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Interview article

Little signs, local seeds, learning and development: an interview on social pedagogy in the UK and Germany

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Abstract

This interview article summarises the key themes of an expert interview held by Christian Spatscheck with Pat Petrie. The text identifies and reflects the history of the establishment and development of social pedagogy in the UK and Germany since the 1990s. The interview ends with the identification of challenges for the further development of social pedagogy for the future.

Keywords social pedagogy; England; Germany; theory; practice; education; current challenges

Background

What is understood as social pedagogy in different European countries? How did this approach develop in the UK, Germany and other countries? And what are the main challenges for social pedagogy in the immediate future? To find out about the answers to these questions, Christian Spatscheck met Pat Petrie on a bright September day in London for a first exchange that then led to a longer online interview which is documented within this interview article.

Beginning during the late 1990s, a stronger discourse on the establishment of social pedagogy can be identified in the UK (Social Education Trust, 2001). The main activities began with a rather influential study that compared the training of social pedagogues in the Netherlands, Ireland and the UK that highlighted the need for an integrative concept of social pedagogy in the UK (Crimmens, 1998). Some years later, the Department of Health funded a comparative study on the concept of social pedagogy, its social policy requirements and the education and employment of social pedagogues. Other influential studies on children in social pedagogic residential care (Petrie, Boddy, Cameron, Simon and Wigfall, 2006) and foster care (Petrie, 2007) followed. These were supported by research and evaluation projects, for example from the Fostering Network (McDermid et al., 2016).

In the UK the Centre for Understanding Social Pedagogy (CUSP) was established in the early 2000s, founded within the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) at the IOE (Institute of Education), UCL, London, as an international forum promoting research and teaching in social pedagogy. Many of the research and practice activities the CUSP undertook in the early years of its existence focused on bringing together international scholars and experts to exchange and discuss theory and practice of social pedagogy. Another important organisation founded in the UK during the early 2000s is ThemPra, a social (pedagogical) enterprise that supports the sustainable development of social pedagogy and focuses its activities on social pedagogy practice projects. Later on, the Social Pedagogy Development Network (SPDN) was founded in 2008 as a platform for the further establishment of social pedagogy in the UK. Then, in 2017, the Social Pedagogy Professional Association (SPPA) was established as a membership-based organisation, aimed at developing excellence in, and raising the profile of, social pedagogy in the UK.

Many of the theoretical studies on social pedagogy in the UK have their focus predominantly on practice models, methods and forms of intervention (e.g. Charfe and Gardner, 2019, p. 33). Other studies reflect social pedagogy on the more general level of theory building and in relation to socio-political issues (e.g. Cameron and Moss, 2011; Charfe and Gardner, 2019). Beyond this, many empirical studies reflect the impact and relevance of social pedagogy in different fields of the social professions (see Cameron, 2016).

While social pedagogy as an approach for theory and practice of the social professions has been introduced in the UK since the turn of the millennium, it has been an established and recognised approach in Germany and other European countries for many decades longer (Hamburger, 2012; Lorenz, 2008). In Germany, social pedagogy builds on a long tradition in academia and practice for centuries and has also managed to create a broader foundation in research and theory development (Engelke, Borrmann and Spatscheck, 2018). Beginning with separate academic degrees in social work (*Sozialarbeit*) and social pedagogy (*Sozialpädagogik*), since the 1990s, universities in Germany have continued to offer BA and MA degrees that integrate both social work and social pedagogy under the umbrella term of *Soziale Arbeit* (Engelke, Spatscheck and Borrmann, 2016).

In theory development, some of the leading models are the concept of the subject orientation (e.g. Winkler, 2021), the model of a lifeworld-orientation (e.g. Thiersch, 2014), the psycho-social coping paradigm (e.g. Böhnisch, 2018) or socio-spatial models for social pedagogy (e.g. Deinet and Reutlinger, 2014; Spatscheck, 2019a). These paradigms still have a high relevance for practice and help maintain the idea of social pedagogy as an approach for social learning in democratic settings, aimed at participation and social development.

Social workers and social pedagogues could be established in very different practice fields, be it in child and youth welfare, youth work, early childhood care, school social work, community development, health- and disability-related settings, services for the ageing population, mental health services, services for homeless people and the prison and probation services (Farrenberg and Schulz, 2021). Currently, there are about 400,000 social pedagogues and social workers with an academic degree working in Germany (Nodes, 2021).

