



## International Journal of Social Pedagogy

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### Social Pedagogy – When the Penny Drops

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## Social Pedagogy – When the Penny Drops

Nivan Dulai\*, Walsall Council

THEORY

PRACTICE

RESEARCH

*I had been working as a residential care worker for 5 years when my employer chose me to take part in a trip to Copenhagen, for 17 days' work experience funded by the EU Leonardo Mobility programme. This was to be the beginning of my journey with social pedagogy. With a focus on to learning more about social pedagogical practice with children with disabilities and challenging behaviour, I was very keen to make the most of my experience and placements. The first of my two placements was at a kindergarten, where I learnt that social pedagogical practice is clearly embedded in the first stages of education and childcare. In my second placement, I saw social pedagogy in motion. The abstract idea I had of social pedagogy now became something tangible and, for me, the penny dropped.*

**Key words:** social pedagogy; early years; risk; practice

Kildehuset is a kindergarten situated in a leafy suburb of Copenhagen, where I spent 4 days working alongside a team of 10 pedagogues who care for 50 children, ranging from nursery to kindergarten age. During one of the days at the kindergarten, an ideal learning situation for me presented itself when a group of older children found a hole in a metal wall in the garden. This stood in front of another wood panelled wall. The hole resulted in a space in which the children were able to hide and play. One of the pedagogues explained that this wasn't perhaps the safest place to play in, especially as some of the younger children also wanted to hide in this area. What surprised me was that the children listened, understood and helped the staff to make this area safe by blocking the entrance to the hole up. The youngsters were more than excited to get involved, they dragged chairs, tables, whatever they could physically move to help keep the area safe. The pedagogue then explained to them that they would now call someone out to fix the hole and make it secure.

Later in the day, during the next playtime incidentally, 3 or 4 gardeners arrived and went to work in the playground amongst 30 or so children. There was no talk of sending all the children indoors or keeping them at bay to avoid a potential safeguarding risk. The workers walked back and forth from the fence to their vehicle outside the gates, and although Kildehuset staff were present, at no time were they escorting the workers or discouraging the children from being curious. Pia, one of the pedagogues, stood with a group of interested youngsters and explained exactly what they were doing; they could see how the gardeners were making the fence safe, and the children asked questions and helped de-clutter the area. The fence was fixed, the workers left, and the children

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carried on playing. All sounds very normal, yet had this occurred in an educational setting or children's home in the UK, I would be inclined to say that the area would have been cordoned off, if not the entire playground made out of bounds until the fence was fixed, and no longer posed a risk.

When I spoke with Pia she explained that, by keeping the children involved in the process, they would gain a better understanding of the situation. They now understood that the fence had previously not been safe, they understood how to make it safe temporarily – and had helped to do so - and that it had now been fixed securely by professionals. This resonated with me as I know that personally I learn best when experiencing or actually doing something myself, so why should this be any different to a child's way of learning?

I can recall at this point standing on the playground with Pia, surrounded by kindergarteners, recalling situations I had experienced in my own work place where, instead of enabling a young person to learn something by means of actual experience, it seemed easier or quicker to solely explain it. Realising this frustrated me, as it is such a basic concept, yet, when stepping through the doors at work and putting on a corporate or 'work' hat, all of sudden things that I would do normally under other circumstances don't really occur to me as the obvious answer. I began to challenge my own practice and how I engage with the young people I work with.

Returning from my experience in Copenhagen I have actively reflected a great deal more and this has been hugely beneficial to me and my ongoing practice. I feel I have a slightly more realistic view about the work I do, in terms of having a personal and a professional opinion when carrying out work or setting targets or goals with young people. I still struggle to put pedagogy into a tidy definition, however, having seen it in practice, lived it for 17 days and seen how it feels so culturally embraced by the pedagogues in Denmark, I have a much better and clearer understanding of it. Although I may be unable to verbalise it, I have been lucky enough to learn by example and experience, which for me, is pertinent to my ongoing learning as a professional care worker. My experiences will last a lifetime and the lessons I have learnt will influence my future decisions and practice as a key person in the lives of the young people that I work with.

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\* **Nivan Dulai** works in an English residential care home alongside children and young people with profound, complex physical and/or learning needs. No two days within the home are the same; there are many hats that need to be worn in order to provide a holistic, well-balanced approach to caring and building relationships with the young people. Her main duties are to support the overall well-being of the young people, with the aim to provide a nurturing, happy environment which enables the young people to develop both emotionally and physically, as well as gain skills which can facilitate them in their adult lives. The most rewarding aspect of her role is to support young people to accomplish developing a skill that benefits and serves them. Knowing that they have learnt and gained something which will help them in the future is definitely a fulfilling aspect of her work.

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