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The Difficult Connection between Theory and Practice in Social Pedagogy

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My main interest in the field of social pedagogy is investigating the link between theory and practice. I will address this topic in the present article, which is a revised version of my presentation at the Social Pedagogy Development Network conference in Sligo, Ireland in May of 2012. That presentation as well as this article draws from my book Sosialpedagogisk praksis (trans. Social Pedagogy Practice), currently being translated into English scheduled for publication March 2013 in the UK by Policy Press (Storø, 2013).

Key words: *social pedagogy; theory; practice; reflection; values*

A Conversation between Colleagues?

The book starts with a conversation between two people sitting next to each other in a crowded lunchtime café. Trond notices that Mette is reading a book called "Social Pedagogic Perspectives". He thinks: "I'd like to meet her, and this is a way to start a conversation".

"Hi, what are you reading?"

Mette looks up. The man next to her leans towards her, alluding casually to the book she is absorbed in.

"What, this? Well, it's about social pedagogy. You probably think it's a bit of a weird subject. On a hot summer's day, I mean."

Mette smiles at him and returns to the book, thinking "I can't be bothered to chat, I really want to look through this new book. I've finally managed to get out of the office to get some peace, and now someone is trying to disturb me here as well."

"Actually, you're wrong."

Trond doesn't give up easily. Mette looks up and sighs.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're wrong. I don't think it's weird at all. You see, I caught a glimpse of the title of the book, that's why I said hello. We are practically colleagues."

Trond smiles cheekily and lifts his coffee glass in a "toast" to Mette.

"I see. What makes you think that?"

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Trond leans over towards the neighbouring table.

"Actually, I'm a social pedagogue. Quite simply. And if that's what you are too, then we are sort of colleagues. So we could have a coffee together, as colleagues do."

Mette understands that this is not the right place to look at her book, and she puts it away. She decides to drink the rest of her coffee with the enthusiastic "colleague", and to try to find somewhere else to look at the book later. No point in getting upset about being interrupted on a day like this.

"OK, so tell me: if we are colleagues, where do you work?"

"I work with young people in outreach teams, here in the town. I've been doing it for many years. Some of the worst young drug addicts are my clients. I particularly work with this group because several of the people I work with would rather not have too much to do with those who are that far gone. But personally I like them. Do you have experience from outreach?"

Mette shifts in her chair.

"I'm not so sure that we are colleagues after all. You are right that I am a social pedagogue. But I don't work with young people. Nor with children."

"Really? Tell me more."

"Right, well, I understand that you use the same professional title as me, but we are actually working on completely different things. I'm a writer. Right now I am sitting here leafing through my new book. Published today. Hot off the press. So you see, my type of social pedagogy isn't the same as yours."

"OK … so you're a writer?! A woman with her head screwed on the right way, obviously. Impressive. May I have a look?"

Trond leans over towards the book, and takes it when he sees that Mette is not resisting.

"Social Pedagogic Perspectives. By Mette Grevstad. Great photo on the back!"

Trond holds the book up to Mette, and smiles while looking from her to the photo and back again.

"Really impressive. I'm Trond Frantsen."

"Hello, Trond Frantsen."

Mette smiles and extends a hand.

"Tell me what you write about."

Mette decides to give her conversation partner something to chew on.

"OK, the book is an attempt to understand the social pedagogic perspective in a contemporary context. I am particularly focusing on various marginalisation processes in post-modern society connected to the development of new media, with emphasis on the tools that are available to schools in order to promote integration and inclusion processes."

"Wow. That's quite something."

Trond leans back with a hesitant smile.

"Listen, maybe we are not colleagues after all?"

This story suggests that practitioners within social pedagogy and researchers and writers within the same field sometimes feel they are not working with similar topics. They may even feel that they are distant from each other – and not on friendly terms – because they speak about very different topics: Social pedagogy as work with people, and social pedagogy as a theoretical

perspective. On one hand, there is an orientation towards clients with problems, on the other hand an orientation towards social pedagogy as an academic discipline.

There are several reasons why it is hard to state in a clear and simple way how social pedagogy is understood. Firstly, often the concepts referred to by practitioners to describe what is important to them, tend to differ from the concepts used by theorists. I will come back to this shortly.Secondly many practitioners in the field of social pedagogy do not seem to take much interest in theory (Mathiesen, 2008).

