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Weaving a philosophical thread linking everyday practice and theory when 'it depends …'

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Abstract

There is a phrase that social pedagogues employ time and again to characterise contextual thinking in everyday practice: 'it depends …'. This is often used when seeking answers akin to a formula that can be applied across situations; but can leave the listener with the thought that socio-pedagogical explanations are woolly or even incoherent. Yet when aware of context, pedagogues are clear about specific actions they take and can articulate the reasons behind such actions. What are the underlying principles, assumptions about the nature of reality, of humanity and of relationships that shape such an attitude? Dialectical epistemology and ontology assume that reality is in constant motion, that contradictions are the driver of that process of change. Further, understanding comes from highlighting relationships between different entities rather than separating them from their context. In this article, I use concepts taken from activity theory – a Marxist theory of learning using dialectical thinking – to articulate the relationship between particulars of everyday situations that are the bread and butter of socio-pedagogical practice. By showing that both activity theory and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* have the same philosophical basis, I argue that these commonalities have explanatory potential for social pedagogues when 'it depends …'. I hope that this will encourage practitioners interested in social pedagogy to expand their understanding of the importance of the philosophical assumptions behind their work, and join the work needed to further explore the development of social pedagogy within an activity theoretical framework.

Keywords: everyday practice; dialectical logic; social pedagogy; activity theory; pedagogy of the oppressed

Introduction

When Storø (2012) addressed the question of the connection between everyday practice and theory in the first issue of this journal, he introduced his theme with a story. Stories problematise and contextualise practice (see, for example, Jørgensen, Rothuizen, Togsverd and Weise, 2017) and are therefore an important tool pedagogues can use to link theory and practice. In this article, I use two short vignettes to illustrate my argument about the necessity for a coherent philosophical basis in social pedagogy. In turn, this philosophical awareness can validate the flexibility social pedagogues claim when arguing that 'it depends' (Drumm, 2014; Romeo, 2018). Indeed, the vignettes illustrate particular situations that exemplify larger social dilemmas, circumstances that could translate in protagonists experiencing high levels of emotional intensity and are retrospectively thought of as formative in their life stories. Part of the narrative of the vignette is to show how the protagonists indeed cannot choose a course of action, the decisions they are about to make are difficult or controversial, in a manner that Freire (1996) may call 'limit-situations', which he defines in this manner:

> Confronted by this 'universe of themes' in dialectical contradiction, persons take equally contradictory positions: some work to maintain the structures, others to change them. As antagonism deepens between themes which are the expression of reality, there is a tendency for the themes and for reality itself to be mythicised, establishing a climate of irrationality and sectarianism. This climate threatens to drain the themes of their deeper significance and to deprive them of their characteristically dynamic aspect. … The themes both contain and are contained in *limit-situations*; the tasks they imply require limit acts. (pp. 82–3)

By carefully crafting stories that highlight how those universes of themes interact in our everyday practice, we may be able to act constructively rather than reinforce the divides that already exist in the field. My argument in this article is that if social pedagogy's value-based practice is to appear robust and hold its own against more linear and outcome-based theories prevalent in the social care and welfare system in the UK currently (Lowe, 2013), we need to understand the assumptions and theoretical positions that are contained within them to arrive at an understanding of 'it depends'. This, in turn, will support communicating more successfully the necessity for differing alternatives.

In order to do so, the argument follows three consecutive steps. At first, I follow Freire's lead by summarising his understanding of everyday practice and limit-situations, which I expand through looking at another theory of learning broadly called 'activity theory'. It is possible to link the two because they use the overlapping theoretical framework of dialectical logic.

