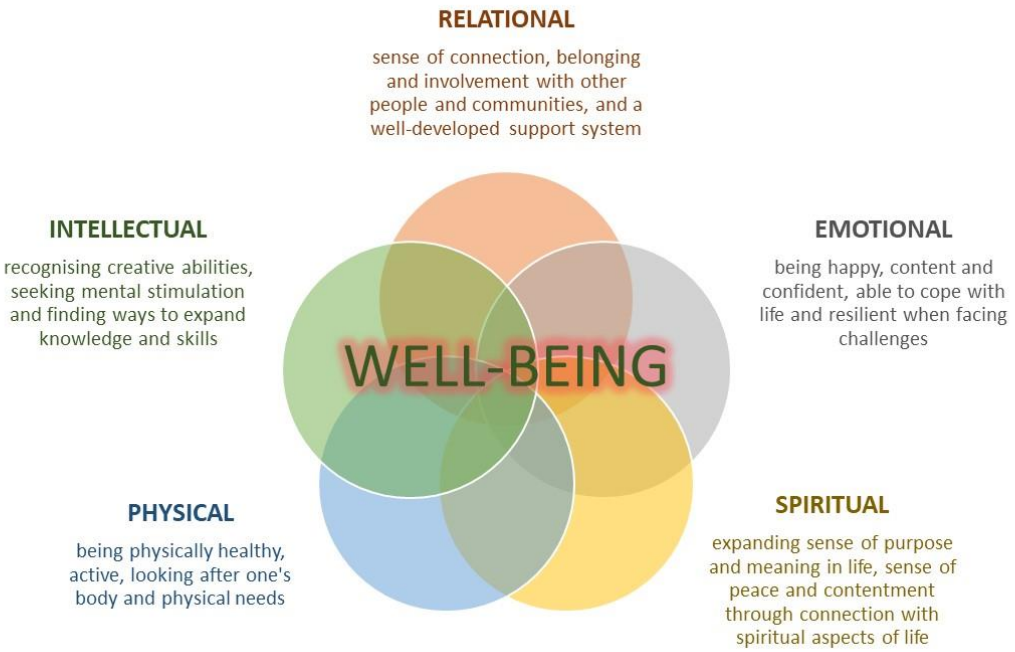
Well-being and happiness:

The overarching aim of all social pedagogical practice is to provide well-being and happiness. Nurturing well-being covers a broad spectrum ranging from averting adversity to supporting recovery from trauma and, vitally, enhancing happiness and well-being. In social pedagogical practice, well-being is understood holistically, as an integrative term covering relational, emotional, spiritual, physical and intellectual dimensions of wellness.

In nurturing well-being, it is important that we think not just about the here and now but about the long-term implications. This requires that we don't give in to the temptation to use a needs-focussed approach by doing things for others in order to achieve quick but short-lived gains (the 'give-a-hungry-man-a-fish' approach) but instead take a human rights approach, which is more sustainable and enabling (the 'teach-a-hungry-man-how-to-fish' approach).

While the terms 'well-being' and 'happiness' are often used interchangeably, it is worth differentiating between the two: happiness usually describes a present state whereas well-being describes a long-lasting sense of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social well-being. Not all things that cause happiness will contribute to a person's well-being, yet experiencing lots of happy moments is essential to one's subjective well-being. The dual focus on both happiness and well-being, both the here-and-now and the long-term perspective provides a crucial aim in social pedagogical practice that we must never lose sight of. Giving someone a reason to smile can have profound implications that we mustn't underestimate.

Well-being and happiness are highly individual and subjective, and consequently what causes happiness for one person can be very different to what makes someone else feel well. In social pedagogical practice, we must constantly keep this in mind, question where we might be making assumptions and get into dialogue to explore how the people we support experience happiness and nurture their well-being. This means social pedagogical practice has to be very context-specific and highly responsive to the individual and the situation rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.



Holistic learning:

Well-being and happiness are inherently connected to learning processes as a person's physical, cognitive and emotional state affects how the brain processes information, in which parts of the brain it is stored and how easily it can be recalled. At the same time, learning should actually make people feel better about themselves and bring the joy that comes with discovering something new and exciting, satisfying one's curiosity and gaining greater understanding.

Learning is more than what happens at school, it is a holistic and lifelong process of realizing our own potential for learning and growth, which can take place in every situation that offers a learning opportunity. Research shows that effective learning is a holistic, immersive and active process. Social pedagogical practice therefore aims to initiate learning situations that holistically support people's cognitive, social, emotional, physical and spiritual development – commonly referred to as educating *head, heart and hands*. Given that each person has unique potential, individuals learn in unique ways. Therefore, if we want to help people unfold their potential, then learning settings need to take their uniqueness into account.

Relationships:

In facilitating enhanced well-being and learning, relationships play a crucial role, as they offer us unique insights into a person's inner and outer world. Developing positive, supportive, trusting, authentic relationships with people in which we're both able to be who we are is central to social pedagogical practice and seen as inherently valuable and

purposeful. Social pedagogy therefore encourages us as professionals to bring our personality into the relationship, which is not the same as sharing private matters. Social pedagogical relationships are about being professional and personal at the same time, thus requiring from practitioners to be constantly reflective.

Importantly, social pedagogical relationships enable us to better understand how they experience the world, what meaning and impact these experiences have, and how we can help make a difference. Where we role-model authentic and supportive relationships, we can convey that people matter to us and that we value them for who they are, with everything they bring with them. We also encourage and support them in developing relationships with others in their lives, thus ensuring that they have a strong support network, a 'relational universe' consisting of friends, family, professionals and people within the wider community.

Empowerment:

The idea of the diamond is reflected in the notion of empowerment and aim to further increase a person's agency. Empowerment aims to give people a sense of identity and belonging, a sense of who they are. By supporting people's empowerment, giving them a sense of determination and control over their own lives, we can help them take responsibility for themselves as well as others. We can thus facilitate people's increasing self-confidence and abilities to cope with the complexities and uncertainties of life.

Empowerment also suggests an educational approach, a gradual process of increasing people's power. It provides opportunities for individuals to learn and better understand issues of power and how they can form relationships where power is used not as a form of control over others but as responsibility for others. Thus, from a social pedagogical perspective, empowerment has an important role to play and is nurtured through relationships.

Positive Experiences:

In order to realise these core aims, social pedagogy has to be about providing positive experiences. The power of experiencing something positive – something that makes a person happy, something they have achieved, a new skill they have learned, the caring support from someone else – has a double impact: it raises the individual's self-confidence and feeling of self-worth, thus reinforcing their sense of well-being, of learning, of being able to form a strong relationship, or of feeling empowered; and by strengthening their positives the person can also improve their weak sides, so that negative aspects of their self-image fade away and become less corrosive.

