

## *Guests of the Journal*

### Interview with Gabriel Eichsteller (January 2019)

**1. You have gained experience with social pedagogy and social work in Germany, Denmark and the UK. What are the main differences among these countries in social pedagogy practice?**

As I'm part of an international team of colleagues involved in several cross-national projects, I've been fortunate to learn, compare and contrast social pedagogy practice at length. For me, some of the most striking differences lie in how social pedagogy is conceptualised, and how these conceptualisations play out in practice. I love the focus on dialogue and seeing social pedagogical practice as an exploratory journey guided by the unique resourcefulness of people, which I've come across in German social pedagogy. By recognising that every person experiences the world in unique ways, there is a clear imperative that any intervention or support that's meant to be helpful and sustainable must start with an insight into the person's lifeworld and what their reality looks and feels like. Being able to translate such abstract principles and conceptualisations into practice is, in my view, a really profound skill, because it frames the relationships and interactions with the people we support in social pedagogical practice.

Of course, this skill is not unique to German social pedagogy. For instance, the focus on solidarity, inclusion and the way Danish social pedagogues work with groups is really powerful, I think. At a micro-level, this shines through in a rather ordinary example of a group of youngsters in a children's home going out for an ice cream together with all of the social pedagogues. When one of the young people didn't want to join in, it wasn't the social pedagogues who persuaded him. His peers coaxed him into coming along, as they felt it was important they all do this together. This goes to show that solidarity and inclusion can become not just what underpins the social pedagogues' practice; these values can be shared and socially reinforced by the group they support, which makes them all the more powerful. That concern with how to nurture a sense of community, reciprocity and solidarity in such organic ways really stands out for me in Danish social pedagogy.

Here in the UK, we've been quite attracted to how some of the concepts used in Danish and German social pedagogy can help professionals be authentic and bring in their personality without being unprofessional. In a practice climate where professionals are too often expected to keep their distance, social pedagogy has added strength and an important theoretical foundation to a resurgence of relationship-centred practice.

Social pedagogy in the UK is still in its infancy, relatively speaking (cf. Petrie, 2013). There are many similar traditions, which link incredibly well to social pedagogy, but as a term, as an overarching conceptual framework or inter-discipline it's relatively new. This combination of being familiar yet different has attracted a lot of professionals to social pedagogy, in part because it has validated their ethos and approach to practice and because it has offered impulses for creative practice, trying out new ideas and recognising that, as human beings, we can always become even better at what we do. And many organisations that have really connected with social pedagogy are achieving impressive results. One noteworthy example is [St Christopher's Fellowship](#), a charity supporting looked after children. They have genuinely embraced social pedagogy as the foundation for a new home in London for girls at risk of sexual exploitation, creating a safe environment where the girls can understand how to spot the signs they were being exploited and maintain positive links with their family, friends and education in their own communities. There are many other small and big examples too of innovative and creative practice developments as professionals are feeling liberated by social pedagogy and teams move from having a blame culture towards a learning culture, where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities.

Despite these accomplishments, social pedagogy developments in the UK are so far largely limited to services for looked after children. Many settings that would be social pedagogical practice fields in other countries are only just starting to become aware of social pedagogy and its potential relevance as an interdisciplinary practice framework. That's hopefully just a matter of time though as social pedagogy in the UK is really vibrant, fuelling people's passion, creativity and ambition. This is really remarkable and encouraging news at a time where, in many countries, social pedagogy is increasingly under pressure to justify its *raison d'être*.

## 2. Is it possible to identify more paradigms of social pedagogy in the UK?

It's important to note that social pedagogy in the UK has been influenced particularly by social pedagogy in Germany and Denmark. That's in part due to the scope of some of the earlier cross-national research by [Petrie, Boddy, Cameron, Wigfall, and Simon \(2006\)](#), which compared outcomes for looked after children in Denmark, Germany and England, and due to the cultural backgrounds of some of the social pedagogues who have been working in the UK as part of various pilot projects. As a result, specific theoretical concepts from these two countries have shaped the broader understanding of social pedagogy in the UK. In addition, because of the need to introduce social pedagogy as a paradigm to an audience largely unfamiliar with the term, we've also had to develop some accessible models to try and convey the overarching principles and theoretical foundations of social pedagogy as we understand it. The Diamond Model ([Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011](#)) is one example of a conceptual framework that has become almost synonymous with social pedagogy in the UK but would, as a model, be completely unknown to social pedagogues in other countries. What this means is that social pedagogy in the UK is beginning to have its own tradition which, whilst linked to other social pedagogy paradigms across Europe, has some unique features.