Theory can be understood as abstractions and simplifications of reality (Thomassen, 2006), and as such many practitioners feel that theory is distant from the kind of reality they engage in in their everyday practices. They often say that the meetings with clients, there and then, as well as their relationships and the actual lives that individual clients live, are far more interesting than theories on a macro-level about these things. Some practitioners feel that theory brings distance to practice, and many share an almost hostile attitude towards theory. It should also be acknowledged that some theorists are only loosely connected to practice. One critique of the academic field concerning theory, is given by Parton and O'Byrne (2000) who some years ago wrote: "There has also been, however, a failure to develop theoretical approaches which are useful to practitioners and which therefore try to inform practice directly" (p. 2). It could perhaps be said that some scholars are more or less occupied with developing theory for its own sake, not theory understood as a tool for practice. One reason for this could be the growing academization within social sciences, which should both be seen as a positive development, but which also leaves us with new demands. A growing body of academic oriented literature, will of course affect the field's self-understanding. If this is true, we need to put effort into finding better ways to describe practice in such a way that it is both theoretically sound, and valid as a guidance for how to intervene from a practitioner's perspective. As Collingwood et al. (2008) suggest, it is important to "aid the integration of theory to practice" (p. 71), and therefore they argue for "a tool which operates at a far more vital level, providing the practitioner with the means to truly access, understand and integrate these two core strands of theory for practice; theory to understand and theory to intervene" (p. 73).

One can imagine that the theoretically oriented social pedagogue with a focus on society on a macro-level would use terms such as *marginalization, inclusion, living conditions, groups, society* and *research* in her everyday language. By contrast, the social pedagogue who works with people in some sort of crisis would rather use words like *relationship, individual, personal development, engagement, activities, support* and *upbringing*. This creates an often challenging and interesting situation providing possibilities to focus on the individual, on groups within a society, and on society itself (Madsen, 2006). The basic connection between individuals and society allows for social pedagogy to change dynamically in line with changes in society (Hämäläinen, 2003a).

A much-acclaimed view on social pedagogy in Norway is proposed by Mathiesen (2008) (and supported by Gjertsen, 2010), who argues that social pedagogy is constituted by its theoretical base. He also writes that "it is not sufficient to define social pedagogy through a reference to a practice field" (Mathiesen, 2008, p. 160) (author's translation). This is parallel to my own effort to describe social pedagogy practice as closely connected to theory (Storø, 2013). Mathiesen writes that social pedagogy originally was developed as a contradictory perspective to individually oriented pedagogy/education. He also shows that the discussion of both an individual and a social perspective is a central topic within the social pedagogic discourse. The social aspect can be seen as social pedagogy's perspective on societal issues, and the connection between human beings and society. Madsen (2006) describes the subject field of social pedagogy as "individuals and groups who find themselves in conflicts zones in society, in the tension field between integration and marginalisation or actual expulsion" (p. 58, translation from Storø, 2013). Mathiesen (2008) also claims that social pedagogy is scientifically based in the human sciences, and thus is "in opposition to empirism and a positivistic ideal for science" (p. 12, author's translation). He mentions that when social pedagogy was established as a topic at The University of Oslo in the 1970's, this was embedded in a critique of pedagogy's/education's relationship to this ideal.

In the Nordic countries, where social pedagogy has a relatively strong position compared to the UK and Ireland, one can frequently find discussions of what many people feel to be the most central question posed in this connection: the question of wh*at social pedagogy actually is* (Eriksson and Markström, 2000; NFFS, 2001; Madsen, 2006; Mathiesen, 2008; Gjertsen, 2010; Storø 2013). And through the years we have come time and again to the realization that this question is very hard to answer. It may be, as outlined at the beginning, that the very different interests of Trond and Mette represent a problem that makes this field impossible to understand. However, before addressing that question, I would argue that it is also possible to take the view that this uncertainty creates the *potential* for this to be an exciting area of study.

Social pedagogy has many similarities to social work (Hämäläinen, 2003b). A main difference lies in social pedagogy's focus on learning, formation and upbringing and therefore on children and young people. Social pedagogy also builds more on a central European tradition, with writers such as Paul Natorp at the forefront, whereas social work is more a heritage from a North American tradition pioneered by Jane Addams and Mary Richmond.