The importance of creating positive experiences is perhaps best illustrated in the Danish concept of the Common Third. It encourages us to engage in shared activities, to find a common interest in order to learn together and develop our relationship with a person, no matter their age. The significant thing is less what we do, but how we do it and with what intention, so that it becomes a purposeful activity in which outwardly we are just two people doing something we enjoy, and more importantly in which we can meet as equal human beings, can be who we are without fear of being judged. A Common Third activity could be anything from baking a cake together, going on a bike ride, flying a kite, taking the dog for a walk, playing a game of chess, painting a wall or growing vegetables - anything

we do with the purpose of bringing us together and offering an insight into who we both are, what we are like, what we enjoy doing, what we're good at, what we can learn from each other.

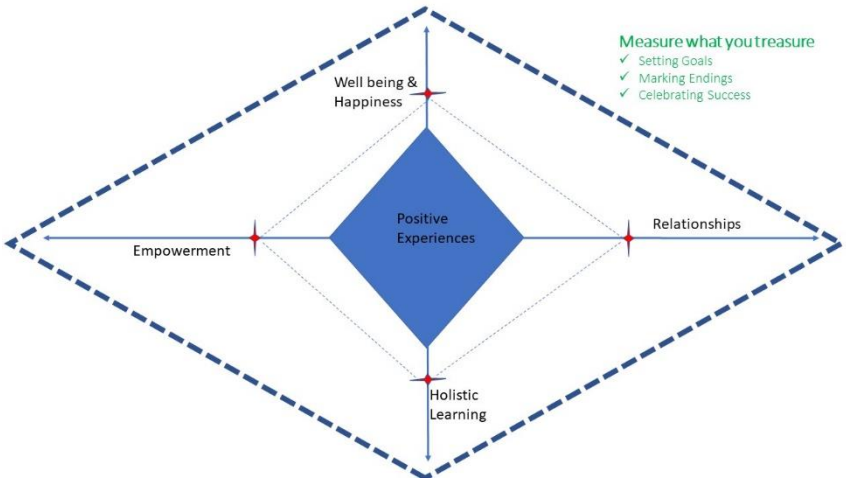
Kingswood (2015), a foster carer trained in social pedagogy and SPPA Trustee, gives a wonderful example of how the Common Third can be integrated in practice: 'Our family are fairly high energy, and we generally have as much fun as possible. In our house there is always music and, depending on the volume and the mood, a large amount of dancing that happens in our kitchen. While this happened, our foster daughter would sit and, in absolutely defiance to look as stupid as us, would remain in the chair. What was funny though is that she would always stay in the chair, she would never leave. Whatever I did I could not get her out of that chair to dance, but yet she would not leave. I [then learned about the] Common Third [...], about finding a way that we could connect in ways that we would both benefit. I thought creatively around this and came up with the idea of getting her to choose the music one day for us to dance to. She suggested a band, I put it on and my wife, birth children and myself danced around the kitchen to her tune. She smiled and bounced her foot along. It gave her a way in [...] because we stopped trying to get her to dance but rather invited her to be herself inside that space. In that moment she was allowed into the activity, she was shown that her choice was valid, and she allowed herself just a little bit of involvement. This doesn't sound like much, but it is moments like that which are remembered!'

Wider Application of the Diamond Model

As a framework, the Diamond Model is just as applicable to how organisations support their teams – as unique, precious, inherently rich in abilities and potential. In our experience, the metaphor really resonates with many people and enables us to talk about social pedagogy without necessarily needing to use the term!

It's possible to use the Diamond Model in supervision as a values-led framework designed to help bring out the best in each staff member and to engage in critical self-reflection around the five areas of the Diamond Model.

The Diamond Model can also serve as a flexible framework to measure what you treasure! It can lead to greater insight into what each area means to the people you support, what's important to them and what they might like to achieve. By setting goals with them, marking endings and celebrating success, you can ensure that you capture the progress and outcomes that genuinely matter to you and the people you support.



NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION

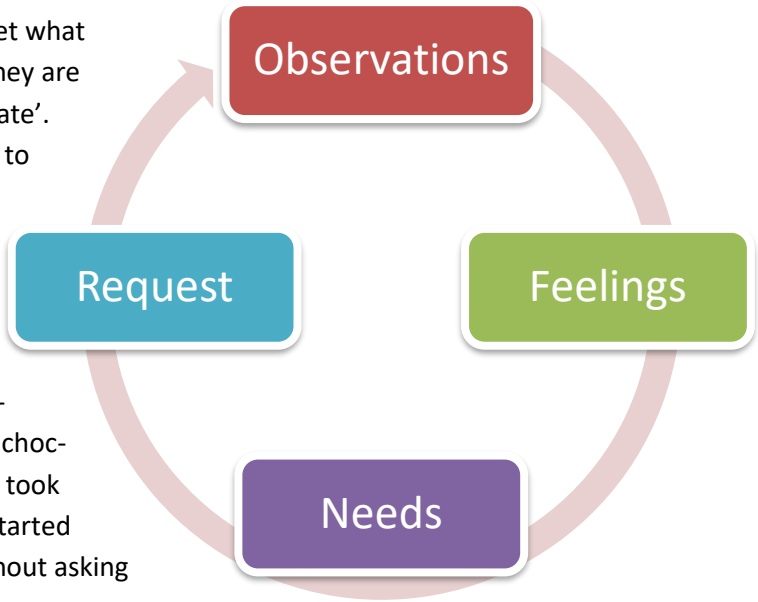
Based on the work of the American psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, nonviolent communication emphasises how we can engage with other people in a way that avoids judgments and conflict by expressing our feelings and needs. Through this, Rosenberg argues, we can empathise with each other and connect with other people as equal human beings, recognising our commonalities rather than our differences. Essentially, nonviolent communication is underpinned by the idea that we all have the capacity to be compassionate with others but often don't have the language that allows us to understand each other's emotions and needs. Violence and conflict happen as a result, when we try to meet our needs but can't find a way of doing this in a way that considers or understands other people's feelings and needs. For example, we might complain about a child's teacher's 'inability' to encourage our child to engage more in class and think that the teacher is simply incapable or lazy. Our response is perhaps motivated by our anxiety that our child won't learn as much or will find the class boring and misbehave. Most likely, though, the teacher will have the same anxieties, not just for our child but for all children in the classroom. And the teacher's reality might be that they feel unsupported in working with a big classroom full of children, all of whom have different needs and learn in different ways. Therefore, if we realise that we actually feel similarly to the teacher and have the same needs, we can avoid accusing the teacher of being incapable (or worse) and instead think about constructive ways forward.

