The Social Pedagogy Toolkit: Relationship-based Social Work with Adults

Abstract:

This article examines the urgency and centrality of relational social work. It discusses the potential of social pedagogy for empowerment and social justice and introduces a Social Pedagogy Toolkit for social workers. Written by a Principal Social Worker who also lectures in Social Work, it revisits Morgan's (2012) work on threshold concepts in social work education and argues the need for creative resources that support transformative processes. It concludes with a discussion on further development and application of the toolkit.

Relationship-based Social Work

Relationships are at the heart of social work practice (Trevithick, 2014). Critically, relationships are both what adults with lived experience of social care most value (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014), and the greatest source of successful outcomes (Ingram and Smith, 2018).

Despite this, relationship based practice within social work is increasingly challenged by the dominance of market-based neo-liberalist approaches (Parton, 2014), and a pervasive managerialist culture (Trevithick, 2014). Aided by the creeping professionalisation of social work (Munro, 2011), practice has become increasingly emotionally austere, reflecting wider socio-economic austerity (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016), whilst ignoring the structural inequalities that lie beneath individualised personal experience (Fenton, 2019). The number of adults with care and support needs is increasing, as is their and their carers' dissatisfaction with services (NHS Digital, 2022). Conversely, the number of adults' social workers employed by councils is falling (Community Care, 2022), with ethical stress (Fenton, 2014) and the negative impact of Covid-19 on relationship based social work practice (Pascoe, 2022) cited by many.

Within contemporary social work organisations, it can be difficult to see relational values explicitly articulated and 'alive in practice' (Charfe and Gardner, 2020). There may be deeply ingrained paternalistic practices (Jackman, 1994) that foster 'structured dependency' for many older people in particular (Beresford, 2022). Social workers with adults, in the most recent survey of how local authorities are meeting the standards for employers of social workers, spoke about widespread pressures that impact on their time, and the nature and quality of the work they are able to do (Local Government Association, 2022). In the face of this, there is an urgent need to reclaim the values and ethics at the heart of what it means to be alongside people (Rogers, 1951). Social work with adults is so much more than a technical/rational approach to market-adopted transactions (Lorenz, 2005). It is about the ethics that underpin our relationships, and central to it are social justice and human rights (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Relationship based social work – and any threat to its practice – is not just a professional matter, but a political one (Cooper, 2018). The very real challenge of neo-liberalism for social workers (Garrett, 2010), is to be able to

do ‘proper social work’ (Fenton, 2019, p.9) that is grounded first and foremost, in purposeful relationships.

Relationship based social work is not simply about what we do, but authentically about the how and the why. Relationships that are valued and nurtured have long-lasting transformative potential for the creation of hope and self-belief (Trevithick, 2003), and optimism, essential for mental wellbeing (Crittenden, 2014). When social workers see people ‘in the light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, however dashed and distorted these may have become through circumstance, oppression and trauma’ (Saleebey, 1996, p. 297), we do not limit the potential for change. For Fenton (2019), ‘Getting close to a person provides protection against distant, bureaucratic and oppressive practice…..A real relationship fills the space which might otherwise be occupied by prejudice, stereotyping and assumption’ (2019, p. 79).

Social Pedagogy and the Social Pedagogy Toolkit

Relationships are also at the heart of social pedagogical approaches to working with people. Social Pedagogy, the ‘cousin’ of social work (Doel, 2012, p. 39), integrates a humanistic philosophy which values the unique potential of all people, with a robust political rejection of individualised social pathology (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2017). It does not provide a prescriptive method or model of delivery; rather, it is an ethical and conceptual orientation for practice (Hämäläinen, 2003).

‘The basic idea of social pedagogy is to promote people’s social functioning, inclusion, participation, social identity and social competence as members of society….social pedagogy is not a method, nor even a set of methods….an action is not social pedagogical because certain methods are used therein but because some methods are chosen and used as a consequence of social pedagogical thought’ (Hämäläinen, 2003).

Social pedagogy is about education in its broadest sense, creating opportunities for enhanced wellbeing and social inclusion through holistic, everyday learning (ThemPra, 2017). Empowering relationships are the basis of social pedagogical approaches that have developed primarily within mainland Europe (Hämäläinen, 2015), with emerging scholarship within the UK around its wider relevance for older people and other marginalised groups (Smith, 2012; Hatton, 2013).

The Social Pedagogy Toolkit (Squires, 2022) has been developed to bring social pedagogical approaches to life within contemporary social work education and practice with adults. It examines the insights and relevance that social pedagogy has for relationship-based social work with adults and introduces key concepts within social pedagogy. Reflecting the holistic ‘head, heart and hands’ (Pestalozzi, cited in Heafford, 1967) approach of social pedagogy, the toolkit brings together some everyday practice realities with opportunities for reflection, learning, and aligning relationships at the centre of social work.