What question should we pose?

Maybe the question "What is social pedagogy?" is hard to answer because it is the wrong question? It is sometimes better to address the question than possible answers when stuck in one's reflections. The question of what something *is* suggests that it is possible to find an essence, a core of the matter. Such an approach could be criticised for seeking a fundamental truth about a phenomenon that can hardly be described as something final. This question also suggests possible boundaries between different fields. Such boundaries can be important for our understanding, but they do not contribute much to what is located within the boundaries.

In Norway, Gjertsen (2010) has recently maintained that our understanding of social pedagogy is extremely unclear and this view supports earlier, similar claims by Hämäläinen (2003a) and Lorenz (2008). Lorenz (2008) also suggests that "social pedagogy, (…) is an important but widely misunderstood member of the social professions" (p. 625). In 2000, Eriksson and Markström published a book about the field they titled "The hard-to-catch social pedagogy" (author's translation). A few years later, Eriksson (2005) claimed in another book that social pedagogy could be thought of as being in a formative phase characterized by the need to legitimise, to define and to demonstrate its praxis. This phase, too, requires the defining of boundaries. Eriksson also argued that the academization of social pedagogy witnessed today in higher education involves increased reflection upon its practices and therefore contributes to a phase of increased uncertainty.

These developments suggest that perhaps trying to define what social pedagogy *is* is not the most productive approach. Maybe the only thing achieved in trying to answer this is to mystify something that people need to get a clearer picture of. Maybe it is more helpful to pose an altogether different set of questions, for example: What could social pedagogy *be*, and perhaps even better: What can social pedagogy *do*? This last question is very much directed towards practice. It implies that the pro-active, action orientation always characterizing practice is what this field is about. This question could, and should, also be discussed.

In investigating the question of what social pedagogy can do, my suggestions would be:

- Create a focus on work with children and young people (at least it is used in this way within a Norwegian context, although there are clear differences to how this is understood in other countries, for example in Denmark (Madsen, 2006)).
- Combine different theoretical starting points from sociology, psychology, education, social work and other disciplines.

- Provide alternative and additional goals for working with children and young people drawn from other disciplines like sociology and developmental psychology with their shared emphasis on inclusion and integration in societies.
- Create new conceptual tools for reflecting on the links between theory and practice.

It is, however, necessary to warn against a certain possible understanding of making social pedagogy's "doing" the most central question. As stated earlier in this article, it is not my view that social pedagogy practice is *only* about doing. The action must also be connected to theory. And in a few moments I will even broaden this picture.

In returning to further reflections on what happened in the conversation between Trond and Mette, it can be of interest to find out why two people calling themselves social pedagogues might experience problems having a conversation on professional topics.

A crisis?

A fair question to begin with is one asking: Can we talk about a crisis in the relationship between theory and practice in this field? When practitioners do not feel that their work is described in theory, and that they cannot gain much help from theory, this might be an issue. It suggests that practice is not sufficiently present in the profession's theoretical foundation (Storø, 2013).

I take an interest in the two different worlds of practice and theory as I have lived in both. I worked with young people for 30 years and then moved into the world of academia, where for the last 7 years I have taught, undertaken research and written books and articles. This, I feel, has given me a vantage point that can be used in my writing on social pedagogy. And this in turn has led me to tackle the kinds of problems encountered in the exchange between Trond and Mette. When I started writing the book mentioned earlier, a friend of mine who had been working with young people for many years but without formal education said: "Fine, write that book, but write it without parentheses. I am so tired of parentheses". I thought that this was a good idea, because I wanted people like him to study more and to broaden their practically oriented perspectives. So I tried to do as he asked, but my publisher rejected the manuscript. She told me to write another book. And half a year and many late nights later, I had done so. By then, I realized the strength in the assumption that there is no way around theory, even if we "just want to do" practice. So, instead of running away from the difficult dilemmas made visible in the practice-versus-theory dimension, I tried to address them, and I even turned these into some of my favourite dilemmas.

