
Article

Social pedagogy as relational attachment practice

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Abstract

The utility of social pedagogy as an approach to building resiliency and developing positive relationships with children and youth is currently underdeveloped in North America. However, there are signs of growth in this field. For example, one youth project in British Columbia, Canada, employs relationship building, collaboration and creativity in terms of music- or art-based community interventions as part of its programme. The findings from a recent evaluation report on this youth project will be used to explore the potential for a social pedagogical approach being deployed more widely, and possibly more effectively, than current youth-focused practice. Specifically, the importance of relational practice, underpinned by aspects of attachment theory will be used to explore the utility of social pedagogical practices and examine the possibility of its development within a number of professional contexts.

Keywords: social pedagogy; young people; relational attachment practice; attachment theory

Introduction

The utility of social pedagogy as an approach in assisting to build resiliency and develop positive relationships with children and youth is currently underdeveloped in North America. However, there are signs of growth in this field. For example, one youth project, the Basic Life Skills Training (BLT) programme in British Columbia, Canada, promotes relationship building, collaboration and creativity through relationship-centred programming. Youth can become involved in programmes of their choice, such as yoga, and music- or art-based community interventions, activities all associated with the core attributes of social pedagogy.

This paper explores the positive findings from a recent evaluation report of the BLT project. We draw upon interview data from participants of the project to highlight their experiences of the programme and establish how this particular approach varies from other interventions. We identify how these individual experiences correlate with social pedagogy's core principles of the 3Ps (professional, personal and private use of self), zone of proximal development, diamond model of intervention and the common third. Within a framework of attachment theory these principles will be explored using the core precepts of attachment styles, the internal working model, and the secure base. Finally, once explained, these concepts are applied to the research findings to highlight the importance of relationships, and what we are calling 'relational attachment practice', an area of practice that combines the above attributes of social pedagogy and attachment theory when engaging with young people.

Basic Life Skills Training programme

The BLT programme is a well-established (over 20 years) 'drop in' and outreach youth work programme delivered through a community service organisation in British Columbia, Canada. The flexibility of the programme allows for young people to attend (drop in) during the day (or after school) or meet their worker in the community. Referrals to the programme are from colleagues in statutory social services, and the criteria require young people to be 14–21 years of age and living with diagnosed mental health challenges. Attendance is voluntary. Given the unstructured nature of the delivery of the programme, referrals do not reflect actual numbers of young people who attend, or the frequency or intensity of the interactions when they are in attendance or engaging. BLT is designed as a place for young people to meet and build skills through support, education and recreation. BLT strives to empower youth, promote healing and foster healthy social connections. It is a place where young people feel safe, develop positive relationships, and are able to access a diversity of programming in terms of counselling sessions, peer support, music therapy, yoga, and outdoor recreation activities. Once on the programme, young people can remain until they age out at 21; for many, this means becoming peer mentors at the programme and supporting younger attendees.

One young person said of the BLT:

You could call this unconventional therapy, you could call this whatever you want ... it's life skill training ... we can have a conversation about anything ... kids come here and they stay because you're helping kids learn how to live. (2)

The aim of this paper is to explore the youth-orientated service provision offered by BLT as described by the youth themselves. We discuss and examine the relational attachment practice approach located in social pedagogy practice, underpinned by the main precepts of attachment theory.

Literature review

Social pedagogy is a practice used for addressing issues with clients through social interaction and education or 'pedagogy' (education in its broadest sense). The approach assists in establishing capacity in individuals to allow them to become fully integrated and contributing citizens within their immediate community and broader societal context. Social pedagogy practice seeks to 'promote people's growth into active citizenship [enhancing] their ability to act socially and display social responsibility while rationally fulfilling personal interests as a member of society' (Hämäläinen, 2015, p. 1028).

Social pedagogy is strengths based (Saleebey, 2009), and individually or group focused, traditionally deployed with children and youth in their local environment. It combines individual person-centred intervention or group process within a broader community and structural focus. This aligns with a 'person(s) in environment' (PIE) perspective, which allows for an understanding of behaviour by examining the environment in which a person lives (Payne, 2014). Initially, social pedagogy was developed to address 'the discrepancy between individual autonomy and the requirements that modern society imposes upon a person, especially of the younger generation' (Hämäläinen, 2015, p. 92). In this context it seeks to work with the 'whole' child in the child's community context, focusing on improving daily activities (Cameron et al., 2011), and addressing developmental risks in children (Milligan, 2011). This role had developed over time to encompass a wider range of client groups and practice settings, while maintaining its PIE focus.