As the four UK countries are quite different from each other, with significant cultural differences as well as devolved responsibilities for educational and social care provisions, it's possible to identify slightly different social pedagogy paradigms in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales:

- Scotland is culturally quite close to Scandinavia, and has some interesting historical connections to social pedagogy, for instance in the seminal Kilbrandon Report from 1973, which has been a hugely influential policy statement on how 'children in trouble' should be supported within society. Amongst many other things, it led to the creation of the [Children's Hearing System](#) as a community-based and child-friendly system of supporting children who have committed offences or are in need of care and protection. Interest in social pedagogy is therefore quite longstanding, and organisations such as Children in Scotland and the Centre for Looked-After Children in Scotland have been promoting social pedagogy for over 10 years. There have been several pilot projects introducing social pedagogy, which have demonstrated its potential ([Roesch-Marsh, Cooper, & Kirkwood, 2015](#); [Vrouwenfelder, Milligan, & Merrell, 2012](#)).
- The cultural and policy context in England is different and, for a number of reasons, less compatible with social pedagogy. Previous pilot projects aimed at introducing social pedagogy have had varied successes, depending on the approach that was taken and the ways in which they were evaluated. This is reflected in two different narratives: The first is shaped by practitioners' experiences of social pedagogy, who generally find that it makes a real difference. The alternative narrative suggests that social pedagogy lacks a rigorous evidence base that would demonstrate its effectiveness. This isn't entirely baseless and perhaps borne out of challenges with operationalising, quantifying and measuring social pedagogical practice ([Kirkwood, Roesch-Marsh, & Cooper, 2017](#)). But just because some evaluations have struggled to conclusively *attribute* measurable outcomes to a social pedagogical approach doesn't mean social pedagogy hasn't *contributed* to improved practice – quite the opposite. There are now more and more organisations using social pedagogy as their practice model. There are also more universities developing modules or even degree programmes such as the University of

Central Lancashire's new [Masters in Social Pedagogy Leadership](#), which my organisation is co-teaching.

- Wales has so far not seen much activity related to social pedagogy despite interest within some of the sector organisations, such as Social Care Wales. However, social pedagogy fits neatly with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act, which came into force recently. As I live in North Wales, it's certainly close to my heart (and my doorstep) to support social pedagogy developments here in the future.
- In Northern Ireland there have also been pockets of interest in social pedagogy, but similarly to Wales they've been rather confined to a few organisations. However, the organisations we've supported over there are still really committed to social pedagogy, so my impression that social pedagogy interest hasn't spread as widely as in Scotland, for example, is not meant to suggest that it has petered out.

### **3. How do you describe the relationship between social pedagogy and social work in the UK in a theoretical and practical way?**

So far the relationship between social pedagogy and social work has been quite diverse. Within children's social work, there has been more exposure to and interest in social pedagogy, but it's still under-developed in terms of how social pedagogy relates to social work, so it is necessary to have more dialogue. Within adult social work, social pedagogy is only just starting to emerge as a term that is being used, but thanks to the work of our colleagues at the University of Central Lancashire this is starting to change. Lowis Charfe and Ali Gardner in particular have done a lot of work in raising awareness of social pedagogy and their book 'Social Pedagogy and Social Work' is due to be published in April ([Gardner & Charfe, in press](#)). It's certain to take the discourse several steps further, enabling a well-informed exploration of where we want to take this relationship.

In the short term, in my view, social pedagogy can offer a hugely valuable perspective on social work, refreshing and strengthening its core values at a time when social workers are often feeling pretty bleak and demotivated. As a perspective, social pedagogy can serve to put relationship-centred practice back at the heart of social work. It is important to recognise it's not just what social work used to be but has more to offer: It has the potential to resonate with a broad range of professionals from different disciplines, thus strengthening inter-professional practice and breaking down barriers between the many agencies often involved in the lives of a child, family or vulnerable adult. Also, social pedagogy's emphasis on relationships goes beyond the professional-client-relationship by aiming to nurture clients' relational universe with the people around them, too ([Carter & Eichsteller, 2017](#)).

Whilst social pedagogy isn't yet an established profession here, there are several qualified social pedagogues from other European countries currently working as social workers, thus showing that at a practice level there are ways to bring a social pedagogical perspective into social work. Interestingly, the [BASW Social Worker of the Year](#) in 2016 was a German social pedagogue.