What then should we expect *theory in social pedagogy* to help us with? What exactly should we expect it to do? One thing is that it should explain the occurrences and phenomena observed in practice situations. This is vital, because a practitioner needs to understand what she[1] is doing and why. A professional understanding of the issues that one works on is essential. It is this understanding that differentiates the professional from everyone else. But it is not enough to understand; practitioners also need to act while being aware that interventions in the lives of other people are crucial ones. Their professional understanding must be used for some purpose. To act professionally implies that the practitioner understands – and turns this understanding into some form of action. Therefore it is vital that the theory provides guidance for that action.

Subsequently, theory is needed both to explain what we observe as well as to guide our actions. Every practitioner needs both an *explanation theory* and an *action theory* (Storø, 2013). This is

[1] For reasons of readability social pedagogues and practitioners are referred to in the female form throughout this paper.

parallel to Collingwood et al.'s (2008) suggestion – mentioned earlier – that there is a need for both a theory to understand and inform, and a theory to intervene. With this in mind, it is worth exploring whether social pedagogy theory, as well as social work theory, achieves these two tasks adequately. Does theory within these two neighbouring fields offer good enough explanations and good enough guidance for action? I have already hinted that this may not always be the case.

However, there is another angle to this as well. Perhaps the problem is that we understand the theory-practice duality in a way that is not helpful. A reasonable assumption is that the education of professionals within these fields may be missing out on what theory and practice can do *together*. One could ask: Is there a shared crisis in the education of social pedagogues and social workers leading to limitations in how we understand the duality between theory and practice? We often think of theory and practice as two very different phenomena. But perhaps this is a false dichotomy. This supposed difference needs to be investigated, because it may be leading to pessimism hindering or preventing good practice. One intriguing thought is that theory and practice may be much more closely linked than often assumed. Maybe theory and practice are the same? VanderVen (2009) suggests that they could be seen as "inseparable aspects of the same entity" (p. 209). Drawing on the "mental model" concept from attachment theory, she points out that when we focus on the practitioner's mental model, it is obvious that the two come together. As she puts it: "What the person is currently thinking is directly linked to what he or she chooses to do" (Vanderven 2009, p. 190).

This perspective offers an interesting and challenging obligation to learn more about how to move between our thinking and our actions. It is important to note in this connection that the term theory is used here in a specific way. It is not only used to describe what is written down in books and what the object of research is. Theory is also understood as the thoughts each and every one of us use when we seek explanations and when we act. We could talk about everyday theory and thus include a lot more than is commonly conceptualized as theory. It should, however, be noted that everyday theory mostly is connected to more or less isolated situations, and rarely has been formulated on a higher level of abstraction. An example from everyday practice can be found in something as simple as brushing one's teeth.

I choose to use the end of the toothbrush which is soft, not the other side. Why is this? Well, someone taught me, you might say, and that is of course right. I remember my mother and also my father standing behind me in front of the mirror when I was a child. And I even remember learning to brush the right way in school. Up and down. This is the theory of brushing teeth. But there is more to the practice of brushing teeth than just theory. Some of what I know about brushing my teeth lies in my body. My hand "knows" just how to move, how hard it should hold the toothbrush, how to reach the teeth at the back of my mouth, and so on. We can speak about tacit knowledge. But even if we only have tacit knowledge about a certain practice, we can, at least to some extent, also talk about it. I could claim in fact that I know so much about brushing my teeth that I could hold a lecture about it. I should add that I am a very experienced toothbrush-user, as I have been practicing for many years. Maybe I would not be able to deliver a lecture that dentists would say was good. But I *could* give a lecture where I show *my* theory of brushing teeth. Some of it may be applauded by dentists, but then again I probably also have some theory that is of very low quality. But it is still my theory. And it will be until someone convinces me that it is a bad theory. And as long as I use it, it will directly influence my actions, it will in fact be part of my actions, inseparable from my actions.

This reflection on brushing teeth may seem of little significance to social pedagogy. However I think it may be of value as it helps us, in all its simplicity, to reflect on the possible links between theory and practice in a way that can also be useful when working within the social pedagogy field. It should be obvious that we by such reflection are concerned with the most central epistomological question, namely; what is knowledge? Today many authors, for example Thomassen (2006), argue for a new understanding of this question within health and social professions. In these professions, practical knowledge needs to be validated *as knowledge*, and therefore as an area where we should

develop our understanding. As Thomassen shows, this view links directly back to the writing of Aristotle. In his "The Nicomachean Ethics", he writes about three types of knowledge; techne (rational, technical knowledge), episteme (theoretical knowledge) and phronesis (practical knowledge). The practitioner uses all of them, but of special interest here is the last one. Phronesis is a type of knowledge which involves reflection and ethical considerations.