Lorenz (2008) likens Social Pedagogy to ‘a mirror in which the social work tradition can become aware of its own rich but also contested diversity that already contains many of the same elements as the social pedagogy tradition’ (p.641). Many elements of strengths and

asset based approaches within social care resonate with the concept of meaningful belonging within social pedagogy (Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017). What sets this apart however, is the value placed upon the power and potential of the relationship between a worker taking a social pedagogical approach to their work alongside a person to build confidence and self-esteem (bonding) with the aim of social inclusion and participation (bridging).

Haltung, a German word with no direct English translation, but understood as an ethos, or an ethical orientation. The twin 'pillars' of our *haltung* (Muhrel, 2008) are to have an empathic understanding and deep respect for humanity. *Haltung* acts as a guide for practice, connecting our personal and professional selves. It provides a framework for locating and resolving the tension that exists when these are in a state of disharmony.(Fenton, 2016).

Threshold Concepts in Social Work Education: Revisited

Morgan (2012) uses the notion of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003; Land et al., 2008) to illustrate the paradigmatic shift in thinking required of many social work students when they first encounter the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; 2004). Students who have embarked on a social work education, motivated by a genuine desire to help, and make a positive difference, are confronted by very different perspectives within disability studies, and in particular, the social model of disability. These challenge the very premise that social work helps disabled people, suggesting instead that 'for many disabled people, social work has been part of the problem' (Morgan, 2012, p. 221). The social model of disability raises fundamental questions about whether disabled people even need social workers at all (Sapey and Pearson, 2004).

Grasping the social model of disability, therefore, has significant implications for social work practice within many statutory contexts. Considerable challenge exists in acknowledging and letting go of professional power and control within working relationships, as well as working alongside people in ways that develop creative and innovative solutions rather than defaulting to traditional and predictable service options (Sapey and Pearson, 2004). Threshold concepts are defined by their transformative and irreversible capacity (Meyer and Land, 2003). Like the social model of disability, social pedagogy is similarly transformative in its conceptualisation of people, power and relationships. Central to social pedagogical approaches is the concept of education and holistic learning in its broadest sense; across the lifespan and in relation to the everyday potential for positive experiences (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). Unlike contemporary social work, social pedagogy does not operate from a deficit orientation (Lorenz, 2008) but from a position that each human being is intrinsically valuable, deserving of respect, and full of their own unique potential for creative and positive change (ThemPra, 2017).

Disconcerting, troublesome knowledge such as this (Perkins, 1999 cited in Meyer and Land, 2003, p. 2) requires social work education both in the classroom and in community fieldwork settings, to anticipate and support the journey through a liminal space into a place of new understanding. Morgan suggests that:

‘Developing a range of resources that showcase alternative, creative and effective forms of practice and service provision has a considerable impact on students’ ability to envisage working in these types of ways and enables them to think about the sorts of skills, knowledge and experience they will need to develop’ (2012, p. 222).

The toolkit recognises that critically reflective social work is required in order to recognise and re-frame the sometimes unconscious positioning of social workers as expert, and people as individual, passive recipients of care and expertise (Gardner, 2014). Such approaches also risk the misconception of individuals as separate from their social context, and the assumption that solutions for social ‘problems’ are the responsibility of the individual rather than wider society (Cousee et el., 2010).

Sharing the toolkit within social work teaching and workshop sessions has provided opportunities for rich, integrative discussion with students on the foundation and building blocks for values based relational work with adults. From exploring our own values and the language we use to describe our work, to listening and questioning skills and the use of ourselves in practice situations. The toolkit has in itself the capacity to become a ‘Common Third’ (Lihme, 1988), a social pedagogical concept used to describe a shared learning activity between two people, providing an empowering, positive experience. It consciously approaches relational ways of working as necessary in all situations, even where engagement may be involuntary (Smith et al., 2012), and not just in some circumstances, by social workers with special training. Working in relationship centred ways might be easy to talk about, but they require skills, reflection, and practice to achieve (Trevithick, 2014). The toolkit concludes with ideas and resources for students and practitioners to continue their learning and extend their learning relationships to others.

Conclusion

The Social Pedagogy Toolkit has been developed as an accessible and affirming resource for students – and more experienced social workers – to nurture their relationship skills and values. It is a free resource and accessible to people who might otherwise be excluded from learning due to the cost of a textbook (Anthony and Venable, 2019). It may also offer opportunities for critical reflection within social work environments where a practice focus on the value of relationships may be limited (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016).

The toolkit directly addresses the challenge within the Knowledge and Skills Statement for social workers in adult services, which states that ‘The Care Act 2014 puts the principle of individual wellbeing and professional practice of the individual social worker at the heart of adult social care and signals a move away from care management as the overriding approach to working with adults. Social workers need to apply a wide range of knowledge and skills to understand and build relationships, and work directly with individuals, their families and carers to enable and empower them to achieve best outcomes’ (Department of Health, 2015). The toolkit directly addresses the transformative concept of the need for relational ways of working, and was particularly effective in helping students to reframe how they view their role, power, the notion of ‘helping’ and the importance of relationships at all stages of the lifecourse, including with older people (Hafford-Letchfield, 2010).

Perhaps most importantly, students took away a greater sense of their own potential to transform their practice in relational ways, and of the unique richness of every opportunity for learning and developing that they will encounter in their life and work.

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