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Social pedagogy, music making and adopted children

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Abstract

Social pedagogy has become a common feature of CPD training for staff working with looked after children and adopted children. Social workers, foster carers and adoptive parents use the characteristic features of social pedagogical practice to develop meaningful relationships with a young person in care. Creative elements such as music have been noted to be useful activities in which both parties (children and support worker) can share a common interest and partake within a joint activity. This article sets out to examine the way in which a community music project working with adopted children and their adoptive parents uses social pedagogy and the impact that this may have on the participants. A case study strategy is used to examine the Loud and Clear adoption family learning project at Sage Gateshead, through which a multi-methodological approach was used, including interviews and participatory action research to gather participants' and facilitators' narratives of the impacts the sessions and approaches were having. Furthermore, participatory observations were also undertaken to see at first hand the social pedagogical approaches that the facilitators were using within sessions. Findings from the study indicated that having the opportunity to participate in a joint musical activity was key to helping children and adoptive parents develop their attachments to one another. Similarly, through facilitators providing opportunities for the group to socialise, adoptive parents were able to develop a support network that they felt would have been lacking within their lives. Both of these findings indicate the impact of adopting the common third approach to music making.

Keywords: social pedagogy; music making; adopted children; common third; community music

Introduction

Social pedagogy has become one of the main approaches utilised by individuals working with looked after children and children going through the adoption process. Several local authorities are providing training in social pedagogical practice to support social workers, foster carers and adoptive parents in developing meaningful relationships with the child (Derbyshire County Council, 2014). In recent years the UK has seen an increase in the number of children entering local authority care. In 2018 the Department for Education reported that there were 70,450 children in either foster care, adoptive care or residential care.

Arts organisations in the UK have recognised the importance in providing opportunities for looked after children with an opportunity to engage in the arts, linking the arts to developing self-esteem, self-confidence and relationship with their carers or adoptive parents (Chambers and Petrie, 2009; Dillon, 2010). Youth Music, a funding body within the UK for music projects working with children facing challenging circumstances, identified that a common outcome of a looked after child attending music projects was that they developed a bond with their carer or adoptive parent through joint active engagement (Dillon, 2010, p. 4).

This article sets out to examine a weekly early years music-making project working with adoptive families that uses a social pedagogical approach. The aim is to understand the impact that the project and approach may be having for children and parents alike. The questions are as follows:

- (1) What are the ways in which social pedagogical approaches are being used within the projects?
- (2) What are the holistic benefits that these approaches may be having for the child?
- (3) What are the holistic benefits that these approaches may be having for the adoptive parent?

Conceptual framework

Social pedagogical theory is used to underpin this study, as well as drawing on literature relating to attachment theory and music.

Social Pedagogy

Social pedagogy is associated with looked after children, due to its ability to provide equal focus on the building of relationships between children and their key adults while also taking into account the educational and care needs of the child. A study by Berridge et al. (2010, p. 130) found that by training residential home workers in social pedagogical practice, they were able to support the children's emotional needs more effectively, thus helping them better prepare for life after leaving the care system.

Training of social pedagogy often focuses on the principles of the common third, whereby through engaging in non-hierarchical and equally engaging activities, children and adults can develop meaningful bonds (Petrie, 2011, p. 78). The types of activities do, of course, depend upon the situation in which the child and adult find themselves. A study by the Thomas Coram Research Unit suggests that when using social pedagogy, 'The pedagogue must also be creative, being prepared to share in many of the children's everyday lives, such as preparing meals and snacks or making music' (Cameron et al., 2007, p. 4).

Attachment theory

Several studies examine the importance of children developing meaningful attachments (for instance, Bowlby, 1969). Work by the likes of John Bowlby indicates that the attachments developed at the beginning stages of the child's life could form the stepping stones for future attachments that may be built. Reports focusing on looked after children often draw upon attachment theory as a way of helping shape the practice of adoptive parents, carers and social workers (Hughes, 2000; Simkiss, 2012). Often these reports draw on the fact that looked after children struggle to form attachments due to not having secure placements while in care, or not being able to form a secure attachment in the earliest stages of their life. Consequently, social pedagogy's emphasis on the building of relationships has become a staple approach of working with looked after children.