Within social pedagogical settings, nonviolent communication is intended to achieve several aims: to help the person we support to understand their own feelings and needs and how these might influence their behaviour (for instance, what they are thinking and feeling when they are angry and lash out), to show the person that we care about them by empathising with their emotions and giving them emotional support, to deescalate and resolve conflicts in a way that enables the person to understand how others might be feeling. All of this serves to strengthen the relationship between the social pedagogue and the person they support and set in motion important learning processes. To highlight this, here is an example from a Danish nursery called The Green Giraffe, which uses nonviolent communication on an everyday basis. The summary was written by a Scottish residential child care worker, who spent 4 days at The Green Giraffe:

'One of my most important findings was that the pedagogue should make observations not judgments. Within the context of the nursery this proved to be crucial in achieving its peaceful and harmonious atmosphere. If one child took another child's toy, or ran into another, or caused any other person to become upset or unsafe Steve would make an observation on the child's actions from his position in the room and not jumping to the rescue unless immediate danger was present. This observation would always be factual, "look at what your action has done to the spilled glass of milk" or "Ben, please look at Rosie. How does she look now that you have run into her? Do you think she is upset? Maybe you could apologize and look out for her next time?" The absence of judgments and threats is crucial here. As I watched these mini lessons unfold before me, I questioned whether I would have reacted in the same way or if I might have said something like "Don't be so clumsy, Ben", or "If you do that again, you will not be allowed to play anymore". Especially once I considered that Steve had to repeat these same calm, mild mannered, positive suggestions every day to countless kids year after year.'

Using Nonviolent Communication - Observations, Feelings, Needs, Request

Nonviolent communication does not just apply to working with young children but can be highly relevant in any context where we work with people of any age – be these individuals, groups or colleagues. When using nonviolent communication, we aim to share our observations, how a situation might make us feel or how we guess it makes somebody else feel, what needs of ours are related to that as well as other people's needs, and we make a request:



1. **Observations:** Very often we evaluate, judge, interpret what other people do and are tempted to say things like 'they are hard to engage', 'he is a bully' or 'she is so inconsiderate'. When looking at these statements carefully, it is easy to see that they don't tell us much about how the other person has behaved and what really happened – and they certainly don't offer a concrete suggestion of how somebody else should behave, what we would like them to do differently. It is therefore important to distinguish observations from interpretations, to say things like 'I asked you to leave the chocolate bars on the table but when I turned around you took one' or 'when he called his little sister a coward she started crying' or 'she went to get herself a cup of coffee without asking her colleagues whether they would like one, too'.

2. **Feelings:** Sometimes our judgments make it obvious how we feel, or at least we think they do. But very often we don't talk about how something affects us. It's important to distinguish between what we think and how we feel, to dig deeper and find out perhaps why we have angry thoughts when someone tailgates us in their car and that these angry thoughts were brought on by our feeling scared and vulnerable. That then allows us to express our feelings in a way does not imply judgment or blame ('you reckless idiot should learn how to drive!') but shows how we are emotionally affected by a situation ('when you changed lanes right in front of me I got really scared and felt in danger'). This is more likely to get a compassionate response from someone else instead of leading to escalation.

3. **Needs:** Behind every human behaviour is a positive unmet need – the need to be loved and the need to belong might prompt us to be generous and kind, but the same needs might also cause a young person to join a gang. So might the need for safety or the need for structure. Nonviolent communication argues that we all have the same human needs, that needs are universal, but we have developed different strategies of how we meet our needs. And if we are not aware of others' needs it is easy to put our own needs first, without regard of others. This is why it is important to express our needs, to guess what somebody else's needs are and to ask, for example 'could it be that you're smoking in your room because you're feeling upset that your mother didn't have time for you and have a need to relax?'

4. **Request:** In order to show appreciation and help somebody else understand what we would like them to do, it is important to make a request, for example to say 'it is okay to walk here in the corridor' rather than 'don't run in the corridor'. Note that this is not a demand, not an attempt to force somebody, however subtly, to do something we want out of fear, guilt or shame. Rather we want others to really understand and show compassion or consideration for our feelings and needs. So instead of saying 'I'm disappointed that you haven't done your homework yet', which would make a child feel guilty or ashamed, we would perhaps say 'it's really important to

me that you do your homework, because I really want you to do well in school. I guess you might be feeling exhausted and want to relax now, so would you be happy to do your homework in half an hour?'

Although nonviolent communication does not just apply to working with children, it has particular relevance in this area. It gives us a language to show children how we can live together respectfully, how we can take responsibility for our actions and empathise with others, so that they feel they are equal to us as human beings. Of course, this has equally huge potential in other situations where the power differential is tipped in our favour. It's therefore worth learning how to integrate non-violent communication more into the language we all use. And whilst this might feel a bit stilted at the beginning, the effect is often very surprising and worth pursuing with! It does take time to grow into, as it is a bit like learning a new language, so keep practising wherever you can.

Helpful reminders for developing Nonviolent Communication

- Remember that behind every behaviour lies a positive human need. It's not the need that's causing the conflict but the strategy that someone might have chosen to meet that need. So let's find out what that positive unmet need is and what other strategies there might be for the person to meet their need.
- Reflection is a key to learning – a daily habit nurtures competence in understanding ourselves and others.
- Consider that all human beings share universal human needs, try to sense your own and others'.
- Make an effort to listen to understand, rather than listening to reply.
- Check your intentions to see if you are as interested in others getting their needs met as your own.
- When asking someone to do something, check first to see if you are making a request or a demand.
- Instead of saying what you DON'T want someone to do, say what you DO want them to do.
- Instead of saying what you want someone to BE, say what you'd like them to DO (the action(s) that you hope for).
- Before agreeing or disagreeing with anyone's opinions, try to tune in to what the person is feeling and needing.
- Instead of saying "No," consider what need of yours prevents you from saying "Yes."

THE 3 PS

The Professional, Personal and Private Pedagogue

Building trusting and authentic relationships with the people we support is very important in social pedagogy. Through relationships we can show individuals that we care, role model how they can have positive relationships with others, but also learn a lot about who they are. Without relationships we wouldn't be able to really know a person, find out what they are thinking about and how they see the world. And without that we would not be able to help them, to support their development. After all, every person is unique, and we can only appreciate their uniqueness if we know them well, if we look for their hidden talents and find out what brings them joy or causes them sorrow. For people themselves, these relationships are also very important, and they want to know who we are as a person, not just what we do as a professional.

This can often cause challenges for professionals about what it means to be professional and to what extent we are able to be personal. Social pedagogues would argue that we can't be professional without being personal, so we have to be both. What we must avoid is not the personal but the private self. Especially in Denmark this distinction is referred to as the 3 Ps: the professional, the personal and the private self of the social pedagogue.

The **professional** self is fundamental, because it ensures that the relationship with another person is both professional and personal. It helps us explain and understand a person's behaviour, for example to know that a foster child might refuse to go to school, not because he can't be bothered but because he has had traumatic experiences in education before. So the professional self draws on our knowledge of the law, of relevant policies, and of research, practice evidence and theory connected to our practice field. The professional self makes the relationship with the other person purposeful, because as professionals we will have particular aims for the person, for example for an older woman to be able to look after herself well and feel a sense of meaningful belonging in her community. In this sense, the professional self frames the relationship and ensures that we never lose sight of those aims, that everything we do is informed by a clear purpose.

