The Potential of Pedagogy/Education for Work in the Children’s Sector in the UK

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The contributions on social pedagogy/social education in *Social Work in Europe*, (8,1, 2001), made interesting reading and encouraged me to join in the discussion, with this short piece. It is based on past and current work at the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the Institute of Education in London. This includes: a survey of out-of-school services in the European Union (Meijvogel & Petrie, 1996); work on children’s services in Sweden (Moss & Petrie, forthcoming); a project on homework in six European countries; the changing role of the school (in integrating, for example, social work and health services) in Sweden, France and the USA (Moss, Petrie & Poland, 1999); and on-going work on the reorganisation of education in England, Scotland and Sweden.

Current work (for the Department of Health at the Thomas Coram Research Unit) examines the part of pedagogy/education with reference to work with looked-after children in five European countries - Denmark, Belgium (Flanders), France, Germany and the Netherlands - where pedagogy/education, rather than social work or care, is the main approach used. For the research, we have commissioned national experts to give an account of the development of pedagogy in each country. The report also covers policy towards looked-after children. In addition, in each country we have interviewed civil servants, the heads of pedagogy departments in universities and colleges, placement tutors, students, the heads of children’s residential establishments, pedagogues working face-to-face with children, and young people themselves. The project goes on to explore the feasibility of the pedagogic approach in young people’s residential establishments in England. This is accomplished by, for example, examining the extent to which some existing trainings may be capable of delivering a pedagogy curriculum. At the same time, also for the Department of Health, we have been engaged in mapping training and qualification for work across what might be called ‘the children and young people’s sector’ - including children’s daycare, out-of-school clubs, social services, recreation, mentoring and the ConneXions service.

In the course of research conducted in Europe, I have often needed to grapple with ‘pedagogy’, whether within the domain of welfare or of education, and whether or not the term ‘social’ precedes the word. ‘Pedagogy’ is difficult for English ears, and, outside certain specialist circles, it is largely unused. In my own institution and similar places, we mostly use it in the sense of the science of teaching and learning as it relates to the formal curriculum of school, college and university (e.g. Mortimore, 1999) - what many of our European colleagues might refer to as ‘didactics’, rather than pedagogy or education.

Not only is ‘pedagogy’ used differently, in the Anglophone world, it is a term that can disappear in translation. In papers that I have had translated, ‘pedagogy’ too often becomes ‘education’. However, in some countries, such as France, *éducation* and its variants are, like ‘pedagogy’, given a much broader meaning than they have in the UK. *Education* and ‘pedagogy’ as used in continental Europe, often relate to the whole person: body, mind, feelings, spirit, creativity and, crucially, the relationship of the individual to others - their connectedness. The domain of pedagogy/education is, therefore, the social domain, and the work of the pedagogue/educator is conducted via relationships; relationships in which the pedagogue/educator is often the member of a group, of children or adults, but sometimes works one-to-one. As the earlier papers in this discussion have indicated, the approach values reflective practice and team work.

While it may be named differently in different countries, a distinct field is generally recognised at four important and connected levels: the development of theory, daily practice with children, the formulation of policy, and the training and education of workers. Most usefully, pedagogy can be used to refer to the whole domain of social responsibility for children, for their well-being, learning and competence. As a field, it has a place for provision such as childcare, youth work, family support, youth justice services, secure units, residential care and play work - provision that, to
English eyes, appears somewhat disparate. Yet pedagogy allows for a discourse that can, provisionally at least, discount differences based on, for example, the age of those who use services or on a service’s immediate goals, and permits any particular provision to be located in the context of a wider social policy towards children.

It should be said, however, that pedagogy is not value free. The ethics and political positions that inform it differ from country to country and over time. At its starkest, a totalitarian regime produces an oppressive pedagogy, while the politics of emancipation produce a pedagogy of equality, citizenship and respect for diversity.