In the second section of this article, I then explain how Freire's method is used by an activity theorist to follow a specific process that enables a different response to limit-situations, in that it holds in balance different aspects of 'it depends'. In order to do so, I use a short vignette taken from a study of the concept of movement in Finnish home care. For those well versed in the many strands of activity theory, I want to clarify that while I am arguing for the necessity to explore the link between pedagogies such as Freire's and activity theory through their common ontological and epistemological stance, I have purposefully restricted the references to activity theory to some of Engeström's work. This is only for clarity, as it does represent an oversimplification of the broad field of activity theory and its many nuances, which may be explored fruitfully in social pedagogy (for example, Blunden, 2009; Chaiklin, 2019; Fleer, González Rey and Jones, 2020; Hakkarainen, 2007; Hedegaard, 2012; Jones, 2011; Roth and Lee, 2007; Sannino, 2011; Suvorov, 2003; Vianna and Stetsenko, 2011).

Finally, in a third section, I attempt to show the relevance of Freire and Engeström's dialectical thinking to everyday practice could have for social pedagogy. Working as a participation worker in a children's residential home in England I experience daily the contradictions in the universes of themes Freire refers to. Further, as my role positions me within specific themes, I find my range of possible actions limited by the antagonism that exists in the differing realities at play within the system. Therefore, using observation from my everyday practice as well as the framework given by Freire and Engeström to understand the limit-situations I find myself in, I hope to be more able to articulate to my colleagues and other professionals why 'it depends'.

Before starting with the three steps in my argument, however, it is useful to share a series of conceptual tools needed to delve into Freire's thinking and his own understanding of the world. He, like some activity theorists such as Engeström, Sannino and Virkkunen (2014), uses several seemingly common-sense concepts that do not follow everyday definitions attributed to them. Particularly salient are terms like logic, but also abstract and concrete, as well as object and subject.

Take logic, for example. It is most commonly thought of as a process of deduction, where the mutually exclusive nature of given elements allows the thinker to reach a specific and replicable solution. This is based on assumptions such as the mutually exclusive nature of day and night; or the fact that particles can't be waves and therefore the physical nature of light is a mystery, and so on. Dialectical logic, on the other hand, doesn't rely on the mutually exclusive assumptions that opposes night and day, or particles to waves, but rather seeks to understand the relationship between them (Roth and Lee, 2007, p. 197).

Habits and cultural norms in the West have conflated the word 'logic' with formal or deductive logic, which proceeds in a linear manner by analysing (in the sense of cutting out, separating) the differences between elements under consideration. But Freire, and a long tradition of philosophers before him, uses dialectical logic, and therefore understands reality as always transforming through contradictions (Blunden, 2013). The fact that we experience those contradictions as mutually exclusive and separate opposites is an illusion, the root of ideology. This creates the universe of themes that become apparent in the definition of Freire's limit-situations. It prevents us from acting in accordance with our values and the material conditions we find ourselves in. A dialectical thinker like Freire doesn't analyse but rather seeks to understand the relationship between different aspects of reality and go beyond the contradictory appearances of ideology so as to be able to transform reality. Therefore, it always 'depend' for a dialectical thinker (for example, Ollman, 2015).

Step 1: Everyday practice in Freire and activity theory: methodological implications

(a) Practice in Freire's work

Freire's formulation of a pedagogy of the oppressed developed over many years, through a combination of personal and emotional experiences, as well as drawing heavily on Hegel, Marx and Marxist tradition of learning for its theoretical foundation (Freire, 2013). This is particularly important in his understanding of practice, as – like Marx (Allman, 1999, pp. 31–49) – Freire takes as central the relationship human beings have with the world around them. To Marx, this is labour; and it is through this basic relationship that human consciousness arises. Indeed, for Freire (1996), the practice of education

> denies that man [*sic*] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man [*sic*] nor the world without people, but people in their relation with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous, consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it. (p. 62)

There are many implications arising from this philosophical position, from the development of consciousness in children to a rather pejorative interpretation of human beings consuming the resources nature puts at their disposal. It is not difficult, however, when reading Freire and Marx, to realise that their position is much more humane and ecologically mindful (Harvey, 2019).

