

Practice paper

Social pedagogy in the United States: eleven dimensions

Jennifer Shure^{1,*} 

¹ School of Education, College of Health, Education and Human Sciences, University of Arkansas at Fort Smith, Fort Smith, AR, USA

* Correspondence: jennifer.shure@uafs.edu

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Abstract

Social pedagogy can be understood conceptually as an interdisciplinary approach that considers the underlying social contexts in learning and development. Despite social pedagogy's global traction, it remains relatively unknown in the United States. This article highlights the potential for social pedagogy to develop uniquely in North America, emphasising the importance of equipping students with both academic content and social awareness. The article examines existing literature through a pragmatic lens, bridging US educational practices that are not categorically termed social pedagogy with international social pedagogy research. It provides an overview of social pedagogy, focusing on how its critical branch promotes democracy through active participation. The article also explores the foundations of the US education system in progressive education. Jane Addams's writing and works lay the footing for this understanding, particularly in how social pedagogy plays a role in supporting the educational and social needs of the immigrant population. Eleven dimensions of social pedagogy within the US education system are identified. These dimensions include critical reflection, student empowerment, cross-generational opportunities, cooperative learning, integrated schools and classes, generative themes, healthy relationships,

dialogue, a student-centred focus, problem-posing and the exploration of cultural narratives. Further research is needed to advance the understanding and application of social pedagogy in the United States, particularly for immigrant students.

Keywords social pedagogy; US education; progressive education; critically compassionate education; Paulo Freire; Jane Addams; dimensions of social pedagogy

Introduction

Social pedagogy combines theory and practice to influence the relationship between an individual and society (Ryynänen and Nivala, 2019) in order to 'improve the human condition and change society for the better' (Schugurensky, 2016, p. 228). There is no easy definition (Hämäläinen, 2013), but educators can understand it conceptually as combining social and educational theories (Eriksson, 2013; Hämäläinen and Úcar, 2016; Schugurensky, 2016). Though social pedagogy transcends the realm of education, Hämäläinen and Eriksson (2016) define it in terms of an 'educational means for social integration' (p. 140).

Broadly, social pedagogy bridges divides, addressing the needs of both children and adults in a variety of settings and bringing relevance to multiple fields extending beyond education, such as social work and civil service. In recent years, social pedagogy has gained traction as an approach to working with various populations within numerous countries. In the United States it still remains a relatively unknown concept (Fox and Thiessen, 2019). The term social pedagogy may lack a rich history within the United States, but there is room for praxis to further develop uniquely in North America as research pinpoints existing practices (Hämäläinen, 2013). This article seeks to explore the current state of social pedagogical dimensions evident in the United States, with a particular focus on the immigrant population. It is a summary of the development of social pedagogy in the United States, which seeks to identify current practices within US education that fit under the umbrella of social pedagogy. Social pedagogy exists outside this narrow focus and further exploration in future studies is appropriate.

Philosophical assumptions pertain to the values of the researcher and her ideas surrounding reality: 'All researchers bring values to the study' (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 18). The theoretical perspective taken within this study is pragmatism. Within this context, a pragmatic approach views the world as one in which truth exists, but where the truth is open to interpretation (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Creswell (2009) opts for a more generic term – *worldview* – which encompasses epistemology and a theoretical perspective. Among his suggested worldviews are pragmatism and, separately, constructivism. This study maintains a pragmatic theoretical perspective but acknowledges that, epistemologically speaking, knowing consists of individuals constructing meaning from several personal factors. This recognition of subjectivity aligns with constructivism (Creswell, 2009; Yazan, 2015). The study adheres to Garrison's (1995) interpretation, which concluded: 'Suitable constructivist epistemology already exists deeply embedded in the tradition of Deweyan pragmatism' (p. 717).

By examining the literature through the pragmatic lens, this article aims to serve as a bridge between existing practices in US education not termed social pedagogy and international research specific to social pedagogy. First, an overview of social pedagogy will be provided with an emphasis on mobilising social pedagogy, a branch of social pedagogy that takes a critical approach. From here, the article will focus on the United States' education system and its foundations, specifically progressive education. A focus of this article is the immigrant population within the United States. This narrowing of focus is beneficial because contemporary scholars' work with this population emphasises the importance of student-centred, culturally relevant praxis, both of which are elements of social pedagogy. In addition, this population could benefit from the combination of social and educational theories. Finally, 11 dimensions of social pedagogy within the US education system will be identified and a thorough review of the literature throughout the article will support these dimensions.

