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Article

Social pedagogical perspectives on fidelity to a manual: Professional principles and dilemmas in everyday expertise

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Abstract

Manualised interventions, in use across the UK for decades and increasingly in use in Denmark, aim to support change through professional practitioners following detailed prescriptions of what they must do to affect a particular change in the target group. Social pedagogy, a strong professional tradition in Denmark and an emerging profession in the UK, takes an approach that responds to the individual's experience of the immediate situation, seeks to nurture relational opportunities and to empower people to fully participate in their lives and society. Harbo's research reveals that this approach can be at odds with manualised interventions for a variety of reasons. A social pedagogically informed programme has been developed in London that uses a clear ethical stance and key theories as its foundation, and upon which structures have been developed, but no manual. This article explores the use of these manualised and non-manualised interventions in Denmark and the UK and the roles of social pedagogues in supporting change through programmatic interventions. Harbo's doctoral research findings on

practice surrounding the highly prescriptive manual Aggression Replacement Training in Denmark (Harbo, 2019) is explored alongside Kemp's reflections on the social pedagogically informed Family Learning Intervention Programme in England, examining the tensions and synergies that emerge around each programme when they meet reality and the individual characteristics of day-to-day situations. The perspectives presented emerge from practice research and reflections, and as such are based in an experiential research tradition. Finally, we draw together our learning and openings for further research and policy development.

Keywords: social pedagogy; social work; social care; manual; manualised evidence-based treatments; evidence-based practice; evidence-informed practice; guiding principles; navigation methods; young people

Introduction

We see every day social care work and social pedagogical practice in both the UK and Denmark as practices influenced by many different incidents, values, agendas, policies, programmes and approaches, all handled by the social pedagogues or social care practitioners who are there, in that specific moment of time, with those particular young people, in that specific group, organisational context and a myriad of other spheres of influence. In recent years, political systems have introduced evidence-based practices (EBP) and manualised evidence-supported treatments (MEST) in the fields of both social work and social pedagogy (Webb, 2001; Nevo and Slonim-Nevo, 2011; Barth et al., 2012). This article considers one MEST in particular, making reference to other forms of evidence-based or evidence-informed practices.

It can be argued that the aim of introducing EBP and treatments in the field of social care was to create a transparency and assuredness about the efficacy of the approaches or treatments in relation to the welfare of social care service users, an assuredness that was as strong as drug treatment trials in health care. There appears to be an assumption behind the introduction of MESTs that the more a programme is described in detail in a manual, the easier it is to follow and the more likely it is that the desired outcome will be reached. Manual authors call for high fidelity to the programme/manual, which can be linked to the level of adherence; Carroll et al. (2007) argued:

Adherence is essentially the bottom-line measurement of implementation fidelity. If an implemented intervention adheres completely to the content, frequency, duration, and coverage prescribed by its designers, then fidelity can be said to be high. (p. 4)

Based on observations of our empirical material, we argue that a requirement for fidelity to the programme/manual might make more sense in a research perspective than in social pedagogical or social work practice, since the fidelity requirement seems to call for a shift of focus in practice. The programme/manual indicates that practice focuses on ensuring that the young people and practitioners continuously relate to the programme. Social pedagogical practice focuses on how to continuously relate to the young people, and how theoretically informed, situated social pedagogical judgements might best support the young people in managing their life-world (Jensen, 2018, p. 12) and reaching, in collaboration with the social pedagogue, what the young person decides to be their overall aim. In that sense and based on our empirical research, we argue that with the required necessity for high fidelity, evidence-based manuals risk a loss of sensitivity towards those involved in a programme and are likely to miss opportunities in the specific, day-to-day contexts that service users and practitioners find themselves in. Based on our analysis, we suggest that when it comes to methods or programmes, the nature of social pedagogical or social care practice calls for *Navigation Methods* (Jensen, 2010), structured around *Guiding Principles* (Rothuizen, 2004). This approach calls for the practitioners to act in everyday situations, using their professional knowledge and making situated judgements regarding what seems to support the intended process the best.