### **4. Can you describe your own social pedagogy practice?**

My background is largely in play work and children's participation. Most of my social pedagogy practice now focuses on creating learning situations for people to explore social pedagogy. This includes facilitating short courses, developing educational resources, engaging with organisations interested in better understanding social pedagogy and its potential for their services, and most importantly bringing people together. The real practice expertise lies with professionals in organisations that have really invested in social pedagogy and have developed a social pedagogy that reflects their unique characteristics as well as the central values and principles of social pedagogy. I'm therefore keen to find ways of highlighting and sharing their insights and expertise as well as ensure that they can continue their social pedagogy learning journeys, for instance through new courses or networking opportunities such as the [Social Pedagogy Development Network](#) (SPDN) events, which I co-ordinate.

The SPDN is essentially a grassroots movement, which we initiated together with a few partner organisations in order to create a free, open and inclusive forum where everyone involved or interested in social pedagogy can get together and be part of co-constructing what social pedagogy actually means within a UK context.

#### **5. Can you write something about ThemPra's activities?**

My German colleague Sylvia Holthoff and I set up ThemPra 10 years ago following a pilot project we were both involved in. We were keen to run a social pedagogical organisation, with a focus on collaboration and connection in order to support the sustainable development of social pedagogy in the UK. Over the last ten years, we've developed a range of short courses, organisational capacity building projects and whole-systems strategies. Some of our courses focus on specific aspects of social pedagogy, such as its core values, understanding the impact of trauma, leadership, reflection, change agency and learning facilitation. With the exception of our new [Massive Open Online Course in Social Pedagogy across Europe](#), our courses are very much based on creating experiential immersive learning experiences around social pedagogy in a learning environment that is focussed on relationship-building with and between our course participants. We're trying to build as much on every practitioner's inherent expertise as possible, because many people are already doing fantastic work. We've seen that, with its focus on well-being, learning and relationships, social pedagogy can enable them to do even more of that and thus make a substantial difference to the lives of disadvantaged children, young people and adults. We have also seen evidence of the positive impact it can have on practitioners and entire teams who have embraced social pedagogical principles not just as a way of working with children, young people and adults but as highly relevant and applicable to team work, leadership and multi-agency working.

We've been mindful from the outset that if our key role is to nurture the development of social pedagogy in the UK, then we need to create a broad range of learning opportunities. So in addition to pilot projects with residential children's homes, early intervention teams, foster carers and social workers as well as communities for children and adults with special needs, we've also been busy developing open access educational resources, speaking at conferences, supporting universities in developing social pedagogy modules, and setting up the Social Pedagogy Development Network. We're really delighted to be adding the MOOC in Social Pedagogy across Europe to that list – it's an 8-session online only course we've been developing with partner organisations in the Czech Republic, Spain, Denmark, Belgium, Germany and the UK.

#### **6. What is the typical institution or organization for social pedagogy graduates' employment?**

At the moment one of the challenges is that social pedagogy graduates aren't necessarily able to register as qualified social workers, and as social pedagogy is not yet a well-developed profession there aren't many positions advertised specifically for social pedagogues. However, there are a range of jobs they are well equipped to do, such as in participation and advocacy services, residential care, early years and teaching, early intervention and family support services, and an increasing practice field around mental health where social pedagogues would be well placed.

#### **7. What are the most important contemporary challenges for social pedagogy in the UK? How does social pedagogy face these challenges?**

Given its relatively recent tradition, it's fair to say that social pedagogy in the UK is still under-theorised and that there's lots of scope for further developing it. Whilst we've been working with a broad range of practitioners and academics under the leadership of the Social Pedagogy Professional Association to define [standards for social pedagogical practice](#), the focus in practice is still very much on the pedagogical – the aspects that are directly applicable in day-to-day practice and that professionals can relate to. Whilst this has been rightly critiqued by some international observers (e.g. [Coussée, Bradt](#),

[Roose, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2008](#)) as lacking some important features, its impact shouldn't be underestimated, because it has (re-)introduced social care to an educational perspective and a focus on relationships as catalysts for learning. The socio-critical dimension of social pedagogy – its ambition to challenge the status quo in society, address social inequality and marginalisation by nurturing people's social and political agency – is so far less well developed in the UK. This is a challenge in that we don't want to reduce social pedagogy to simply being about good practice, and it would miss the opportunity to tap into its full potential.

There are huge challenges facing social care after more than a decade of austerity measures and the erosion of many public services and non-statutory provision. Local authorities in England have seen their funding cut dramatically by the UK's Conservative Government, with many barely able to afford their statutory duties such as child protection services. The Local Government Association has just reported that 88% of local authorities have overspent on children's services by a combined estimated total of £807m in 2017-2018 ([Perraudin & McIntyre, 2019](#)). Ironically, more preventative early intervention services to support families have been cut or defunded, thus compounding child protection issues – at much greater expenses. It's extremely difficult for organisations experiencing those kinds of pressures to make time for creative thinking and developing new ideas – the financial austerity is in many ways mirrored by an austerity mindset leading to emotionally and relationally austere practice ([Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016](#)). The good news is that social pedagogy can help professionals get out of that austerity mindset and to reconnect to their motivations and sense of purpose.