History of social pedagogy

Social pedagogy is 'a pedagogical attempt to deal with a discrepancy between individual autonomy and the requirements of a society' (Ryynänen and Nivala, 2017, p. 42). It exists uniquely to help people

deal with increasing demands, pressures and changes within society. The concept of social pedagogy pre-dates the term as societies have always endeavoured to change through politics and pedagogy (Hämäläinen, 2013; Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017).

The term social pedagogy is believed to have emerged in Germany more than 150 years ago, though its implementation has undergone many changes due to changes in the social and political climate over the years (Hämäläinen and Úcar, 2016; Petrie and Moss, 2019; Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017; Rynnänen and Nivala, 2019). It once served to alleviate the adverse effects of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation (Petrie and Moss, 2019; Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017; Rynnänen and Nivala, 2017). During the 1960s and 1970s, a shift occurred in social pedagogy, as it adopted a more critical approach (Rynnänen and Nivala, 2019; Schugurensky, 2014). The concept quickly spread north into Scandinavia, where it continues to have strong traditions today (Cleary, 2019; Hämäläinen and Úcar, 2016).

Europe is not the only area with strong traditions in social pedagogy; South America also has a history of solid social pedagogical ideas, with Paulo Freire being a prime example (Hämäläinen and Úcar, 2016; Rynnänen and Nivala, 2019; Schugurensky, 2014, 2016). Despite never using the term, Freire is associated with social pedagogy through his liberating and emancipating pedagogy (Rynnänen and Nivala, 2017). Social pedagogy seeks to emancipate children from all constraints hindering full participation in the democratic process or, at the very least, to facilitate successful integration into a democratic society (Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017). This critical social pedagogical mindset is rooted in Freire's work and that of the Frankfurt School.

Nuances of social pedagogy exist from one country to another, and they are not detrimental to its application. Hämäläinen (2013) has noted that 'it is important to allow room for country-specific understandings' (p. 6). Koengeter and Schroeer (2013) have cautioned against considering social pedagogy to be an expanding phenomenon from one country into the world, preferring it be studied from a synchronic perspective in which transcontinental connections are discovered and developed. Social pedagogical practices existed in the United States long ago and have developed over time in unique ways.

Mobilising social pedagogy

The implementation of social pedagogy can vary depending on the situation from which it is observed and the goals of the educator. Eriksson (2013) and Hämäläinen (2013) have divided the field into three branches or models: the adaptive model, the mobilising model and the democratic model. In an adaptive model, the goal is social integration; students become productive members of society. A mobilising model aims to encourage people to change poor conditions; students identify societal problems and seek solutions. The democratic model seeks to achieve the goal of social cohesion by promoting active citizenship; students unite through civic organisations and opportunities to seek solutions to social problems. Rosendal Jensen (2013) suggests a *unity in diversity* approach despite model differences.

A considerable challenge of mobilising social pedagogy, especially from a US perspective, is in perpetuating the individual's freedoms without neglecting the societal bonds and interactions that shape the individual (Hämäläinen and Úcar, 2016; Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017). A social pedagogue considers the social environment that betters the individuals who make it up (Hämäläinen, 2013). An emphasis of mobilising social pedagogy is on influencing society (Eriksson, 2010; Rosendal Jensen, 2013). 'Our social world is in the spotlight; perhaps because we fear losing it or because we feel that we have already lost it' (Hämäläinen and Úcar, 2016, p. 13). Focusing on society at large does not have to reduce individual freedoms; instead, it can enhance these freedoms by improving their application at the personal level and their effect on the broader population.

Perhaps an educator can best understand this tension by considering mobilising social pedagogy as democratic social pedagogy with an additional focus on critical orientation (Rynnänen and Nivala, 2019), suggesting students self-determine areas of reform (Petrie and Moss, 2019). A closer look at the mobilising branch of social pedagogy reveals that it is a 'question of liberation of the citizen who thus becomes aware of his and the group's situation' (Eriksson, 2010, p. 408). There is an 'activist element' (Petrie and Moss, 2019, p. 397) to mobilising social pedagogy. It has a bottom-up focus, similar to the grassroots movements during the founding of the United States that sought greater autonomy and self-governance.