For example, social pedagogues (qualified social pedagogy practitioners) are currently employed in a variety of settings, often aligning with types of residential care, such as group homes for youth in care, prisons and, more recently, older adults in care facilities (ThemPra, 2015–19a). The role of a pedagogue is to develop positive 'growth' relationships with their clients. This connectedness has the potential to foster sharing power and creating equality in reciprocal relationships (Duffey, 2006).

Social pedagogical interactions at the individual level are based on the 3Ps approach (professional, personal, private), and reflect practice that establishes distinctions between these aspects of the self, and thus create clear professional boundaries (Cameron et al., 2011). This is considered essential in ensuring that when using 'self' in interactions with clients, it is done in a healthy and productive manner. Social pedagogy encourages workers to give more of themselves, the 'personal' P, while maintaining professional and private boundaries (Cameron et al., 2011). This requires a practice focus that is self-reflective and authentic, and not procedural and managerialist. Intervention from a social pedagogue's perspective views both 'process' and 'outcomes' as essential in their engagement with clients. Additional core concepts of social pedagogy are the zone of proximal development, the diamond model of intervention and the common third (ThemPra, 2015–19b, 2015–19c, 2015–19d). The first concept explores how the social context enhances and supports learning through the collaborative practices of imitation and prosocial modelling (Bandura, 1977). The second concept is the philosophy that reflects the practice that all people have intrinsic worth as human beings. Pedagogues seek to establish the well-being and happiness of their clients through holistic learning, relationship building, and empowering practices (ThemPra, 2015–19c). In addition, this concept also encompasses the common third, where principles such as empowerment and building positive healthy relationships are used in the practice of social pedagogy with clients (ThemPra, 2015–19d). For example, the long-term relational goals of social pedagogues are achieved through interventions with an individual or group for a significant period of time, and during a particular phase or phases of their lives. This engagement is seen as working in the common third or undertaking a shared activity, where social pedagogues develop relationship-based opportunities to learn together with the client by undertaking daily tasks with them (Cameron et al., 2011).

Social pedagogy embraces a community- and activity-based methodology, as well as promoting an experience-orientated practice (Hämäläinen, 2015). The social pedagogy approach embraces notions of informal, less-structured activities, and creativity in terms of music- or art-based interventions. These can be undertaken in community settings, as well as in more formal environments, such as prison. These aspects of social pedagogy, along with its focus on relationship building and consistency, can provide a useful frame to explore and address issues experienced by many young people in a variety of practice settings.

Of the many theories that underpin social pedagogy as a practice, attachment appeared as a relevant framework to assist in exploring young people's experiences of BLT. Attachment theory has a number of core precepts: attachment styles, secure base and internal working model. Each of these corresponds to the capacity an individual has to build and sustain relationships with others (Holmes, 1993). Within the first core concept, attachment styles, there are four subcategories: secure, insecure avoidant, insecure ambivalent, and disorganised. The goal is to nurture children to grow into having a secure positive attachment with caregivers and significant others in their lives (Ainsworth et al., 1978). The other three

styles of attachment – insecure avoidant, insecure ambivalent, and disorganised – offer explanations of differing levels of the individual’s inability to build trusting and healthy relationships with others (Fox, 2018).

While instructive to have a definition of all the attachment styles, for this paper we are going to focus on defining secure attachment only, and combine the other three styles (insecure avoidant, insecure ambivalent, disorganised) under the one heading of ‘negative’ attachment. An examination of the young people’s attachment styles was not explored in the research interviews, and therefore there were not sufficient data to provide an in-depth analysis. However, the data does highlight where positive attachments have been created and developed. Secure attachment occurs when the child is cared for by sensitive and responsive caregivers. Securely attached children are able to regulate their distress and know that they can show their needs and feelings without being rejected (Brown and Ward, 2012).