Content of the article

First, we show how practitioners who perceive a given evidence-based manual as a well-thought-out idea to structure practice around, paradoxically deviate from the manual in an effort to ensure that the young people continue to participate in the programme. Next, we show how the deviations seem to structure themselves around a handful of guiding principles, such as values, the individual and the group, and we show how social pedagogues discuss the evidence-based manual in relation to what we name here as consensus-based conditional programmes or navigation methods. A key element of this is that when social pedagogues are asked about their preferred way of structuring practice, they point towards the navigation methods, since these allow for situated practice. We as authors choose to pursue this and present a UK example of a consensus-based conditional programme (based on values that allow and enable practitioners to facilitate change through drawing on their everyday expertise in situ) where situated practice is a foundation of the programme. Finally, we draw together our learning from Danish and British perspectives and identify areas for further research.

Doctoral research and an evidence-based manual

There are a number of MESTs in use across the world today – multi-dimensional treatment foster care (MTFC) and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) are perhaps good examples. Harbo examined the programme manual for aggression replacement training (ART) (Gundersen, Olsen and Finne, 2008) and how it was used in practice by qualified and experienced social pedagogues. To briefly summarise ART's genesis, in the 1990s a group of American psychologists developed the programme in relation to young offenders (Goldstein, Glick and Gibbs, 1998). The programme was used in a variety of ways in different countries and, in the 2000s, a group of Norwegian practitioners and researchers translated and adjusted the programme into a Norwegian edition (Gundersen et al., 2008). Around 2010, the political system in Denmark sought more transparency regarding social pedagogical practice and looked to Norway for evidence-based manuals. In this sense, evidence-based manuals are those that claim it is possible to reach predetermined goals if practitioners follow the detailed descriptions in the manual.

The Norwegian manual related to ART contains 167-page-long description of the 10-week-long programme, including 30 training sessions (Gundersen et al., 2008). The descriptions are highly detailed; for instance, the introduction element of each training session contains these steps (Gundersen et al., 2008, p. 14):

Welcome

- *Bid the young people welcome*
- *Introduce guests if there are any*
- *Revisit the agreed rules*
- *ART-shout out ...*

Meanwhile, further into the training, a social skills session describes what practitioners must do (Gundersen et al., 2008, p. 33):

Define the social skill for the day: to offer a compliment (nr 8):

<i>Steps in the skill</i>	<i>Guidance for the trainer</i>
<i>1: decide what you wish to compliment the other person for</i>	<i>The compliment can relate to behaviour, appearance or accomplishments</i>
<i>2: Decide what you wish to say and how you wish to say it</i>	<i>Think about choice of words; variate your expressions (texts, thumbs up, smiles)</i>
<i>3: Choose the right place and time</i>	<i>Make sure you have the other persons attention</i>
<i>4: Offer the compliment and explain why you are giving the compliment</i>	<i>Be kind and authentic. Look the other in the eyes if you offer the compliment face-to-face.</i>

As the examples show, the level of detailed structure in the manual makes it possible to observe when the manual *is not followed*, for instance, if the trainers skip the 'ART-shout out' that is part of the introduction to the training session.

Methods

For her doctoral thesis 'Social pedagogy in different forms', the focus of Harbo's research interest was not the many situations where the social pedagogues followed the manual, but when they deviated from it, exploring interest in how a particular manual, that the Danish political system appeared to value due to its reported efficacy, is followed by social pedagogues (for more on this, see Harbo, 2013, which shows how different practice situations can be observed with both the theory on self-efficacy found in Bandura, 1977, 1997, and the concept of recognition in Schibbye, 2010). Harbo (2019) explored these deviations by first filming ART sessions, then watching the filmed sessions with those who were conducting the sessions, and then asking them to elaborate on situations where deviations from the manual occurred.

