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Conceptual Critique

Towards recognising practitioners working in out-of-home care as experts in everyday life: A conceptual critique

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Abstract

This conceptual critique elaborates on the phrase 'experts in everyday life', which the author first used in 2015 in connection with recognising the contribution of foster carers and residential care workers to the education of children in out-of-home care (OHC). The article examines the case for greater recognition of the children's workforce in OHC, and situates the concept of 'expertise' in the rise of recognition of children's status as competent social actors, as well as in professionalisation debates. The article examines two examples, drawing on the author's prior research in residential care and foster care, of expertise in everyday life in OHC. It concludes that, viewed from a social pedagogical perspective, expertise in everyday life refers to the complex milieu, or environment, in which the activity is taking place, as well as the relational encounters and activities themselves. It refers to the capacity for supporting young people in the mundaneness and predictability of everyday events and routines. Recognition of practitioners as experts in everyday life is not a substitute for changes to the structural conditions of employment but is a first step towards it.

Keywords: foster care; residential care; expertise; everyday life; practice

Introduction

The issue of appropriate recognition for working with children in out-of-home care (OHC) is often contested. On the one hand, welcoming a foster child into one's home is perceived as sullied by mere financial payment; it is a vocation and a measure of commitment and love. Indeed, most foster carers are rewarded by the caring work they undertake and by having a hand in turning children's lives around. On the other, foster carers are routinely undervalued, and low levels of financial payment are but one strand of a relationship with the state wherein foster carers' role and status is ambivalent. The question of professionalism and professional status often arises (House of Commons Education Committee, 2017; Narey and Owers, 2018). In residential care, where the workforce is contractually employed to care for young people, the discourse is less one of tension between love and commitment on the one hand and payment for work completed on the other, but low status prevails (White et al., 2015).

The purpose of this conceptual critique is to explore the idea that, regardless of the many differences in contractual status and organisational arrangements of residential and foster care work in England, they all share a key similarity: their practice is often largely invisible but could in fact be regarded as complex and multi-faceted, and practitioners recognised as experts – in the everyday life of the young people they work with and look after. This expertise is not just, as the English House of Commons Education Select Committee on Fostering urged, 'with regards to the life and care of their child' (2017, para. 71); I argue here that they are also experts in the wider environment in which children in OHC live, and that a first step to appropriate reward is recognition of expert status.

I start from the position that, despite 30 years of adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which embodies the principles of listening to and respecting the views of children, their competence is routinely undervalued. This is especially the case for children living in local authority care, who have usually experienced multiple disadvantages in their lives. Recognition of these participatory rights of children, wherever they live, is arguably a foundation for addressing the pedagogically empty concept of 'care' that structures most discourse, in the UK, on work with children in OHC (Cameron, 2002). Care work has long been associated with motherhood, or women's work, and accorded low societal value on the basis that it is carried out unpaid and in largely private domestic spaces (Williams, 2018). Care work, when done well, is characterised by attentiveness to others, taking responsibility for others, responsiveness to others and undertaking to see issues from differing perspectives (Tronto, 1993). It is inherently relational as well as practical work. It is, or can be, morally educative, and concerned with the upbringing, or maintenance, of competences (Held, 2006). In certain organisational conditions, care work can also be a series of tasks carried out in strict timeframes that mitigate against relational content, or against seeing the person cared for as a whole person, with potential and competences in their own right. In our study of care work in Europe, the highest quality of employment was associated with organisational conditions where 'care' was combined with educative goals, or social pedagogy, where the core worker role required degree-level qualifications and workforces were highly unionised (Cameron and Moss, 2006).

By investigating the 'everyday' expertise of foster carers and residential care workers, I aim to move beyond the limitations of defining it as 'care work', to bring relational, creative, practical, educative and advocacy competences to the fore, and to recognise practitioners as professional experts who should be valued and rewarded as such. In this article I draw on research I have conducted over 20 years, based at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, and I am indebted to the research environment there and to the social pedagogy community in the UK that has emerged over this period.

Rethinking the person in the environment (Lewin, 1946) has potentially broad consequences for children in care. In relation to improved educational participation and attainment, a policy goal toward which substantial progress has not yet been made, Cameron, Connolly and Jackson (2015) argued that foster carers and residential care workers had an important role. This was not just to facilitate attendance at school, but as part of redressing the 'care' focus of OHC practice itself. We argued that living in foster and residential care should be seen as residing in 'learning placements' where there was a conscious effort by foster carers and residential care workers to think of themselves as capable educators and their environment as offering opportunities to learn and exercise curiosity. Combining care and education in

everyday life contexts is at the heart of social pedagogy. Furthermore, we argued that this workforce should be seen as ‘experts in everyday life’ because they know a good deal about the young people they look after, the environment in which they operate and the capacities and limitations of all the key players.