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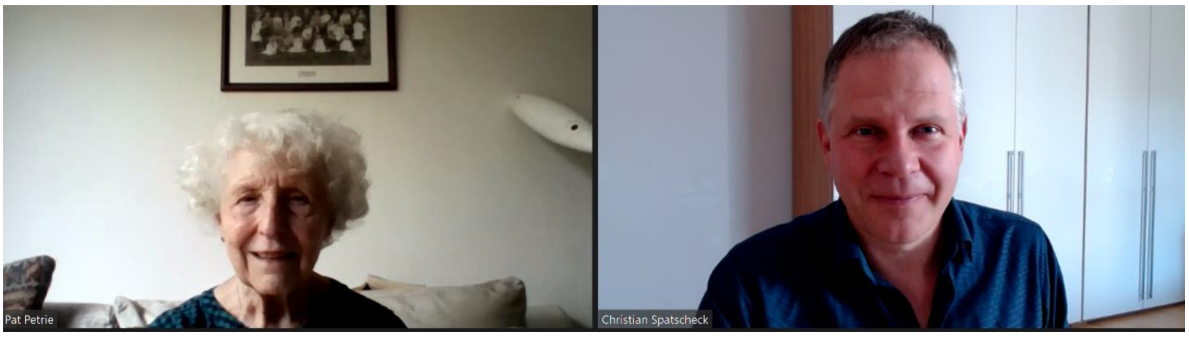
Interview

Christian Spatscheck and Pat Petrie (Figure 1) first met at UCL, London, UK, in September 2021. They then moved from the university to a lunch meeting in a nearby park in Bloomsbury. After this first meeting, they decided to continue their exchange one week later in an online video meeting to find more time and to delve deeper into the topics of this interview.

Figure 1. Pat Petrie and Christian Spatscheck (Source: Christian Spatscheck).



Christian: You are one of the leading researchers and practitioners who has carried out a variety of international research and who brought the debate on social pedagogy back to the United Kingdom. Along with many other colleagues, you managed to create an academic and professional environment for social pedagogy in different areas and organisations. What brought you into the field of social pedagogy and what were your initial motivations?

Pat: I began my career in pedagogy as a drama teacher. I worked in residential settings with young offenders, and children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Later, I qualified with an MA degree in Child Development and started working with the research psychologist Jack Tizard at the TCRU. There I wrote my PhD on childcare in day nurseries and with child minders, in which I compared the children's behaviour towards their mothers and towards their professional care givers. From child development I moved more and more towards the field of social pedagogy and settings for informal learning. Here, my studies were focused on policy and practice regarding looked-after children, family support, the extended school, play, and school-age child care. From the late 1990s, I carried out several systematic and comparative studies on social pedagogy in continental Europe, and in the UK – but mainly in England, as the responsibility for social care and education belonged to the devolved powers of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Christian: Before these years, social pedagogy had hardly been discussed in the UK, whereas it remained a common approach in many other countries. What were your original intentions to (re-)establish the debate on social pedagogy in the UK and which were the main activities for this undertaking?

Pat: There was no plan. Initially, interest had been confined to a small group of academics from different UK universities, who met to discuss what social pedagogy had to offer [Social Education Trust, 2001]. One of their number, David Crimmens [1998], had compared the training of social pedagogues in the Netherlands, Ireland and the UK. The question 'Why can't we do this in the UK?' emerged. For our research activities at TCRU, a huge source of inspiration was the opportunity to carry out a study on out-of-school services and after-school programmes for children in many countries across Europe. As co-founder and coordinator of ENSAC, the European Network for School-Age Childcare I had already met many European colleagues and was impressed by what I had learned about social pedagogy.

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In 1999, I made a proposal to the Department of Health (DH) for further research in the area. This led to the involvement of Helen Jones from the DH, who was already convinced by the concept of social pedagogy and its relevance for social care. Accordingly, the DH funded a comparative study on the concept of social pedagogy, social policy towards it and the education and employment of social pedagogues. This was followed first by a study of children in social pedagogic residential care [Petrie et al., 2006] and second, in foster care, with English comparisons [Petrie, 2007]. The Department for Education, which took over the main responsibilities for children's social services from the DH, continued to support research and development activities on social pedagogy until 2011, with a change from Labour to Conservative governments – initially in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Overall, these projects investigated the theoretical foundations and the practical and societal potentials of social pedagogy as a professional approach. There were also research and evaluation projects conducted by private organisations, for example the Fostering Network [McDermid et al., 2016].

