Social Pedagogy

“Social pedagogy is a theory of all the personal, social and moral education in a given society, including the description of what has happened in practice.”

Karl Mager (1810 – 1858), German ‘founding father’ of social pedagogy

Basis:
- Humanistic value base, e.g. respect, trust, unconditional appreciation
- Fundamental concept of children as equal human beings with rich and extraordinary potential, as competent, resourceful and active agents
- Inter-disciplinary theory combining concepts and models from sociology, psychology, education, medical sciences and social work

Aims:
- Holistic education – education of head (cognitive knowledge), heart (emotional and spiritual learning), and hands (practical and physical skills)
- Holistic well-being – strengthening health-sustaining factors
- To enable children to grow up as self-responsible persons who take responsibility for their society
- To promote human welfare and prevent or ease social problems

Pathways:
- Through providing opportunities for learning (“It is not possible to teach; but it is possible to create situations wherein it is impossible not to learn”)
- By building strong and positive authentic relationships which are non-hierarchical
- By enabling children to empower themselves
- Working with head, heart, and hands in the everyday, focussing on the here and now
- Cultural impact on what is possible in practice – depending on society’s image of children, policy-context, regulations, qualifications

‘The pedagogical approach rests on an image of a child as a complex social being with rich and extraordinary potential, rather than as an adult-in-waiting who needs to be given the right ingredients for optimal development. [...] For pedagogues there is no universal solution, each situation requires a response based on a combination of information, emotions, self-knowledge and theory.’

Children’s Workforce Development Council

Pedagogic practice is a holistic process that creates a balance between:
- the professional (theory and concepts, reflective practitioner – the ‘head’)
- the personal (using one’s personality, positive attitude, building personal relationships, but keeping the ‘private’ out – the ‘heart’)
- the practical (using certain methods and creative activities – the ‘hands’)

All three elements are equally important and complement each other ⇒ synergy
What is social pedagogy?

Social pedagogy is an academic discipline that draws on core theories from various related disciplines, such as education, sociology, psychology and philosophy. Social pedagogic practice is concerned with human beings’ learning, well-being and inclusion into society. The term pedagogy is derived from the Greek pais (child) and agein (to lead, to bring up).

As a concept, social pedagogy is founded on humanistic values and an image of children as active agents and competent, resourceful human beings. Cameron (2005) translates pedagogy as ‘education in its widest sense’, a holistic approach towards children’s experiential learning with head, heart, and hands. Particularly in the context of residential child care the terms social pedagogy and pedagogy are often used synonymously. Kornbeck (2007) illustrates the close relationship of the two terms by describing social pedagogy as the provision of social welfare based on pedagogic principles.

How social pedagogy has emerged:

It is worth noting that social pedagogy has emerged in order to address culturally specific social problems through educational means (see Hämäläinen, 2003), and as every culture encounters their own unique problems, solutions to social problems are highly context-dependent. As a result, there is no agreed definition for social pedagogy - its meaning is specific to the context, the culture and the time. In this sense we can speak of social pedagogy as socially constructed.

Accordingly, social pedagogy is a ‘function of society’ (Mollenhauer, 1964). This means that it describes how a given society thinks about children's upbringing, about the relationship between the individual and society, and how it supports disadvantaged or marginalised members of society. Throughout history, different cultures have therefore constructed varying meanings of social pedagogy.

Social Pedagogic Practice:

Social pedagogues work with all age groups, starting from the early years up to the aged. They work in nurseries and kindergartens, schools, children's and youth services, play settings, children's homes and youth clubs; they work in adult services engaging with communities and disadvantaged adults, such as ethnic minorities, substance misusers, homeless, unemployed or imprisoned persons; and they are employed in palliative care, supporting older people at home or in care.

It is only logical that the practical methods in all these settings will differ, depending on the target group. Therefore within the general discipline pedagogy we can distinguish various approaches. Some of these are named after key thinkers like Fröbel or Montessori who have created a very specific pedagogic concept for the context of their work, while others are termed according to the medium they are utilising, such as play, circus, music, or theatre pedagogy.