In the sections that follow I examine the state and status of the OHC workforce, consider why we should be paying attention to the conceptualisation of the work now, review the theoretical roots of working in the ‘everyday’ and then focus on two examples, one from residential care and one from foster care, of social pedagogical orientations to expertise and everyday life. I conclude with a discussion about building capacity in OHC practice that addresses the idea of a practitioner self-concept as intentional and educative; someone who is an expert in their domain.

The state of the OHC workforce – Why do we need to recognise OHC workers as experts?

In 2018, 104,100 children were looked after by local authorities in England (DfE, 2018a). There were around 79,000 children in foster placements and around 18,410 in residential placements (the remainder were placed in kin or community settings). There are about 20,000 residential care workers, including those with managerial responsibility (Thornton, Hingley and Mortimer, 2015), and 44,450 fostering households (National Statistics, 2019). The most common reason for a child to be looked after is abuse and neglect (DfE, 2018a). Reparation for the psychological damage caused by a childhood history of abuse and/or neglect requires exceptional relational and responsive competences over a prolonged period of time (Brown and Ward, 2013). Many children in care have elevated mental health needs (Meltzer, Gatward, Corbin, Goodman and Ford, 2003). The advanced skills required to do this work on behalf of society are not reflected in the salaries paid to residential care workers or foster carers.

In 2015, the latest year for which data is available, non-managerial staff in residential care earned on average £15,841 p.a. (Thornton et al., 2015). In 2019, 41 per cent of foster carers responding to a survey said that allowances and fees paid to them were sufficient to cover the costs of the children they cared for, but only 60 per cent were paid a fee at all and typical monthly income was about the same as the national living wage (Lawson and Cann, 2019). Furthermore, only around 15 per cent of foster carers receive a retainer payment in the period between one child leaving and another arriving (Lawson and Cann, 2019). However, Narey and Owers (2018), in their review of fostering for the English Department of Education, stated that ‘too little prominence [is] given to the reality that fostering is reasonably remunerated’ (p. 44). Narey and Owers argue that it is ‘understandable’ that ‘many new carers, those looking after children in the 0–4 age bracket and without complex needs, as well as kinship or family and friends foster carers, will not receive a fee’ (Narey and Owers, 2018, p. 45) in addition to the fostering allowance. In 2019, the number of new foster carers rose slightly, after several years of decline (National Statistics, 2019), but there are still insufficient numbers of foster carers to offer a choice to children or social workers looking for a placement for a child (DfE, 2018b).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 55 per cent of residential care providers report that it is difficult to recruit staff with appropriate skills and training (Thornton et al., 2015). While nearly all residential care workers have a basic level of training (at Level 3, equivalent to A levels), this is acquired while in practice; it is not required for entry to the role. It takes about four hours a week over two years to obtain the qualification (Thornton et al., 2015). In comparison with other European countries, the workforce in residential care in England has lower qualifications on entry, and arguably lower societal status, and residential care practitioners in England report fewer positive aspects of the work and more dissatisfaction with working conditions than do social pedagogues working in equivalent settings in Denmark and Germany (Petrie, Boddy, Cameron, Wigfall and Simon, 2006).

Foster carers are recruited precisely because they offer a ‘normal’ family environment to young people in distress, for which parenting experience and aptitude is the most important criterion, but there is no defined learning and development framework for foster carers to support them to meet the needs of their target group (Lawson and Cann, 2019). Foster carers would like more specialised training in topics such as ‘therapeutic parenting, behaviour management, mental health, specialised first aid, and attachment’ (Lawson and Cann, 2019, p. 16). Around 20 per cent of foster carers feel they are not treated

as equal members of the team around the child. About a fifth of foster carers feel they do not have clear authority to make day-to-day decisions about the children in their care (Lawson and Cann, 2019).

But undervaluing children's social care work goes beyond undervaluing children in OHC. It applies to virtually all care work with children, young people, older people and people with disabilities (Cameron and Moss, 2006). Hands-on, practical and relational work in the day-to-day context of everyday life is undervalued in relation to technical or organisational expertise. Part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that it is associated with non-monetarised (unpaid) women's work, and specifically mothering (Cameron, 2006; Noddings, 2012). Women and mothers have enduring practical and emotional responsibility for household members and the caring tasks required for their maintenance and sustenance (McMunn, Bird, Webb and Sacker, 2019).