Research findings

Here we present examples of how the manual dictates a certain structure, how the social pedagogues in a specific situation *do something different* to the manual's stipulations, despite their intentions to maintain a high degree of fidelity to the manual, and how they describe the conditions for their deviations during subsequent interviews.

The description in the manual

As part of the programme, the young people are supposed to work on different tasks between the training sessions, such as practising a certain social skill. The young person then notes down on a reflection sheet how they addressed the homework task and hands the sheet to trainers/social pedagogues at the beginning of the next training session. According to the manual, it is

important that those who get the homework done, receive the recognition they deserve. Do not read out the homework or refer to it in training if it is not agreed with the young person . . . As an idea, it might be appropriate to establish a reinforcement system for accomplished homework such as stars, crosses or the like which is then visible for the rest of the training group. (Gundersen et al., 2008, p. 15, our translation)

Therefore, fidelity to the manual would be that the trainer/social pedagogue receives the homework sheets when the training session starts and that each homework sheet is not read out during training without the young person's prior agreement.

The filmed ART session

One of the film clips shows how Gro, a bachelor's degree-educated social pedagogue, as part of the introduction, asks the young people if they have done their homework. One of the young people, Adnan, answers very slowly since he has only been in Denmark for a few years and is new to the language. In the interview, where Harbo and Gro watch the film together, Harbo stops the film and asks Gro how she perceives the situation. Gro explains how she finds herself in a dilemma in the situation: on the one hand, it takes '100 years' for Adnan to go through his homework, and on the other hand, the rest of the group seem to 'be going nuts' in their aspiration to listen to Adnan with interest and at the same time handle their impatience with him to finish. In addition, Gro explains how ART is a rather packed programme that contains a lot of elements that require a rather fast pace. Gro finds that the young people have to be given the time to elaborate on their homework since that is a way for her to show them that she values their effort. If they just handed her the sheet at the beginning, they will not feel seen and listened to. In that sense, as Gro phrases it, 'they will not feel recognised'. 'Recognition' emerges as a central concept throughout the interviews and in that way, the interviews reflect a tendency in Danish social pedagogy to emphasise recognition as a central value. One could argue that recognition is a central element in the manual since recognition is mentioned quite a few times, whereby Gro's intention of recognising Adnan would show fidelity to the manual. However, in our view, the recognition concept in the manual is linked to prompting prosocial behaviour as decided by the professional. To us, Gro's intention differs from that because she wishes to show Adnan and the rest of the group that she *sees* them and that she *listens* to them. We link this kind of recognition to Anne-Lise Løvlie Schibbye, who describes this kind of recognition as a therapeutic subject–subject relation. Schibbye sees *listening* as empathic or active listening without prejudice and *seeing* as linked to understanding, acceptance and tolerance (Harbo, 2013; Schibbye, 2010).

Analysis

Gro's descriptions present a dilemma between the manual's requirement for a rather 'high-paced' practice and her understanding of learning as something that takes time. Gro took the time needed for Adnan to participate meaningfully, reflect on his homework and consolidate his learning, which, in turn, enabled him to feel 'recognised'.

We link this description of learning to the concept of reflexivity in Luhmann (2000), which, in short, is a question of 'communication communicating about communication' (p. 507). In the example

above, the reflexivity elicits Gro's intention to enable Adnan to talk through his homework in present time communication in the training session. Gro creates a possibility for Adnan to experience how she and the group perceive his work; they can ask him about it and Gro has a chance to enhance what she sees as successful in his work. If Adnan had just handed Gro his homework to begin with as the manual stipulates, this possibility for reflexivity might have passed since the homework could then be regarded as one-way, first-order communication and not as a learning opportunity.