Critical orientation

Critical orientation has been applied to race (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995), the Latino experience (Cooper Stein et al., 2017; Hernandez, 2013), social status (McLaren and Jandrić, 2018) and more. Social pedagogy and critical theory both originated in Germany (Bronner, 2017; Hämäläinen and Úcar, 2016). It was not until the 1960s that social pedagogy began to adopt a critical approach, influenced by critical pedagogues emerging from Germany during that era, some of whom were from what is known as 'the new generation of the Frankfurt School' (Schugurensky, 2014, p. 7). Notably, during this period, Hans Thiersch, a reformer in social pedagogy and a critical theorist, developed a critical social pedagogical approach known as the lifeworld orientation (Schugurensky, 2014). This approach centred on addressing people's problems and needs while respecting their interpretations of their situations (Schugurensky, 2014).

Social pedagogy offers a critically reflective approach, but it should not be equated with all critical theories. In his book *The Politics of American Education*, Spring (2011) contrasted conservative and liberal viewpoints. He posited that in the United States conservatives favour American exceptionalism, the idea that promotes the American perspective, while liberals promote a multicultural viewpoint. While Spring's binary thinking may stem from oversimplification, it is a starting point to consider political implications. The critical nature of mobilising social pedagogy allows for critical thinking across areas, including, but not limited to, race. While scholars of critical theory may understand the many facets of critical theory, this article chooses to focus on the much less controversial components, such as critical thinking and emancipatory pedagogy. In doing this, the political polarisation can be diminished. The question of whether social pedagogy could offer mediation to effectively heal polarisation is yet to be answered.

The term critical race theory serves as a potential weapon for political triangulation, and the political climate is more divisive than it has been in recent history (Pew Research Center, 2021). Several controversial bills, lawsuits, procedures and employment terminations have stemmed from critical race theory and associated theories due in part to a perception that critical race theory equates with socialism (Wheeler, 2021). Texas' House Bill No. 3979 (2021) explicitly specifies which foundational documents can be referenced legally in educational settings and illegalises certain curricula. Specifically banned are curricula connected to critical race theory or the principles of 1619 that seek to reframe American history by examining people and events through the lens of slavery and to emphasise the contributions of Black Americans (Lopez, 2021).

In addition to restricting this viewpoint, social studies teachers are allowed to skip issues that could be deemed controversial. Teachers are also cautioned against expressing a preference for any ideology. Taken to extreme measures, teachers may be cautioned against expressing a preference for beliefs and values that align with democratic systems of government. The limits placed on the historical lens and the option to skip events in history could reinforce biases, undermine critical thinking skills and reduce civic engagement.

Texas is not the only state affected. Virginia governor Youngkin enacted his first executive order on his first day in office, prohibiting the teaching of what he called divisive topics (Executive Order No. 1, 2022). Youngkin went so far as to set up a hotline for parents and community members to report teachers for violating this order (Abdel-Baqui and Calfas, 2022). A New Hampshire mandate operates in a similar manner, and one group even offers US\$500 rewards to parents that offer proof of teachers in violation of the order (Gibson, 2021). There have been 122 'gag orders' (Sachs, 2022, para. 3) introduced, 12 of which have become law, and 88 of which were yet to be decided on as of 24 January 2022. Since 2022, there have been many more similar instances. The proverbial snowball is growing.

Emancipatory pedagogy

Mobilising social pedagogy most closely follows Freirean emancipatory pedagogy (Eriksson, 2013). Social pedagogy is a concept, theory and practice that supports a healthy relationship between individuals and the societies in which they live (Ryynänen and Nivala, 2019). Impeding these relationships are inequalities, and, according to Freire (1972), inequality, 'although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny' (p. 44). Mobilising social pedagogy addresses those that Freire would refer to as oppressed by promoting educational efforts that empower students to engage (Colares da Mota Neto and Apoluceno de Oliveira, 2017; Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017).