The point of departure here is the practical conditions within which we find ourselves and the impact this has on the way we think. Take, for example, the gap between digital natives and those of us who have had to learn to use IT in adulthood. Another example is how Darren McGarvey (2018) argues that the stress and anger that is pervasive in certain classes of society shape the people's circumstances to such an extent that anger and violence are part of the culture within which they live. What all those examples point out is that the context, material and social, within which we grow up affects the way we think. Dialectical thinking is relational, however, asking us to consider the impact of one thing on another and vice versa, and the important element that Freire, and McGarvey as well, point out is that reflection is part of practice. Reflection is the intellectual part of activity that allows us to understand our relationship to the

world and it is the interplay between our deeds and reflection that constitutes activity (Freire, 1996, p. 35). The interaction between our actions, our reflection, and the world around us (both of other people and of the material circumstances within which we find ourselves) manifests in contradictions and dilemmas that are part of the changing and transforming nature of the world.

There is much that philosophers deduce from this simple assumption about the relationship between human beings and the world which cannot be addressed here. However, the importance and originality of this idea for social pedagogy comes into sharp focus when introducing the concept of 'activity'.

(b) What is activity in Marxist theory?

It is obvious that Freire (2005b, pp. 43, 45, 96) was a product of his particular time and place, and his passing reference to Vygotsky reflects this. Vygotsky on the other hand, is a Russian educationalist and psychologist who became prominent after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Despite historical and geographical differences, both authors have much in common in their theoretical understanding of education and pedagogy. Yet the lack of circulation of Vygotsky's writings in the West during the Cold War, as well as the ideological bias against ideas originating in the USSR, made his work misunderstood and largely unavailable up until the mid-1980s (see, for example, Lima, 1995; Miller, 2011; Veresov and Barrs, 2016). If there had been more transparency and communication at the time, making Vygotsky's work more readily available, I suspect that the concept of activity, important to Vygotsky and post-Vygotskian theorists, might have resonated with Freire.

In the Vygotskian tradition, activity is the central concept through which philosophers think about the nature of reality, about ontology (Chaiklin, 2019). This is, of course, following with Marx's own position whereby consciousness arises from the activity human beings carry out in transforming the world around them. Human beings are motivated to act because of their needs (Heller, 1976), and this is the root of consciousness and social and economic relations. Within the merging disciplines of education, psychology and philosophy, such thinking gave rise to activity theory, a theory of learning that seeks to understand psychological processes such as motivation and sensory perception, as well as language from the interaction of human beings, their goals and the material context within which they operate (Blunden, 2009). Situated at the juncture between psychology and sociology and the interaction between individuals and society, this is highly relevant to social pedagogy. In short, activity is the process through which an individual or a group of individuals reaches their goal (Leontyev, 2009).

(c) Freire's decoding of universes of themes and its links with activity

So far, the two underlying notions and core concepts necessary to thinking dialectically require to:

- assume that reality is in constant motion and full of contradictions, which is the mechanism through which a given aspect of the world influences other aspects and is influenced in return, thus implying change and transformation;
- focusing on 'activity' and the material conditions within which people find themselves.

One could assume that it is because of the contradictory nature of human activity that social pedagogues think 'it depends'. A further complicating factor is that contradictions are only manifested through the universes of themes that Freire refers to, they do not appear in and of themselves (Harvey, 2008). As such, this is an attempt at focusing on the complexity of everyday practice. Where Freire and activity theory are helpful in furthering social pedagogic thinking is through an understanding of their reflective methodology.

Freire sees contradictions and limit-situations as generative, much like keys to understand and transform the relationship between human beings, the world they live in and the actions they can take within their given situations. Limit-situations represent the starting point that generates critical consciousness (Freire, 1996, pp. 76–105). This gradual awakening of thought in action is necessary because initially, without engaging in the process of reflection that I am about to describe, human beings perceive their reality only as fragmented.

Freire and others describe this type of thinking as ideological (Allman, 1999, pp. 66–7, 85–125). For them, ideology is an understanding of reality that is fragmented and chaotic, because it emphasises

only partial and unrelated aspects of a situation. Ideology is the result of the antagonistic positions people take within a specific context, as driven by the 'universes of themes' referred to in the introduction to this article (Freire, 1996, p. 82). Therefore, the purpose of education is to develop students' critical awareness of the dialectical nature of reality. Once this is accomplished, those students would be able to understand the power relationships at play behind the different universes of themes within their current condition. This awareness then allows for the formulation of different, novel responses, which Freire calls 'untested feasibility' (Freire, 1996, p. 83).