Christian: Interestingly, all of this happened while social pedagogy in Germany was already a long-established approach. There, both the tradition of social work and social pedagogy have existed for centuries alongside one another. It is highly recognised that the social professions need an internal differentiation between a focus on help and integration (social work) and a focus of social learning and education (social pedagogy). Both traditions belong to the umbrella profession of *Soziale Arbeit* that integrates social work and social pedagogy into one profession and discipline. Accordingly, about 80 universities specialising in the applied sciences as well as other more general universities in Germany offer Soziale Arbeit programmes. Beyond this, there are still about 15 universities in Germany that are offering degrees in social pedagogy at BA and MA level and also PhD programmes in social pedagogy.

Within an academic context, I myself had the opportunity to study the theories, concepts and history of social pedagogy during my degrees in social work and pedagogy during the 1990s. After working for nine years in child and youth welfare and in open youth work, it was then possible to write a PhD thesis on youth work and youth cultures in the subject of social pedagogy at the Institute for Social Pedagogy at the Technical University Berlin. And also in my professorship for Theories and Methods of Social Work at Hochschule Bremen, City University of Applied Sciences, I frequently connect concepts and models of social pedagogy with my teaching and research activities. But what happened after the initial activities in the UK and how did the establishment of social pedagogy in the UK continue during the beginning of the new century?

Pat: During the first years of the new century and alongside the research at TCRU, further new developments occurred. Here, I especially wanted to name the foundation of two agencies. One being ThemPra, which carried out several practice projects and evaluations, and the other, the international recruitment and development agency Jacaranda, which brought staff with social pedagogy qualifications to the UK. Both were in regular and productive communication with each other and the team at TCRU. During these years, some practice organisations – both public and private – started to integrate concepts of social pedagogy in their activities and created staff profiles for the roles of social pedagogues in foster care and residential care for children and adolescents. In 2008, the SPDN was founded as a platform to connect all these activities and bring them to the attention of local and national government and others. Three years later, a pilot scheme to integrate social pedagogues, qualified in different European countries, into children's social care was conducted by Professor Claire Cameron.

Christian: And, as far as I remember, there were also many activities at UK universities?

Pat: Yes, indeed. Over the years, there have been different vocational and academic qualifications for practitioners and leaders in social pedagogy, as well as courses for social pedagogy in the arts. Parallel to these activities, I was especially involved in the facilitation of the manifold international expert meetings at the CUSP with colleagues from various

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places in Europe. An important action was the setting up of the *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, by Gabriel Eichsteller (ThemPra), and myself as founding co-editor. The journal is now published by UCL Press. Gabriel continues as editor alongside Professor Claire Cameron as co-editor. In 2017, the foundation of the SPPA resulted from cooperative activity between TCRU and different agencies and authorities. At present it is the only professional association for the support and further establishment of social pedagogy in the UK. Further significant activities in academia and practice in the UK can be found on the 'ThemPra UK Map of Social Pedagogy' [SPPA, 2017].

Christian: I think the German debate in social pedagogy in the early 2000s was very much focused on the challenges of a reawakening of neoliberal concepts and its negative effects on social work and social pedagogy [Spatscheck, Arnegger, Kraus, Mattner and Schneider, 2008]. Here, I find it very helpful to read theoretical counter models in social pedagogy, be it Michael Winkler's concept of the subject orientation [see, e.g., Winkler, 2021], Hans Thiersch's model of the lifeworld-orientation [e.g. Thiersch, 2014], Lothar Böhnisch's psycho-social coping paradigm [e.g. Böhnisch, 2018] or socio-spatial models for social pedagogy [e.g. Deinet and Reutlinger, 2014; Spatscheck, 2019a].

During the same years, the practice fields of social pedagogy and social work could grow and develop rather well. Within and through these practice activities, concepts and models of social pedagogy could be integrated in everyday social and educational services and also public debates. But at the same time, social pedagogues always need to be prepared to defend these concepts, models and values in public debates.

This brings us to considerations for the future. What do you think are the main tasks and challenges for social pedagogy in the immediate future?

Pat: This is a very easy question to answer. We need more public and political support for the formal recognition of social pedagogy qualifications gained in the UK. Social pedagogy needs to come back onto the policy agenda and requires a supportive public infrastructure [see, e.g., Petrie, 2020]. At the moment, I can see no direct UK government support or interest for this whatsoever. But across the UK I do see a lot of tiny, vigorous seeds being sown. Some examples are the degree programmes in social pedagogy in Scotland (for example, at the Robert Gordon University Aberdeen) and England (at Kingston University and the University of Central Lancashire), with many special study modules in other university programmes and online courses. There are, as well, a growing number of publications, together with the networking, conference and seminar activities of SPPA and SPDN. Beyond this, more and more practice organisations are taking up concepts and models of social pedagogy. There are these little signs emerging, but whether it is going be developed further remains quite open.