The **personal** self is about how we engage with the person in a way that feels authentic. By sharing who we are as a person, we can develop a better, more genuine relationship with the other person. When we're comfortable with being ourselves and showing our personality – including our flaws – we encourage the people we support to be who they are and not to feel inferior to us. Using our personal self in a social pedagogical way requires a lot of professional reflections (which is where the professional self comes in): we have to know what we aim to achieve through the relationship, how the relationship may help the person, why this requires us to be authentic and how we can ensure that this is beneficial to the individual. For example, if a person has just been bereaved, we might choose to talk about someone we have lost who was dear to us, how we have felt and how we have coped with the loss. This might help the person feel understood, recognise that they are not the only one who have been in such a situation and are feeling devastated, and it might provide a chance to talk about how we can support them through this difficult period, how they might want to commemorate their loved one, and so on. But this requires tactfulness and that we've processed our own experiences, so that we can keep the focus on supporting the other person.

The **private** self sets the personal boundaries of what we do *not* want to (or feel unable to) share with a child and should therefore not be brought into the relationship. The conscious private self draws the line between what is personal and what is private, and where we are aware that our own needs take priority. It is important to be authentic in what we share about ourselves and to share some of our own experiences that have shaped who we are, but these must be processed experiences and our intention must be underpinned by what's in the other person's interest and what we think the benefit to them will be. The private self has a sub-conscious aspect too, where our own needs and feelings can suddenly appear and take priority, causing us to react without thinking rather than respond thoughtfully. Reflection on our own experiences in practice helps us to recognise when our reactions to a person may have something to do with what is part of our private self. We need to be open to discuss this in professional supervision, so that we can gain a deeper understanding of our private, personal and professional self and improve our practice.

The 3 Ps are all constantly in play during practice, meaning that we need to frequently reflect on how our work impacts on our professional, personal and private self. Especially in situations where we show our vulnerabilities – or expect our colleagues to be more authentic and vulnerable – we must consider how it might affect our private self, so that we respond in a professional and personal manner. But the 3 Ps is not just a useful model in challenging practice situations but can be applied more broadly, as this example from a German youth worker shows:

'One of the boys in the youth group was always acting out and drew everybody's attention to him through his behaviour. I decided to give him attention for positive behaviour instead and we ended up playing table tennis. I am pretty good at table tennis and he showed a keen interest and was eager to beat me. Using the 3 Ps I reflected that professionally I wanted us to get along well, to have a better relationship, to have an opportunity to find out more about him by just talking. I also wanted him to get better at table tennis. The personal self was about using the opportunity to talk a little about myself, my family and find out more about him and his family. I also wanted him to feel liked for who he is. I also reflected on how I could best work with his sense of competitiveness – he was desperate to beat me and enjoyed getting close to it in a couple of sets. The private self in me would normally have responded with being very competitive myself, so I had to keep that in check, because my professional aim would have been undermined. I wanted him to have a success experience but one that he'd worked hard for and could feel a sense of accomplishment about. In the end we played for about two hours before he beat me. We bonded really well and he was very proud of himself. Also his behaviour significantly improved and he engaged far more than he had previously.'

Reflecting on the 3Ps

In the table below Erik Jappe (2010) examines the basis or premise underpinning practice, which areas the practitioner's knowledge is drawn from, what influences practitioner's action, how the practitioner co-operates and collaborates with others, and whose needs are uppermost in the practitioner's approach.

THE 3PS	PROFESSIONAL	PERSONAL	*PRIVATE*
Basis	Professionalism	Purpose-related Impartiality Objectivity	*Subjectivity* *Partiality*
Knowledge	Theory Law Policy	Processed experience Self-awareness	*Own experiences (more or less processed)*
Influences on action	Analysis Methods Evaluation	Empathy Immediate understanding of the situation	*Emotionality* *Chance*
Approach to collaboration	Multi-disciplinary Participation rights	Willingness and eagerness to co-operate	*Pursuing one's own agenda*
Needs	Others	Others / own	*Own*

This is a useful reflection tool for individual, paired and group reflections, and can be used to aid purposeful planning. We have since also extended this table to encompass power and politics as critical aspects:

THE 3PS	PROFESSIONAL	PERSONAL	*PRIVATE*
Power:	Formal authority Critical self-reflection and awareness of power dynamics and structures Empowerment, co-production and advocacy as professional methods	Informal authority and self-awareness / role modelling Ability to connect equally as human-to-human Humility, owning human flaws	Unconscious and uncritical use of power and privilege Trapped in drama triangle Incongruence
Politics:	Professional values and codes of ethics Critical awareness of political ideology and paradigms Educational action is political action Political representation of minority views Addressing structural inequalities	Personal values and commitment to social justice and human rights Taking a stance – social work is more than just a job The personal is political	Own values which clash with social work values Party-political propaganda Conspiracy theories and holding views that violate human rights

THE COMMON THIRD

"It is not possible to teach. But it is possible to create situations, wherein it is impossible not to learn."

The Danish concept of the Common Third is central to social pedagogical practice and highlights the significance of developing authentic and trusting relationships for helping others. It recognises the imbalance of power often felt between us as the professional and a person we support, and so seeks to find, create and respond to situations where the focus of attention is experiencing something together, an interest that is shared, a common third. As social pedagogues we see the other person as an equal participant in the support we offer, so it is important that we try to share our power on a human level. Doing things with (rather than to) people helps us form and strengthen relationships, within which the other person can feel secure and relaxed enough to be, and find new aspects of, themselves. Finding a Common Third enables us to share an activity in which we can both be equal, two people connected by something we both enjoy doing. Not all shared activities are automatically Common Thirds though; a key condition for a Common Third is that we undertake an activity with the clear intention to deepen the relationship.

The Common Third requires us to be authentic and self-reflective, bringing in our own personality as an important resource. It is about finding an activity in which we and the person we support are both genuinely interested. In this sense, the Common Third suggests a relationship-centred approach and meaningful involvement in every step – the person has to be involved on equal terms throughout the entire process, from jointly identifying a shared activity, to organising and undertaking it, to reflecting together on our learning. What makes the Common Third particularly important is that it enables us to learn together with the person we support. An equal relationship means that we both share a common potential for learning and growth, which makes the opportunities for Common Thirds almost endless: the activities are not limited to just those that we are particularly good at or skilled in, but also those in which the other person might be more expert in and can teach us, or even activities that we have both never tried and can learn about together.

