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**The role of social pedagogy and civic engagement**

**in helping troubled 14-year-olds**

Chris Kyriacou

*This paper focuses on the role that can be played by social pedagogy and civic engagement as a means of supporting troubled 14-year-old pupils to sustain their engagement in school work over the crucial two year period leading up to their GCSEs.*

Keywords: social pedagogy; civic engagement; troubled pupils.

One of the major challenges facing schools is how best to help troubled 14 year old pupils to be engaged in their schooling in the two-year period leading up to their GCSE examinations (Hayden, 2007; Kyriacou, 2003). There is little doubt that success in gaining GCSE passes at the age of 16 years is a pivotal moment in a young person’s life course. Success in GCSEs opens up a number of educational and career opportunities. Failure at this stage can have a powerful negative effect on one’s life chances that can be very hard to rectify later. This paper focuses on the role that can be played by social pedagogy and civic engagement as a means of supporting troubled pupils to sustain their engagement in school work over this crucial two-year period.

Social pedagogy (in the context of work with children) refers to an enduring one-to-one relationship between a child and a social pedagogue designed to foster the welfare, care, education and socialisation of the child in a range of settings, which includes residential care, nurseries, pre-school play groups, schools, youth clubs, hospitals, and young offenders units. Social pedagogy is widely practised in mainland Europe, where being a social pedagogue is a professional qualification in its own right, and social pedagogy also features as part of the education and training of a wide range of other professionals involved in working with children (Cameron and Moss, 2011; Kornbeck and Jensen, 2009; Stephens, 2009). At its heart the practice of social pedagogy with children involves four key features:

1. It is based on a long-term enduring relationship between the child and the social pedagogue, often sharing the same life space which enables interactions to occur on a regular basis.
2. The social pedagogue takes a holistic view of the child’s needs, much in the same way that a typical parent would view the needs of their child (social pedagogy can be viewed as a form of substitute parenting).
3. The key task of the social pedagogue to promote the child’s well-being. This can be done by taking practical action in meeting the child’s care, welfare, social development, and educational needs; by helping the child to develop a positive self-esteem; and by empowering the child to make decisions and take actions that promote their development and well-being.
4. The social pedagogue works closely with the child’s parents/carers and other professional agencies to address the child’s needs.

In recent years increasing attention has been paid in England to the notion of social pedagogy as a means of addressing the needs of vulnerable children in a range of settings. This increasing attention was promoted by the introduction of the ‘Every Child Matters’ agenda and a recognition of the need to improve the practice of professionals working with children. The practice of social pedagogy in mainland Europe, particularly in Scandinavia and Germany, was seen by some to provide a possible way ahead for working with children in England (Cameron *et al.,* 2010; Coussée *et al.,* 2010; DCSF, 2008). At the same time, a focus on how to ensure that more pupils gained success at GCSE level, in part fuelled by international comparisons of educational attainment, has intensified the concern about those pupils who gain few, if any, passes at GCSE level.

In the context of schooling, this has led to a consideration of the need to identify pupils who are a ‘cause for concern’ and to consider how the practice of social pedagogy in a school setting could help address these pupils’ needs (Kyriacou, 2009; Kyriacou *et al.,* 2009). It is important, however, to note that social pedagogy in schools is based on taking a holistic view of the child’s needs: personal, social and academic. A key feature of such ‘intervention’ work can be described in terms of helping the pupil to develop a more positive psycho-social identity (as a confident, can-do person, who feels himself/herself to be part of the mainstream of society) and who possesses the type of personal and social skills that will enable them to thrive in modern society (Bryderup and Frørup, 2011)

Research on troubled pupils has indicated that the causes for concern can range across a wide variety of issues (Kidger *et al.,* 2010; Kyriacou and Uhlemann, 2011; Riley *et al.,* 2006). These seem to fall into four broad areas. The first area deals with concerns about ‘poor academic attainment’ particularly in the core areas of literacy and numeracy. The second area deals with concerns about ‘disaffection’ as indicated by misbehaviour, truancy, and poor career aspirations. The third area deals with concerns about ‘poor psycho-social development’ as indicated by anti-social behaviour, having worries, being unhappy, poor social skills, and feeling excluded. The fourth area deals with concerns about an ‘unhealthy life style’ as indicated by eating problems, alcohol and drug abuse, and involvement in gang crime.

