Foster care: A role for social pedagogy?

Social pedagogy, still an unfamiliar concept in Britain, is concerned with education in its widest sense, encompassing but going much beyond formal school-based learning. Pat Petrie reports on studies of social pedagogy in four countries conducted at the Thomas Coram Research Unit and discusses potential benefits of the social pedagogic approach for fostering in England. She argues that this would fit well with developing English policy towards children and children in care and can bridge the tensions inherent in foster care, combining a personal, relational approach with an insistence on reflection.

Introduction
The context for the study on which this paper is based was ongoing concern about children in care and about the need to further develop foster care. Of special relevance was the government’s expressed wish, in the Green Paper Every Child Matters, to identify ‘radical and imaginative ways’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p 13) to develop fostering and to expand and develop fostering services.

In 2005, approximately 60,900 children and young people were in the care of English local authorities, of whom 41,700 were in foster care (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). These young people form a diverse group but they share a multitude of disadvantages associated with life in public care, and are among the more socially disadvantaged groups in society (eg Corlyon and McGuire, 1997; Davies et al, 1998; Buchanan, 1999; Department of Health, 2000; Richardson and Joughin, 2000; Social Services Inspectorate, 2001; Bhabra and Ghate, 2002; Chase et al, 2002; Ward et al, 2002; Meltzer et al, 2003; Simon and Owen, 2006).

Stress arises from problems associated with the foster children themselves, difficulties associated with contact with the child’s birth family and challenges involved in combining fostering with attending to the needs of the carer’s own family (Sinclair et al, 2000; Triseliotis et al, 2000).

Despite such evidence that foster care is demanding work, an inspection (Social Services Inspectorate, 2001) conducted in seven local authorities found that most authorities had not yet developed any strategy to address the recruitment, retention, support and training of foster carers. Evidence of good practice has, however, been reported elsewhere (eg, Department of Health, 2003; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003).

To date, there is little English-language literature on foster care in different countries (Colton and Hellinckx, 1993; Gottesman, 1994), particularly with regard to the role of social pedagogues in supporting foster care. Comparative research has often addressed wider issues of child welfare and social policy (eg, Harder and Pringle, 1997; Hetherington et al, 1997; Pringle, 1998).

The study upon which this article draws (Petrie et al, 2006a) aimed to examine and compare fostering and fostering services in Denmark, France, Germany and Sweden. The intention was not to provide models for direct import into England, but to contribute an analysis concerning the recruitment, employment, support and training of foster carers and – the focus here – to look at any potential contribution of social pedagogy for the development of English foster care.

The research built on two earlier studies, the first of which took an overview of pedagogy/social pedagogy, but with particular reference to residential care; the second compared residential care in England, Denmark and Germany in the context of the pedagogic approach (Petrie and Simon, 2006).
In continental Europe, the pedagogue is a widely recognised professional and pedagogy is both a theoretical field and an area for social policy. Most pedagogues train for three to four years at first degree level. Others take longer, more theoretically based degrees, often in preparation for management or policy work in local and national government and children’s voluntary organisations. The pedagogic approach takes a holistic view of the child as a person with mind, body, feelings, sociability and creativity. The approach proceeds on the basis of the relationship between the pedagogue and child. Pedagogues work in a wide variety of social care, health and educational settings, in most cases sharing the everyday activities of the children – and in some cases adults – with whom they work. Pedagogic practice aims to support children’s overall development, their ‘education’ in the broadest sense of that term.

From a social pedagogic perspective, both personal and professional characteristics are highly important for working with children. Critical reflection on personal capacities, motivations and abilities is included within pedagogic education. During training, pedagogues examine their practice and what lies beneath it, and the extent that their actions and reactions derive from personal and/or professional considerations. In the light of their theoretical knowledge and experience, the trainees, in group work or in individual supervision, consider how to modify subsequent actions. This interaction between self-knowledge and formal knowledge is a key aspect of pedagogic practice and, individually and in staff groups, continues to be employed post qualification. It is intended to improve the pedagogue’s awareness of the purposes of the work and their understanding of the part played by themselves and their own personal characteristics in this work.

**Methods**

Four case studies were developed for Denmark, France, Germany and Sweden, based on (i) a review of foster care and fostering services, provided by a national expert, and (ii) interviews with key stakeholders at local, regional and national level. In each country, interviews were conducted by the research team, assisted by local research associates, all of whom spoke English. Two members of the English research team had a working knowledge of French or German and in these two countries almost all interviews were conducted in the local language. In Denmark and Sweden interviews were undertaken in English, with translation help from the local research associate.