Thiersch names Freire, a Brazilian educator famous for his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as a key influence on his critical approach to social pedagogy. Freire (1972) drew from critical theory and his Christian faith to develop what he called *emancipatory pedagogy*. Emancipatory pedagogy stemmed from Freire's aspiration to empower fellow Latin Americans, particularly those living in poverty, to make social progress. Freire's work has played a pivotal role in shaping modern social pedagogy, and his approach bears a close resemblance to practices developed in the United States (Hämäläinen and Úcar, 2016; Ryyänen and Nivala, 2019; Schugurensky, 2014, 2016). Freire (1972) demonstrated a critical mindset in explaining two systems within education: a banking concept and a problem-posing method. A difference between the two is the starting place of the teacher; the teacher either serves as an expert on the knowledge or they seek to understand the student's viewpoint and guide students towards critical thinking through dialogue and problem-posing. Freire (1972) referred to 'narration sickness' (p. 71) in education, meaning the teacher either talks about a reality different from what the students experience, or the teacher offers a monologue separated from the cares and concerns of the students. With this approach, the teacher acts as an expert, depositing knowledge; thus, it is called the 'banking concept' (Freire, 1972, p. 75).

US setting

The lack of social pedagogy's prominence in the United States is remarkable, considering the shared democratic principles (Eriksson, 2010; Nouri and Sadjadi, 2014). The United States is founded on such principles, and social pedagogy is 'deeply rooted in the notion that education should play a role in creating a just and democratic society' (Nouri and Sadjadi, 2014, p. 78). It exists to advance democracy through promoting active citizenship (Hämäläinen, 2013; Schugurensky, 2016).

In the Americas, there were democratic, educational practices aligned with social pedagogy developed before the terminology arrived (Schugurensky, 2016). Though potentially 'underdeveloped' within the United States (Fox and Thiessen, 2019, p. 1), social pedagogy can be found in the US education system through movements such as progressive education. Progressive education movements encompass the work of theorists such as John Dewey and Jane Addams.

Progressive education

Advances during the Progressive Era influenced social pedagogy, especially in terms of US praxis. Out of this era arose philosophies and practices that contributed to modern-day social pedagogy. Among others, Addams and Dewey worked to bring about social change, using the US education system as a primary tool for reform.

The idea of active citizenship can be controversial in today's contentious political climate, but the views are not new. Addams is perhaps the ultimate US social reformer, using education as a primary method to bring about social change (Seigfried, 1999). 'We are impatient with schools which lay all stress on reading and writing, suspecting them to rest upon the assumption that the ordinary experience of life is worth little' (Addams, 1902, p. 181). Addams combated a 'superficial standard of Americanism' (Flinders and Thornton, 2004, p. 55) in her work at Hull House, where she cared for and educated immigrants in a culturally compassionate manner (Addams, 1912). 'Hull-House was soberly opened on the theory that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal' (Addams, 1902, p. 90).

Addams's progressive work at Hull House combined educational and social programmes 'with efforts to generate systemic changes' (Schugurensky, 2016, p. 232). Addams met the needs of the community in a passionately religious manner. She relentlessly emphasised the value of respecting and identifying with the diverse cultures of those from all walks of life, especially those underserved. 'Thus the identification with the common lot, which is the essential idea of democracy, becomes the source and expression of social ethics' (Addams, 1902, p. 11). Hämäläinen (2013), a Finnish social pedagogical expert, has referenced Addams's work as the 'manifestation of social pedagogical thinking' (p. 70). A contemporary of Addams was Dewey.

Dewey (1903) believed education could catalyse social reform and democratisation, and he developed practical tools for accomplishing this (see also Schugurensky, 2016). He emphasised the real-life application of learning within social situations rather than imparting knowledge where 'acquiring takes the place of inquiring' (Dewey, 1903, p. 201). This shift was radical for his day in that 'it makes

women, as the traditional caretakers and earliest socializers of children, central figures' in education (Seigfried, 1999, p. 208). These concepts of desegregating social experience from formalised education are fundamental components of social pedagogy. As educators explore Dewey's practical tips, they discover the foundations for social pedagogy. Dewey embodies the heart of social pedagogy (Nouri and Sadjadi, 2014; Schugurensky, 2016; Seigfried, 1999). His emphasis on the real-life application of learning placed learning in social situations above learning by lecture (Dewey, 1903). Addams and Dewey influenced education in subsequent years, and more initiatives followed.

One successful attempt at social pedagogy within the United States occurred during the 1930s. Myles Horton took inspiration from Hull House in Chicago, the Folk School in Denmark and the writings of social pedagogues to solve problems created by the coal and mining industry in the Appalachian region (Schugurensky, 2016). He founded the Highlander Folk School (Highlander) in Monteagle, Tennessee (Schugurensky, 2016). Initially, the school focused on community education programmes with content such as literature and current issues but eventually this evolved into programmes with the overall intention of civic change (Schugurensky, 2016). Highlander educated black and white community members, including Rosa Parks just months before her heroic actions led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. She observed that her time at the school was the first time in her life that she 'experienced people from different races and backgrounds living and working together in harmony' (Schugurensky, 2016, p. 236).