The Common Third is often not a new idea to practitioners in the UK, but it provides much more focus on engaging in activities together with individuals they support and emphasises the importance of practical, creative activities for developing relationships. It gives professionals a language to articulate why this is important. The following example from a Scottish fostering support worker illustrates this:

'I had been supporting a young boy who was in foster care for around two years. We had developed a good relationship over this time and had done some fun activities together. The plan was for him to return home to his mother, and I was to support him with this transition. Although he was a very energetic, friendly boy who talked easily to adults, he was struggling to open up to people about his thoughts and feelings about returning home. I planned to do a creative project as a Common Third with him to help him think about what he had experienced with his foster carer, what he was looking forward to and also fearful of about returning home and who could help him with this. We discussed this project and planned to build a bridge on top of a board, with all his memories of being with his foster

carer on one side of the bridge and his feelings about moving back with his mother on the other side. He liked this idea and asked if we could go to the woods to do it. As this sounded like a great idea, we made plans to do this on my next visit. It was a lovely sunny day, so we took all the art equipment we needed and a rug and found a big old tree to sit under. We laid out the rug on the grass and settled down to work on the project. He decided to use scrunched up tissue paper to make a river to go under the bridge, so we both got busy scrunching and gluing the tissue paper onto the board, and he then put glitter on to make it look like water. He painted the grass on each side of the river and wrote his foster carer's name on the left side and 'mum' on the right, ready to stick his photos, memories and words on. We both experimented with trying different ways to construct a bridge out of twigs and branches that we collected from under the tree. We ended up making it in papier-mâché, which then needed to be left to dry in the sunshine. He said he'd like to try climbing the tree we were sitting under but said he was a bit scared of heights. With a little encouragement from me he tried climbing on the lower branches first to see how he felt and got quite excited. So we ran over to another tree, which had fallen over and had some big, easy-to-climb branches. I climbed this tree too, which he thought was funny. He went on to climb several other trees, getting higher each time. He was thrilled and said he wasn't scared of heights anymore. At the end of the session when it was time to go back to the car he proudly carried his board with the bridge and river on. He was so proud of himself and said several times "I think we've done really well today"; I of course agreed. He was excited to show his foster carer what we had done on our return and put it away safely for us to continue on my next visit. I reminded him and his carer to collect photos and memories to put on the board next time.

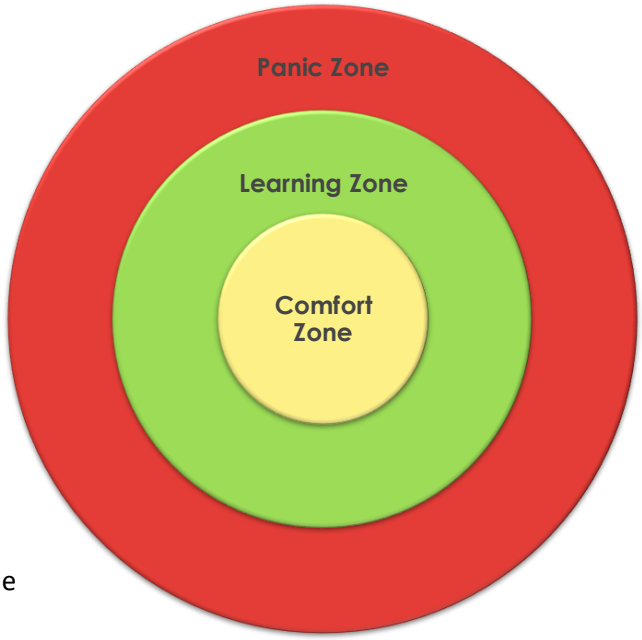
When I arrived the following week, he was all ready with his board on the kitchen table and his photos. We began working out where to put what, and he told me about each of the photos and the memories they hold. He also had photos of his mum and her new husband at their recent wedding, along with other family members and told me who they all were. I had some ping pong balls in my box of crafts which he decided he wanted to paint and place on the bridge. I suggested that he put the people who could help him on the bridge, but he insisted that he put two on – one being him and the other being his foster carer. The paint was dripping down the balls and he told me that this was him and his foster carer crying when he has to leave her to go home. I suggested that he write down some of his feelings about going home and cut them out to stick on the board. The only feeling he wanted to cut out was "happy", but he wanted to stick it on the bridge. He said this was because he was happy with the way things were, living with his foster carer but spending several nights a week with his mum. The more we created and worked on this project together, the easier it became for him to realise and open up about his feelings. This helped me understand in what way I could help him to feel better.'

The example shows that, when we're guided by the ideas and excitement of the person we support, we can often achieve a much more meaningful, memorable and positive outcome. By emphasising the importance of both us and the other person becoming fully engaged in the process, the Common Third illustrates that what really matters is how we interact with people; what exactly we are doing together is just the catalyst for developing our relationship, learning together and feeling the joy of sharing an experience.

THE LEARNING ZONE MODEL

'If you want to feel secure
Do what you already know how to do.
But if you want to grow …
Go to the cutting edge of your competence,
Which means a temporary loss of security.
So, whenever you don't quite know
What you are doing
Know
That you are growing …'

(Viscott, 2003)



Social pedagogy encourages us as practitioners to see any daily life situation as a potential learning opportunity with and for the people we support and thus to gradually nurture their human development. For small children learning itself is a hugely joyful experience, stimulating curiosity and connecting them to their physical and social environment – and yet many people grow up into a life where learning feels joyless, forceful or onerous. Developed by the German adventure pedagogue Tom Senninger, the Learning Zone Model is a helpful model to illustrate how we can create learning situations that tap into the positive power of learning.

As human beings, we have to explore and venture out into the unknown if we want to learn. We already know our immediate surroundings, which form our Comfort Zone. In the Comfort Zone things are familiar to us; we feel safe, comfortable and don't have to take any risks. We can be just who we are, without fear of being judged. The Comfort Zone is important, because it gives us a place to return to, to relax and recharge, to reflect and make sense of things – a safe haven.

Although it is cozy to stay in our Comfort Zone, we have to leave it in order to get to know the unknown. We need to explore our Learning Zone, which lies just outside of our secure environment. Only in the Learning Zone can we grow and learn, live out our curiosity and make new discoveries, and thus slowly expand our Comfort Zone by becoming more familiar with more things, mastering new skills and using new experiences to gain deeper insights and broader horizons. Going into our Learning Zone is a borderline experience – we might enjoy the novelty, our freedom and ability to pursue new challenges that test us; we might feel the thrill of exploring the edge of our abilities, our limits, how far we dare to leave our Comfort Zone.

However, beyond our Learning Zone lies our Panic Zone, wherein learning is impossible, as it is blocked by a sense of fear and our neuro-system tries to cope with the stress. Any learning connected with negative emotions is memorized in a part of the human brain that we can access only in similar emotional situations. Experiences of being in our Panic Zone are frequently traumatic – our reactions tend to fall within the fight, flight, freeze and fawn responses, as we desperately try to get out of the situation. Any sense of curiosity is shut down by a need to get out of our Panic Zone and back into our Comfort Zone. Therefore, we should aim to get close to, but not into, our Panic Zone.

In the transition from Comfort Zone to Learning Zone we need to be careful when taking risks that we don't go too far out of our Comfort Zone – beyond the Learning Zone – into the Panic Zone, where all our energy is used up for managing/controlling our anxiety and no energy can flow into learning.

Importantly, these three zones are different for different situations and different for each person – we all have our own unique Comfort Zone, Learning Zone and Panic Zone. For example, for a child who has grown up in chaotic family circumstances, drinking out of a dirty cup might be perfectly normal and within their Comfort Zone, whereas sitting down for a meal together might be far out of their Comfort Zone to begin with – for children with different experiences this might be the other way around. Where one zone ends and the other starts is very often not as clearly visible as in the illustration above. This means that we must never push someone else into their Learning Zone, as we cannot see where one zone leads into the next. All we can do is invite others to leave their Comfort Zone, value their decision, take them seriously and give them support so they won't enter their Panic Zone.