In order to start observing those internal, dialectical relationships, Freire (2005a) has developed a method of thematic investigation whereby students and teachers decode the universes of themes that are contradictory in the situation within which they live. Other dialectical thinkers refer to this method as 'ascending from the abstract to the concrete'. It is used by Marx (1973, p. 40) to come to his understanding of the capitalist system. It has also been used within education as a learning process (Allman, 1999; Davydov, 1988; Engeström et al., 2014; Vianna and Stetsenko, 2011).

The process is one that takes the thinker on a journey from her sensory perception and experiences to an abstract notion that captures the contradictory aspects of the situation under scrutiny. This generalisation is then confronted with social reality and its understanding checked, enhanced and refined by observing and understanding its relationships to other aspects of the material situation.

In order to understand a situation truly within this specific, dialectical methodology, an examination of the relationship between separate chaotic sensory perceptions is the beginning of this journey. This should lead to an abstract set of ideas that then need to be tested against reality, transforming it. In this mode of thinking, abstract and concrete do not hold their common-sense meaning. Instead, concrete refers to the lived situation, the material conditions within which the contradiction occurs. It can be fragmented, chaotic or, on the other hand, if apprehended dialectically, form a coherent whole where the initial situation is transformed. Abstract, on the other hand, is the process of categorisation of concepts a dialectical thinker goes through in order to arrive at the most succinct form of the contradiction under scrutiny. This relationship is abstract because it is cut off from its context and becomes universal, yet it can only be understood through observing how it is embodied in material and everyday activity within particular contexts. Marx, after Hegel, calls this abstracted essential relationship the 'germ cell' (Blunden, 2017; Engeström, Nummijoki and Sannino, 2012, pp. 288–90). The germ cell is the expression of the relationship between the different aspects of reality that at first, appear unrelated, contradictory and create antagonism between people acting within a specific context. If a germ cell is formulated accurately, it can generate many ways in which the antagonisms can be overcome. The germ cell, I propose, is the scientific formulation of the social pedagogic 'it depends'.

This first step in the argument is abstract, removed from the particular manifestations of our everyday practice. It is therefore important to understand how this manifests in the work of the social pedagogue, which I will demonstrate using two short vignettes taken from everyday practice in Steps 2 and 3.

Step 2: Applying the method of abstraction to the concept of mobility in Finnish home care

Adopting a dialectical theoretical standpoint in social pedagogy implies a more coherent discipline that could avoid the trappings of ideology. The method of abstraction – whether Freire's decoding methodology or the germ cell formulated by Marx – can only take its full meaning when relating to the complexity of human practice. I now attempt to apply this thinking to everyday practice relevant to social pedagogy.

There are two ways at our disposal when attempting to recognise a germ cell: one is to examine the limits of the meaning of a concept, where it applies and where its explanatory power is lost; the other way is to understand how it develops over time (Engeström et al., 2014; Ilyenkov, 1982).

In order to do this, let me introduce the first vignette. It is an extract from a study carried out by Engeström and others at the University of Helsinski (Engeström et al., 2012; Engeström, Kajamaa and Nummijoki, 2015). This was a long-term study looking at the use of 'mobility agreements' between elderly people and their nurses over the course of several years. What is relevant for our purpose is the dilemma that Anne and her nurses are experiencing.