Progressive education continues to influence education. Teacher candidates become familiar with names such as Dewey in teacher preparation programmes. Contemporary pedagogues have built on their ideas and maintain that effective, culturally relevant, student-centred practices should take a prominent place in education rather than maintaining a peripheral position (Cooper Stein et al., 2017). These ideals are especially prevalent within research regarding the education of immigrant students. It is widely held that educators should consider each child's life experiences, society's systems and the implications of historical events (Hernandez, 2013; Salinas et al., 2016; Valenzuela, 2005), all of which are components of social pedagogy.

Key developments

Arizona State University has been at the forefront of advancing social pedagogy in the United States. The university offers a master's degree in social and cultural pedagogy (Arizona State University, n.d.), which has played a significant role in shaping the field domestically (Social Pedagogy Association, n.d.). Graduates of this programme established the Social Pedagogy Association in 2015 and have been instrumental in promoting social pedagogy through various initiatives. Notably, the association co-organised an international conference in collaboration with the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla in Mexico. The proceedings of this conference were subsequently published in the book *Social Pedagogy and Social Education: Bridging traditions and innovations* (Keller et al., 2020).

In the realm of scholarly research, the *Educational Policy Analytical Archives* – a reputable open-access journal based in the United States – published a special issue titled 'Social Pedagogy in the 21st Century' (Biesta, 2013). This marked a significant milestone as it was the first time a US-based journal dedicated an entire special issue to social pedagogy. This development reflects a growing interest in the field and underscores its increasing relevance in contemporary academic discourse. The examination of social pedagogy is particularly pertinent in the context of current social issues, including the impact of immigration policies and their influence on educational practices and social services in the United States.

Immigration to the United States

The number of lawful immigrants migrating to the United States has exceeded 1 million annually since 2003 (Sanderson et al., 2021) until 2020 when it dropped to 707,362 (Department of Homeland Security, 2022). This reduction was presumably due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Roughly 49 per cent of these immigrants arrive from Latin America, more than any other region (Pew Research Center, 2024). On average, they are significantly less educated, although roughly 37 per cent speak English very well. Five states welcome the majority of those immigrating to the United States: California, Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois (Batalova and Mittelstadt, 2012; Rolstad et al., 2005), but every state is affected.

The impact of immigration and immigration policy extends beyond those entering as documented immigrants and affects all Americans (Gonzales, 2019; Roberts and Willis, 1988). In the 2024 presidential

election campaign, immigration was discussed frequently and the manner in which it was referenced has resulted in rising tension among the general public. In the debate between Vice President Kamala Harris and Former President Donald Trump, held on 10 September 2024, Trump stated that, 'In Springfield, they're [the immigrants] eating the dogs. The people that came in. They're eating the cats. They're eating – they're eating the pets of the people that live there. And this is what's happening in our country. And it's a shame' (Trump and Harris, 2024). Rising fear is prevalent, especially concerning those referred to as 'illegals', meaning those residing in the country without proper documentation.

Statistics exist concerning legally admitted immigrants, but no one can presume to know the exact number of total immigrants currently residing within the borders of the United States (Roberts and Willis, 1988). Some cross the border without proper documentation, while others come with the proper paperwork but overstay the limits of their visas (Gonzales, 2019). US Immigration and Customs Enforcement deport or forcibly remove certain undocumented immigrants; there were more than 5 million deportations between 2009 and 2016 (Kirksey, 2020). Politicians are tasked with public policy to address this phenomenon in a humane and sustainable manner.

Educational response

US educators have the responsibility of providing free and appropriate public education for all children within the borders of the United States regardless of their documentation status (Lau et al. v. Nichols et al., 1974). Many challenges are specific to the unique experiences of people immigrating to the United States (DeGarmo and Martinez, 2006). Immigrant youth often face higher levels of poverty, limited access to healthcare and barriers to education compared to their native-born peers (Potochnick and Perreira, 2010). These challenges are compounded by the stress of acculturation, legal status issues and uncertainty surrounding their new situation (Arbona et al., 2010). Uncertainty surrounding immigration adds to the fear and stress for immigrants of all backgrounds, particularly Muslim and Latino immigrants (Artiga and Ubri, 2017). Another shared stressor is the risk of deportation (Arbona et al., 2010; Artiga and Ubri, 2017). One parent stated: 'Uncomfortable and unstable; we feel that in any moment a new rule could be issued leading to expelling us and sending us back' (Artiga and Ubri, 2017, n.d.).