Attachment styles develop as a consequence of the nurturing that children receive in their early years, from birth onwards. If this development process is successful for the young person, their formative positive attachments create an internal working model (IWM) that dictates how future attachments and interactions develop over the lifespan. However, if trusting relationships are not built with carers, then one of the three dysfunctional attachment styles can occur, each one influencing the IWM in a negative way, establishing unhealthy patterns of attachment behaviour in future relationship building (Waters et al., 2002).

Another precept drawn from attachment theory is the ‘secure base control’ system of attachment, which promotes the idea that in healthy attachment development, ‘both infants and adults [have] the capacity to use one or a few primary figures as a secure base from which to explore and, as necessary, as a haven of safety in retreat’ (Waters et al., 2002, p. 5). Therefore, the social pedagogue seeks to build and sustain a positive secure relationship with the young person. This in turn assists the young person in having more trusting relationships, and this creates a pattern of healthy relationship building.

Relational practice

Social pedagogy practice, and how attachment plays a pivotal role in its success with clients, reflects how relationships are key to individual and social development. Much has been written about relational practice, especially in associated professions such as social work. Indeed, it was once considered a core aim of social work practitioner interaction (Collins and Collins, 1981). The quality of the relationship between practitioner and client allowed for trust to be built and issues to be addressed more collaboratively. It has been written elsewhere that ‘we become more relationally competent as we represent ourselves authentically in our relationships’ (Duffey, 2006, p. 50). Trevithick (2003, p. 167) suggests that ‘the relationships that we strive to build involve creating a sound “working relationship”, or “working alliance”, as the platform and the medium for the work we undertake with service users’. This approach is seen as useful for assessing clients and determining intervention. It can be seen as a two-way, reciprocal process that seeks both to remedy the client’s issues and to provide a forum that in itself may be therapeutic (Trevithick, 2000; Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1970). In social pedagogical practice, the ‘work’ is considered ongoing and, in relation to children, it is part of their development process into adulthood. Clients who have experienced difficulties in their relationships in the past may, if the relationship with the practitioner is positive, start to correct this negative experience and begin to build toward a positive and healthy attachment. According to Miller and Stiver (1997, p. 22), these early experiences, which often relate to negative attachment histories, can be overcome by ‘participating in growth fostering relationships’. However, these positive relationships require time to develop and need to be based on the core attributes of warmth, empathy and authenticity. Relational social pedagogical practice identifies that attachment and many of its requisites are core to its ability to provide a healthy and enriching interaction between client and practitioner (Trevithick, 2003). After discussion of the methodology and findings, the core concepts of social pedagogy, and attachment theory will be combined to establish a relational attachment practice framework that will be applied to the research data.

Methodology

An ethics application was made to the University Human Research Ethics Board to video interview staff and youth from the BLT, along with alumni and other professionals, to evaluate the success of the programme. Ethics permission was granted in September 2015. A thematic analysis explored the interviewees' data through the identification, description and analysis of the most predominant themes that occurred throughout interviews undertaken between January and March 2016. The application of a qualitative, open-ended narrative interview strategy allowed for open dialogue and the opportunity to explore young people's views of the service they received as they emerged (Sarantakos, 2005). The interviews encompassed the experiences with BLT of 15 youths, 1 BLT alumnus and 1 child welfare social worker. The overarching aim of this paper is to capture and qualify the youth-orientated service provision offered by BLT as described by the youth themselves. To achieve this goal, a thematic analysis was undertaken, which provided an inductive approach to organising, describing and interpreting the themes that surfaced during the interviews with BLT's youth participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Many youth interviewees described BLT as 'unique' because of the physical environment, relational approaches and practice models employed. For this paper, we are focusing on the relational attachment practice approach used, as this lends itself more suitably to social pedagogy and attachment theory. ThemPra (2015–19a) identify that 'social pedagogy is not something we do or don't do – the question to ask ourselves is to what degree we are working in a social pedagogical way!' Using the interview data, we analyse to what degree the BLT programme achieved social pedagogical practice. As social pedagogy involves both a practice approach and the interconnection of specific core practices, we will apply the social pedagogical attributes – 3Ps (professional, personal and private use of self), the common third, the diamond model, and the zone of proximal development – to the quotations below. The main concepts of attachment theory – attachment styles, internal working model and secure base – will also assist in the analysis, highlighting the intersection of these two approaches within a relational attachment practice framework.