Anne's nurse Tina recollects that in 2008, after Anne returned home from the hospital, the nurses who participated in Anne's home care were afraid that she would permanently remain in bed. [In the interview] Anne points out that all she wanted was indeed to stay in bed, to not even have to go to the toilet. Little by little Anne got better, but in September 2010 she got worse again. She spent two weeks in the hospital. In the third segment, Anne recollects an incident in which a physician suggested that Anne might start applying for a permanent place in a hospice or a similar institution due to her severe health problems. This suggestion made Anne angry, and she declares, 'And I will live at home as long as I can.' In other words, Anne was practically bedridden and unwilling to get up, that is, increasingly dependent on help from professional caregivers, again in September 2010. A person who is unable to get up from the bed does not anymore belong to home care. Yet very shortly after that, in October 2010, Anne was appalled by the suggestion that she should live in a hospice; she wanted to continue living autonomously at home. This conflict of motives was emotionally quite strongly experienced by both Anne and the nurses. Anne talks about anger (1463: 'I got angry'), and the nurse talks about fear (972: ' ... we had small fear, all of us, that you will remain there ... '). (Engeström et al., 2012, p. 296)

The project's overall aim was to understand how the agreement (in the form of a booklet) influenced the participants' ideas around sustainable mobility for elderly people as opposed to ideas of mobility in the general population, where competition, efficiency and sporting prowess are its defining elements (Engeström et al., 2012, p. 290). Engeström and his team analysed the situation twice using the method of abstraction, so as to arrive at a germ cell, an essential dilemma that contains the main tension manifested in everyday practice.

They did this first empirically, by looking at video recordings of nurses' visits and trying to track the activity of both the nurse and their patient. They identified 'boundary problems', something Freire would probably have called limit-situations, where a conflict or a contradiction appears in the activity of both the nurses and their clients. The data showed that among different types of mobility exercises, the repeated action of 'standing up from the chair' led to unexpected and fruitful developments (Engeström et al., 2015, pp. 59–61). In particular, it highlighted a contradiction present in all situations: that of the need for autonomy, as observation and practice emphasised the importance of standing up without the help of a chair or a table, while at the same time being subjected to the very real danger of fall and injury together with the health complications of remaining chair-bound.

The second type of analysis Engeström and his team carried out is more historical, not on a grand scale, but within Anne's local context. Within activity theory this is called historical-genetic, or finding the genesis of a given concept (Virkkunen and Ahonen, 2011). Indeed, the article in Engeström et al. (2012) is based on an interview with Anne and her nurse where they recall a period of three years, between 2008 and 2011. In that time, Anne and her nurse used the mobility agreement, and like other participants, found that 'standing up from the chair' is a contradictory and powerful exercise that allowed Anne to ultimately remain living at home well beyond the hopes of her nurses and doctors as described in the vignette. Indeed, when Anne stands up from the chair, it leads to further actions that support her mobility sustainably and that have enabled her to act in new and unexpected ways. For example, the act of 'standing up from the chair' can be used as a diagnosis tool, but also led to walks as well as prompting more activity, such as setting up the table.

Those 'generative themes' – to recall Freire's expression – are summarised by Engeström in a diagram reproduced in Figure 1.
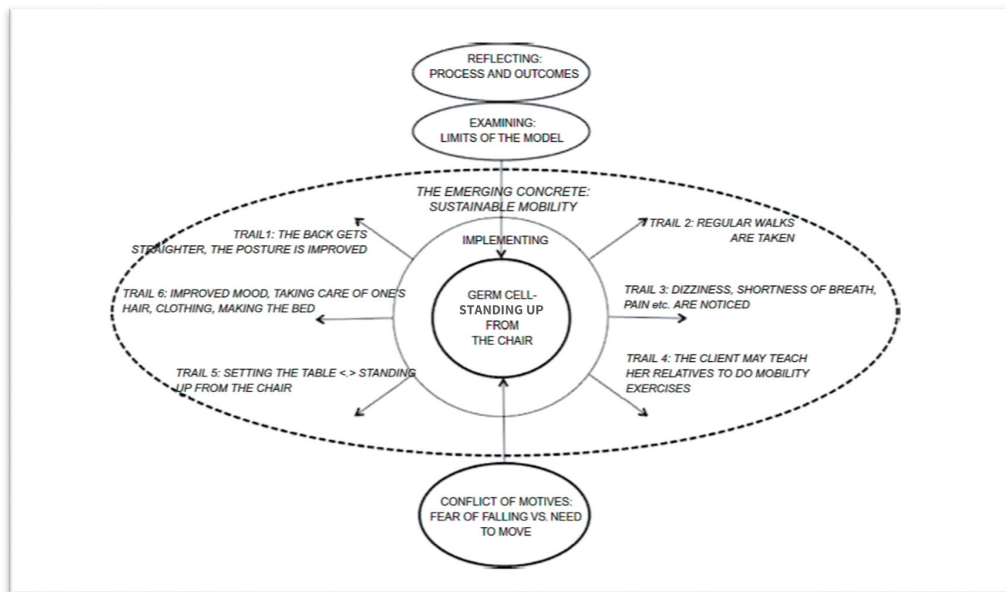
Figure 1. Generative themes in Anne's situation (Engeström et al., 2012, p. 304).