Music in relation to social pedagogy and attachment

Several community music organisations have integrated social pedagogical practice into their projects, drawing upon the ‘heads, hearts and hands’ artistic pedagogue framework developed by [Chambers and Petrie \(2009\)](#). This framework places emphasis on artists reflecting on their work while working with the child, taking into account both the emotional needs and their contextual knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the child.

By emphasising the development of social pedagogical approaches, art organisations and facilitators are coming up with activities for looked after children where attachment building is at the core of the work. This is achieved through the ideas of creating activities that enable and support mutual interaction between children and adults. The Loud and Clear evaluation pack reported that through joint engagement, children were seen to increase their confidence and their ability to verbalise their ideas, as well as to contribute to the music making ([Mooney and Young, 2012](#), p. 15).

Methodology

A case study strategy was employed to examine the impact of a music project working with adopted children through a social pedagogical approach ([Yin, 2003](#)). I will begin by outlining the background of the project being examined before outlining the method of collection and analysis.

Project context

Loud and Clear is an early years music-making project working with children in the looked after care system. The project is delivered by Sage Gateshead, which is a music charity based in the north-east of England that delivers a breadth of participatory projects. COMUSICA (Community Music Activity) is one of the learning strands based in the creative learning department that delivers music-making projects for children and young people facing challenging circumstances. These include children and young people living with special educational needs, children in looked after care and young people classified as being not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The Loud and Clear project provides music making for children who are in adoptive and foster care, delivering three projects: Loud and Clear Adoptive Family Learning (0–5 years of age), Loud and Clear Foster Family Learning (up to 5 years of age) and Loud and Clear Move On Up! Adoption Family Learning (4–7 years of age). Loud and Clear Adoptive Family Learning was established in 2011 as a means of continuing to engage with children who had attended the foster project and had now been adopted.

The project is advertised as a drop-in session where participants to the group are recruited on the advice of their social worker. In the project, children have an opportunity to continue to nurture their relationship with their new guardians, develop their knowledge and playing of musical instruments, and have an opportunity to socialise with other children in similar circumstances. To facilitate these developments, the project is based around following a social pedagogical approach, where there are opportunities for children and adults to socialise with one another and the group to make music collectively.

Participants

Table 1 shows the sample of participants that were involved in the data collection for this study (January 2018–April 2018). Most of the participants attending were female, with only two males attending. Many in the group had begun attending once completing the adoption process. One of the families had begun by fostering the children and attending the Loud and Clear foster project. They had subsequently decided to adopt the children and were now attending the Loud and Clear adoption project. This is a unique case with only this individual family participating since the project began.

To gather the data, I used several different methodologies, including one-to-one interviews, participatory observations and participatory action group research. Participatory observations undertaken over eight sessions were used as the first point of data collection. Throughout the observations field notes were recorded outlining the activities that were undertaken within the session and participants’ responses to the activities. There was a particular focus within these observations into how facilitators were leading the session and working within a social pedagogical way.

One-to-one interviews were used to gather participants' experiences of the project and were undertaken before and after the Loud and Clear sessions. Interviews were also undertaken with the facilitators, gathering their thoughts on the approaches they used and how they adapted the session to meet participants' needs. The interviews took on a semi-standardised approach, allowing there to be freedom within the questions that adjusted to the participants' responses (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 310). These interviews were recorded and transcribed removing any confidential information to ensure anonymity.

Table 1. Sample of participants.

9 adoptive parents	10 children	2 facilitators
7 female adoptive parents (aged 28–40)	4 females (aged 2–4)	1 female, 1 male both attached to the project since 2012 and trained in social pedagogy
2 male adoptive parents (aged 30–42)	6 males (aged 2–4)	

Ethical approval was granted from York St John university in December 2017 after a full ethical review.

Findings

This section begins by highlighting the findings from this research, which will then be explored and discussed further in the literature surrounding social pedagogy and looked after children. The research highlighted several ways that social pedagogy was being used within this project, and the implications that working within this way was having on participants.

How were social pedagogical approaches being utilised?

