**Social Pedagogy in Schools as a Promoter of Civic Engagement**

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**Abstract**

This paper draws upon multidisciplinary research in Europe, particularly at the interface between education, psychology and social work, to explore the extent to which the adoption of a social pedagogic approach in schools can provide a basis for promoting civic engagement. This paper focuses on the use of a social pedagogic approach to addressing the needs of pupils in secondary schools whose circumstances are identified as giving a cause for concern. Such concerns cover a range of problem areas, which includes poor attainment, disaffection, an unhealthy life style, child abuse (as the abuser or victim), bullying (as the bully or victim), physical and mental health problems, poor career aspirations and prospects, anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. The essence of social pedagogy lies in the empowerment of the pupil, through their relationship with a social pedagogue, in addressing the problem they are experiencing. Such empowerment can lead to civic engagement by the pupil in the short term (as a pupil) and in the long term (as a young adult and beyond) and by the social pedagogue in bringing about changes in policy and organisational structures that appear to contribute to the problem arising and/or making the problem difficult to solve. In some cases the pupil and social pedagogue may act together to argue for such changes to be made in their local community or beyond, and in some cases a group of pupils will act together to advocate change. The paper also draws, more specifically, on the emerging findings of an on-going research project looking at student teachers’ views concerning the adoption of a social pedagogic approach within schools in England, Norway, Switzerland and Greece, to highlight the implications of this approach for the civic engagement of teenagers and young adults.

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**Introduction**

In this paper I will be arguing that civic engagement can help troubled pupils to face and overcome their adverse circumstances, by enhancing pupils’ self-esteem, self-efficacy and sense of well-being, and will also help them to overcome a sense of social marginalisation by becoming part of a social network concerned to contribute to the common good and improve society. In addition, I will be arguing that social pedagogues are uniquely well placed to facilitate such civic engagement activities as part of their work in supporting troubled pupils.

A social pedagogue is an adult who works with a child in order to promote the child’s well-being. In many countries in mainland Europe social pedagogues receive professional training to work with children in this role, most commonly in residential care settings. Social pedagogues also work in residential care settings with adults who have learning disabilities. In addition, social pedagogues work within social services on interventions with children and families in their home setting, and with homeless adolescents living on the street or in non-secure accommodation.

The relationship between a social pedagogue and the child with whom they are working is based on the social pedagogue holding a caring disposition towards the child. This relationship is typically regarded as involving the type of concern for the child’s well-being that is normally displayed by a good parent. Parents, however, typically share a living space with their child on a daily basis, which enables them to discharge their caring role as part of their everyday interactions with the child. Social pedagogues who work with children in residential care settings can recreate this to some extent, and this ‘sharing a living space’ element of the work of a social pedagogue is generally held to be of great importance. However, in a school setting, this can only be recreated to a much more limited element.

In recent years in England, there has been much discussion concerning whether the role of a social pedagogue could make a useful contribution to meeting the needs of pupils in schools who are experiencing adverse circumstances as a result of which their wellbeing is under threat. A small proportion of such pupils may not be in contact with their natural parent, and may be living in residential care or foster care settings. However, the vast majority of pupils who are identified as a cause for concern will be living with one or both natural parents.

In working with a pupil in a school setting, a social pedagogue’s main task is to support the pupil in dealing with the problems they are facing and guiding the pupil towards adopting healthier behaviour and attitudes, which is intended to enable pupils to develop towards being able to live happy and fulfilling lives as adults. The social pedagogue’s key role can be viewed as a form of mentoring. The task is not to admonish, coerce or direct the pupil to change their behaviour and attitudes. Rather, it is through conversation and advice, that the social pedagogue seeks to encourage the pupil to be receptive to the need to make such changes in their own interests. The social pedagogue will also work with teachers in the school, with the children’s parents, guardians or carers, and with other professional agencies, to put in place practical support, opportunities and arrangements, which will be helpful to the pupil. A key aspect of this task in to ‘empower’ the pupil to take control over improving their situation. Part of this may involve a need to enhance the pupil’s self-esteem and self-efficacy. In addition, the social pedagogue may also need to explore whether there are features of the pupil’s situation (whether in their home setting or in the school setting) that are creating or exacerbating the problem. Indeed, an important aspect of the social pedagogue’s role is to critique and seek to change ways in which the problems that arise could have been prevented or can be dealt with more easily.

Education refers to the process of becoming a person, with understandings, capabilities and sensitivities. It is through Education that we become fully human, that we come to understand the world around us, and can contribute to our own well-being and the well-being of others. In the school setting, there are five aspects of the ways in which education can be discharged.

1. The **cognitive** domain: in seeking to foster intellectual development and academic attainment.
2. The **social** domain: in seeking to foster appropriate social behaviour towards others.
3. The **personal** domain: in seeking to foster self-esteem, self-efficacy and a sense of well being.
4. The **health** domain: in seeking to foster a healthy life style.
5. The **civic** domain: in seeking to foster moral values and attitudes in which the person seeks to play their part in helping others and contributing to improving society.

The cause for concern within the school may arise in the cognitive domain because of poor academic progress and general disaffection towards school work. Or it may arise in the social domain because of anti-social behaviour, most notably bullying, towards other pupils, or rudeness towards teachers. Or it may arise in the personal domain, because of evident unhappiness and lack of confidence. Or it may arise in the health domain because of involvement with drugs and alcohol. Or, finally, it may arise in the civic domain, through involvement in illegal activities, including gang crime, or expressing ideologically unacceptable moral views, for example, towards certain racial groups.