I hope by this to have shown that there is a direct link between an apparently simple practical task such as tooth brushing, and the core of epistemology. A consequence of this is of course that the far more complex practice of social pedagogy and social work challenges certain definitions of knowledge, namely those within an empiristic and positivistic tradition.

Systematic reflection

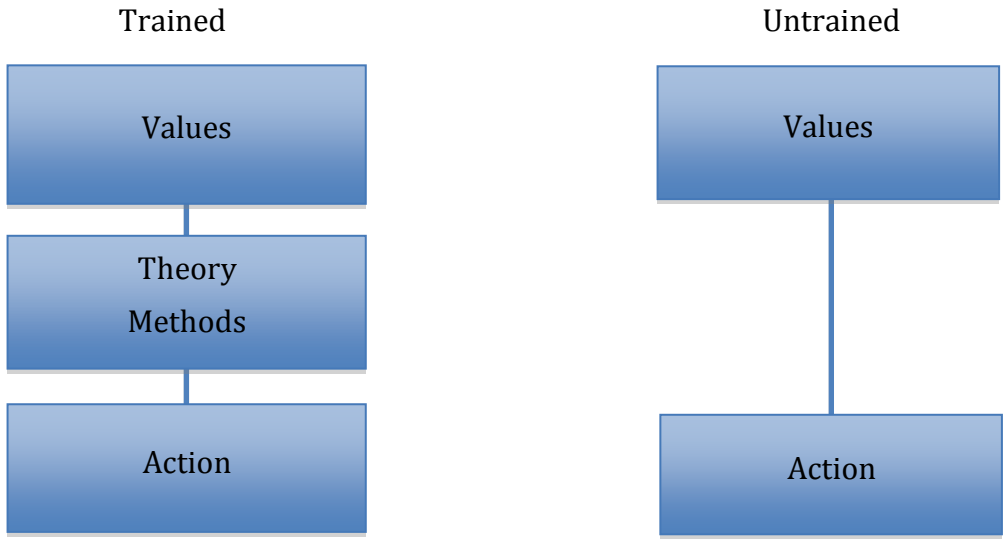
When acting within social pedagogy, or brushing teeth for that matter, we always have the possibility to reflect on what we are doing. But while there is little value in spending much time reflecting on tooth-brushing, it is clear that there is great value in reflecting on practice in social pedagogy as well as in many other professional practices.

Professional reflection is something more than "just thinking about it", as reflection is not just a stream of thoughts. It is thinking through different aspects of the matter of the situation we are in, discussing (in spoken words or in the mind) alternative ways to handle it, and choosing the best intervention. Systematic reflection implies taking into consideration all aspects that can be useful to make a good decision. It also implies seeking a broad range of information as well as discussing with colleagues, if possible, to get different views. We must keep in mind that most decisions in this field are not simple to make and easy to reach. On the contrary, in a great many situations, the professional has to choose between several solutions that may all seem just as good – or perhaps just as bad. To make the best possible choice, the professional has to go through a demanding reflection process. This should include reflection on oneself, one's own practice, and especially the ethical side of it. In relationships with the child or young person, the reflective professional must, as Andersen and Malmborg (2001) puts it, "dare to become significant for the young person" (p. 23). This calls for a high level of self-reflection.

The reflection has to turn to theory (both social pedagogy theory and theory from other fields, such as psychology and sociology) and the values that can be made relevant in the field (ethical values such as a resource focus – and inclusion and equality transcending ethnic and cultural differences) (Storø, 2013). The most important value for the social pedagogue's practice is that all she does should be in the best interest of the client. But for an untrained worker the relationship between values and action is more direct than it is for a trained professional. The trained professional will always have the possibility, and the obligation, to consult theory to find the best possible action in every situation.