Facilitators on the Loud and Clear project spoke in great detail of the importance of providing activities that the children and adults could join in with together. This was believed to be critical to the approach of the project, whereby adoptive parents and their newly adopted child could interact and engage with one another. Within the observations undertaken, there were several opportunities for parents to interact and dance with their children. An adaption of the song 'Do You Love?' by The Contours was used during several sessions, in which facilitators changed the lyrics to incorporate different child-and-adult interactions, such as through tickling, cuddling and dancing. Likewise, joint instrumental percussion playing was also witnessed as happening on several occasions, with facilitators supporting parents and children to keep a steady beat on the instruments.

Both facilitators identified snack time as being a pivotal moment for fostering relationships between the group, providing opportunities for interaction between the different adoptive parents. Providing this time to snack was identified as being a unique approach compared to other projects facilitators had worked on, but was believed to be essential when working within this setting.

Reflection was also outlined as being key to fostering the social pedagogical approach within the project. Facilitators highlighted that undertaking weekly reflection diaries was important in understanding the developing relationships between the children and parents and were useful for helping to inform future sessions:

As part of this project we also fill out a reflective diary, so in some ways that had helped because it is articulating what we think we are seeing and what we might do ... so in my reflections every week I am thinking when I did that thing what was the outcome. (Facilitator J, 2018)

The support of the other facilitator in the room was also deemed as being a valuable tool for helping enable developments for participants. Facilitators described 'bouncing ideas' off each other on different activities they could use as a way of continuing to keep the activities progressive and challenging. It was

recognised that having two facilitators could also help the running of the session if individual participants required further support.

What were the impacts seen on the children?

Adoptive parents believed that attending the project had several impacts on their child. Increased musical engagement was spoken about on several occasions, with many parents describing their children replicating activities from the sessions at home.

Several parents also identified how attending the project had been vital for helping their child to bond with them, highlighting singing and dancing as being key activities. One parent, in particular, described the difficulty they had first faced when trying to bond with their new child, and how finding a mutually engaging activity key for fostering their new relationship:

Back in the early days when I hadn't had her long, and I would sing the songs we had both heard here to her. I could see erm – her recognising the songs, and that helped us to bond more. Really, because a lot of the songs – I had no idea. (PSA, 44, 2018)

The building of structure and routine for the children was noted as being an impact of attending the project. Parents described how, when they were home, they would use certain songs or activities to engage the children. A song entitled 'Walk and Stop' was seen to be vital for motivating children to tidy away. Likewise, the singing of lullabies was an essential part of children's routines, with several parents describing almost having a set routine that they would sing every evening.

What were the impacts seen on the adoptive parents?

Through undertaking one-to-one interviews with the adoptive parents, insights could be gained into the impacts that attending the project was having on themselves as well as the children. The opportunity to socialise with other parents was seen as being a profoundly beneficial impact, with one parent describing it as being particularly crucial in the early stages of the adoption process to gain support. Similarly, for another parent, attending the group had provided them with an opportunity to hear how other parents had overcome the struggles of forming a bond with the child. This parent believed they would have struggled to gain similar support in overcoming this if they had attended other mother and children groups:

I started going for me so I could meet some other parents, you know and just be in another environment where I knew there were more people like me – who had a child that wasn't theirs and maybe struggled. (PSA, 44, 2018)

Additionally, for one parent attending the group over several months, it had led to them rekindling their interest in music. They described how participating and developing their child's interest in music had led them to re-engage with songs that they had listened to when they were younger.

Discussion

The findings revealed several different ways that the Loud and Clear Adoptive Family Learning project was integrating the use of social pedagogical practice and the impact that the project was having on looked after children.

A current issue that looked after children can face within their lives is the struggle to form meaningful attachments (Hughes, 2000; Simkiss, 2012). The lack of opportunities to form meaningful attachments can often lead to issues for adoptive children trying to settle within their new environments, leading to an adoption breakdown. Social pedagogy – with its ability to facilitate bonds and relationships between individuals through the use of the common third, where individuals engage in non-hierarchical activities with one another – has become a critical approach for children's support services.

Findings revealed that facilitators at Sage Gateshead are aware of the importance that social pedagogy can play in supporting the development of bonds between children and their adoptive parents, particularly around the ideas of joint, non-hierarchical activities. There were numerous opportunities throughout the sessions for children to play instruments and sing together with their new parents. This was found to

be vital for helping foster a bond that was occasionally quite a struggle at the beginning of the adoption process. The fact that the joint, non-hierarchical music making could be carried on at home between children and parents was an additional bonus for continuing to develop the bonds outside of the sessions.