There are many elements in ART and it seemed that Gro had an intention to cover all the elements within the 45-minute training session, including the self-added element with the young people presenting their homework to the group. This calls for a fast pace in the session. The sociologist Niklas Luhmann (2000, p. 85) described how systems can arrange themselves in ways that enable the system to increase the speed of its own processes compared to its surroundings. In our understanding, the 10-week-long ART programme can be seen as a way to increase speed in social pedagogical processes regarding aggression replacement. In this way, ART is supposed to create a form of *speed superiority*. However, in the example, Gro finds it critically important to *protract* speed in order to create space for reflexivity and recognition, whereas the ART's intended speed superiority does not seem to allow for reflexivity and recognition.

In our view, it seems as if recognition of the young people's effort with their homework and the possibility for reflexivity in this example is induced by the social pedagogues as a precondition for the young people's participation and learning in the ART programme, as is consistent with their professional practice ethic. ART does not contain expectations on reflexivity – as shown in the example above – or recognition in relation to seeing and listening to the young people in a subject–subject relation, nor does it contain an explicit value base. Rather the values are implicit in the structures, such as when we in the above see it as an element in social skills training to 'look someone in the eye' when talking to them. What becomes clear here is that the implicit values do not acknowledge that for some young people, looking an adult in the eye is seen as culturally inappropriate and potentially very rude. No acknowledgement of cultural difference is made within this manual, leaving professional practice potentially open to discrimination, especially if fidelity to the manual by the trainers is high.

We suggest that high fidelity to this manual in these social pedagogical perspectives seems to risk the young people's active and meaningful participation in the programme, and that the extra layer of recognition and reflexivity, rather than diluting the programme, functions as a vital support structure to the method.

One could argue that no one would expect practitioners to follow the structure in such detail or to that degree of fidelity to the method. In line with this, the authors of the Norwegian edition emphasise that the manual is to be seen as an inspirational catalogue and that the practitioners should pick and choose among the different elements, according to the specific group of young people (Gundersen et al., 2008, p. 6). On the other hand – but on the same page – it is stressed by the authors that the programme is among the best-validated programmes in the field of aggression replacement (Gundersen et al., 2008, p. 6). Validation indicates that high fidelity to the manual/adherence is a precondition for reaching the desired effect (i.e. replacement of aggression). This can be perceived as a dilemma by ART trainers/social pedagogues: when is the fidelity high enough, which elements can be excluded and which have to stay? In the example, Gro does not dismiss the programme – she still insists on bringing the manual's other elements into the session – her practice takes shape as a combination of ART, reflexivity and recognition. In the example there is a dilemma between speed protraction (reflexivity and recognition) and speed superiority (the fast-paced sessions). This tension is palpable when listening to the recorded interview.

Consensus-based conditional programme

In another interview, a social pedagogue offers a 'solution' to this tension with the suggestion of seeing the manual as not an evidence-based manual claiming effectiveness through high fidelity, but rather as a consensus-based conditional programme.

This interview shows how the social pedagogue 'Lis' introduces a training session that in the manual is named 'Anger control' (Gundersen et al., 2008, p. 82) by welcoming the young people to a session that addresses the theme 'Handling emotions' (Harbo, 2019, p. 127). In the interview she explains how

relabelling the session with an emphasis on emotions instead of merely anger, allows the young people to participate in another way: if the focus is solely on anger, Lis says the young people may feel ‘like a bunch of criminals’. With the label ‘Handling emotions’, the young people can address whatever feelings they wish to address – not only anger.

In the interview, Lis explains how she has discussed different alterations of the programme with both colleagues and programme developers. According to Lis, they all agree that they do not wish to end up with 28 different kinds of ART, since that would not be evidence-based. On the other hand, Lis stresses that it would not be possible for them as trainers to work with ART if they were not allowed to be different as humans. When asked how this links to a claim of EBP, she describes how they ensure a kind of uniformity by teaming up in pairs as trainers, they exchange experiences, they use the same material and use team development days where they offer feedback to each other.