Within social pedagogical settings the Learning Zone Model is often very useful to consider when we're aiming to create learning situations for children. It is a simple model that can even be used when talking with children to find out how they might feel about being expected to go to a new school and to explore with them how, with the right support, this might not put them into their Panic Zone but enable them to increase their Learning Zone step by step.

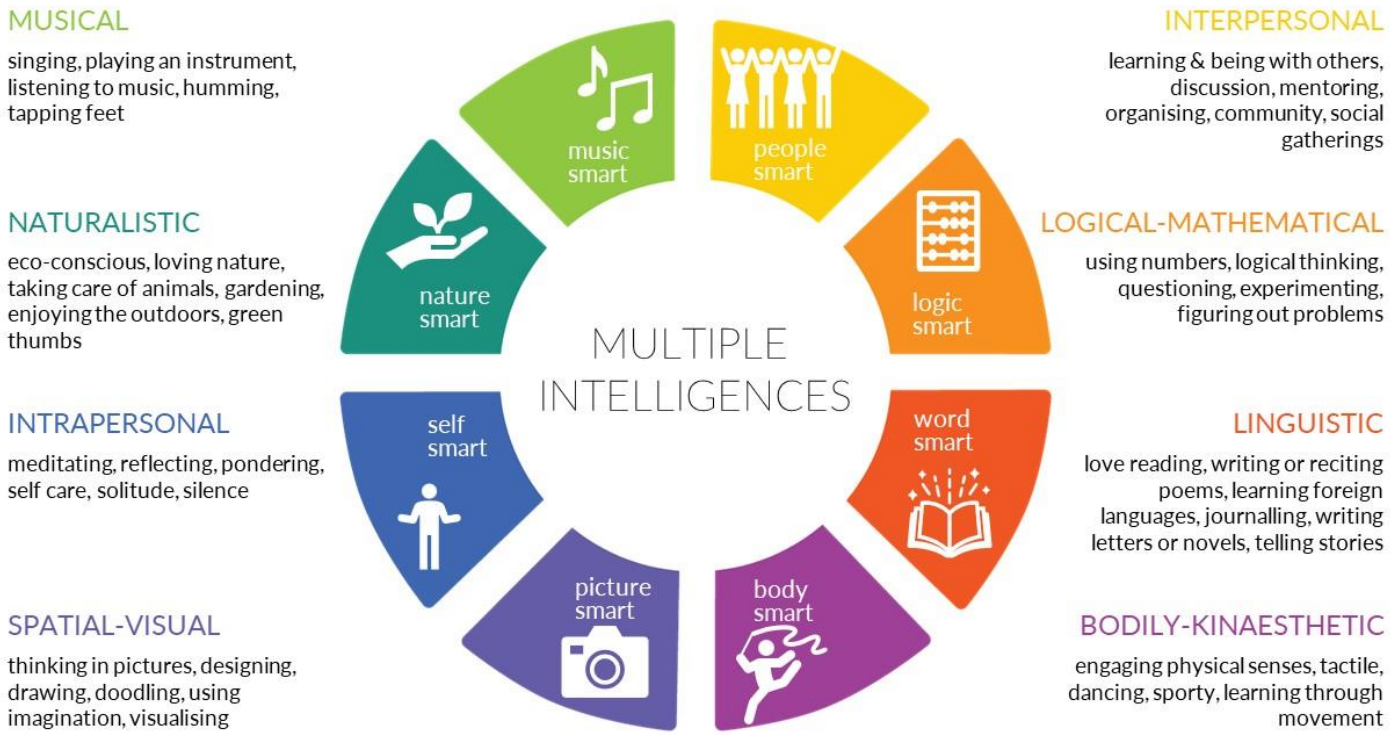
The following example from a residential home for children with disabilities shows how professionals can create positive experiences for children even in difficult conditions. The home had taken some of the children to the seaside promenade on a sunny day. When they walked onto the pier it turned very windy though, and one of the boys with autism began screaming his lungs out and crouched on the planks as he got overwhelmed by the sound and ferocity of the wind on the pier. When the team finally managed to get him away from the pier he was soaked in sweat and exhausted. But rather than avoiding the pier in the future the team thought about how they could gradually help the boy overcome his anxieties, so the first time they revisited the pier they only drove to the car park close to it but stayed in the car with him. The following time they opened the boy's window a little, the next time a little more. Thus he always stayed close to his comfort zone and knew that he didn't have to go a step beyond what he felt capable of.

In small steps they got the boy to be okay with the window all the way down, with the door open, with stepping out of the car, then taking a few steps towards the pier on a later visit, until ultimately the boy was fine with stepping back onto the pier. Now the pier has very much become his comfort zone and is one of his favourite places to go to. It would have been easy to avoid the pier altogether, but most likely this would have resulted in the boy's comfort zone shrinking even further – instead the team chose the more difficult but also more rewarding option to help the boy enter his learning zone without the fear of being pushed beyond. By being given the choice of when to go a step further and how much he felt able to challenge himself, the boy was able to expand his comfort zone slowly but steadily – and quite impressively in the end.

MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES THEORY

The concept of Multiple Intelligences was developed by Howard Gardner, a professor of education at Harvard University, and first published in his book *Frames of Mind* (1983). It quickly became established as an important model explaining the different ways in which we learn, think, understand and act. Gardner's main idea is that intelligence has many forms, that we're all intelligent in different ways. Therefore, the common assumption that some people are highly intelligent whilst others are not very intelligent, and that intelligence can be assessed through measures such as the IQ test, is both deeply flawed and unhelpful. It prevents us from understanding intelligence more broadly and from creating meaningful learning opportunities. Sadly, it also means that many children and adults feel judged as 'stupid' or 'bad' for not being intelligent in the narrow way in which we traditionally conceptualise intelligence.

Gardner argues that each person has a unique blend of multiple intelligences, not just one type or level of intelligence. He originally identified seven different intelligences (see image): logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial-visual, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal. The types of intelligence that we possess both affect how we perceive the world (what we might be most in tune with, which senses we might use) and how we prefer to learn (how we have come to understand the world). For instance, a child with a stronger bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence is keen on tactile experiences, might like to touch all the ingredients used in a cake recipe and might most meaningfully learn about aerodynamics with a parachute strapped on so as to physically experience the forces at play. A child with stronger musical intelligence might be more tuned into the sounds around them and might learn a poem much better by turning it into a song.



Gardner suggests that most of us are strong in three types of intelligence, which come most naturally to us. They are likely to influence what we enjoy doing (e.g. playing chess – logical-mathematical, dancing –bodily-kinaesthetic, socialising with friends – interpersonal) as well as how we learn. It is important to recognise that, according to Gardner, all intelligences have equal value. None is better or more desirable or more likely to cause happiness. However, we

need to understand our own blend of intelligences and use this to our advantage, because our intelligences provide important clues about how we best learn, what our preferred learning styles are and how we can develop our strengths as well as our weaknesses.