Relational attachment practice

Many of the quotations below not only reflect that the BLT programme is consistent with the practice of social pedagogy generally, but also that many of the core concepts of pedagogical practice overlap and integrate concurrently within the practice environment. For example, interviewees stated:

It's a different environment. Just in general, we have open space. I mean when I sit across from a counsellor [referring to past experiences], I feel intimidated. She's just kinda right in front of me staring at me, asking personal questions. (4)

You relate to us better than they can. (14)

There were more quotations about the ability of the BLT staff to relate to the young people attending the programme. While no direct correlation can be made regarding the ability of BLT staff to negotiate their practice between the professional, personal and private use of self (3Ps), it appears implicitly in the quotations in relation to being able to 'relate' rather than 'intimidate' the young people using the service. One could therefore assume that the use of self-disclosure (personal and private use of self) within specified boundaries (the professional P) to build collaborative relationships resulted in collaborative and positive interactions and outcomes (Cameron et al., 2011).

One young person compared experiences at BLT with experiences in a hospital, stating that:

[In the hospital] you feel like s***. Because it's like, wow ... I'm this kid, who's at this hospital [it's like being] in f***ing little school, and I even got kicked out of that for misbehaviour problems, and you feel so much worse when you get kicked out of that. When you go home and tell your parents you got kicked out of that f***ing school and you're like, where now? (2)

Another youth expressed the feeling of safety they experienced at BLT, when asked, ‘Where else have you gone for programmes where you have felt safe?’:

nowhere ... I can't even go home and feel safe ... In here there is no fear and out there, there's just war. (10)

These feelings of safety resulted in youth feeling comfortable with themselves. The young people expressed the ease they had in discussing themselves honestly:

Here what I have found is the energy is safe. Like, the first five times we hung out, we just talked about random stuff. We focused on positive thinking because if you are always thinking about the negative, you are not going to want to go back. Every time I see my counsellor, I am reliving the worst moments of my life. (10)

The relaxed, informal ‘drop in’ approach of the BLT programmes reflects the different energy mentioned above. It also reflects an empowering client-led practice (diamond model) in a physical environment that is not the norm for young people receiving services. Working collaboratively with young people to achieve their goals while building their life skills can be seen to reflect both the zone of proximal development and working in the common third (ThemPra, 2015–19b, 2015–19c, 2015–19d).

Young people take feelings of safety and connectedness a step further in discussing how these feelings have led to personal ownership and empowerment through the beliefs of the BLT staff acknowledging that youth would make the right decision for themselves:

You can sit down and just talk. If I don't want to talk about something, I don't have to. I don't have to feel scared or uncomfortable. You just chill and it's nice because I can get different perspectives. (8)

You didn't even know us and you had so much faith that we would do the right thing for ourselves. (10)

Once young people realised that their stories were recognised and legitimised, they felt free to express themselves openly and honestly, without the fear of being traumatised in the process of reliving their experiences. It can be argued that once again BLT workers used aspects of the 3Ps and the diamond model to create an environment of empowerment where inclusiveness and safety allow for healthy relationships to form and grow (Cameron et al., 2011). In addition, young people did not feel that there would be negative consequences of their honest confession of what could often be perceived as antisocial behaviours. This was supported by a social worker who regularly referred youth to the programme, stating that:

What I hear from all the youth is that they feel at ease with who they are. They don't have to pretend to be something they are not, and they are not judged; they are taken for who they are and they are given guidance and are supported in a way that makes sense to them. That's another thing I've heard from clients I have referred here ... they don't feel they are to follow somebody's agenda or plan. Here kids feel comfortable enough to bring up whatever is bothering them and go with the flow and figure out a process that allows for each side to be equal. In our offices, it is almost not possible. (38)

The above quotations highlight how the social context (environment) enhances the potential for learning (zone of proximal development), where developing trusting and healthy relationships appears to have established positive secure attachment with the programme staff, allowing for growth relationships to form, which in turn creates resiliency (ThemPra, 2015–19b). This reflects an intervention framework of prosocial modelling and imitation (zone of proximal development).