Lis changes the title of a session from ‘Anger control’ to ‘Handling emotions’ to ensure that the participants don’t feel labelled and to create space for them to address a range of feelings including, but not limited to, anger. She introduces the change to the programme developer as a way of adapting the programme and allowing for responsivity, but the idea is rejected by the developer with reference to the evidence base relating to *anger*, not to *handling (other) emotions*. In this way, the idea of maximising the programme’s potential is rejected by the developer, which could be said to lead to social pedagogues towards more flexible methods and programmes.

The same tendency is seen with Lis as with Gro, where deviations (recognition, reflexivity, changed session title) aim to ensure that the young people wish to continue their participation in the ART programme. In relation to evidence and fidelity, we see how Lis tries to maximise the programme when she connects evidence to team development days, discussions with programme developers, trainer teams and so on. In that sense, evidence is described here as consensus among experts, whereby they link it to their professionalism and their everyday expertise, and not to the research-oriented concept of evidence, related to high programme fidelity/adherence. This suggests that the social pedagogues see social pedagogy as a professionalism that supports ART, as opposed to acting social pedagogically ‘within’ the manual.

With Luhmann’s systems theory we can link the social pedagogical perspectives on programmes like ART to conditional programmes – those that are guided by the conditions for communication (Luhmann, 2000, p. 372). With an example from the health system, clinical guidelines are supposed to aim at specific diagnosis – that is if the diagnosis is A then the treatment is B (Knudsen, 2005, p. 7); the medical model of *problem – treatment – cure*. Hereby, the form of conditional programmes ‘if . . . then’ emerges. It is argued that ART addresses a problem or diagnosis (aggressive behaviour) that it seeks to treat (replace with prosocial behaviour), which leads the following to emerge: *if* there is aggression, *then* ART will address it. In the example with Lis, it seems as if she does not see the simple diagnosis of aggression with the young people. Instead she sees a broader selection of emotional problems which can still be ‘treated’ with ART. Thereby the form changes into: *If problems with emotions, then ART*.

Lis reveals a variety among the trainers in the way that they conduct the programme, which she calls a ‘human approach’ (Harbo, 2019, p. 138). This exemplifies how the social pedagogues expand the trainer role by adding an extra layer which, inspired by the systems theory found in Luhmann (2000), we define as the trainers’ ‘personal style’ (p. 371). In relation to the manual, it can determine whether certain elements of a personal style function according to the manual or not, and how this might affect fidelity to the programme.

In light of the body of research on fidelity in relation to evaluation of evidence-based manuals, these deviations can be seen as essential components for the success of the programme (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 3). If our interest was to strengthen the transformational change potential of ART, we could suggest that the concept of ‘recognition’ (Schibbye, 2010) was implemented by the social pedagogues in their adaptation of the manual. But our intention is not to engage in further development of the manual – instead we pursue the suggestions regarding consensus-based conditional programmes as approaches that seem to resonate better with the social pedagogues and their practice situations.

This leads us to suggest an understanding of the programme as a consensus-based conditional programme, which again leaves room and space for the trainers' personal style and for concepts such as reflexivity and recognition.

Navigation methods and guiding principles

Practice fields such as social pedagogy or social work might call for different methodological approaches than evidence-based manuals, such as the ART manual, predetermine. Social pedagogical practice is described by [Rothuizen and Harbo \(2017, p. 22\)](#) as work in progress, supported by an inquiring approach, and performed on an imperfect foundation. In that sense it is argued that evidence-based manuals could *inform* rather than *form* practice ([Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017, p. 24](#)). Based on a literature review, [Harbo and Petersen \(2020\)](#) suggested that social pedagogues observe claims for causality and uniformity, as seen in MESTs for instance, as a challenge. This emerges in a broad variety of articles: Andersen describes the social pedagogical subject field as constituted by a wide range of factors that change over time and are difficult to unravel, making it unrealistic to define the optimal intervention to create tailored developmental changes for a specific child ([Andersen, 2013](#)). [Frørup \(2012\)](#) described social pedagogy as focusing attention towards content, processes and resources in specific situations. [Mørch \(2002\)](#) pointed out how it is absolutely crucial for social pedagogy to build on the complexity *in* the meeting between social pedagogue and a young person or a family. Only this can function as breeding ground for the social pedagogical approach ([Mørch, 2002](#)) and its coherent ethical framework for practice.