It is now time to link back this example – more specifically the method used – with the first step of this article. In the vignette, the method helped Engeström identify how Anne's anger when confronted to the possibility of living in a hospice was actually necessary for her to become aware of all the aspects of her situation, and how this balance between autonomy and safety is something that colours all aspects of her everyday life. Examining how different concepts and ideas interact in a given situation, as well as how those concepts came to mean what they currently mean, may allow a social pedagogue to identify other germ cells containing contradictory aspects of a dilemma. For Anne and her nurses, in everyday practice, 'it depends' on whether it is appropriate to take a risk and stand up unaided, thus building core strength necessary for home life, or to err on the side of caution and use support from the table, as it may be that the nurse is absent and the risk of falling too great.

We can follow Engeström's argument because he presents it from the end point of his research process; we as readers are introduced to the basic tension identified for movement in the elderly home-care population in Finland. Once the most basic relationship between safety and unsupported movement has been established, the generative powers of this germ cell are clear to us. Practitioners can easily establish why 'it depends', and the possibility for change that stems from such a simple relationship is explored practically.

Step 3: Finding the germ cell in everyday practice

As social pedagogues we aim to take transformative actions in our work, yet we do not have the luxury of working with the understanding of the basic germ cell that Engeström et al. (2012) had identified. The method of ascending from the abstract to the concrete is sometimes described as a double helix (Blunden, 2017, p. 139) because it starts from the fragmented perception of reality to reach an abstract understanding – that is, the germ cell – which then needs to be tested through applying it to a specific context. Marx insisted on the difference between the way in which his argument was presented and the method to construct the argument:

> Of course, the method of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development, to trace out their inner connexion. Only after this work is done, can the actual movement be adequately described. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is ideally reflected as in a mirror, then it may appear as if we had before us a mere a priori construction. (Marx, 2015, p. 14)

This same process applies to everyday practice, and we as practitioners need to start from fragmented and disconnected experiences. In the final step of the argument, I therefore attempt to start the reflection by bringing fragmented elements of my practice to point towards a basic, explanatory and generative relationship of conflicting aspects of the universes of themes I am part of.

I have written the vignette from my point of view as a participation coordinator within a children's home, where Qoree, a 16-year-old young man, had moved into the home in an emergency. A meeting was to be held to discuss his long-term living situation. As with the first vignette, the salient point in our discussion is with the dilemma I experience.

> The social worker seems stressed, she talks a lot about all the things she has had to do since Qoree contacted social services because he couldn't live at home anymore. I am mindful of the obvious pressure she is experiencing; as well as the discrepancies between her plans for Qoree to move into foster care and his own wishes. Indeed, he talked about his preference to stay in residential care, as he imagines he would feel a stranger in somebody else's home if he were to move in with foster parents. My role in this meeting is to advocate for Qoree.

> The discussion moves to identifying a foster carer where Qoree could move in permanently, and I ask the social worker to explain why it is unlikely he will be able to remain in his current residential placement. Her exasperation towards me increases even more when I continue to press for what he is entitled to: 'Would it be possible to visit a prospective foster carer before moving in?' At another moment during the meeting, Qoree is offered counselling as both his family and the professionals around him are worried that his recent transition to becoming 'looked after' must cause stress on him. They want to give him the possibility to work through the complex situation he is in at the moment. Qoree explains that he isn't much of a talker.