In order to address the deep-seated, and usually serious, needs of looked-after children, a dramatic shift is needed in the way the workforce is conceptualised. But the everyday milieu of residential care and foster care, its very resemblance to familial, domestic – and so unremarkable – day-to-day events and routines, mitigates against specialisation or technisation that might lead to re-valuation of 'care'. Moreover, in most nations and workforces, practice with children that is considered 'care' attracts lower status and rewards than that conceptualised as 'education', or, in the case of some countries, social pedagogy (Cameron and Moss, 2006).

Why now? Children as social actors

In the past three decades, more attention has come to be paid to social justice in child welfare work, particularly thinking about children as children and not as objects of concern (Butler-Sloss, 1988). Their lives, wishes and feelings are of importance and are now embedded in legislation, however imperfectly (e.g. Children Act 1989). Adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, which included the right to self-expression and for their views to be taken seriously, applied to all children, including those living in alternative (i.e. non-parental) care, which in itself is required to be continuous and respectful of children's culture, language and religion (United Nations, 1991, Articles 12, 13, 20). This period of articulation of the subjective life of the child in statute and international frameworks coincided with the rise of the new sociology of childhood; this movement reflected a period of intense scrutiny of children and childhood through which children were recognised as both shaping and shaped by their circumstances (James and Prout, 1997). In the debate on recognising children's competence, one key phrase to emerge was the positioning of children as 'experts in their own lives' (Langsted, 1994). In contrast to much previous discussion, children were now positioned as competent social actors, who have the capacity to communicate their own experience of social life. Positioning children as competent makes new demands on the children's workforce. Those who 'care for' children must also listen and take into account their views, for children's expertise is quite different from, but no less valuable than, that of the adults surrounding them. This pivoting of the term 'expert' away from professional and institutional knowledge inhabited by those who are adult, or hold qualifications, is a potential route to re-valuing the children's workforce, who as we have seen are likely to be low paid and to have low-level qualifications, so their identity as 'expert' is not assured. But, given that we saw above that care work is usually seen as taken-for-granted unpaid tasks, what are they expert in?

What is the theoretical framing for giving value to the 'everyday'?

Everyday life is the habitual, taken-for-granted and unremarkable actions of day-to-day existence (Scott, 2009). The everyday is 'obvious to the point of elusiveness' (Scott, 2009, p. 2), but its very habitual character also means it is not obvious to the inhabitant. Routines are unremarkable by their nature, but by examining and making visible these micro-processes we can both draw attention to the unsung or invisible work or social practices and relate them to macro social-order phenomena (Brannen and Phoenix, 2014). Housework is a good example of an everyday activity that was once so embedded in the fabric of women's lives that it was considered unremarkable and not 'work' at all. Sociological investigations since the 1970s have drawn attention to the unequal and gendered division of labour in the private space of the home, and particularly in the light of women's growing participation in the paid labour force (Oakley,

1974; Sullivan, 2019). The mundaneness of the everyday is not necessarily domestic: it can be observed in bus queues, workspaces, urban spaces or even ‘non places’ (Moran, 2005).

Everyday life in families and in pedagogic services such as residential care and early childhood education and care has particular resonance in the Nordic countries. Törrönnen (2014, p. 10) has referred to everyday life in Finland as

a process of actions being created moment by moment . . . connected with matters that proceed in time and through situations, such as cooking, preparing for the next day, developing a comfortable environment, and creating opportunities to feel cozy . . . the opposite of celebration . . . [but] ordinary and familiar.

She continued: ‘Home as a place is understood as something close and emotionally based ... a place that provides both a focal point for values and a source of support’ (Törrönnen, 2014, p. 10). Other usages of the term ‘everyday life’ in Nordic family contexts refer to daily activities, relationships to significant others, work life, home life and recreating home life in hospital settings (Dyckjaer and Dreyer, 2019), as well as to common events in young people’s lives (such as romantic break-ups and moving home) (Boddy, Bakketeig and Østergaard, 2020). Children’s influence on family life is regarded as an important part of Danish culture and as such is part of everyday life (Ringsmose and Kragh-Muller, 2017). The concept of ‘everyday life’ has been applied, for example, to studies of Mexican institutional care for children (Khoo, Espinoza and Skoog, 2015); to moral discourses among Finnish and Swedish mothers (Karlsson, Perala-Littunen, Book and Hultman, 2016); to Swedish and Polish fathers’ practices (Suwada and Plantin, 2014); to refugee lives in Finland (Kohli and Kaukko, 2018) and Sweden (Bergnehr, 2017); and to clothing practices in Finnish day care (Paju, 2018).