For undocumented students mental and physical health issues are exacerbated (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2007), the process of acculturating is hindered (Gonzales, 2019), academic performance is lower (Brabeck et al., 2014) and higher levels of anger are reported (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2007). These stressors often result in psychosomatic symptoms concerning sleep and diet (Artiga and Ubri, 2017) and internalising behaviours, including low self-esteem and suicidal ideation (Potochnick and Perreira, 2010). Contemporary pedagogues maintain that affective, culturally relevant, student-centred practices should, therefore, take a prominent place in education (Cooper Stein et al., 2017). These practices should not, however, be limited to this population, lest schools miss the opportunity to promote greater empathy and understanding for all.

Numerous students immigrate from parts of the world with rich histories and unique perspectives. For some, the Eurocentric perspectives within American schools can seem foreign (Choi et al., 2011; Cooper Stein et al., 2017). Often, teachers are ignorant of their biases, and their dismissal of students' perceptions is unintentional (Cooper Stein et al., 2017). Social studies can be especially problematic for some students (Busey and Russell III, 2016; Choi et al., 2011). Educators may determine that students' struggles are due to a lack of background knowledge, but immigrant students often possess *more* background knowledge than the average student (Hernandez, 2013). For example, if a teacher references 'the civil war', students from some countries may conjure visions of 'the civil war' from their home country rather than the US Civil War.

Schools must develop best practices when considering the large percentage of students born outside the United States (Chaudry et al., 2010). Many immigrant students face disillusionment and hardship as they leave everything familiar behind in search of a new life (Bartlett et al., 2018; Hernandez, 2013). Disillusionment as a result of race, ethnicity or language can lead to disempowerment and impact on students negatively (Nieto, 2004). It occurs in self-evident ways, such as segregation, and more covert ways, including any discriminatory or exclusionary practices (Nieto, 2004). These often include the stigmatisation of students (Basic et al., 2018; Jussim and Harber, 2005). There is a danger of harming students' self-esteem by stigmatising them and disrupting the formation of self-image (Basic et al., 2018). Discrimination typically results in poor academic performance, but social support can buffer the negative impacts (DeGarmo and Martinez, 2006).

Valenzuela (2005) offers valuable insight. She coined the term *subtractive schooling* to describe practices in some schools that are specifically detrimental to Latin students. These practices subtract existing language and culture from the lives of Latin students and include mispronouncing students' names, prohibiting speaking Spanish, delivering Spanish language lessons at the same level to all irrespective of students' first languages, inappropriately interpreting texts from home countries and even tracking students (Valenzuela, 2005).

It is clear that advocacy and equity of learning are the key ingredients to a complete education (Staehr Fenner and Snyder, 2017). Van Ngo (2007) stresses that quality instruction maintains, at least in part, a focus on students' social experiences. Educators can strive to create an atmosphere of belonging (Mariscal et al., 2017; Rodríguez et al., 2020), demonstrate authentic caring (Valenzuela, 2005), implement a curriculum that offers cultural diversity (Busey and Russell III, 2016) and offer educational experiences that promote justice (Cammarota and Romero, 2006). It is advantageous to acknowledge the unique prior knowledge of immigrant students and build on this for more profound understanding (Dong, 2017).

Quality education explicitly offers students the opportunity to apply action with conviction. Counter-storytelling, telling stories of those whose stories are not well known, is a practical tool (Cooper Stein et al., 2017; Hernandez, 2013). Similarly, autoethnography, or asking students to self-reflect and write about their personal experiences, is beneficial (Hernandez, 2013). These approaches can be part of what Cammarota and Romero (2006) coined as critically compassionate education. 'We contend that educators can move towards a liberating education for Latino/a youth by combining critical pedagogy, authentic caring, and social justice content into one educational approach – a critically compassionate intellectual praxis' (Cammarota and Romero, 2006, p. 311).