The Danish researcher Mogens Jensen ([2010](#)) suggested a differentiation between action-guiding methods such as MESTs and what he terms 'Navigation methods' (p. 197). In Jensen's descriptions, MESTs can be seen as answers to already known problems that potentially can be solved in the same way day after day. Navigation methods, on the other hand, can provide different *modus operandi* to handle different situations – characterised by the dynamics and complexity described by Andersen, Frørup and Mørch– while at the same time helping the social pedagogues to assess whether the chosen *modus operandi* is coherent with working towards an aim decided with the young person ([Jensen, 2010, p. 196](#)).

In navigation methods, practice is navigated from guiding principles. Jan Jaap Rothuizen ([2004, p. 151](#)) explored guiding principles in relation to practice as different kinds of everyday life that exist and which humans are already part of, act within and contribute to. In this understanding, knowledge-based practice is not related to methods that work. Rather, the focus is on the possibility for the practitioners to, at any given time, reflect on whether practice is moving in the right direction ([Rothuizen, 2004, p. 152](#)). In this sense, guiding principles function as a sub-term for themes like aims, indicators or values, which all can function as guiding principles in the construction of what [Rothuizen \(2004\)](#) termed 'assessment-relevant-knowledge', as opposed to 'know-it-all-knowledge' (p. 154). More specific examples of guiding principles could be to be significant to each other, shared power or the relation between social pedagogue and young person. As it shows, guiding principles do not have to be complicated but can be almost obvious ([Rothuizen, 2004, p. 162](#)). One finds guiding principles when examining practice, since practice is where guiding principles of relevance can be found. It is useful to examine any elements in practice that raise doubt, either because they seem esoteric or because it is not possible to identify any kind of progress. In that sense, situations that cause surprise can initiate the construction of guiding principles, as shown with Gro and Lis's experiences. The Family Learning Intervention Programme (FLIP) is an example of social care practice that structures itself around guiding principles.

Family Learning Intervention Programme (FLIP), London, UK

FLIP was established in 2014 as a radically different way to support birth, legal and substitute families to stay together when there is a risk that a child or young person may need to be brought into care or their care situation may be at risk of disruption or breakdown. Initially supported through an innovations fund from central government and now funded by the local authority, FLIP was established as a non-manualised intervention, founded on a strong value base that sees relationships, active participation, co-construction and collaboration with all family members and practitioners as central to its efficacy.

The social pedagogue's primary role is to facilitate supportive relationships within the group through ways that have real meaning for the family and can be sustained over time.

Whole families come to a large house in the countryside for about five days to work on their strengths and relationships in creative and meaningful (for them) ways. One of the central aims is to promote strong relationships between family members and the professionals supporting them, so the allocated social worker and other professionals come for all or part of the week, with the social worker as the lead professional. Social pedagogues and other FLIP practitioners support the family and other professionals to co-design a week that balances the need to address some difficulties with the need to notice and strengthen the positive aspects of this particular family's life and relationships and to nurture well-being. Life can be tough for the families – FLIP is a way for them to put their usual life on hold for a few days to concentrate on what might usually be difficult to spend time on, be supported to devise their own solutions, to remind themselves of what is joyous in their family and to develop trust with the professionals supporting them. In this way FLIP can be seen as a place and space for families to find new ways of coping with reality through navigating and shaping their own stories. A social pedagogue coordinates the process, and a detailed daily schedule is created through choosing activities and interventions to address what is important to the family and agreed with all those involved. Often the team veer from the schedule, in agreement with the family, to respond to the needs of the group or individuals in the moment. They create spaces and opportunities for learning, for positive memories to be developed, for recognition, for appreciation and for emotional connection.