Figure 1 illustrates the difference between a conscious and unconscious way of thinking. I have made a direct connection between conscious and trained, and unconscious an untrained, which in some cases is unprecise and maybe even unfair. I have made this choice because I believe it illustrates a central topic in the article.

Figure 1. The relationship between values and action (Storø, 2013).



It can be argued that the right side of the above figure shows how we often connect our ideas for actions to actual actions in our everyday lives. If, for example, I lost my wallet at university while giving a lecture and one of my students found it, the student would probably act in accordance with this. Hopefully her ethical values would provide a direct understanding of what to do – to give it back. But of course if her values were that what you find belongs to you, she would (with the same kind of certainty) pocket the wallet. We often act this way in our own lives. Whether or not we drink alcohol, drive faster than the speed limit or treat other people nicely all depends to a large degree on our set of values.

In a similar way, a social worker or social pedagogue who is well trained for the work will need to learn to develop a value based rationale for her actions. If the values are good ones, this may lead to good action, but there is certainly a danger that the opposite will be the case, if the values are of a different quality. And there is of course an uncertain link from a set of values to actions. We cannot predict a certain action just by pointing to the person's values.

Whilst values provide an important foundation for our everyday actions, in professional practices they are insufficient. Something more is needed. Professionals have to consult different theories, from books or from their own experiences. And they have to consider what actions, what methods, are the best to use in that specific situation. This is what makes the difference between professional action and the everyday actions we all do throughout our own lives. But the process on the left side of the figure is sometimes very hard to catch, is almost invisible – if we don't seek to make it visible. At the same time, it is obvious that it can provide better grounds for action. We *can* choose to make the detour from the straight line between values and action (the right side of the figure) – and consult theories of different kinds, for example by talking about it, reflecting with colleagues. And this is what constitutes this field as a professional field – namely that we base our actions on more sources than just our values alone. We build on the experiential knowledge we and other professionals have acquired. Also, we consciously and systematically engage in a reflective process where we evaluate before, while and after acting.

Why is this form of reflection important in working with children and young people? How does it explain anything about social pedagogy? I would like to advocate for a deeper understanding of the link between theory and practice, and for how we use theory in social pedagogy. In my view, theory can be used to talk about something that is written in books *as well as* something involving our thoughts and presumptions following us into every action we undertake. Theory could then be understood both as simplifications and abstractions (Thomassen, 2006) with the aim to generalize on practice, and as the more immediate assumptions one does in isolated situations with the aim to act there and then. If we accept that the term theory can be used in both these meanings, it

potentially opens up new possibilities for us. First, we will be given a link between theory and practice that allows us to investigate the type of relationship the two are engaged in. Secondly, and maybe of even more interest, it provides the practitioner with tools to give reasons for and explain her actions. This can lead to a growing interest among practitioners to contribute to such reflections.

Social pedagogy practice

These ideas are of special interest within social pedagogy, as I will seek to show in this section. As stated elsewhere:

"*Practicing social pedagogy can be understood as a collective term for pedagogically-oriented practices based on a professional assessment and carried out in ordinary, everyday situations. These are directed towards children and young people who need help, or to situations where the need for help can be prevented, and towards their families, networks and immediate environment. The main aim of the work is inclusion in a community. Interventions are guided by values and theory."* (Storø, 2013).

When it comes to understanding social pedagogy practice, it is vital that *practice is oriented towards pedagogy*, towards work with *change as a goal* and with a *pedagogic angle* to it. The word pedagogy is used here to point to *upbringing*, *social learning*, *formation* and *socialisation*. It is not referring to the pedagogy of the teacher in the classroom as the aim of this (social) pedagogic approach is not to teach pupils history, geography or mathematics. It is about influencing the lives of children and young people. As the Norwegian author Frønes has written (about social learning): "It is training in, participation in and understanding of social life. Not in any deep, therapeutic way, but in terms of skills for the participation in various social contexts, the ability to master different situations" (Frønes, 1979, p. 36, cited in Storø, 2013, p. 11). And whilst psychologically based practice would point at mental health as a central aim, social pedagogy is instead oriented towards *inclusion in a community*. Mental health is of course also important, and it can be seen as an intermediate aim.