> After the meeting, his social worker, Qoree and myself are having a chat, and we come to talk about different ways to express anger. Qoree says he usually uses the punch bag that we happen to stand close to, or that he cycles to get his anger out. I reflect upon the fact that physical activity is a good way to process anger, but his social worker interjects: 'Oh, I don't want to you to cycle when you're angry, it's not safe!'

My professional intention, as shown in this vignette, is to ensure Qoree's rights are respected and he is consulted in the decisions that are made about him as per the Universal Declaration of Children's Rights (United Nations, 1990, articles 3, 5 and 12).

The relationship between different aspects of the situation wasn't clear to me at the time. What I experienced as a dilemma was the social worker invoking safety in a manner that assumed Qoree was unable to make decisions around his physical safety when cycling. It did not fit with what I knew of him, a young 16-year-old who went to school, had a regular job and was socially adept with other young people in the home.

Much of the relationship between safety, children's rights and the position of the social worker was highlighted several months later, when preparing a presentation on 'the image of the child in residential care'. Indeed, the method of abstraction that is gradually revealed through this article indicates that seemingly unrelated episodes can gradually expose the fundamental relationship of the germ cell, thus encapsulating practice. At the time of the vignette, however, I was fully subjected to Freire's contradictory universes of themes mentioned in the introduction.

In this presentation, I wanted to illustrate how the actions and narratives we tell ourselves about children are influenced by social norms. This is an idea that Murris (2016) summarised in what she calls figurations of childhood. In order to help the group of about 30 people think about this, I chose to focus on a controversial item sometimes used with children: a safety harness (Pawlowski, 2014). This is a kind of leash harnessed on the child and held by the parent or carer in order to stop the child from running into danger.

I asked group members whether or not, as a child, they had been made to use such a harness, and whether they knew of children currently using them. They recorded this on a timeline running from 1950

to the present. What several participants noticed was the fact that the harnesses were in use much earlier than expected. Indeed, many of us assumed that the use of harnesses was a relatively new practice, but in fact we had five examples of people using them in the late 1950s and 1960s. This points to the fact that this is more than a trend or a symptom of health and safety's impact on everyday life. In the lively discussion that ensued, people justified their parents' choice through its practicality, and the fact that parenting means compromising between the child's safety and other demands made on the adult.

A final, and also fragmented theme that helped me understand a possible underlying tension between children's rights, safeguarding and the position of adults consisted in reflecting with the same group on the justifications for using such a harness in schools. We used the material provided by a company marketing such a harness to schools (Walkodile®, 2012). What this highlighted was that safety for children was used in a manner that deformed and twisted the group's understanding of other concepts associated with childhood, such as learning, becoming responsible or socialisation. The website listed benefits of using the harness for school outings. In that document, children benefit because harnesses:

- Create more & better learning opportunities as the walk is more effectively managed
- Make children more independent, taking responsibility for walking on their own without needing to hold anyone's hand. (Walkodile®, 2012)

Together with the awareness that child harnesses were in use before health and safety was at the forefront of decision making, this highlighted how adults' practical constraints are an important factor in what happens to children, and that adults' decisions (whether as social worker, parent or teacher) in everyday practice are justified with, rather than dictated by, safety. Just as the website described promoting the use of harness, the social worker's remark about her fear for Qoree's safety when cycling felt like an add-on, a bit like an excuse to gain control of the many demands that were made on her. She quite rightly needed us to be aware of her constraints, yet some social or professional taboo made it difficult to express this. Calling on safety had the desired effect, however, and the many different aspects of the situation were maintained in balance.