Whatever their political and ethical context, the scope of the European pedagogue/educator is wide. In Sweden, the pedagogue denotes a profession that works alongside teachers in all school classes for children up to the age of 10 years (sometimes older). In addition, they provide the main workforce for out-of-school services. A pedagogue can be a school principal, or the principal of a cluster of schools. In interview, a pedagogue, who was herself a school principal, told me that this was an obvious development for pedagogues who are, she said, professionals skilled in team work. The employment of pedagogues is central to recent educational reforms in Sweden, and emphasises a concern with the whole child, rather than the child as conceived in narrow educational terms. (Moss and Petrie forthcoming). They also work in children’s out-of-school services. In Denmark, where the remit of the pedagogue is wider, pedagogues work as staff in nurseries, pre-schools, out-of-school services, children’s residential establishments and in disability services with children or with adults.

In continental Europe generally, the field of pedagogy/education covers a wide spectrum of work, from children’s and young people’s mainstream services to special services for adults and children, with the somewhat different emphases in different countries.

Training for pedagogues includes theory, methods, practice placements and, often, a range of arts, crafts and practical skills, that staff will be able to use in their work with children. Qualification may be offered at graduate and post-graduate level, as part of other vocational courses, such as social work and childcare training and in higher education. In some countries, a certain level of qualification may be available for young people aged over sixteen years in further education and at secondary school. At the same time, some practitioners within the field may be unqualified or awaiting qualification.

Qualified practitioners work in administration, in research and development, or as consultants; and in Flanders and the Netherlands, those carrying out this sort of work may have undertaken four or five years of study (including some practice placements) while at university. Others, who work face-to-face with groups of children on a daily basis, are more likely to have qualified via courses that last between two and four years, depending on the country. Once in employment, pedagogues may have a variety of job titles relating to the setting in which they work.

So, what might pedagogy have to offer to the UK? In a paper on training for residential child care workers (Crimmens, 1998: p. 319), Dave Crimmens cautions against “a tendency to believe that the grass is always greener (in other parts of Europe)”. Nevertheless, recourse to ‘pedagogy’ and ‘education’ has the potential for an inclusive, normalising approach, with the main focus on children as children, but also with an awareness that children can have special and additional needs (social pedagogy and terms such as éducation spécialisée are often reserved for work, for example, with disabled children, looked-after children or children in secure units).

In English social and educational policy, there is currently no overarching concept that might help to bring coherence to work in the children’s sector, such as that which pedagogy/education might supply. Yet, for the sake of policy coherence, work with young people in whatever setting, needs to share the same overall aims - this would seem fundamental to the Government’s policy of ‘working together’, on behalf of children across departments and sectional interests. Also, while different agencies may have identified different objectives as a means of achieving overall aims, there should, perhaps, be some unifying ethos across settings, whether secure units or playgrounds, some notion that workers in the children’s sector would share values and have, fundamentally, the same approach towards children. Much of the current training approach, based on skills and competences relating to the requirements of specific settings, can blur the similarities to be found across the whole area, and
there seems little sense of commonality across the sector.

In part, this may be because the work has not usually been named as the children’s sector or as pedagogy/education, so that addressing children and young people, and their relationship to society across settings, becomes difficult. There is little firm ground as a basis for public debate on children and childhood. It is interesting to contemplate how positioning - and being able to name - secure units for young offenders as both pedagogic and youth justice settings, might have informed recent discussions in the UK. These were about two young people, who, seven years earlier, had been found guilty of killing a young child. The discussion centred, to some extent, on their experience in the secure unit and what was seen by some commentators as their favourable treatment: for example, that they had pocket money and were taken shopping and to places of interest. The debate was made more difficult because it could not be conducted in terms of pedagogy, addressing questions such as how children should be brought up and the necessary requirements for this - whatever the setting, its constraints and other purposes.

While it may prove difficult to transfer whole systems of training and qualification from one country to another, perhaps the introduction of ‘pedagogy’ or ‘social education’ - or an equivalent term - has something to offer us in the UK. Such a term could address work with children across the board. It could have the potential to bring a greater coherence to policy development, to practice and to training. These are areas that, across settings and departments, may sometimes fail to focus on children as children, whatever their age, and whatever the type of service to be delivered. It could also provide a framework for discussing the place of children and young people in society as a whole. There are basic questions, such as “what do we want for our children?” “what is a good childhood?” “what relationship would we wish to promote between children and children, and children and adults?” These are pedagogic questions, cutting across sectional interests.

Moreover, at the level of practice, the pedagogue, exercising an emancipatory pedagogy and respecting children as social agents, could ensure that children and young people were themselves brought more fully into the discussion.

References