Christian: How do you regard the theoretical development of social pedagogy in the UK?

Pat: A key challenge for the UK will be the conceptual development and building of a stronger theoretical foundation for social pedagogy. So far, the debate has often been focused on a reflection of the understanding of practitioners, their value base and their often tacit knowledge. Nonetheless, some key concepts could be identified within the debates.

One of these main models is the unity of head, heart and hand [see McDermid et al., 2016] that argues for a reflected integration of the human activities of thinking, feeling and doing within social learning processes, with the aim of reaching a more holistic understanding of learning. Historically, this model can be traced back to Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, but it has been an ongoing reference for social pedagogy ever since.

Another reference is the concept of the 3Ps – the integration of the professional, personal and private selves of social pedagogues in their professional activities [e.g. ThemPra, 2018]. This model highlights the existence and relatedness of these different aspects of the self. The professional stands for the purpose and the requirements of the professional role. The personal represents the individual attributes and experience that a social pedagogue brings to his or her relationships. The private describes those personal experiences that should not be brought into a work context. Altogether, the 3P model

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argues for the need to reflect and integrate these three aspects as appropriate for the role of a social pedagogue.

Another important concept is the model of the Common Third [see Hadi and Johansen, 2018]. This relates to the shared activities of social pedagogues and those they work with. Examples could be sharing chores, or learning new skills together. Such shared experiences can enable relationships to develop and create possibilities that, otherwise, would not have existed.

Among others [e.g. Charfe and Gardner, 2019, p. 33], such concepts and models are supporting a stronger and more systematic awareness of professional roles and pedagogic relationships in practice. But this strong focus on educative relationships might also lead to the development of a social pedagogy that loses its connection to the socio-political aspects of theory. Against this background, a more far-reaching aim would be to reconnect these models to broader academic discourses on social pedagogy and society [see Cameron and Moss, 2011; Charfe and Gardner, 2019] as well as to other discourses from the social sciences, for example on social justice, or on the quality of life or well-being [Petrie, 2014, 2020; Spatscheck, 2017].

Christian: Are there also empirical studies that can show how social pedagogy has been established in the UK?

Pat: Yes, indeed. Beyond these theoretical considerations, empirical evidence shows that social pedagogy could already create stronger positive effects in different practice settings of child and youth welfare in the UK. A synthesis of ten different evaluation studies on the impacts and outcomes from the integration of approaches of social pedagogy within organisations for children's residential care, foster care and related services in the UK [Cameron, 2016] shows that the introduction of concepts and models of social pedagogy has created far-reaching and sustainable impacts in these organisations. Effects can be found on staff, the organisations, the children and wider societal contexts. The introduction of social pedagogy was identified as highly supportive for the validation and reframing of practice, and helped young people to thrive in public care settings. The experiential learning style within the training programmes was identified as a key factor.

I also have to identify Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic as new challenges. New immigration labour laws and travel restrictions may well have hindered the recruitment of social pedagogues from EU countries. Beyond this, many support structures for the academic exchange of researchers and students have been blocked through the abolition of the Erasmus schemes for academic exchanges between EU and UK countries. And the pandemic has highlighted how vulnerable our societies are and how necessary it is to have networks of care and solidarity.

Christian: This bears many similarities to the developments in Germany. On a theoretical level, a main question certainly is whether there will still be a clear role for social professions within academic and practical settings for pedagogy and public education in general [Coussée, Spatscheck, Roose and Bradt, 2020]. Alongside this, a further question is whether the focus on education, learning and development from social pedagogy can keep pace with other fields of social professions, in contrast to the approaches of social work that are more related towards help and integration [Birgmeier, Mührel and Winkler, 2019; Spatscheck, 2019b].

In the end, the concept of the social, of mutual care and the need for solidarity remains crucial. This is getting even more relevant in times of climate crises, new socio-ecological challenges and the need to define a new social pedagogy of sustainability [Böhnisch, 2019]. Here, maybe the COVID-19 pandemic has helped to raise more consciousness of these issues. Perhaps, at least, communities and institutions, on a local level, are showing signs towards caring more for one another other – and better realise what is more important in their lives and well-being. This reminds me of a piece of graffiti in my local neighbourhood with the message 'We are all in this together' as an appeal for more solidarity and reciprocity in communities and societies. Such virtues can only exist if people care for them and if they find supporting public infrastructures. Social pedagogy should, and is, an important place and approach for such experiences.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

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Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

Not applicable to this article.

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