Social pedagogy in the United States

Analysing certain practices within US education exposes a measure of social pedagogy executed in uniquely 'American' ways. That is to say that the practices are not mirroring those in Europe but are relevant all the same. Practices are relevant if they approach the 'heart of teaching' (Schoone, 2020, p. 2), develop the whole child (Rosendal Jensen, 2013), address systemic inequalities (Nouri and Sadjadi, 2014), promote democracy (Ryynänen and Nivala, 2019) and support freedom (Rosendal Jensen, 2013). In keeping with social pedagogy, educational programmes should point students and teachers towards understanding the social conditions affecting their everyday life (Nouri and Sadjadi, 2014). Any programme that does not address the whole child, social situation included, is likely to be ineffectual (Rosendal Jensen, 2013).

Critically compassionate education championed by contemporary US pedagogues aligns with the dimensions of social pedagogy. But what does this look like practically? This article seeks to address the schism between identifiable practices within the United States and social pedagogy's concepts in a delicate manner. The propensity within modern education towards evidence-based, prescribed practices may be advantageous at a surface level, but there is a risk of providing a 'false sense of security' (Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017, p. 23). Rosendal Jensen (2013) cautioned educators against viewing social pedagogy as a scientific approach to a profession.

The aim is to balance theory and practice (Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017), as an overemphasis on either provides an incomplete picture. Practices implemented without regard for context are likely to be ineffective (Hämäläinen, 2013; Petrie and Moss, 2019; Rosendal Jensen, 2013). Rather than relying on 'predetermined procedures, to be applied irrespective of context or circumstance, they [social pedagogues] seek to understand ... why something has happened and how best to respond to it' (Petrie and Moss, 2019, p. 399).

Identifying practices, although necessary, presents risks (Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017). An educator may seek to implement suggested strategies yet fail to understand or embrace the theories. These risks do not discount the value of identifying practices. 'It should be acknowledged that critical pedagogy in general and emancipatory pedagogy in particular needs to move from text to practice' (Nouri and Sadjadi, 2014, p. 78). In identifying the current practices that fall under the umbrella of social pedagogy, this 'move from text to practice' is more apt to happen and sound social pedagogy has the potential to develop stronger roots.

This article sought to uncover the intersectionality of social pedagogical ideals, foundational US educational theorists and contemporary scholars, and in doing so, 11 social pedagogical dimensions

found in the US education system have emerged. These are referred to as dimensions rather than practices, as a way to mitigate the risks discussed above. The frequency and fidelity of use may vary across states, schools and individual teachers.

1. *Encourage critical reflection* – Critical reflection involves examining and analysing the understanding of reality to uncover deeper power dynamics and societal contradictions. This process helps individuals expand their perspectives and encourages collaborative efforts towards positive social change. Action items could include the following: (a) from a problem-posing stance, read and discuss articles, newspapers and book chapters asking questions such as ‘why do different newspapers have such different interpretations of the same fact?’ (Freire, 1972, p. 122); (b) inspire confidence that change can come; and (c) maintain a posture of hope (Freire, 1972; Rynänen and Nivala, 2019).
2. *Create cross-generational opportunities* – Cross-generational opportunities involve open communication and interaction between students, teachers and community members from multiple generations. Action items could include the following: (a) invite guest speakers; (b) allow older students to work with younger students; (c) partner with nursing homes and (d) students and adults to act as co-investigators (Freire, 1972; Rynänen and Nivala, 2019).
3. *Facilitate cooperative learning* – Cooperative learning integrates community-orientated principles with structured group dynamics to enhance learning experiences and outcomes. Action items could include the following: (a) encourage interdependence by establishing a role for each student; (b) assign roles that are attached to potential careers; (c) emphasise the importance of all roles; (d) explain the *why* behind specific tasks and (e) facilitate horizontal communication (Addams, 1902; Cleary, 2019; Petrie and Moss, 2019; Rynänen and Nivala, 2019).
4. *Integrate schools, classes and concepts* – Integration involves connecting diverse ideas to create a cohesive learning experience that enhances understanding and application across different contexts. Action items could include the following: (a) integrate curricular concepts; (b) avoid all segregating practices; (c) explore themes from across disciplines; (d) intentionally include all students, notably those who do not speak English; (e) avoid overspecialisation (Addams, 1902, p. 206) and (f) offer a well-rounded education (Addams, 1902, 1912; Cleary, 2019; Kyriacou, 2009; Rynänen and Nivala, 2019).
5. *Explore generative themes* – A generative theme is a key idea or issue that is important and relevant to students’ lives. It helps them discuss and think deeply about social and cultural topics by connecting their own experiences to the world around them. Action items could include the following: (a) investigate topics that students feel strongly about; (b) guide topics towards desired learning; (c) explore themes from multiple perspectives; (d) investigate culture as a theme and (e) select encompassing themes of study (Addams, 1902; Freire, 1972).
6. *Promote healthy relationships* – Healthy relationships in education are supportive, respectful connections that foster trust, communication and positive learning experiences. Action items could include the following: (a) demonstrate authentic caring; (b) accept students and the identities that they bring; (c) centre teaching around relationships; (d) create an environment which students desire to experience and (e) seek to go beyond understanding students and move towards valuing students (Addams, 1902, 1912; Kyriacou, 2009; Manninen et al., 2019; Petrie and Moss, 2019; Valenzuela, 2005).
7. *Generate dialogue* – Dialogue involves an interactive and reflective conversation between teachers and students or among students themselves that promotes mutual understanding, critical thinking and deeper learning. Action items could include the following: (a) promote healthy conversations about race, class or any other potentially divisive topic; (b) draw attention to the motives of those in power while giving a voice to the oppressed; (c) demonstrate trust in students, as this is the basis for healthy dialogue and (d) choose student-centred topics (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017; Freire, 1972; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995).
8. *Explore cultural narratives* – Exploring cultural narratives involves examining and integrating diverse cultural experiences and perspectives to promote student learning. Action items could include the following: (a) encourage autobiographical writing; (b) be inclusive of all students, including multilingual students; (c) celebrate differences and (d) model learning from others (Addams, 1902; Cleary, 2019; Fabbian and Zanotti Carney, 2018; Freire, 1972; Valenzuela, 2005).
9. *Maintain a student-centred focus* – A student-centred approach ensures that learning is personalised, engaging and responsive to each student’s unique context and aspirations. Action