Research indicates that adolescents with friends who are both responsive and supportive of their needs have better overall health and well-being (Williams and Anthony, 2015). Furthermore, they identify that peer-to-peer social support significantly increases resilience among adolescents (Williams and Anthony, 2015). This research is consistent with the youths' experience in peer-to-peer relationships at BLT.

The application of attachment theory and the building of trusting relationships between BLT staff and youth cannot be emphasised enough in its importance for creating change for the youth themselves.

These relationships once again reflect the secure base control system of attachment that provides ‘both infants and adults with the capacity to use one or a few primary figures as a secure base from which to explore and, as necessary, as a haven of safety in retreat’ (Waters et al., 2002, p. 5). One youth highlights the power of the trusting relationships they built with BLT staff members in their comparison of relationships they have built with other social workers and counsellors:

If you go see people at other offices, it’s like they’re a social worker and you’re [BLT worker name] . . . the difference between these guys [BLT staff members] and what a worker does, is those guys have a lot of clout, they can sign things and get stuff done, but they cannot get on a personal level with the kids and actually truly deal with it. Whereas [BLT staff] don’t have any clout, their words would piss in the wind but, they have more emotional attachment and you can push more with that. (32)

This quotation reflects the change in role of social worker from being interventionist to exercising brokerage, thereby reinforcing notions of de-professionalisation, where the utilisation or expropriation of relational practice has shifted from social work practitioner to another pseudo- or semi-professional group. We can see that professional power resides here with the social worker. However, the quality of the relationship and its capacity to achieve positive change through relational practice resides with the BLT worker. In some social pedagogy degree courses, the use of power in the practice context is being addressed through the training process, educating pedagogues in creative, inclusive practice (Hatton, 2013). The ethical use of power in practice needs careful reflection, as it has the potential to have both positive and negative impact on relationship building with the client. A social pedagogue needs to be critically aware of how power is transmitted through the use of the 3Ps (professional, personal and private use of self), and must ensure that they have developed good boundaries regarding the use of these aspects of their practice (Cameron et al., 2011).

The collaborative and empowering relationships that the youth experienced at BLT were arguably major influencing factors in the youth viewing their relationships with staff members in terms of friendship or companionship. Attachment theory highlights the importance of developing ‘an attachment relationship with a single keyworker’ as important in connecting with ‘hard to reach’ youth (Bevington et al., 2015, p. 158). Furthermore, Trevarthen (2001, pp. 117–8) claims that ‘an experience dubbed as companionship or one of being meaningful to someone important is a core need evident even in infancy and present throughout the lifespan’. Therefore, the attachment bonding is significant for the future development and sustainability of positive relationships, and in turn highlights how relationships can be therapeutic in and of themselves.

The majority of the youth interviewed used terms such as uniqueness and realness, which correlate to the professional language of authenticity, collaboration and consistency. In relation to service provision, one BLT alumnus described BLT as an ‘anti-programme’ in comparison to other programmes, stating that:

you’re getting kids that have gone through how many f***ing programmes and they end up here. A lot of them stay, and that shows something big to me . . . it wasn’t just a one-off personal relationship. You’re doing it with all sorts of people, all the time. (1)

At BLT, the learning or ‘social education’ is focused on life skills in the relational sense. Young people are offered emotional support that helps regulate emotion to cope with the stressors in their everyday lives (Hämäläinen, 2015). The young people participating in the programme create informal personal connections with staff and peers that assist in teaching broader interpersonal and communication skills for building capacity and empowerment. The concepts of therapeutic community and of employing a practice that focuses on a sustained relationship with the individual (Payne, 2014) reflect the informal ‘drop in’ practice of BLT. However, while the structure of the BLT programme is similar to a therapeutic community or residential programme, the goal is not to solve or manage a pathologised problem within a client, in what could be seen as an overly medicalised way. The goal is to develop the individual youth into a contributing member of broader society, and, in many ways, this requires less structure and fewer boundaries rather than more,

Blanchet-Cohen and Brunson (2014) argue that the context in which a programme operates can promote youth leadership and empowerment. It is claimed that if workers had ‘organizational or community development skills’ they could promote ‘power-sharing’ in young people by creating environments that are youth-orientated (Blanchet-Cohen and Brunson, 2014, p. 7). As far as the interviewees that received BLT’s services were concerned, the way in which the programme was structured made a difference to how power-sharing was perceived. In comparing their experience at BLT with other programmes, one youth stated:

everyone I talked to in professional settings was just really weird but when I came here everyone was really casual. (11)