This approach suggests that children and young people should be understood *holistically*. It provides the possibility to engage in physical and mental health, in relationships, in living conditions, in the child's school situation, in what goes on within the family and also in the neighbourhood – and the society in which the child or young person lives. The everyday situation for the child or the young person is our objective, now and in the future. As stated above, this understanding of social pedagogic practice requires two types of theory. They are both useful and valid here, because they help explore a type of professional practice that goes on in everyday situations. Ideally, practitioners in this line of work should be able to connect to the rationale of written-down theory, and to the rationale of the working theory within their own head. At the same time they should also connect to the children and young people with whom they are working.

When working with children and young people, social pedagogues do many things ordinarily done by adults who spend time with children and young people (for example, their parents): these persons eat with them, help them with their homework, tell them to go to bed, tell them off when they have done something wrong, comfort them when they are sad, teach them skills, and play with them, to name just a few things. As the professional is doing these and many other *ordinary activities*, one could make the wrong assumption that she is just doing the same as every other adult. But that would miss the fact that the social pedagogue is also doing *specific activities*, based on knowledge that is different from that of most parents. These activities are observing, assessing, choosing between different interventions, intervening, and evaluating interventions (Grønvold and Storø, 2010). And this whole range of systematic approaches constitutes social pedagogy as a

professional activity. Thus what might be thought of as the soul of social pedagogy practice is contained along the dimension between the ordinary and the specific as illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2: Ordinary and specific activities of social pedagogues (Storø, 2013).

The ordinary side of it concerns the everyday life of children and young people, and the collaboration between them and the professionals in these contexts. The specific side concerns the theoretical and systematic character of how the professionals reflect and act. These two sides have different functions. The ordinary and everyday side of social pedagogic work helps the professional to get in touch with the client, to find situations where the problems occur and can be observed, but also where resources and possible strategies can be found and developed. The specific side is about expertise, not on how to live a life, but expertise on how to work with processes of change, how to find resources together with the client to think of oneself in different and ground-breaking ways – and how to seek help and support from other people. The specific side rests on professional reflection that goes beyond the type of reflection we all do in our own lives, every day. On the continuum (or maybe even better: in the area) between the extreme points, we find a whole range of areas of utilisation of different forms of theory, stretching from everyday theory to more specific and abstract theory.

Reflection-in-action

Some of these ideas about reflecting on practice are based on Donald Schön's writings (1983). In describing how dependent practitioners are on their reflections as they practice, he created the concepts knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action. In Schön's view, the practitioner acquires practical competence and knowledge through practising and through reflecting on her own practice. This reflexive process is going on all the time as we practice and includes both conscious and unconscious levels. However, it may be that the unconscious level, rather than being understood as something that we do not know anything about, is instead connected to tacit knowledge.

It could also be argued that the practitioner is theorizing. As suggested by the above example, most of us can theorise about brushing teeth. But often this is not interesting. As long as our teeth are relatively clean, most of us would say that we don't need such theories. My ideal for social pedagogy practice, on the other hand, is to be more conscious about what we do when we practice. Is it perhaps the term theory which sometimes prevents us from theorizing? Perhaps we have a kind of inflated respect for this word? One way of dealing with this could be to speak about perspectives (Storø, 2013). This term is easier to handle. When we act, we always take a perspective, which is different from *having a perspective*. The latter would be a passive way to use the words, not taking the opportunity to seek the possibilities in the language. *To take a perspective* means that we actively, but maybe not always very consciously, choose how we want to think and act.

I would even suggest that we turn the word into a verb, to perspectivate. If we can speak about theorizing, it should be possible to speak about perspectivating. This term could then be used to describe an action, namely, to actively take a certain perspective in a certain context. Using these concepts in this way points to a certain function that perspectives can have. They are more flexible than we often think about theories. Choosing a perspective then could be connected to the individual person we are working with as well as the context of this work. To perspectivate thus

means to make clearer the grounds upon which our assumptions and actions in work with this person are based – especially in the particular situation within which these actions take place.

There is an obvious danger in this approach, namely that professionals may describe any thought or reflection they may come up with as a perspective. In Norway, we have for many years talked a lot about an eclectic way to handle theory, meaning that you can work with multiple theoretical starting points at the same time. This could be called 'theory-hopping'. The positive ideal of an eclectic approach is unfortunately often misused. Some professionals feel that this is a good way to escape from being clear about what theory they may be using. It seems that being eclectic is in fact the most demanding way of working, because if using multiple theoretical perspectives at the same time, practitioners should be able to explain at any time their current perspective. However, many professionals cannot do this.