The contribution of the social pedagogic approach was given special attention. When the case study data had been analysed, the research team undertook interviews with expert informants in England to discuss the emerging findings and to evaluate the potential of the approaches adopted in continental Europe for policy and practice in this country.

**Denmark**

Pedagogy is well established in Denmark as an approach to working with children and young people in a variety of non-school settings, and also with adults – increasingly older people. We were told that while most foster carers are not pedagogues, about a third of the foster care workforce had been educated in pedagogy or in a field related to working with children, such as teaching or social work. The proportion of pedagogues working in upholdssteder, a more professional model of foster care, was thought to be higher than this but no figures were available at the time of fieldwork.

Pedagogues were also employed, alongside other professionals such as psychologists and social workers, in public and private foster care services, and had a role in shaping the recruitment and support processes along pedagogic lines.

Asked whether pedagogy was relevant to foster care, most informants thought it had a place, more for its general principles than as a qualification for fostering children. Those informants whose role was to devise and deliver training and to support foster carers referred to pedagogy as useful because they saw the pedagogic approach as action oriented: the application of knowledge in practical situations, a support for communication and a sys-
tematic way of thinking that focused on strengths rather than weaknesses. One interviewee said that pedagogy could help with the difficulties often presented by having to work with the tensions existing ‘between opening one’s house and heart, and being professional . . . [children] have to know both are in place, that they feel loved’.

A key concept in pedagogy is reflection, where an individual or a group of people with similar concerns think about or discuss practice situations and what possibilities there are for action at any given point. This method was referred to by many informants as a useful skill to gain in training and to employ in practice. Members of one foster carer group said they used group reflection frequently to support members who were experiencing difficulties. One foster carer who was trained as a pedagogue thought it essential to her successful practice:

[It] can help you to understand and give you some tools once in a while, and tools to be open in supervision and knowledge about your own reactions and understanding. That is very important. I couldn’t have done this job without my education [as a pedagogue] I am sure.

While other foster carers – not themselves trained pedagogues – believed that such an intensive professional preparation was not necessary, a social worker commented that trained pedagogues were more likely to have the tools for working with severely ‘damaged’ children. Thus, children with higher levels of need were more often placed with them; since placement fees were needs related, pedagogues could earn more money than other foster carers.

France
In French, the terms equivalent to ‘pedagogy’ and ‘social pedagogy’ (as used in Germanic and Nordic languages) are éducation and éducation spécialisé.

French foster homes provide not only shelter and care, but are seen, explicitly, as having an educational – in the widest sense of the word – function. Éducateurs (pedagogues) are employed by public and private (non-profit) fostering agencies.

France has three forms of éducateurs relevant to fostering: (i) éducateurs spécialisés are trained to work with children, adolescents and adults who are in difficulties on account of a disability or because of problems encountered in their family or personal life. They train for three years, full time, or four to five years in-service training, post bac bachelor (roughly equivalent to A levels); (ii) in the youth justice system, éducateurs undertake two years of special postgraduate training; (iii) there are also éducateurs who work with children aged nought to seven in many different settings, from residential care to day nurseries.

Various French policy documents place looked after children in an explicitly ‘educative’ framework. The publications of fostering agencies refer to the educative nature of the agency’s work, and that of the foster carers. When the term éducation is used, this does not denote schooling or formal education but education in the broadest sense of that word: children’s general upbringing and development. Accordingly, foster homes do not only provide shelter and care, they have an educative role. This emphasis was often referred to by our informants and was explicit in much documentation. For example:

- The ASE annual report for Paris (L’aide sociale à l’enfance de Paris Rapport d’activité, 2002, p 7) states that the aim of ASE is to bring material, educative and psychological support to children and young people in social difficulties.
- A booklet for young people in the judicial system describes the judge’s function as putting an ‘educative’ measure in place, which may include a foster placement. In the same booklet, young people involved in an offence are told that any decision about their future will be

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1 Livret d’accueil, Ministère de la Justice, Direction de la Protection Judiciaire de la Jeunesse, (undated) p 5
based on ‘education’ as the rule and punishment as the ‘exception’.

The work of agency éducateurs
The fostering agencies studied all included éducateurs in the staff team. (For example in the youth justice agency, two members of staff, including the director, had trained as éducateurs for the youth justice service; indeed, the directors of three of the five agencies visited had been éducateurs.)

Éducateurs prepare children for their placement and keep in touch with them throughout the placement. They spend time with the children, playing or in other activities, while foster carers attend meetings with other members of the agency staff (foster carers, as formal employees, are seen as members of the fostering team, undertaking 240 hours’ initial training). Éducateurs accompany children on ‘difficult’ visits, for instance to supervised meetings with their parents in hospital, prison or at a meeting place. It was reported that where a foster home was emotionally warm but not very ‘stimulating’, the éducateur would provide the child with activities and outings.