Evidenced throughout the interviews, youth appreciated the reciprocal disclosure and shared conversation provided by BLT staff members:

With them [other counsellors], you’re allowing them to see a vulnerable part of you and they are not being vulnerable back. With you guys [BLT staff], you either have feedback from another story with someone else or connections with yourself. (10)

For some youth, reciprocal disclosure and the willingness to use aspects of two of the 3Ps, their personal and private selves (Cameron et al., 2011), allowed for casual conversation with staff that was an essential part in reducing their anxiety when accessing services, and a necessary part of the process of developing trusting relationships:

With other counsellors, I’ve never heard a single life story. They don’t talk about themselves. All they talk about is you. It feels like the pressure is on. I would get so anxious sitting in those tight little rooms. Like I told them once, I did this [referring to drug use] and she (counsellor) automatically calls up a drug and alcohol counsellor . . . here it is a casual conversation. It’s like talking to my friends. . . . I don’t want to be stuck in a room with a doctor that really doesn’t care about me. (8)

When comparing their experiences with other programmes, the interviewees appeared pleasantly surprised by the balance achieved by BLT staff in terms of the collaboration and openness they experienced. For many young people interviewed, the professional setting that they had experienced with other counsellors in the past created barriers that increased their anxiety and discomfort. This appears to correlate with social pedagogy’s focus on relational practice that is more self-reflective and authentic (Trevithick, 2003), and less procedural and managerialist. It is not focused solely on outcomes, but on a practice that values an empowering process based on excellent relationship building and trust (Watson and West, 2006).

Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo (2013, p. 1770) argue that if workers wish to prove themselves as ‘relevant, reliable and trustworthy’, they must ‘take an on-going social and political position of standing by the youth in the face of their hardship, even in times it involves conflict with other professionals or institutions’. The fact that BLT staff members stood alongside young people to the extent that youth could trust that they would be consistent and reliable made a huge impact on the youths’ ability to trust them. Young people entering the BLT programme could rely on that BLT staff would show up and be there for them on a long-term, continuous basis. This reinforces Bevington et al.’s (2015) notion of the importance of developing an important attachment relationship in connecting with hard-to-reach youth.

The interviewees from the BLT programme all highlighted that it was the relationship between them and their worker that provided the opportunity to learn and to grow. The ability to allow our clients to ‘use us’ affirms Winnicott’s (1971) belief in the therapeutic nature of relational practice that provides an environment that helps build capacity, which in turn establishes a secure base to venture from dependency on services to independence and citizenship in a broader context of society.

The following interview quotations support BLT’s success in creating positive change in the lives of many of the youth they work with, and, support the idea of BLT being unique in its ability to create change compared to other youth programmes. Interview excerpts made clear that for youth who had experienced many other programme opportunities, BLT was preferable. Youth interviewed attribute the changes in their life trajectory to the support they received through BLT:

I've been asked about going to see formal therapist and I'm like, no way, I'm done with that. I've improved so much since being here [BLT]. I mean when I first started coming here, I was like, what, 16 . . . I remember I had such huge issues. I had an eating disorder and huge a** anxiety issues. I wanted to stay in bed all the time. I slept either 23 hours a day or I didn't sleep at all. I didn't do anything and then now I've been actively searching for a job and I have plans to move out in September. (5)

Going to school every day wasn't easy . . . and then when I started coming here it, started to get easier and easier because I could really look to you guys [BLT staff] and you guys really guided me and showed me a way. You know, coming here, having someone to talk to and being able to relate to someone is a lot, it means a lot. (13)

The last sentence highlights particularly how valuable consistent, reliable and authentic collaborative relational attachment practice is for young people to initially build trust and to develop healthy connections individually and in their broader communities. For example, another youth makes a direct correlation between the relationship skills they learned through BLT and a healthy change to the relationships they have with their parents:

Honestly, if I didn't come here I would probably have the worst f***ing relationship with my parents. I hate to go there but I would probably be dead. It was different vibe and different feeling and everything than I had ever felt. If I hadn't come here, I would probably off myself or spend years arguing with my parents. (2)

Furthermore, one youth expressed increased feelings of inner strength in themselves after accessing services from BLT:

I've really changed a lot since I've come here. I've been open more and showing a lot of my strong qualities, instead of being introverted and weak. Maybe weak isn't the best word, but I was making myself weak. (11)

These enhanced feelings of control over one's life connect with the positive attributes of social learning theory in terms of imitation and role modelling (Bandura, 1977), and more broadly with the strengths-based philosophy of social pedagogy (Saleebey, 2009), especially the diamond model, where the intrinsic worth of the young person is acknowledged through empowering practices.