- items could include the following: (a) base learning on the students' hopes, dreams and aspirations; (b) connect to the students' futures; and (c) monopolise student experiences and social activities, as well as their affections and memories (Addams, 1902; Kyriacou, 2009; Freire, 1972).
10. *Teach through problem-posing* – Problem-posing is a dynamic educational approach that involves engaging students in real-world issues to foster active participation. It could also be referred to as problem-based learning. Action items could include the following: (a) present the world to students, not as a lecture but as a problem; (b) think with students, not for students; (c) pay attention to the authenticity of problems and (d) monopolise upon the natural curiosity of students (Addams, 1902; Dewey, 1903; Freire, 1972).
 11. *Empower students towards agency* – Empowering students involves giving them choices and a voice in their learning, allowing them to become active agents who shape their educational experiences and contribute to societal change. Action items could include the following: (a) empower students to make decisions and consider their impact on those around them; (b) avoid only teaching towards a career and instead explore what the meaning and relevance of the career is; (c) model ethical behaviour; (d) combine critical intellectualism with morality; (e) engage in true dialogue which involves reflection that leads to action; (f) give students opportunities to shape their world and (g) offer opportunities for social expressions of democracy (Addams, 1902; Boegeman, 2013; Freire, 1972).

Conclusion

Education within the United States has the potential to gift students an understanding of both the content being presented and the social undertones, yet there are potential consequences if students are not empowered to actively engage. These consequences may be as insignificant as a group project not being as high quality as it would have been with all members participating actively. The consequences may, however, be as significant as a social movement taking a detrimental course or not taking a course at all. Democracy within the United States is supported when students are empowered to engage through social pedagogical praxis and undermined when this is inhibited.

Research addressing social pedagogy exists primarily in journal articles published outside the United States. This article has sought to identify dimensions of social pedagogy currently evident within schools in the United States. It did not attempt to identify the fidelity of application. After examining research concerning social pedagogy, foundational US theorists and contemporary scholars of educating immigrant students, 11 dimensions were deduced. These include empowering students towards agency, critical reflection, cross-generational opportunities, cooperative learning, integrated schools and classes, generative themes, healthy relationships, dialogue, a student-centred focus, problem-posing and exploration of cultural narratives. While there is still more research to be done, it is the hope of this researcher that this article has served to develop what was known about social pedagogy in the US education system, specifically regarding immigrant students.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

This article was developed as a foundational piece for phenomenological qualitative research. Approval was granted by the IRB of Arkansas State University on 27 February 2023 (FY22-23-247).

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest in this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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