Germany
While few German foster carers were themselves qualified in social pedagogy, social pedagogues played a major part in fostering agencies, support services and training. (We did, however, find a salaried fostering project that employed social pedagogues themselves as foster carers.) Pedagogic concepts were applied to fostering and social pedagogues were employed in both local authority and private (non-profit) fostering support teams. Social pedagogy was seen as an important strand in professional development for staff in fostering services. A large majority of the professionals interviewed were qualified in social pedagogy:

[Professionally] it is important to have social pedagogy training. We have a lot of training in communication skills and in how to put ourselves in many different situations and to understand the different viewpoints of the people involved. We know a lot about child development and psychology. We know about the legal framework and legal basis of the work. We need to keep an oversight of the different perspectives.

In Germany, pedagogic concepts ran through the training of foster carers and were part of the professional discourse. These included the concept of Haltung, a term seen to pertain to foster carers as much as to professional staff. Haltung encompasses notions of appropriate disposition, stance and integrity, underpinning reflection and conscious attention to the needs of children. It is a stance that is both conscious and conscientious, that enables the carer to set limits for the child, such as the necessity of going to school.

Lebensweltorientierung (literally, living world orientation) is another key pedagogic concept applied to foster care. This concept positions children within their own specific social worlds and circumstances, rather than seeing them as inhabitants of a more generalised social context. It can encompass a child’s history, but it is also in line with an emphasis on the ‘everyday’, the working context for pedagogy.

Sweden
Sweden differs from Denmark, France and Germany, in that it appears that the concept of social pedagogy is not generally recognised within the field of foster care. Pedagogues in Sweden are more widely employed in educational settings, such as pre-school and out-of-school services and, we were told, in family support and residential care services. However, we found that ‘family pedagogues’, who may have been trained either as teachers or as pedagogues (principally for out-of-school services) were sometimes engaged in family support work. Their role was to support the parent in the home setting, building on their strengths and improving their parenting skills. In this capacity, the family pedagogue was distinct from the social worker.
The place of pedagogy: an overview

In general, foster carers were not required to be qualified as pedagogues in any of the countries visited. Exceptions were foster carers at the more professional end of the foster care spectrum in Denmark and Germany. Given that training to become a professionally qualified pedagogue takes at least three to four years full time, after the successful completion of secondary education, this is perhaps not surprising.

However, the principles of pedagogy were apparent in the training and support of foster carers which, with the exception of Sweden, were often carried out by people who were themselves qualified as social pedagogues (Germany), pedagogues (Denmark) or éducateurs spécialisés (France), all of which are roughly similar qualifications. In addition, pedagogues were often employed specifically to support the placement of children and to work directly with them during the placement.

The strengths of the pedagogic approach, detailed by various informants, included its orientation to action, its provision for a ‘normal’ way of thinking about children and their upbringing, and its focus on children’s strengths. Importantly, trainers and support workers could draw on their own pedagogic theory and knowledge of child development in their work with foster carers. Pedagogues’ training helped them to be aware of the conflicts that arise in work which is at the same time both professional and personal.

The work of the pedagogue is basically a matter of engaging as a person in relationships with children and young people, while maintaining a professionality that best supports the child’s development and well-being. Foster carers need to do both, in order to be warm and welcoming and at the same time capable of reflection, maintaining distance as appropriate. In this respect, the pedagogic approach appears to fit well with foster care.

Discussion

On the basis of the four national case studies, 20 English informants with varied backgrounds, but all knowledgeable in the field of foster care, were interviewed focusing on the relevance of pedagogy for the English childcare context. In this concluding discussion, we draw to some extent on their opinions, which are reported in detail elsewhere (Petrie et al, 2006b).

Although foster carers are paid for their ‘work’, foster care is among the most personal of all paid jobs. The carer opens both home and family to the foster child, whether on a short- or long-term basis. As an occupation, fostering is certainly demanding, calling for the carer to offer the fostered child a personal relationship. Indeed, attachment theory – and in particular, Bowlby’s (1951) monograph for the World Health Organisation – lies at the heart of the English policy preference for foster care, in order to provide personalised caregiving in a family context and thus allow continuity over time in relationships.