Another youth stated how the safe atmosphere and skill development they experienced at BLT gave them hope for themselves and other struggling youth:

I myself never imagined a place like this. It was only just a safe place in my mind and now that it is here, it fills a lot of people with hope. People can come here, touch base and recharge, and go back into the world and face it and survive. You guys fill us with everything we need to just survive and be comfortable in our own skin. (34)

These developments can be seen to reflect how the zone of proximal development has the potential to influence a positive change in attachment style from negative 'insecure or ambivalent' attachment, to 'secure and trusting relationship'. This reflects a positive change in the young people's IWM of themselves, and seeks to address negative attachment styles developed from their early childhood experiences (Bowlby, 1979). In turn, many young people's relational behaviours have changed, establishing positive 'secure and trusting relationships' with BLT staff, their peers and, as seen above, their family members (Bowlby, 1979).

Discussion

While a number of themes emerged from the data, it was the interconnection between social pedagogical practices and aspects of attachment theory that established trusting therapeutic relationships that consistently appeared as positive in the young people's narratives. The data clearly identify that

support offered by staff and peers at the BLT programme was a major influence in a young person establishing positive relationships and building resiliency. The defining relational attachment attributes of trust, empathy and authenticity were identified by many of the participants. The literature identifies these attributes as having the potential to establish positive attachment relationships, therapeutic growth and collaborative working practices with clients (Miller and Stiver, 1997; Bowlby, 1979). Relational attachment practice therefore provides the intersection between the practices of BLT, social pedagogy and the core aspects of attachment theory, which can assist us in understanding how those practices can be effective in developing self and the core characteristics of citizenship.

BLT's less formally structured 'drop in' approach to working with youth, differing from more traditional residential or therapeutic community approaches, allows for the combination of music therapy, yoga and outdoor recreation pursuits within a youth-focused strengths-based framework. Having a safe place to heal, explore and feel safe, highlights connections to attachment theory, where a 'secure base' is essential for developing independent life skills, both emotional and practical (Bowlby, 1988). The relational social pedagogical practices of the staff, especially the interconnected use of two of the 3Ps, their personal and professional selves, while working alongside the youth in the common third (ThemPra, 2015–19d; Cameron et al., 2011), created the potential to build trusting, authentic and ongoing relationships with their service users. As seen in the quotations above, these positive growth relationships have been life-affirming, and have assisted with sustaining and managing other relationships in the young people's lives. Again, relational attachment practices can be seen to assist young people create positive relationships, and these can help overcome negative attachment experiences either in their past or in their current relationships. These will assist in establishing a healthier IWM (Bowlby, 1979), which hopefully will allow young people to experience other significant relationships in the same positive way.

The somewhat unstructured nature of BLT practice appears to appeal more to the most marginalised and hard-to-reach young people, and this in turn appears to encourage an environment that builds trusting and respectful relationships between this particular peer group and staff. This was an interesting finding, as practice wisdom often suggests that while working with young people who may have an unstructured lifestyle, stronger boundaries are required (Hart, 2016). Social pedagogy's approach to working with youth – for example, creating and maintaining positive longer-term relationships – highlights a practice that historically was often seen in other professional fields, such as social work. Social pedagogy, underpinned by its own code of ethics and practice, has managed to negotiate a trajectory where professionalisation has not diminished its relational practice. For example, in the notion of 'friends' or being 'friendly' identified in the interviews, one can view relationships and boundaries as perhaps less rigid than in other professional fields. Using the comparison of social work, much of its professional education promotes the use of self. This can appear contradictory, in that practitioners are then trained to reduce this aspect of their personal selves (for example, self-disclosure) and create strong boundaries when working with individuals (Reamer, 2013), a practice that often establishes barriers rather than boundaries in building relationships (Fox, 2018). Social pedagogues, however, are encouraged to use aspects of themselves, the professional, personal and private (3Ps) aspects of their lives in building rapport with their clients. The emphasis in pedagogue training is the use of ethical boundaries and professional discretion when disclosing personal information. As Bevington et al. (2015) and Williams and Anthony (2015) point out, these more informal types of attachment are essential in establishing relationships and building resiliency with the most disenfranchised young people, and this is especially relevant to BLT.