In such circumstances, the social pedagogue could be a teacher at the school, another member of staff at the school (such as a teaching assistant, learning mentor, school counsellor), or an adult based outside the school (e.g. a social worker, youth group leader, adult mentor, educational psychologist). What is crucial here is that the social pedagogue is in regular contact with the pupil over a long period of time and takes a holistic view of the pupil’s needs.

As already stated, one of the key features of the social pedagogue’s role is that of empowering the pupil. In this context much has been made of the empowering nature for pupils of civic engagement. Civic engagement can be defined as community-based action aimed to improve society and the well-being of others which shapes and informs one’s political beliefs, values and behaviour. For many pupils described as troubled, vulnerable, at-risk, a cause for concern, one of the barriers they often face is a sense of helplessness in the context of the adverse circumstances in which they find themselves. A relationship with a social pedagogue through positive mentoring can help the pupil to overcome this sense of helplessness, gain an insight into their adverse circumstances, and a sense of what they need to do in order to turn the situation around for the better. Such mentoring can lead on to civic engagement by pupils based either on the pupil’s pre-existing concerns or on concerns prompted by becoming involved in community action groups drawn to the pupil’s attention by the social pedagogue or by others. Such civic engagement provides four main benefits for such pupils:

1. It provides an opportunity to contribute to society by helping others.
2. It provides an opportunity for positive social interactions with others leading to a sense of community inclusion.
3. It provides an opportunity to develop new understandings and skills regarding social interaction and the ability to participate as a member of a social group.
4. It provides an opportunity to develop a more positive self-esteem, psycho-social identity and sense of empowerment.

However, it is important that the nature and type of civic engagement chosen by the pupil is one where the pupil views the activity as important, meaningful, relevant and of value. Civic engagement by 14 year old pupils can take many forms, but the most widely cited examples involve volunteering activities (Cremin *et al.,* 2011; Morimoto, 2010; Spring *et al.,* 2007). For example, the activity could involve helping to clear an area of a nature reserve so that animals and plants can thrive there; acting as a learning mentor for younger pupils in the school, particularly in the area of literacy and numeracy; acting as a peer mediator providing support for pupils being bullied; taking part in a campaign to protect or improve council leisure facilities for adolescents; taking part in a drugs awareness campaign. Such civic engagement by 14 year olds will, however, need to be supervised by appropriate adults.

The key difference between volunteering *per se* and civic engagement, is that the latter goes beyond simply doing something that is good and worthwhile, by being embedded in an understanding by the pupil of why the activity is good and worthwhile. This understanding may involve reference to key ideological concepts such as social justice, power, rights and responsibilities. A critical understanding by pupils of the value of the activity is what makes it a civic act. Moreover, Barber (2010) has argued that we need to consider the nature of the pupil’s involvement in the decision-making process to take part in the activity; the greater the extent to which the pupil has taken an active role in the decision-making process, the more likely it is that participation in the activity will be experienced as empowering.

The development of such understanding is more evident in civic engagement which takes the form of advocacy activities. These can take various forms. In issue-based advocacy schemes, pupils are helped to act as a pressure group by identifying a key area of concern and then advocating changes that need to be made to the organisational and political agencies with direct responsibilities for the matter of concern. If the concern is about a school matter, this could take the form of making the case to the headteacher. In support-based advocacy schemes an individual (usually an adult) acts on behalf of a pupil (or group of pupils) whose ‘voice’ needs to be heard in terms of their care and welfare concerns. Support-based advocacy is often part of the role of the social pedagogue. However, pupils also can act in this way in schemes where they are offering peer support to younger pupils. A number of schools, educational, social and welfare services, and charities operate schemes to involve pupils in advocacy activities (Blake and Frances, 2004; Stoneman, 2002).

Being supported by a social pedagogue and taking up the opportunity for civic engagement will not be easy to establish for many troubled pupils, but the benefits for pupils of both social pedagogy and civic engagement are evident. Recent initiatives involving the work of social pedagogues working with pupils in a range of settings in England, including the employment of social pedagogues trained in mainland Europe (Cameron *et al.,* 2010; Palomares, 2011) suggests that extending social pedagogic work into the school setting and providing opportunities for civic engagement could play a useful role in helping to sustain the engagement in schooling of troubled 14 year old pupils during the critical period leading up to their GCSEs.

**Correspondence**

Professor Chris Kyriacou, Department of Education, University of York, YO10 5DD.

E-mail: chris.kyriacou@york.ac.uk

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