My ideal is to go in and out of perspectives and to explain which one is taken in different situations, with different clients. This could be described as understanding theories as tools. When a craftsman has a toolbox, he is very aware of what tool should be used for what task. It is, for example, much better to use a hammer when working with nails, than it is to use a saw. And it is also better to use a theory that says something about emotions, if that is what the professional is dealing with, instead of drawing on a theory that describes learning processes. Or the other way around. But it is also important to note that by combining perspectives, one may come up with good approaches.

Repetition versus reflection

Whilst reflection about possible links between theory and practice seems useful it is, however, possible to absorb oneself in this type of reflection. The practising social pedagogue faces a demand to act, to intervene (Storø, 2013). Reflections should be made useful for practice. And they are not useful until they actively contribute to how practice is performed and further developed.

The alternation between carrying out actions, reflecting on them and viewing them against theory and ethics – in order to act in the light of such reflection – can be seen as a necessary cycle for developing practice. It is important that such reflection should have a developmental orientation.

Being interested in practice *could* also involve trying to do more of what one already masters, or what has been seen to work earlier in practice. Schön (1983) describes a certain side of practical competence by the concept *knowing-in-action*. This is a type of knowledge that all experienced practitioners can relate to. But this knowledge needs to be developed, and that process demands reflection. There is something positive in learning from practice, but if the learning is solely on a practical level it becomes problematic, since it can easily lead to doing the same things over and over again. In the short term, workplaces thinking in this way will probably be able to show *some* good work, but after a while the real spark will likely disappear. Repetition becomes mechanical and destroys creativity. It could be argued that the workplace is in danger of becoming characterised by a *culture of repetition.*

Not many social pedagogues would agree that it is useful *only* to do more of what was done yesterday. In my experience, most of them are keen to try to find and to construct new ways of working. Sometimes this can involve working in new ways with well-known problems; at other times it can involve learning new moves because they are presented with hitherto unfamiliar problems and challenges. So in reality, the demand for development obliges us to attempt to discover new ways of solving problems, not least because we are constantly meeting new people who need help. We cannot, however, learn the best ways of doing this until we assume real responsibility for the learning. As argued here, one way to do this is to reflect on our own practice.

In their book on learning from practice, my Oslo colleagues Herberg and Jóhannesdóttir (2007) emphasise the importance of reflection for including ethical questions, norms and values into the professional approach. When we reflect on practice, we often try to discover *what* in the practice makes it good. As a rule, we then quickly start moving into a theoretical as well as a value-based landscape. We might find some of this theoretical reflection in the area of everyday theory, while some can be found in neighbouring areas of academic theory. Workplaces where practitioners spend much time reflecting on their own practice may gradually create a *culture of reflection*. Clearly, the development of such a culture depends on having time and space set aside for reflection as well as having managers and mentors who recognize and emphasise the value and importance of this kind of work.

Therefore, creation of a culture of reflection ought to be prominent among the ideals and achievable goals for a workplace engaged in social pedagogic work. This kind of working climate would ideally enable actions and the thinking behind them to be regularly investigated and assessed in order to learn, and in turn bring increased understanding to how practice ought to be carried out.

However, according to Eriksson's (2005) study of social pedagogy (in the Nordic countries), the practicing social pedagogue does not seem to participate to any great extent in reflection on social pedagogic theory. This study found that social pedagogic reflection first and foremost happens among theoretically oriented social pedagogues and researchers. Here, then, is a major challenge for all social pedagogue practitioners: they will have to include reflection in the execution of practice and use it actively to develop practice.

Maybe Trond has something to learn from Mette in this respect. Maybe professional reflection is undervalued more among some practitioners than it is by theorists. But maybe by going into the ways practitioners think and reflect about their practice, it is possible to find more traces of what could be called professional reflection than we usually imagine. I have tried to argue that it is vital that we learn how professional reflection can come about, and that practitioners and theorists should speak to one another. By doing this they can actually contribute to building bridges between practice and theory.

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