The BLT programme has flexible creative activities such as music therapy and yoga, and the utility of the programming allows either for group connection, or for the possibility of the activity being undertaken as a solo exercise. The 'drop in' environment also allows for a safe space in which youth can disconnect safely from their other personal and professional relationships, and just talk with peers and staff in a very informal manner. According to Bowlby (1988) attachment styles formed in early childhood (by age 6) shape a person's ability to relate to others, and unless a corrective experience such as therapy is experienced, that style will continue throughout their lives. We are not suggesting that BLT is therapy in the traditional sense of the word; however, as suggested by Trevithick (2003), BLT relational practices were, according to the young people themselves, therapeutic. Therefore, the overarching practice of

social pedagogy, with its focus on communitarian education and working in partnership and collaboration with clients, and where practitioners' use of self is authentic, establishes a practice to assist in correcting previous insecure attachment issues.

There are some areas for consideration and a need to pause for critical reflection. One important issue to consider relates to the level of independence the BLT programme fosters. Several of the youth mentioned that they still keep in regular contact with BLT staff even after leaving the programme. Some opponents of the approach used at BLT may consider that dependency is nurtured rather than independency, and while continued support is positive, 'dependency' at some point becomes limiting in terms of young people's development (Winnicott, 1963). In addition, although not undertaken for this project, an intersectional analysis of the service user data from the programme would assist in identifying categories of difference (Verloo, 2006) among the youth and how much, and in what ways, the social pedagogical relational practices of BLT may mitigate or enhance experiences of oppression and discrimination. While gender and age did not manifest themselves as problematic in the interviews, age, patriarchy, culture, race and sexuality are categories that could be further explored for both young people and staff members.

If one takes the view that BLT is developing citizenship, this highlights interpersonal connection and the potential to reciprocally mentor others at both staff and peer level. While acknowledging the potential for discrimination to occur within categories of difference, it appears that social pedagogy and its practices can offer great insights for youth-related practice, perhaps especially in how we address the perennial concerns that arise between assuring young people's autonomy and the requirement of their commitment to broader society responsibilities and values.

More broadly, concerns may be identified regarding the reduction in relational attachment practice by other associated professional groups, such as social work. These professional groups, with their preoccupation on case management rather than relational practice, may lose much of their initial practice intent, establishing targets as the only measure of success, rather than the empowerment and growth of the client. This focus in turn creates spaces for allied professions, such as social pedagogy, to grow and claim areas of practice that are client focused.

Conclusion

The interview data established that the interpersonal connections at BLT highlight relational attachment practice at its most effective. Locating these practices within attachment theory and a social pedagogical practice framework allowed young people to voice what they felt were the most effective aspects of the programme's success. The explicit and implicit nature of the quality of the connection between BLT staff and young people identified authenticity, inclusiveness and collaboration defined within positive secure attachment relationships. The data identify BLT practice as concurrently embracing the interconnecting social pedagogy practices of working across the 3Ps, the professional, personal and privates aspects of the pedagogues' use of self, the zone of proximal development, the diamond model and working in the common third. These practices enhanced the ability of staff to develop positive attachments with young people and through these relationships help young people develop into healthy adults and responsible citizens.

Many professional groups such as social work, probation and the prison service have similar service goals to those that underpin social pedagogy. However, as these professions have become more professionalised, they appear to have lost some of the interpersonal client-focused practice approach that social pedagogy promotes, and exchanged these for a more managerialist case-management focus. It is our assertion that associated professional groups, and the multiple client groups they work with, could benefit from the reintegration of the core relational attachment practices exemplified in social pedagogy practice.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The authors declare having no conflict of interest.

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