It is also increasingly clear that we desperately need educational solutions to some of the most pressing social challenges, such as homelessness, child poverty, youth gangs, elderly care, domestic violence and mental health provision, to name just a few. These issues – and their complex causes – require the kind of attention to social justice that social pedagogy can offer. That's a case we are planning to make in greater detail as part of our Erasmus+ funded project on Social Pedagogy across Europe. One key to countering austerity is to provide an inspiring counter-narrative, to show that change is possible and to articulate how we can collectively address social inequalities in our practice. For instance, the [Social Pedagogy Professional Association](#) has recently launched a campaign seeking to showcase social pedagogy's potential to offer a holistic approach to well-being and how it could contribute to addressing the mental health crisis. So far this has initiated greater dialogue with other organisations specialising in mental health, with the aim of forming more of an alliance. We'll need to build more of these alliances – and as social pedagogy is essentially about connecting with others, it feels like we're on familiar territory.

## **8. Can you predict social pedagogy future development in the UK?**

My sense is that social pedagogy is here to stay. After more than 10 years of making fairly regular headlines and a range of pilot project, the concern that social pedagogy might just be the latest fad has largely proved unfounded. Rather than fading away, interest in social pedagogy actually keeps growing and, importantly, extending into new practice areas such as adult social care. There are by now many powerful examples demonstrating its transformative impact not just on individuals but on entire organisations.

We are increasingly becoming aware that social care and education are full of complexities if we really want to recognise people as whole human beings with myriad connections to other people, places and history. This requires us as professionals to constantly develop new solutions together with the people we support, so as to draw on their unique resourcefulness and bring out their unique potential. The more we're committing to working in such a way, the more social pedagogy will look like the kind of coherent ethical and theoretical framework that can enable practitioners to make a meaningful contribution. Discovering social pedagogy in practice can really bring back the joy, motivation and sense of purpose stifled by an obsession with crude measures, quantifiable targets, and narrow procedures – and we've still got too many of those in the UK.

But there are many brilliant professionals who are determined to counter these trends and are successfully showing that things can be different. One notable example is Helen Sanderson, who set up [Wellbeing Teams](#), a radical new model for delivering care and support within communities through self-managing, values-led, neighbourhood-based teams focussing on wellbeing rather than more narrowly on older people's ill health. They illustrate the potential of making connections between social pedagogy and the trailblazing ideas of people determined to create a positive future. As social pedagogy is all about relationships, I'm confident that we'll succeed in developing more of these connections.

## References

- Carter, A., & Eichsteller, G. (2017). Cultivating a relational universe. *The Therapeutic Care Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.thetcj.org/in-residence-articles/cultivating-relational-universe-andy-carter-gabriel-eichsteller>
- Coussée, F., Bradt, L., Roose, R., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2008). The emerging social pedagogical paradigm in UK child and youth care: Deus ex machina or walking the beaten path? *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(3), 789–805.
- Eichsteller, G., & Holthoff, S. (2011). Conceptual Foundations of Social Pedagogy: A Transnational Perspective from Germany. In C. Cameron & P. Moss (Eds.), *Social pedagogy and working with children and young people: Where care and education meet*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Gardner, A., & Charfe, L. (in press). *Social Pedagogy and Social Work*. London: Sage.
- Hingley-Jones, H., & Ruch, G. (2016). 'Stumbling through'? Relationship-based social work practice in austere times. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 30(3), 235–248.
- Kirkwood, S., Roesch-Marsh, A., & Cooper, S. (2017). Evaluating social pedagogy in the UK: Methodological issues. *Qualitative Social Work*, 18(1), 8–23.
- Perraudin, F., & McIntyre, N. (2019). Rise in children taken into care pushes 88% of councils over budget. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jan/08/rise-in-children-taken-into-care>
- Petrie, P. (2013). Social Pedagogy in the UK: Gaining a firm foothold? *Education policy analysis archives*, 21(37), 1–16.
- Petrie, P., Boddy, J., Cameron, C., Wigfall, V., & Simon, A. (2006). *Working with children in care: European perspectives*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Roesch-Marsh, A., Cooper, S., & Kirkwood, S. (2015). *Social pedagogy pilot project evaluation*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
- Vrouwenfelder, E., Milligan, I., & Merrell, M. (2012). *Social pedagogy and inter-professional practice: Evaluation of Orkney Islands training programme*. Glasgow: Centre for Excellence for Looked-After Children in Scotland.