Similarly, our own findings revealed that utilising a social pedagogical approach provided an opportunity for adoptive parents to build relationships with other adoptive parents, something which would have otherwise been difficult to achieve. Providing a snack time in the session provided an opportunity for participants to interact with one another. Hughes (2000, p. 213), whose work explored how adoptive parents can form attachments with their children, described how it is desirable for parents to develop relationships with other parents to benefit from their support and empathy. Cameron and Moss (2011, p. 125) described how providing a space for interaction is key within social pedagogical practice. Facilitators were aware of the importance of providing such a space, labelling it as one of the critical parts of the session.

The sessions also appeared to be having the positive effect on parents of increasing their engagement in music. Several parents described how participating in the project had led them to re-engage in music, particularly the sharing of songs from their childhood with the children. One parent described introducing their child to the music of Rufus Wainwright, which the child then loved and would try to sing along with when hearing it on the radio. Pitts (2012, p. 71), whose work explored an individual's life-long engagement with music, found that many individuals had limited engagement with music after leaving school. Thus, attending Loud and Clear, where parents were expected to join in with the music making, provided them with a unique opportunity to get involved with music once more and develop their interest and musical skills.

Attending Loud and Clear was seen as having numerous benefits for the children. Children's engagement in music making appeared to increase as they attended the session for several months. One parent described how participating in the project had developed their child's interest to the point where they eventually requested an instrument for Christmas. This child would ask for musical activities throughout the day, including singing songs from the sessions with the parents and dancing to the radio. Youth Music's evaluation of projects working with looked after children found that children would develop their interest in music through engaging within a project (Dillon, 2010, p. 22). The support bags offered by the project for families to use at home also seemed to be vital for helping continue to facilitate children's engagement outside of sessions. Parents spoke about how they had received bags filled with ukuleles, other instruments and puppets, which children would use at home, replicating activities from the sessions.

Looked after children are noted as struggling to form a structure or routine while living through the looked after care system (Simkiss, 2012; Bazalgette et al., 2015). Once leaving care, adoptive parents have to quickly develop a structure or routine to help the children settle into their new environment. The music-making sessions were seen as key for providing this structure. Music making is a beneficial tool for helping to build structure for children. Work by Kate Williams and Margaret Barrett explored the effects of parents using music with children aged 0–5 as a tool for structure, suggesting that using specific songs at certain times of the day become essential for building a routine (Williams et al., 2015, p. 114).

Findings suggested that parents attending Loud and Clear were able to use music as a way of providing structure, though this was less prominent compared to effects of developing a bond that music making offered. Parents became reliant on using certain songs to motivate their children to engage in specific activities. Lullabies were seen as being the most prominent at nighttime, though this was probably down to the age of the children. Thus, the use of joint music-making activity became key to helping the child develop a routine and structure within their new family.

Although these results provide insights into the impact that utilising social pedagogy through a music project can have on adoptive families, due to the small sample size within this case study it is difficult to state if the results found would be similar in other cases. Further research could be carried out to examine and compare the impact of other groups working with similar demographics within a social pedagogical approach.

Conclusion

Utilising a social pedagogical approach within a music project working with looked after children was indicated as providing several impacts. The most significant impact that the approach supported was the opportunity of developing bonds between children and their new families. Literature surrounding looked after children showcases the difficulties that families can often face in developing meaningful attachments (Hughes, 2000; Simkiss, 2012). Using a social pedagogical approach provided an opportunity for adoptive parents and children to interact with one another in a non-hierarchical way, and that was of mutual interest for both sets of participants.

For adoptive parents, attending a project that was using an approach that provided a space for interaction was vital for helping them to develop their support network. Adoptive parents identified that the adoption process was often a complicated and highly emotional experience. Attending a music project where they could interact with those in similar circumstances was vital for gaining advice from others around the adoption process and being able to talk about the challenges with individuals who understood. Thus, using social pedagogical approaches within community music projects plays a crucial role in providing a safe space for both looked after children and adoptive parents to build secure bonds and supportive networks.

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Declarations and conflict of interests

There are no conflicting interests within this publication.

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