Everyday life might then be considered as the unremarked events of the day in domestic or familial, or institutional, settings. In some families or residential homes it might entail sharing meals, expressing affection, doing chores, watching television, doing homework and so on. It might be the kinds of things that if asked ‘what did you do today?’ one might easily neglect to mention. Of course, for some children arriving in foster care or residential care, these might be precisely the life-affirming routines they have been missing and find easy to notice. The very normative character of everyday life makes assumptions about the desirability of these routines; routines that form the habitual glue that makes up the reliability of day-to-day events and may, if accompanied by warm relationships and active listening, contribute to a sense of security and belonging that assists in the reparation of psychological or moral distress that children in OHC often need and welcome. This is conceptually close to Maier’s (1981) idea of temporal rhythm.

Maier argued that residential care workers should pay close attention to the ‘minutiae of daily life’. It is in these moments of exchange and expression that workers have the potential to stimulate or facilitate changes which ‘acknowledge the reality of the context within which interaction occurs’ (Garfat, 2010, n.p.). For Maier, rhythmic interchange that arises spontaneously, or in a planned way, has the potential to encourage a sense of predictability about what to expect, and interdependence between the key players. Clapping or chanting, for example, can induce a sense of togetherness. Adults and young people doing things together, even apparently trivial things such as helping a child make their bed, can also have a wider relational benefit. It can signify involvement and investment in that particular child or young person’s development (Maier, 1981).

Maier worked in a tradition of valuing the therapeutic qualities of everyday life in residential – also referred to as institutional – care. This tradition includes Trieschman, Whittaker and Brendtro’s (1969) *The Other 23 Hours*, which foregrounded the milieu of an institution as offering possibilities for behaviour change through day-to-day relationships, seeing staff as companions to children and doing things together to support children’s development. Anglin (2019) pointed to the significance of ‘other’ in the title of this now-classic work, which drew attention to both the vast bulk of time that residential care workers have to influence young people (compared to formal therapy) and the invisibility of a profession that is designed to address holistic needs across a lifespan. Ward (2002), working within a therapeutic community tradition, also drew attention to the informal, in-between moments of being together as an opportunity for

therapeutic work ... [to be] potentially ongoing in all the other times and contexts in which the young person is involved, and especially in the course of everyday life and the social and other interactions which this entails ... It is in these moments, and with the sometimes fleeting feelings which they may engender, that some of the most useful work can be done. (Ward, 2002, p. 112)

Ward called these moments 'opportunity led work' (Ward, 2002, p. 111), wherein practitioners spot possibilities for effective communication in the moment, and decide which of various options to pursue. The process involves observing, assessing, decision-making, action and review, often in a very short space of time, and may lead to short- or longer-term interventions. The emphasis, Ward argued, is 'mainly on identifying and using those opportunities for deeper communication with children' (Ward, 2002, p. 124).

In summary, everyday life refers to the day-to-day, mundane, familial or institutional environment that is often rendered invisible, but which for children is a primary context for interpersonal, moral and educative experience with the potential for normative integration and/or therapeutic intervention. In the next section, I explore specifically social pedagogical concepts and practices that have a bearing on developing the idea of expertise in everyday life.

Social pedagogy and everyday life

A pilot programme to introduce social pedagogy to residential care in England through the employment of social pedagogues trained in Germany and other countries found that they often sought to make children's lives meaningful through paying attention to the everyday, practical and creative opportunities presented by sharing a lifespace – the residential home (Cameron, Petrie, Wigfall, Kleipoedszus and Jasper, 2011). The purpose was to use the everyday life or milieu of residential care to share experiences, deepen reliable relationships and broaden opportunities to develop skills and self-confidence among young people – in short, to give meaning to the lifespace. This was in keeping with the aims and principles of social pedagogy as distilled in Petrie et al. (2006).

Three social pedagogical concepts informed this practice: (i) *Lebensweltorientierung* (or lifeworld orientation); (ii) *Alltagsorientierung* (or everyday orientation); and (iii) the 'common third'. The first two are German in origin, while the last is a key concept of social pedagogy in Denmark.

Hans Thiersch (1986) developed the concept of *Lebensweltorientierung* over the course of the twentieth century to convey to those working in children's (or indeed adults') lifespace that

how any child makes sense of the world, and constructs their understanding of the world, is to some extent particular to their own life. Each person's 'life world' is distinctive. Their understandings of their world, their own place in it and that of others, depend in part on their own individual history and experiences, and in part on the social, economic and political contexts which impact them. In this light, it is apparent that the child's responses to their circumstances make sense to them – even those which seem unwise from an outside point of view. Seeking to understand the child's 'life world' and the validity of their decisions from this perspective is seen as an emancipatory process. Social pedagogy based on a *Lebensweltorientierung* does not seek to 'colonise' the children's lives (Hämäläinen, 2003). (Cameron et al., 2011, pp. 35–6)