Despite these differences in approach, what combines all pedagogies is the way of thinking, the philosophy, the attitude with which these different methods are used - and this is what makes practice social pedagogic: as Hämäläinen (2003) points out, ‘social pedagogy is not a method, nor even a set of methods. As a discipline it has its own theoretical orientation to the world. An action is not social pedagogical because certain methods are used therein, but because some methods are chosen and used as a consequence of social pedagogical thought.’ So social pedagogy is not what you do, it is rather how you approach practice, with what attitude and aims. This also means that social pedagogy is not something you do or don’t do - the question to ask is to what degree you are working social pedagogically.
The Aims of Social Pedagogy - the Diamond Model

The Diamond Model symbolizes one of the most fundamental underpinning principles of social pedagogy – that there is a diamond within all of us. As human beings we are all precious and have a rich variety of knowledge, skills and abilities. Not all diamonds are polished and sparkly, but all have the potential to be. Similarly, every person has the potential to shine out – and social pedagogy is about supporting them in this. Therefore, 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 pedagogic practice is to provide well-being and happiness, not on a short-term needs-focused basis, but sustainably, through a rights-based approach. While the terms ‘well-being’ and ‘happiness’ are sometimes seen as one and the same, in our understanding they are notionally different: happiness describes a present state whereas well-being describes as a long-lasting sense of physical, mental, emotional and social well-being. In combination we can get a holistic view of a person’s well-being and happiness. Importantly, well-being and happiness are very individual and subjective: what makes us happy is very different from person to person. As a result social pedagogic practice is very context-specific and highly responsive to the individual rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

Holistic learning:
‘Learning is the pleasant anticipation of one’s self’, according to the German philosopher Sloterdijk. In this sense, holistic learning mirrors the aim of well-being and happiness – it must be seen as contributing to, or enhancing, our well-being. Learning is more than what happens at school, it is a holistic process of realizing our own potential for learning and growth, which can take place in every situation that offers a learning opportunity. Holistic learning is a life-long process involving ‘head, heart, and hands’ (Pestalozzi). Social pedagogy is about creating learning opportunities, so that people get a sense of their own potential and how they have developed. As we are all unique, so is our potential for learning and our way of learning and development.

Relationship:
Central to achieving these two aims is the pedagogic relationship. Through the supportive relationship with the social pedagogue a person can experience that someone cares for and about them, that they can trust somebody. This is about giving them the social skills to be able to build strong positive relationships with others. Therefore the pedagogic relationship must be a personal relationship between human beings – social pedagogues make use of their personality and have to be authentic in the relationship, which is not the same as sharing private matters. So the pedagogic
relationship is professional and personal at the same time, thus requiring from the social pedagogue to be constantly reflective.

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

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

**Conclusions:**
Social pedagogy offers a conceptual framework that can help guide professional practice. As an academic discipline, social pedagogy uses related research, theories and concepts from other sciences such as sociology, psychology, education or philosophy to ensure the holistic perspective. This means that in realizing those core aims there is a lot of inspiration to be taken from what research and concepts tell us about related areas. Similarly, other professionals might inspire us with their ideas around developing particular areas of the Diamond model further.

All four aims point at the fact that social pedagogy is about processes. Well-being and happiness, holistic learning, relationship, empowerment – none of these is a product that, once achieved, can be forgotten. This is why it is important to perceive them as fundamental human rights that we all constantly need to work on if we want to ensure that nobody’s rights are violated or neglected. There is always something more that can be done to enhance the quality in each of the areas of the Diamond as it lies within human nature to constantly develop.

**Further resources:**
On ThemPra’s website you will find many more resources on social pedagogy, including a collection of essay excerpts from Essex practitioners we have been working with on developing social pedagogy within their children’s homes. Their insights offer a compelling perspective on how social pedagogy has impacted on their way of thinking, feeling and acting.