Perhaps the most obvious yet commonly ignored implication of multiple intelligences is that, as human beings, we learn far better and far more effectively if we use our strengths. We'll feel better, more relaxed and more confident as a result, whereas the pressure of possible failure and being forced to act and think unnaturally cause stress and have a corrosive effect on our learning. Developing our strengths will make us more responsive to learning experiences that help us develop our weaknesses too. For instance, a child who is interpersonally intelligent might find it a lot easier to develop a weakness in linguistic intelligence and learn French by meeting up with children who speak French or improvise a role play with their friends in French than by reading a book in French – which might be a much better way for a child with strong intrapersonal and linguistic intelligence to learn the language. Neither of these ways are superior and both children could end up doing equally well in French if given the opportunity to learn it in the ways they learn best.

As professionals engaged in learning settings (both formal and informal, with children or adults), we therefore have particular responsibility to ensure that learning opportunities reflect multiple intelligences and the diverse ways in which people learn effectively. Gardner's model provides an excellent framework, which has been taken up by many schools and other educational settings, sometimes translated into different areas of being smart (see above). Some schools have gone so far as to design the school environment accordingly, with cozy quiet corners for intrapersonal learners ('self smart' students), social spaces for groups of interpersonal learners, areas for bodily-kinaesthetic learners to be physically active and zones where naturalistic learners can engage with pets or tend to flowers. Even small ways of encouragement can make a big difference: a 'body smart' child constantly fiddling with a pen might find it easier to concentrate if they can shape a lump of play-do; a 'picture smart' child might just need somewhere to doodle.

Since Gardner first introduced the 7 multiple intelligences, he has further developed the model, which now commonly includes naturalist intelligence as an eighth form of intelligence to describe people who are very in tune with their natural environment, enjoy being outdoors, love gardening or caring for a pet. Gardner has also considered further intelligences, particularly spiritual and moral intelligence, but these are much more complex and therefore also more difficult to measure and evidence.

Finally, as human beings we cannot possibly be strong in all multiple intelligences. In life we need people who collectively are good at different things. A well-balanced world, and well-balanced organisations and teams, are necessarily comprised of people who possess different mixtures of intelligences. This gives the group a fuller collective capability than a group of identically able specialists. We can thus greatly benefit by actively and non-judgmentally engaging with people who are different to us.

CULTIVATING A RELATIONAL UNIVERSE

The Relational Universe draws on the power of metaphor to illustrate what we mean by relationship-centred practice. It conceptualises relationships in the broadest sense, recognising that when it comes to relationships, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. By providing a way of looking at all the relationships that surround a person or family, the Relational Universe widens the focus on both each individual relationship that has significance – for better or worse – and the entirety of the relational constellations in someone's life.

Importantly, the Relational Universe emphasises that human beings are interdependent. We are all part of other people's Relational Universes, just as others are part of ours. They might be close to us or be farther in the distance. Their presence might have a strong gravitational pull on us or less of an effect. They might be looming large or play a smaller role, perhaps like distant stars guiding us. Some of the relationships will have been there since our birth, others may have been recent additions to our Relational Universe. Each of these relationships has meaning, albeit in a multitude of different ways, with a wide variety of emotions and needs connected to every single relationship. Some might be toxic or laden with trauma, whilst others are characterised by love and a strong bond of trust – there's a story to each and every relationship. All of these aspects mean that our Relational Universe is in a constant state of movement, with ever-changing dynamics that can make it hard to find a comfortable state of equilibrium. In this sense, the Relational Universe applies both to us as professionals – because we're human beings too – and to the people we support in our practice.

Application to Practice

In social pedagogical practice, the metaphor enables us to engage in dialogue with the person we support and to learn more about the relationships that affect them. Once we better understand their Relational Universe – how they see and feel about both individual relationships and the overall constellation of relationships – we can explore how we might best support the person in developing and maintaining these relationships, or in forming new relationships. In this sense, the Relational Universe is a solution-focussed model, encouraging us to look together towards what can be different rather than what has happened in the past and can't be changed.

In the below examples we explain how the model can be applied to practice with looked-after children and in adult social work in order to illustrate the value of the Relational Universe. The model has equal significance when working social pedagogically with any other group of human beings throughout the life course, particularly people who experience loneliness.

The Relational Universe and Children in Care

The relational universe of a child in care can be quite curious. There is no shortage of people appearing like a multitude of distant stars in a universe and disappearing long before they've even become visible. But there are also others, those who are close enough to develop a gravitational pull, who become central to the child's relational universe. This is true for every person, yet what is different for children in care is the ways in which their relational universe is often thrown out of equilibrium by decisions outside their control: placement moves resulting in loss of friends, school changes as well as new carers, limitations to family contact, changing social workers, gaining new friends. The frequency with which many children in care experience such upheaval and its potentially negative consequences makes it imperative to put greater emphasis on developing and sustaining relationships. We argue that a social pedagogical perspective with children's relational universe at the heart of care and educational practice can provide a useful and visually stimulating framework that considers all past, current and future relationships that surround a child in care. (The model is of course not limited to children in care and can equally be applied to working with families, elderly people or any other individuals, groups and communities.)

The importance of positive relationships for children in care and leaving care is becoming clear; however, the 'how, who and when' is often driven by real and perceived barriers, resources and professional roles. Many children in care have fragmented relationships in communities and once they leave care will often attempt to return to them, even if this exploration is painful when relationships are not as ideal as expected. To identify these relationships early on is crucial to nurturing them and establishing a supportive emotional and social network during their time in care and also for their move to in(ter)dependence. As the Care Inquiry (2013) noted:

'Whilst the importance of relationships is often implicit in what we already do for and with children, what has been missing is the determination to view relationships – their extent, their quality, their supportive character and the likelihood of their lasting – as the cornerstone of planning and practice. We need a renewed focus on using resources and approaches that will nurture positive relationships for children who cannot live with their parents. This must drive practice in the future – moving away from the focus on process and on administrative requirements that have come to dominate practice in recent years.'

Our universe evolves from birth, where as a baby it consists of our parent(s) and expands as grandparents, relatives and family friends enter it. That universe continues to grow throughout our life as we develop relationships with more people, evolving in ways that are highly individual and unique. In practice, it is therefore important for the child to define their relational universe, supported in this by carers and others as the child explores who they feel is able to support them now or in the future. This is unlike other models, which do not always take the views and needs of the child into account as a central planet in the universe around them, especially if these are in conflict with the professionals' views.