Meaningful participation

Participation is a key concept at FLIP and constantly in the minds of its practitioners, just as for the ART trainers described previously. Should a member of the family or group indicate that they don't wish to participate in a particular pre-agreed activity, the FLIP team try to find other ways of actively engaging them and every family member. In this sense it is important for FLIP practitioners to 'know what to do when you don't know what to do' (Rothuizen, 2019). They found that for one young person, his active participation in sitting-down sessions was very difficult for him, so the team veered from the schedule to include more physically active sessions, particularly at the beginning of the day. How this individual could actively participate was discussed with him and his foster carers prior to attending FLIP but, once at the house, more information emerged over time, leading the FLIP practitioners to adapt the schedule to his emerging needs and wishes. Through adapting the schedule (remapping the terrain) and helping the young person to participate more meaningfully, the foster family were able to see him slightly differently and in ways that they later transferred to other parts of their lives together. A small adjustment based on the guiding principle of participation helped the FLIP team navigate through a tricky moment, and this, in turn, had wider benefits for the young person and his carers, sustained over a longer period of time. High fidelity to the guiding ethics and values in delivering the tailored schedule can be said to have shaped the success of the programme.

FLIP as a consensus-based conditional programme

FLIP could be considered as a consensus-based conditional programme, founded on guiding principles (FLIP values and ethics) and utilising navigation methods (from the FLIP toolbox) to reach a set of shared and agreed aims. Rothuizen (2008, 2013) described the fundamental dynamics in social pedagogical work in his diagram 'the task of pedagogue', highlighting bridge-building and contact as key professional tasks in both the environment and the relationship. Nurturing the quality of contact and communication between family members and between family and professionals through attention to the individual relationships, the group's dynamics and, perhaps crucially, the environment, are central to FLIP's successes, together with continually building bridges between people and between people and their communities and society. Without the strong guiding principles and values, perhaps FLIP would only be able to respond to individual needs in limited ways, limiting its effectiveness and sustainability.

Discussion

Guiding principles

Cameron, Petrie, Wigfall, Kleipoedszus and Jasper (2011) argued that the ‘there is a personal dimension to being a social pedagogue which goes beyond formal training and is to do with personal-professional ethics’ (p. 74). A social pedagogue’s training instils a strong sense of principles and values and provides a coherent ethical framework in which to practice. Veering away from these principles and values would be inconsistent with the sense of professionalism.

When met with a highly prescriptive manual, what emerges can be described as the social pedagogue’s sense of ‘ethics as first practice’, one that overrides a sense of ‘manual as first practice’. While they might veer from a manual against the authors’ prescriptions, we argue that a social pedagogue’s adjustments to a manual can create better conditions for more active participation and, therefore, more of a chance that the both the programme and the subjects will reach the desired goals, thereby increasing the functionality of the manual *The social pedagogy profession*.

Furman (2009) argued ‘Embedded within the structure and core elements of evidence-based practice are implied organizing principles that can lead to the privileging of certain sets of values, knowledge, and actions over others’ (p. 82). It can be argued that social situations will never lend themselves to the kind of predictive behaviour and hard factual evidence that is required to make sound judgements based solely on manuals and procedures. Social pedagogues and social pedagogical practitioners in both the settings we have described can be said to be professionally obliged to resist reductionism in favour of understanding and working with complexity. Harbo’s research shows that the social pedagogue exercised a situated judgement when met with the dilemma of setting the pace of the session within the expectations of the manual or according to the needs of the young people present. Rothuizen and Harbo (2017) argued that

Social pedagogues act without being able to know beforehand whether they are doing the right thing. Therefore, it is important for them to have ethical orientation points and landmarks, to be in constant professional dialogue with colleagues and to expose themselves and each other to criticism. (p. 19)

Welcoming exposure to criticism requires a strong level of confidence in one’s profession and one’s own professionalism, together with trust in the communication process. That social pedagogues have this in their professional ethical orientation perhaps creates the conditions for greater engagement of subjects in manualised and programmatic interventions.