The second concept, *Alltagsorientierung*, also developed by Thiersch (1992), draws attention to 'a sense of upbringing or education-in-its-widest-sense that takes place via everyday experiences in the shared living space' (Cameron et al., 2011, p. 35). This orientation towards the roles of everyday activities in bringing meaning to shared lives speaks to the practical training of social pedagogues,

whose hands work alongside their heads and their hearts. Accordingly, their education prepares them to share in many aspects of children's daily lives, undertaking practical activities together as a matter of course. So washing up, making beds, shopping, cooking and eating together are all 'everyday' tasks in which they encourage children to participate, sometimes alone, sometimes with other children and often alongside the pedagogues. For the social pedagogues, these activities are supported by social pedagogic reflection – they are not undertaken mechanically, but are informed by social pedagogic aims and principles. (Cameron et al., 2011, p. 36)

Social pedagogic aims require practitioners to support children's competences, including those that are challenging, and take them out of their immediate comfort zone. The idea of working in the 'everyday' signifies the importance, to social pedagogues, of apparently mundane activities, such as eating together, which may nevertheless have unpleasant associations for some children. Social pedagogues must make professional and situated judgements about what level of integration into everyday routines is tolerable for a particular child at a particular moment and also support their developing competences. Through activities and judgements, and over time spent together, relationships are formed, and a dependable structure to daily life is forged. Daily events, such as mealtimes, can be infused with mutual enjoyment and recognition of the other's contribution to the shared daily life. In this example the social, habitual and community aspects of eating together become the desirable or normative goal of everyday expertise.

The third concept informing everyday life practice for social pedagogues is the *common third*. [Lihme \(1988\)](#) considered the common third to be a useful way of thinking about doing things together. The idea is that jointly undertaken activities, whether cooking or going for a walk, learning a musical instrument or washing up, are a mutual focus and 'belong', at that moment, to both the social pedagogue(s) and the child or group of children. The focus on the doing, together, and the joint investment in the activity, creates a medium for establishing or sustaining constructive relationships. Memories and reference points can be created, and reflected upon later, through jokes, retelling tales and recognition of each person's part in the story. The aim of these activities is 'to foster children's self-confidence, their sense of being valued, to enhance the children's social and practical skills and to promote group life. Engagement in joint activity is also seen as a means of building trust between pedagogues and children' ([Cameron et al., 2011](#), p. 36). Common-third activities, whether practical, creative or sporting, elevate what could be chores or tasks or challenges into potential learning moments and deflect the focus from possible relational discomfort on the part of the child and towards the activity itself. They transform the instrumental into the meaningful through acute observation and reflection in and on the moment.

Taken together, these concepts suggest not a routinised or institutionalised everyday existence, but establishing an environment for children living in residential or foster care where each child's particular cultural background, personal circumstances, social competences and perspective on their current living situation are valued. In such an environment, mundane, daily activities are seen as helping to form a reliable structure in which all can participate and which all can shape, and where joint participation, whether in predictable or exceptional activities, can be entered into from a position of mutual curiosity with the potential for enjoyment as well as learning about and showing appreciation of the other. This kind of everyday environment is one where social pedagogically informed practitioners are experts and offer children in care considerable opportunities, as we found in the social pedagogy pilot programme:

Working with children in this way is to work with them as whole people, engaging them physically, emotionally and creatively, impacting on how children experience their world and interact with it, providing opportunities for them to exercise agency in a positive way. Creative group activities also offer an opportunity to interact and communicate about individual and group needs. Properly supported, they contribute to social skills, provide opportunities for practising mutual respect and for developing the trust and team work which are necessary for working in the adult world. ([Cameron et al., 2011](#), p. 38)

Lived examples of experts in everyday life

The ideal social pedagogic everyday lifeworld in residential or foster care rarely exists. Staff work according to shift patterns, and so are not always sharing the lifespace of the children; they have their own families and lives elsewhere. [Camphill Communities](#), which for decades have practised with the concept of unsalaried live-in 'co-workers', have found it more and more difficult to recruit, and now offer a range of contract types ([Camphill Communities, 2019](#)). Children's homes, even foster care homes, are not solely domestic spaces but workspaces that are visited by a wide range of professionals. Children's lives in OHC are subject to surveillance through regulation, such as rules about health and safety and risk-taking, and administration of their lives, such as periodic formal reviews of their progress, that is hardly recognisable as 'everyday'. Moreover, the administrative routines are sometimes organised

to suit professional requirements, such as dictating which members of staff can carry out which tasks (Cameron et al., 2011).

One example to which social pedagogues in the pilot programme drew attention concerned attempting to create regular, shared times for nutritious meals in residential care, a routine that was not always in place. The social pedagogues aimed to ‘develop a culture of eating as a social activity which would help to produce a sense of belonging and provide times for talking together’ (Cameron et al., 2011, p. 39). It was also seen as promoting team development, as Figure 1 shows.