For children in care, their universe includes many professionals who have involvement at different times, often entering the close universe and latterly moving to a more distant position as their role changes. This doesn't mean that this relationship which has been established disappears; it may be that the gravitational pull of this professional decreases, but they will still remain within the universe and perhaps move closer again as the needs of the child change. For example, a foster carer may move into the further reaches of the universe, but when the young person experiences a crisis after leaving care they may re-establish this relationship by having their former carer in their near universe for a period of time for support they can offer. Even if not in close proximity, the knowledge that this support is there may in itself be sufficient. It is therefore crucial that we professionally support such 'planetary movement' in children's relational universe.

The relational universe also acts as a reminder that we mustn't exclude those individuals we may not see as 'ideal' from a professional assessment, such as a grandparent who has used alcohol in the past. Once a young person has left care, these are often the people they turn to and, if engaged early on, they could play a vital long-term supportive role in the young person's life. Recognising that they are part of the relational universe – whether or not we like this as professionals – can help us put a clear emphasis on the assets rather than the deficits of these people, which is key to this process.

Children in care are often cautious of relationships with adults or resentful as their previous experiences may have been very negative, so a primary task is for professionals to offer a safe environment where they can model positive, trusting relationships for the child and allow them to build trust in others. Over time, this can then extend to other relationships in the child's universe, including those outside the looked-after environment. A social pedagogical approach is a key factor in the 'why and how'. Nurturing children's sense of empowerment plays a crucial part in this and can be achieved in a number of ways, including non-judgemental acceptance of children's views and choices of who to develop relationships with, while offering safeguards, supporting children in differentiating which relationships are positive for their well-being and which ones aren't and how they themselves can cultivate their relational universe.

With the metaphor of the relational universe we aim to highlight that human beings are intricately connected and interdependent. This is often undervalued in social care practice, where it is independence that remains the stated end goal in preparing looked after children for leaving care. Rather than suggesting that human beings are constantly dependent on others, interdependence conveys mutual support, reciprocity and a strong, reliable social network with a multitude of different connections. Within the relational universe, some of the connections may be temporary, some may have a strong and lasting impact, some might be considered positive and others problematic or even toxic. Irrespective of any attributes or judgments we as professionals might use to describe certain relationships, there can't be any doubt that they are part of the child's universe. Each of these people will bring some positive aspects to the life world of the child, which are potentially neglected by professionals and needed by the child in their universe to sustain their further interdependence.

The Relational Universe in Adult Social Work

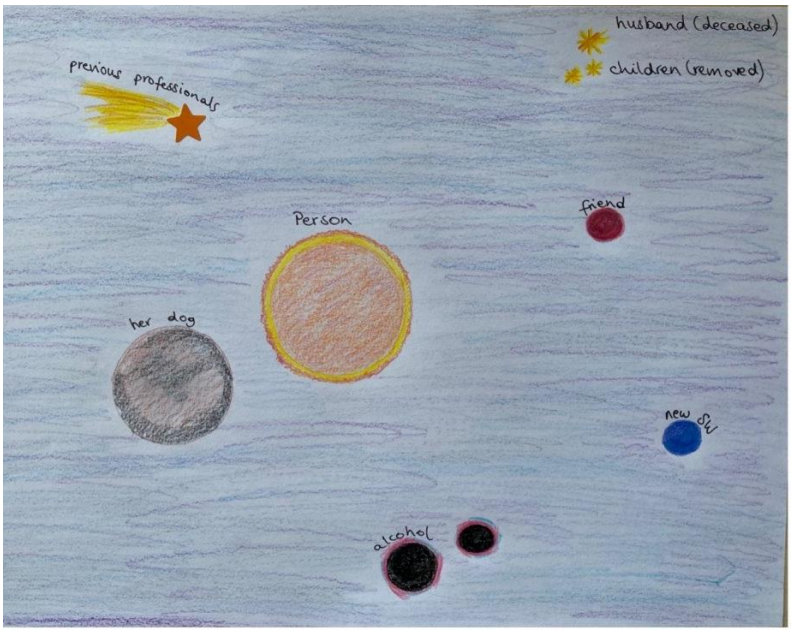
The below example of using the Relational Universe is provided by Nicole Ashworth, a Social Worker, ASYE and Student Lead at Middlesbrough Council:

I recently completed a course called "Developing Relationship-Centred Practice". During this course, we were introduced to different social pedagogical concepts. I would like to focus further on one of those concepts, as this one really resonated with me.

The concept of the Relational Universe is based on using the universe as a metaphor of someone's relationships and support systems. It is linked to systems theory. Maclean and Harrison (2015) suggest that systems theory incorporates the forming of a web, or system. The person is connected to other people who can be family, friends and wider organisations. This system should sustain and enrich people. However, it is also recognised that someone's support system can be placed under strain due to ever changing circumstances.

We were asked to draw the Relational Universe of someone we are working with. I chose to draw the universe of someone I have recently supported. For the purpose of the activity, I called her Marie, which is not her real name.

Marie has experienced abusive relationships which have led to longstanding problems with drinking alcohol to excess.



In Marie's universe, I placed her at the centre as the glowing force in this. She can be fiery at times, but also she is naturally the central focal point. Marie lives on her own. Her husband passed away years ago, and their children were removed when they were young. I depicted them as stars in the distance. Whilst they are no longer physically there, they continue to shine for Marie in her memories. Marie's most important factor in her life is her dog, which I drew close to her. A little further along in the constellation is her friend, who I imagined as a small red planet. The reason why I chose red, an alarming colour, is because her friend has her own issues, and she and Marie can negatively influence each other. They appear to have a symbiotic relationship (although it is not for me to judge this). Marie would have probably not chosen red to describe her friend! Further down in the universe, there are two black holes which represent the alcohol. They have a strong pull on Marie and influence her a lot. In the left hand corner we have a beautiful, sparkling and rare shooting star. The shooting star in Marie's universe stands for previous professionals who were involved in her life, and there were lots of them! Initially they were keen to support her, but Marie finds it difficult to build and maintain relationships. She easily withdraws her engagement. So, these shooting stars appear in her life or "knock on her door" and, as quickly as they appear, they disappear again; if you blink you miss them. Shooting stars are seen as something amazing and rare, something you're lucky to have seen. People make a wish and wait for it to come true. How many times did Marie wish for someone to come along and understand her? And I don't mean: "Yeah, I totally get you. Let's get you sorted!" No, what I mean is for professionals to use their empathy to fully explore Marie's feelings and thoughts and her reasons for non-engagement with professionals. The new social worker is depicted as a small blue planet, almost blending into the background and sitting on the periphery for now, until Marie invites them to move closer into her universe's constellation.

I found the concept of the Relational Universe extremely valuable in order to explore relationships. It really made think about how I perceive the relationships someone has, and how the person, in this case Marie, would view them. I have no doubt that she would have had a very different constellation of planets and forces if she would have drawn her own universe. As professionals, we sometimes want to feel as if we are the most important person in someone's life, as we want to be the agents of change. However, looking at our own universe, do we perceive our GP or dentist to be a big influencing factor in our lives? Of course not, they are metaphorically on a different planet! This concept really helped me to analyse relationships more deeply, and it acts as a stark reminder of how privileged we are to be part of someone's universe.