
Practice Paper

A good day at work. But what really is a good day at work?

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Abstract

Social pedagogy encourages practitioners to view everyday situations as potential learning opportunities for young people and to support them to learn through doing rather than being told. This article uses a reflective account from an experienced residential care practitioner to illustrate how creating a space in sports activities for young people to learn together and support each other to solve problems can provide an opportunity for young people to develop valuable interpersonal skills and relationships with each other.

Keywords: social pedagogy; residential child care; sports; learning

Social pedagogy as being: What does it mean?

Social pedagogy is all about *being* – being authentic and genuine, being supportive and empowering, being present, finding the learning in the everyday and, of course, being with others – relationships. All this being, but what does it mean? Well, it is not so much about ‘what’ you do, but more about ‘how’ you do it. But wait. Daily, as a participation and lifeskills manager, I find myself filling in paperwork, sending emails and recording key performance indicators that capture *what* has been done, not *how* it has been done.

Outputs measurement has become commonplace. How else will we know and be able to share what we are doing well? We are all pretty good, in residential care, at recording that a young person left the building to attend a football session or went to school; less is done to capture the impact and change in that young person as a result – and these are the outcomes that really matter! It is not just that we do not routinely record these things. Sometimes a drive for success in terms of outputs can actually stand in the way of what really matters for the children and young people in our care – the outcome.

Outcomes that matter?

I wanted to explain this a bit more with a recent example from my own practice. Last Thursday I was part of a small group of staff who organised a football training session for boys who regularly take part in different football initiatives. We have been running football sessions two or three times a week for a couple of years. Thanks to social pedagogy providing a helpful framework called the 4Fs (facts, feelings, findings, futures) (Greenaway 1992), we have found time after sessions to question, reflect upon and develop our practice to make those sessions even better for the young people that attend.

Recent reflections have led us to identify that a drive to get good ‘outcomes’ as in ‘run a successful football session, where young people turn up, play football and go home in a good mood without experiencing any really difficult emotions (so they still want to come back)’ had meant that we were drifting away from one of our initial aims with football, which was to practice in a socially pedagogic way. Many social pedagogues have championed the idea that the experience required for holistic learning is participation in community life (Smith 2009). We hoped that the football pitch could become that community or common life – a place where there are group activities, where people cooperate, where adults and young people exist as equals, learn through interaction and have a common endeavour. However, recently, we had forgotten about learning. We had tried to remove all the messy relational stuff so we could record a good output. We needed to get our muddy classroom back. Additionally, that night we did and the pitch became a cold, dark, grassy, mighty place of learning. Rather than run the session and make difficult decisions for young people, reducing the risk of conflict but also removing opportunities for them to experience disagreement and work together, learn to value and trust one another, be generous and collectively problem solve and create, on this evening we gave them back an opportunity to learn to do this for themselves.

The polished version of this story would skip to the end and tell you how they all pulled together and created a team sheet and strategy and had the best game of their lives, but that would be to skip the messy part and that is the important part. For this group of young people, this group work was hard. We asked them to collaborate with each other to identify each other’s strengths and preferences on the pitch and then use this information to make a game plan that everyone understood and felt a part of. For a group who between them speak five different languages and only meet once a week for a 40 minute game of football where their feet usually do most of the talking, this was a challenging task. As the boys commented during this pre-game planning session, it did not feel at all good and was something they would have preferred for us as ‘staff’ to do for them. However, they persisted. We had to persist too. We want football to be a success for the boys and sometimes it can be hard to see them getting frustrated with each other, with themselves, expressing feelings of ‘not being able to do it’ or wanting to ‘give up’. It can be hard to see these and not dive in and show them how to do it, but we kept our distance, wanting them to learn the skills to be able to do this for themselves and to learn the skills to deal with these difficult feelings. Better than any game of football or incredible Zlatan-esque goal 20 minutes into the session, they were no longer spread out in pairs and friendship groups, but huddled together,

as a group, over a piece of paper on which they were drawing their game plan having learnt how to communicate with each other, negotiate, involve quieter voices and resolve differences of opinion with peaceful compromise. This was a powerful image and one I will not forget quickly.

Reflective learning in and through the group

It turns out it was one the boys will not forget either. On the way home from the training session that evening every single player made a choice to travel as a group. This was the first time these 10 boys had left a football pitch as one and not dispersed to make separate journeys in different directions and at different speeds. I spent a moment thinking together with this group of boys about the experience of creating their team and their game strategy together. One of them said 'yeah, we have a squad now', another 'it was hard but now I feel like we can play together', another 'I didn't want to do it. It was long. But yeah I think it was good. Yeah.' Another said 'it feels more equal'. Really, the way they were with each other since this activity spoke louder than any of their words.

The next day they played their game strategy in an 11-a-side game, won 8-4 and for the first time in 2 years played for an entire 90 minutes without making a negative comment to a team mate that made a mistake. On the journey home from that game, I heard one pair say to each other 'I think I know what was different, it was because we did that team sheet thing yesterday'.

So what did I take from this?

Social pedagogy is not about best practice – it is about *better* practice. Encouraging us to reflect, to look for ways to improve our work and sit with the discomfort of stepping back, to allow group processes and learning leads to better outcomes for young people and these are the outcomes that really matter. It reminds me of something of which I am becoming increasingly aware – the activity in itself may have wide ranging benefits, but it is also very powerful at being the vehicle within which relationships are formed (in this case between young people themselves) and in which learning takes place. It reminds me that while *outputs*, such as the number of football sessions run, are important, they are tangible and help us to be accountable and demonstrate value; what really matters for young people are *outcomes*. As practitioners, we have a responsibility to ensure that our practice is always creating opportunities for learning and relational development that contribute to these important outcomes.

Author biography

Alex Jones is Participation and Lifeskills Manager, St Christopher's Fellowship, London, which runs 36 residential children's homes and leaving care homes in the UK and on the Isle of Man and has adopted a social pedagogic framework for its policy and practice.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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