To go back to the methodological point I am trying to make, the information gathered with the help of the group strengthened awareness of the mutually opposing elements of safety, or children's rights for that matter, in contradistinction with the capacity for action of the adult responsible for the child. Cutting through the ideological universes of themes around the safety of children, the fundamental relationship at play here is the compromise between the adult's capacity for action, the child's right and safety. If this was observed in other instances of everyday practice, one might represent this germ cell as outlined in Figure 2.

Children's rights, their safeguarding ⚡v⚡ Adult's capacity for action
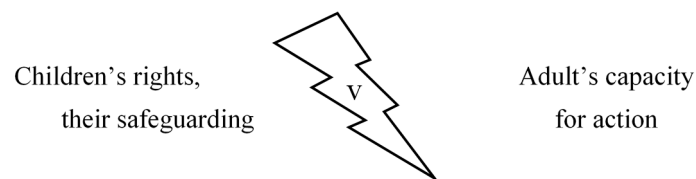
Figure 2. Possible germ cell around the implementation of children's rights and safeguarding.

This is a difficult contradiction to examine because it highlights the guilt that adults experience due to their own limitations, and because of the high level of taboo that childhood is subject to in many societies (Romo, 2011; Smith, 2009, pp. 35–58). I am in no way suggesting that the care children received in those instances was not good enough, simply that in order to truly understand the situation and transform it, adults' capacity to take action needs to be consciously brought to awareness. All three separate instances, at home with parents, in residential care with a social worker and at school with a teacher, highlighted how safeguarding procedures or tokenistic participation can justify a decision despite the fact that other considerations are also at play, and may sometimes be even a stronger influence on the course of action. Yet in all three instances the adult's capacity for action was disguised. Children are undeniably bound to

adults because they are dependent on adults for many aspects of their lives (Corsaro, 1997; Mayall, 2000; Moran-Ellis, 2010) but other tropes may be at play there.

To go back to the argument of this article, and in order to uphold children's rights, the 'it depends' may be to consider including the adults' capacity for action as an important contributing factor to decisions about children's safety and their right to be consulted in decisions made about them. Those three instances of a possible dialectical relationship form only one part of the process of ascending from the abstract to the concrete, and the generative nature of this germ cell relationship still remains to be tested.

Concluding remarks

In this article I describe how Freire's investigative method follows the same principles as Marx's method of 'ascending from the abstract to the concrete'.

Observation and experience of everyday practice highlights fundamental relationships that can gradually be formulated in a 'germ cell'. A germ cell is a contradiction that can then, in turn, be applied to particular concrete situations. If accurate enough, the germ cell has transformative powers in that it allows individuals to bear in mind all aspects present in the situation and therefore resolve the contradiction they initially experienced, thus acting at a level that is both agentic and less prone to ideology.

My contention is that using this method may enable social pedagogues to communicate the contextual thinking they do in a more scientific, objective manner. This may match the apparent linearity and accountability that have become the norm in the sector since it favoured New Public Management, the neoliberal methods that have been adapted to public services across the Western world in the 1980s and 1990s (Frost and Parton, 2009).

In the example of Anne's situation, the formulation of the germ cell as the balance between autonomous movement and safety generated unexpected and welcome results in her life. With regard to the relationship between Qoree's rights to be involved in decisions about his life, differing notions of what is safe for him seem to hold in tension with the adults' capacity for action. So, the question remains what other possibilities would have been thought of should I have acknowledged that 'it depends' on the social worker's capacity for action.

Often there is a sense that here in the UK being a practitioner within children's services means to be pragmatic and to hold everybody's interests in mind. This makes change difficult and slow. What writing this article has taught me, however, is that the possibility of change is present in every contradiction of everyday practice. To conclude let's go back to Freire (1996) as quoted in the introduction where he observes that our reality, our everyday practice as social pedagogues and professionals within welfare services has a tendency 'to be mythicized, establishing a climate of irrationality and sectarianism' (p. 83).

Freire goes on to remind us that each of those myths and differing realities arise because of the specific interest of a person of a group of people. It is healthy and important to keep those oppositions in tension; however, the power imbalances that arise if the tension is not maintained have dehumanising effects.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work.

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