Figure 1. My work and social pedagogy (Cameron et al., 2011, p. 39).

Where social pedagogues achieved the aim of eating together, they described mealtimes as becoming more sociable, and creating a more ‘homely’ atmosphere. But in other children’s homes, introducing healthier eating and mealtimes was seen as a threat to prevailing culture and ways of doing things. In this scenario, the expertise of the social pedagogues around the potential of mealtimes to improve the social and health aspects of the lifespace was in direct confrontation with the expertise of established practitioners, who knew the embedded ‘rules’ and habits of the institution. Emond, McIntosh and Punch (2014) found that the institutionalised food and eating habits, and different expectations of young people and staff, dominated accounts in her study of residential care and food in Scotland, so an apparently simple and constructive change to everyday life may challenge different versions of ‘expertise’. But the social pedagogues in Figure 1 did articulate a theoretical and evidential frame to their mission around health, wellbeing and team and communicative competences, as well as valuing the everyday milieu of shared eating, suggesting that knowledge hierarchies and values-led leadership need attention in some residential care homes.

In another study, foster carers were asked to take photographs of the everyday lives of the young children they looked after over two weeks, and then to make a ‘map’ with selected photographs and annotations, in dialogue with the researcher, in order to illuminate the educational and social opportunities and experiences of preschool-aged children in foster care (Meetoo, Cameron, Clark and Jackson, 2020). Each foster carer made two maps. These maps reveal the concerns of foster carers, for example to show a clean and hygienic environment for children, that were in line with regulatory requirements. They also show the shops and other destinations that form the daily lives of carer and child. One of the foster carers depicted what she believed to be the foster child’s perspective, calling one of her maps ‘My world right now’ (Figure 2). This map was of the interior life in the household and showed pictures of toys, books, the child’s bedroom and the view from the window onto the park they frequented.

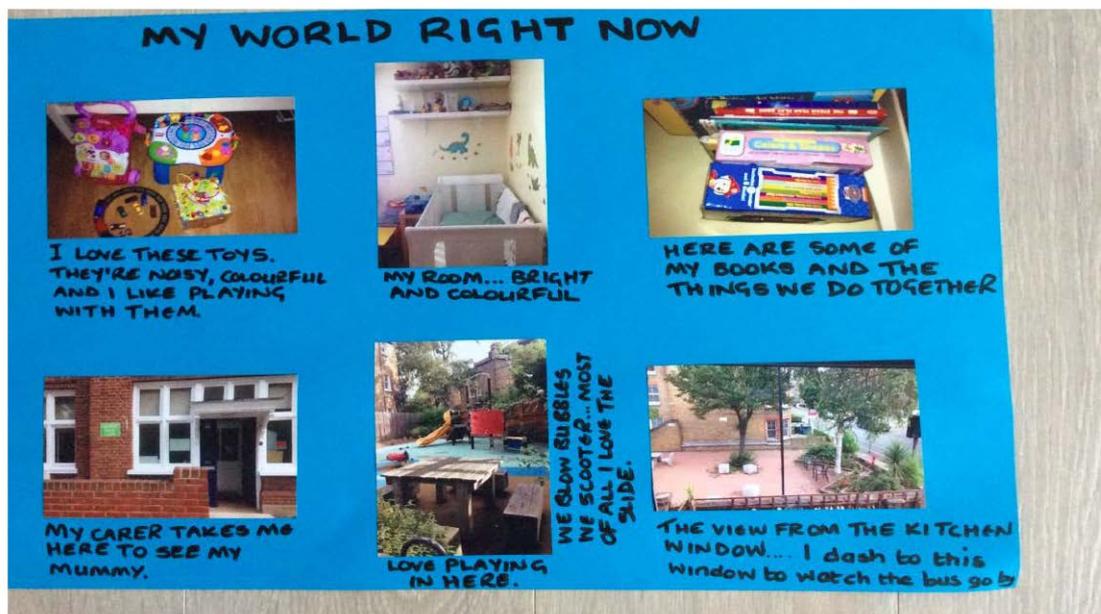


Figure 2. My world right now (Meetoo et al., 2020).

Her second map, called ‘Enjoying life as part of the family’ (Figure 3), depicted an expedition with the family to take part in the foster carer’s daughter’s university graduation. The foster carer in this study explained this as showing her foster child that they were part of the family by taking part in special events and inspiring the child to think that graduation from university could be part of their life trajectory.