In this paper it will be argued that helping pupils to overcome the adverse circumstances in which they find themselves, can promoted by civic engagement in two ways. Firstly, civic engagement can provide a helpful vehicle through which pupils can come to think more clearly about their circumstances and empower them to overcome the problems they face. Secondly, it may provide opportunities for pupils to develop their self-esteem and self-efficacy by benefiting from the experience of acting as part of a social network involved in civic engagement. In both of these ways, the social pedagogue may facilitate such civic engagement, and may indeed participate in the civic engagement alongside the pupil

It is worth noting here that those who have experienced hardships during their school years can become strong advocates as adults of the need for society to address such problems, and can lead to them joining a political party or pressure group, and engaging in voluntary work with a charity or social issues network, in order to push for needed change. They may also decide to pursue a career in an area of work that deals with the problem area of concern.

**Social pedagogy in schools and civic engagement**

The practice of social pedagogy in schools can be described as 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. Three issues face us in considering social pedagogy in schools and civic engagement. Firstly, what type of concerns might usefully be dealt with by targeted support from a social pedagogue? Secondly, who might best take on the role of a social pedagogue? Thirdly, what case study examples exist of the beneficial effects for a troubled pupil of their involvement in civic engagement facilitated by a social pedagogue?

An on-going research project by the author and co-researchers in four countries (England, Norway, Switzerland and Greece) seeks to address these three questions. This research has identified a set of thirty areas of concern that are illustrative of the types of problems were troubled pupils might benefit from targeted support (see table 1). The first stage of data collection has been to explore student teachers’ views of the extent to which they think schools should take a lead role in addressing each of these areas of concern. This was undertaken to consider the extent to which beginning teachers feel this wider care and wellbeing of the child role is a legitimate and important part of the school’s priorities. Broadly speaking, the thirty problems fall into one of four levels of strength (from high to low), as shown in table 2. As expected, concerns in the area of poor progress in numeracy and literacy received high ratings as school priorities for action, whereas concerns in the area of an unhealthy lifestyle received low ratings. This indicates that beginning teachers’ view of the role of schools has not embraced the wider concerns regarding pupil care and wellbeing in equal measure (viz. a concern about numeracy is seen to be a much stronger priority for the school to take the lead in addressing than if the pupil in involved in drug abuse).

The second stage will be to work with teachers in schools to consider how pastoral care work with troubled pupils might be enhanced by social pedagogues. In England, an evaluation is currently underway of a government funded initiative which has involved the employment of social pedagogues trained in mainland Europe to work with pupils in residential care settings. Lessons to be learnt from the evaluation of this initiative may pave the way for social pedagogues trained in mainland Europe or the UK to work directly in schools to offer target support for troubled pupils. At the moment there are a plethora of teachers and other professionals working with pupils in school, who, to a greater or lesser extent, are already adopting a social pedagogic approach; these include teachers with specific pastoral care responsibilities (form tutors, heads of year, heads of house), teachers with specific responsibility for pupils with special educational needs, teachers with specific responsibility for inclusion, teachers with specific responsibility for community links and volunteering, learning mentors, support teachers, teaching assistants, educational psychologists, truancy officers, and social workers.

The third stage will be to work with social pedagogues and others adopting a social pedagogic approach, in order to identify case study examples of civic engagement by pupils facilitated by social pedagogues. Early indications from contacts with researchers in various European countries (particularly in Denmark and Spain) indicate that some useful case studies will not be hard to find.

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**Table 1: The thirty problem areas listed in the questionnaire**

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| --- | --- |
| 1. Unhealthy life style | 16. Unhappy and does not enjoy life |
| 2. Poor basic numeracy skills | 17. Alcohol abuse |
| 3. Being bullied by other pupils | 18. Unable to develop his/her special talents |
| 4. Poor career plans | 19. Victim of child abuse |
| 5. Disaffected with school work | 20. Unlikely to get a job |
| 6. Achieving poor grades in school | 21. Anti-social behaviour |
| 7. Not ‘looked after’ at home | 22. Bullies other pupils |
| 8. Poor sex education knowledge | 23. Eating disorder (eats too much or too little) |
| 9. Feels ‘excluded’ as a member of society | 24. Lacks social skills |
| 10. Poor basic literacy skills | 25. Mental health problems |
| 11. Medical care problems | 26. Drug abuse |
| 12. Physical disability problems | 27. Truants from school |
| 13. Involved in gang crime | 28. Misbehaves in class |
| 14. Unable to discuss worries with others | 29. Does not engage in social activities |
| 15. Immoral behaviour | 30. Has poor aspirations |

**Table 2: Overall ratings of the problem areas in terms of whether the school should take ‘the lead role’ in dealing with the cause for concern**

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| --- | --- |
| **Strength of the rating** | **Problem areas** |
| High | Poor literacy and numeracy skills  Bullying and being bullied  Pupil misbehaviour |
| Moderate | Disaffection with school work  Truancy  Poor career plans and aspirations  Poor grades in school |
| Modest | Victim of child abuse and lack of care  Anti-social and immoral behaviour  Feels excluded from society  Lacks social skills and does not socialise  Unhappy, has worries, and does not enjoy life |
| Low | Medical care problems  Unhealthy life style  Mental and physical health problems  Involvement in gang crime  Alcohol and drug abuse |