However, within this personalised relationship the carer has to maintain a professional distance, in order to judge what is best for the child and to act accordingly. An English interviewee spoke of social pedagogy acting as an ‘honest broker’, combining the professional with the personal. The pedagogic approach is based on relationships. Pedagogues often say that they use ‘head, hands and heart’ in their work (Petrie et al, 2006b). The pedagogue is there for the child both emotionally and practically, while also bringing reflection and judgement to the task. The need for such a balance was similarly summed up by a senior civil servant in English government:

*The real trick with foster care is to put together elements of the gift relationship and of professionalisation.*

Another English interviewee spoke of pedagogy as ‘an over-arching discipline . . . a creative theoretical concept’ that he saw as lacking from current English policy developments such as the Every Child Matters: Change for children programme and the newly developing Children’s Trust arrangements. Pedagogy in much of continental Europe is a field for theory, policy and practice in many domains of work with children and young people (or, indeed with people across the
age range). As such, it could provide an overarching theoretical framework for work with children across sectors. Pedagogy is a discipline that is centrally about bringing up children, supporting their development and working in the complexity of their everyday worlds and ongoing experience of life. Pedagogues reflect on the balance between the personal and professional in the adult–child relationship, and they place much store on listening to children and attending to their rights (Petrie et al., 2006b). All of these skills are highly relevant to the work of foster care. This is not to suggest that foster carers necessarily require the degree level pedagogic training required by law for residential care workers in countries such as Denmark and France, nor even the 240 hours of obligatory training required of foster carers in France: only that the support and training of foster carers should be pedagogically based. Arguably, this level of pedagogic input would be little or no more costly than current arrangements.

The Green Paper on looked after children, Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care (Department for Education and Skills, 2006) proposes a national qualifications framework for foster and residential carers that would, it states, ‘incorporate the principles of social pedagogy’ (p 48). However, the problem remains as to how such principles are to be embedded in English education for care work, without an English experience of pedagogy to draw on.

Research at the Thomas Coram Research Unit continues to explore the potential to introduce pedagogy in England. Cameron’s (2006) research for the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation studied Danish pedagogues already at work in this country, and Cameron and Petrie’s new research for the DfES/Cabinet Office is examining the feasibility of introducing pedagogic training into England. The recommendations contained in Care Matters indicate a need to extend this work to develop ways of establishing pedagogic education within the existing qualifications framework. One such example is the development of a new foundation degree in Working with Children (with specialisations in work in children’s centres and in residential care) currently in development at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Such developments indicate a need to consider the positioning of social pedagogy alongside existing professions, especially social work. This issue was not seen as a difficulty by any of our English interviewees. Nevertheless, pedagogy as a challenge to social work has been discussed in the course of seminars and conference presentations by the researchers over the last five years. It may be that this is a difficulty that is more apparent than real.

Payne (2005) situates pedagogy within social work, distinguishing three main theories of social work, one of which can be applied to social pedagogy. ‘Reflexive-therapeutic’ theories of social work represent, according to Payne, ‘the ideas within social work which concern personal development and fulfilment, with an emphasis on emotions and interpersonal responses’ (p 9). The term ‘reflexive’ is important here, implying that through their interactions, social workers and their clients affect and change each other.

Perhaps the biggest difference between social pedagogy and social work is the extent to which pedagogues and social workers are employed in settings where they have continuing interaction with children and young people, sharing their daily lives. For most social pedagogues this is the normative experience, the work for which they receive their initial training. It is on the basis of such daily experience with children, their involvement in children’s upbringing, that some go on to work, for example, in support and training services for foster care, or in development and policy for government and voluntary agencies. But spending their working days with the same group of children is less normative for people trained as social workers. Social work and social pedagogy do not appear to be in

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competition, they have different spheres of work.

There remains the question of social pedagogy as a difficult concept for English speakers. In English, there is no single word for ‘education-in-its-broadest sense’ as opposed to ‘education-associated-with-the academic-curriculum’. But it is ‘education-in-its-broadest sense’ that many continental Europeans mean when they talk about pedagogy.

The relative strangeness of the term ‘pedagogy’ or ‘social pedagogy’ could be one of its strengths. It invites enquiry and could perhaps encourage new ways of thinking and suggest new opportunities – not least with reference to foster care and the well-being of the children and young people it serves.

A substantial body of research in England indicates the need for a strategic framework to address the increased demand for foster carers, including issues of recruitment and retention, and the growing challenges of the work itself. To develop such a framework requires reflection on the purpose of foster care. The Care Matters Green Paper provides just such an opportunity. For 70 per cent of young people looked after, foster care represents the reality of the rhetoric of corporate parenting. And what is the function of parenting, after all? To ‘accommodate’ children? Or is it upbringing, what for our European colleagues would be an essential role for pedagogy? The experience of our interviewees in continental Europe suggests that social pedagogy could provide a valuable framework for informing and supporting the development of foster care in England.

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