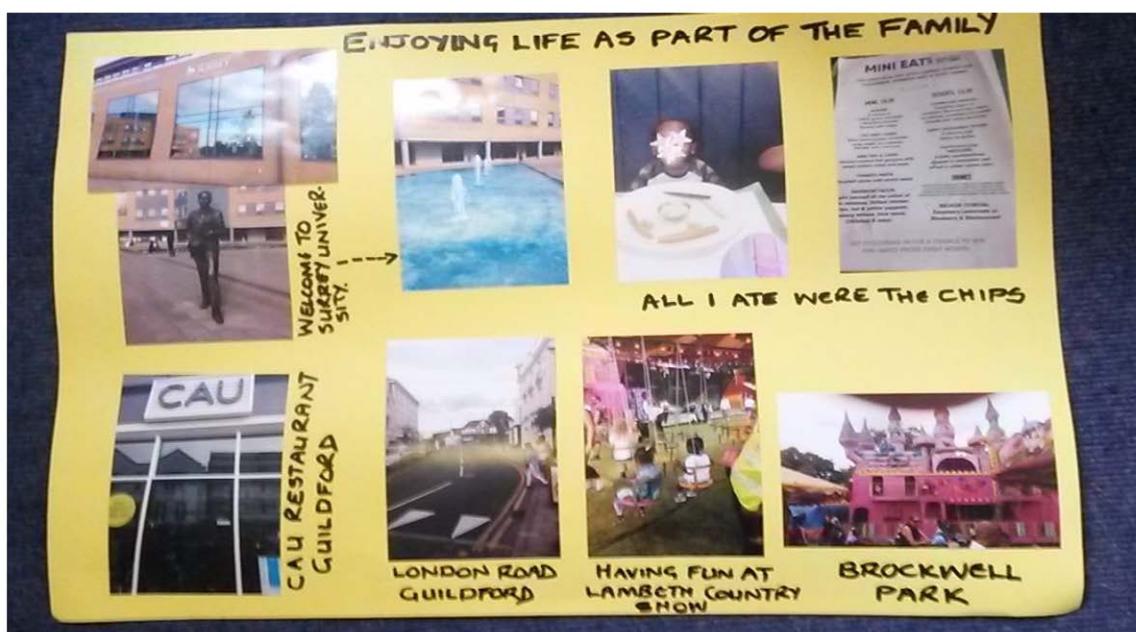


Figure 3. Enjoying life as part of the family (Meetoo et al., 2020).

During the course of interviews, informal conversation, fieldnotes and photographic map-making, this foster carer revealed her thinking about her role in her foster child’s development. In response to a question about how children learn, she said: ‘I think a lot of it comes through play. And other children as well ... from each other, learning together; put them in a group’ (interview), reflecting established evidence about the importance of play, and collaborative spaces, for learning (Cameron, Meetoo, Johansen

and Jackson, 2020). The foster carer had found there was a mismatch between what was on offer in the available early childhood education settings for her foster child and his abilities. He had weak legs ‘stemming from having contracted rickets due to malnourishment as a baby’ and

... he cannot keep up with other kids, running, communication. I’ve seen that where he’s just sort of sat down and just played by himself because he can’t keep up with the other children ... So things like that slows him down, you know. (Interview)

Again, her knowledge of this individual child and his capacities to thrive in a group setting constituted essential expertise in establishing where the child was going to learn best. The foster carer went on to explain that her choice of toys reflected her knowledge of the child’s development and what he could manage, on the basis that she could support his acquisition of new skills by giving him things he was competent at:

... the items are important for him because they show what developmental stage he is at – he is definitely below 3 years – so the shapes and colours help him. ... I picked these toys because looking at him, not even as a three year old, but someone who is younger, I am trying to build him and develop him from coming back and forward again ... like an 18 month old ... (Fieldnotes, photo map making)

This foster carer is clearly only one example among thousands, but serves to illustrate the point that she is an expert in the everyday life of her child and household. She is working in the child’s lifeworld, recognises their particular individuality and social positioning and has an everyday orientation, with an emphasis both on the familiar and routine, and on the value of the exceptional, extraordinary, days out.

Other studies have similarly found foster carers deploying expertise in their lifespace and the child’s (the two of which may differ). Berrick and Skivenes’s (2012) interview-based study with exemplary foster carers in the US and Norway found that some characteristic qualities of high-quality fostering went beyond being a ‘good’ or effective parent. Principally, these additional features of what the authors called ‘parenting +’ in foster care were: (i) attending to the experience of integrating into a new family, creating an ‘atmosphere of belonging’ (p. 1964) where children were parented as another member of the family; (ii) considering the relationship between the child, birth family and foster family, parenting with respect and humility and acting as a buffer for the child’s experience outside the home; and (iii) responding to the development and special needs of the child, employing a child-centred approach and advocating for the child where needed. This data suggests that high-quality foster carers are experts, although they are not referred to as such in the study, in that they were thoughtful, analysed the need required and considered ways of providing it and of managing competing needs. One of the key features of this group of foster carers was their ability to articulate what they were doing in practice and why. They were not selected to be representative of all foster carers but to throw light on strategies for recruitment and training of very good carers. Berrick and Skivenes argued that their findings were a contribution to a field that is ‘relatively sparse in its understanding of foster parent characteristics, strengths and needs’ (2012, p. 1964).