Manuals cannot predict every reality – nothing can – although they can be interpreted as ‘having an answer to every question’. It can be argued that the greater the level of a manual’s prescriptions of behaviour, the lower the likelihood of fidelity when placed in the hands of confident, ethically driven practitioners like social pedagogues. At the same time, and paradoxically, the lower level of fidelity to the manual under these conditions, may also mean the more likely the programme/treatment will be successful.

Political confidence in the social pedagogy profession

The political desire that professional practice should be based on sound evidence that this or that approach or method actually works is understandable – even more so perhaps when public trust in professionals is undermined periodically through exposures of incompetence and abuse (see England’s independent child sexual abuse inquiry (IICSA, 2018); Winterbourne View inquiry report (DoH, 2012); Victoria Climbié inquiry report (DoH, 2003)). However, the conditions for collecting research evidence on manualised interventions are likely to have limited relevance for the hugely varying conditions in ever-changing practice situations (Rubin, 2007). A move from evidence-based towards evidence-informed practice is gaining traction in academic and practice circles across the world (see Nevo and Slonim-Nevo, 2011). This practice triangulates evidence from research, manuals, the presenting situation and the associated individuals and groups. Guiding principles and navigation points provide a much-needed sense of direction.

The ART and FLIP examples we have described perhaps show that when *what* works is coupled with *how* it works, complexities and situational differences and contexts can accommodate more needs

and desires than the programmes originally account for. For the social pedagogues involved in both the ART and FLIP programmes, the guiding principle of participation helped the subjects to meaningfully engage. We argue that few manualised treatments or programmes can be successful without the buy-in of its subjects, and as there are no universal ways of obtaining buy-in, guiding principles and navigation methods help practitioners to create the conditions for meaningful and active participation in programmes and treatments.

The desire to copy and spread FLIP's unique service makes sense. The service would be wise to offer other resources than a manual, so that the guiding principles are cemented into the foundations of future iterations and do not emerge as good intentions that are occasionally reflected in practice, as can often be the case.

Politicians in the UK have been considering social pedagogy as a professional discipline and field of research for some years, and a small but growing number of forward-looking academic institutions are teaching social pedagogy practitioner modules, diplomas and Bachelor's and Master's degrees. It is encouraging that the UK is now 'growing its own' social pedagogy profession and academic discipline, yet the political will to systemically address social care practice shortfalls and embed social pedagogy as a professional, academic and education paradigm remains politically weak despite the growing body of evidence for its efficacy.

Conclusion

Harbo's research considering the ART manual and Kemp's reflections on FLIP show that social pedagogues provide added value to the 'help' that is sought, through applying guiding principles. Manualised interventions must allow for situated judgements guided by principles in order to ensure social pedagogy and social care practice provides *sustainable* help for change, and so that those engaged in programmatic interventions have the right support for meaningful individual and group participation and social connections (Kemp, 2015).

High-quality social care practice is not yet a given in the UK, as it is in many continental European countries. We argue that the time is ripe for the Danish and the UK governments to recognise the considerable added value that social pedagogues and social pedagogy practitioners can offer to our societies as a whole, and to marginalised groups in particular, and to invest in further researching the unique contributions of social pedagogues and social pedagogy practitioners in diverse situations.

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Data and materials availability

The full doctoral thesis, including English resumé, can be accessed at: <https://www.fak.hum.aau.dk/nyheder/nyhed/ph.d.-afhandling-ved-lotte-junker-harbo.cid427893>.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests in this work.

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