Building capacity as experts in everyday life

Part of the intention in the phrase ‘experts in everyday life’ is to draw attention to, and therefore value, what is done for and on behalf of children in OHC, and which is routinely undervalued, at least in terms of pay, working conditions and status. But this is not intended as a means to arrest professional development or to claim that all provision offers the very best care and education to the young people living there. By the measure of national inspections, only 17 per cent of children’s residential care achieved ‘outstanding’ status in 2019 (Ofsted, 2019¹). While not all the inspection criteria are attributable to staff competence, it is likely to be a major part of success.

Professional development or ‘training’ has, since the 1990s, become accepted as part of working in OHC and part of building capacity. For fostering and residential care, occupations that are built on the notion of ‘natural’ care, carried out largely by women, this is a remarkable step change. However, much

¹Individual foster care households are not assessed by Ofsted so no comparable data is available for foster care.

depends on how the training is carried out: one-off events are much less likely to alter practice than longer and more experiential immersion and team-based challenges to established modes of working (Cameron, 2016; Cameron et al., 2020). One example of building capacity via a social pedagogic knowledge exchange programme sought to enable foster carers of young children to shift their self-concept from 'carer' to 'educator'. Over four days of training that combined social pedagogic and other theories, such as about how disadvantaged children learn, and experiential exercises, focused on the concrete technique of 'treasure baskets', two cohorts of foster carers began to see themselves as potential and intentional educators (Cameron et al., 2020). There are now many examples, from across the UK, of social pedagogic training in workplaces that have sought to value everyday relational, creative and practical practice in OHC through theory and experience (Cameron, 2016).

A second intention is to explore the development of the concept of experts in everyday life as one component in the theoretical frameworks of social pedagogy in the UK. Clearly, social pedagogy is not the only discipline or philosophy to embrace the idea of significant helping practice at the level of everyday life, but there are specific ways of understanding the lifespace in social pedagogy that give due weight to recognition of children's lifeworlds, their perspectives and the broad developmental potential of joint participation in mutually chosen activities. A social pedagogic approach to 'expertise in everyday life' is not restricted to the child and their care, but also encompasses the integration of the child into new family and social worlds, and supporting the development of skills and competences to improve their lives. By articulating what practitioners are doing, and with what rationales, intentions and – hopefully – outcomes, we can start to outline what we might expect of social pedagogy in UK contexts for practice.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to address the concept of expertise in everyday life as embodied in the professional practice of those working with children in residential and foster care. Having first articulated the phrase in relation to enhancing children's learning in care placements (Cameron et al., 2015), this article has situated the discussion about what 'expertise' means in the organisational conditions and status of the OHC workforce, and the scope of 'everyday life' within wider debates in the literature. I have argued that a social pedagogical orientation to working with 'everyday life' encompasses the participatory rights of children, and a learning or development ethos and practice, combined with recognition of the particular characteristics of each person and their lifespace, as well as their cultural and social contexts. It moves beyond simple care, and communication or therapy, to 'being alongside' and 'doing things together' within a relational frame; it requires situated professional judgements, in the moment. It also refers to navigating the broader terrain of working the borders between familial/institutional and social lives, and the deeper terrain of working with theory and evidence rather than relying on task or instinct.

This article is a first, tentative discussion about the potential of seeing practitioners in OHC as experts in everyday life. Clearly there are serious structural problems at present, with often inadequate recognition of practitioners through salaries and supportive working conditions. Articulation of a concept does not in itself address these problems, and much more remains to be done to recognise the immense contribution of the approximately 65,000 foster and residential care practitioners in England. Furthermore, the concept in itself does not inform practitioners about what to do; rather, it invites them to reframe their self-concept about their work, and to adopt a curiosity-driven approach about the environment on offer to looked-after children, alongside their relational concern for and about the children in their charge. The concept does not stand on its own but must be viewed within a social pedagogic framework of learning and development.

In conclusion, the concept of experts in everyday life as guiding the status of practitioners also has the potential to invest in the content, or pedagogy, of OHC work as a learning, creative, contextualised, moral and educative endeavour. Where could the idea go next? Framing practitioners as experts in everyday life gives a platform for ongoing learning and development and offers the opportunity to respect and value children's competences and participatory rights, especially from a social pedagogic perspective.

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