The Potential of Art ot Break Down Barriers and Draw Together

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Social pedagogy and art: breaking down barriers, drawing together

Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses how individuals can explore their place in the world through the alignment of social pedagogical and art education. Art has the unique power to connect us as global citizens and create opportunities for us to share our lived experiences, transcending both class and culture. By exercising and enriching our artistic understanding, we can begin to build meaningful relationships not only with our own heritage, but also with each other. These artistic connections, when built on empathy and understanding, can bring communities together through a sense of creative exploration and curiosity, aligning with the social pedagogical concept of the common third. By undertaking artistic experiences together, as part of a learning community, we can utilise art as a tool that enables is to focuss on what brings us together rather than what sets us apart, providing empowerment for all. This chapter aims to explore the ways in which art can be used by social pedagogues to bring people together, break down barriers and foster connections and understanding within diverse communities.

Introduction: The Intersection of Social Pedagogy and Art from Early Years to Adulthood

In Europe, the visual arts play a central role in the professional development of practitioners within education and those supporting families in the community (Petrie, 2006). Education is seen as so much more than traditional schooling, developing the whole child through the 'cultivation and elevation of character' (Stephens, 2009: 344). Yet here in England, the plight of the arts has never been so perilous. Despite claims that the government aspires for a broad and balanced curriculum (Department for Education, 2014: 2), creative opportunities for our children and young people continue to be eroded by a culture of testing and an ideology that more formal, academic education is the road to success (Spielman, 2017). Arts and crafts form a fundamental part of the training of the social pedagogue in continental Europe (Cameron and Moss, 2011) whereas in the UK, trainee teachers receive on average less than one and a half hours of art-based instruction throughout their entire initial teacher education (Gregory, 2017).   Many practitioners working within early years settings, enter the profession with little or no training at all (Petrie *et al*, 2006) resulting in a workforce with limited understanding of the positive impact that art can have on child development. This results in many educators feeling ill prepared to

support children with their artistic endeavours (Cooper, 2018) and contributes to the narrowing of educational opportunities within both schools and early years settings (Ofsted, 2019).

> **Why do you think the place of art within education has become such a divisive topic?**

The time and resources devoted to art education in the UK have been consistently reduced, not only due to the erosion of government funding for education generally, but also as a result of the fundamental lack of understanding and acknowledgement of the multifaceted value of art. A social pedagogical approach to the much-needed reform of education would see art fully re-integrated into children's educational lives (Stobbs, Solvason, Gallagher and Baylis, 2023) ensuring that children explore the asset of creativity as an entitlement. The Cultural Learning Alliance (CLA), outline the benefits of an art-rich life in their Key Research Findings of 2017, which serves as a compelling call to arms for all social pedagogues (CLA, 2017). This report outlines the many benefits of arts engagement, citing empirical improvements in the health, social mobility and life chances of artistically engaged individuals, as well as identifying the positive impact that art has on community engagement and social activism (CLA, 2017: 2). This is why arts and crafts have always been fundamental to the social pedagogical approach. Through the magic of art, children are exposed to the beauty, creativity and wonder of the world around them. Understanding the value of these wider dimensions of existence supports practitioners in recognising the infinite possibilities available within society (Petrie and Chambers, 2009: 3) and encourages a more nuanced understanding of the way that individuals might be supported to fulfil their great potential.

Even the opportunities to engage with art at home during those precious, formative Early Years have been reduced due to increasing societal pressures on parents to return to work. Year on year, a record number of children live in households where both parents work full-time (Office for National Statistic, 2022 :3) and this, coupled with the government introduction of free childcare from age two means that children find themselves in educational settings earlier and for longer (Erikson, 2018). For many young children, sitting around a table at home engaging with painting, colouring or junk modelling with a caregiver is no longer a staple part of growing up,

reducing the many valuable opportunities for connection, playful adult-child relationships, shared attention and eye contact that mutual engagement in art can command (Armstrong and Ross, 2022: 1). This leads to generational decline in arts engagement at home where parents who have not experienced an arts-rich childhood themselves are less likely to prioritise creativity with their own children. The increasing financial pressure on families also means that the provision of extra-curricular art opportunities and the availability of artistic resources at home are increasingly beyond the budget of many families (Hodgson, 2023). Entry into an educational setting from an increasingly young age erodes the opportunities that children may once have had to engage in free-flowing creative fun within their own homes, and places increased responsibility for art engagement onto educators. A social pedagogical approach to early years education with art at its core would help redress this imbalance, recognising that holistic education provides children, like flowers, with the optimum conditions to grow (Eichstellar and Holtoff, 2011: 20).

With art becoming increasingly underfunded, undervalued and often overlooked in education (Cooper, 2018), it is becoming the domain of middle-class children whose parents have the resources to provide art materials or access to extra-curricular art opportunities. This means that the benefits derived from a richly artistic upbringing, like so many other enriching activities, are retained only for those who can afford it (Warwick Commission, 2015). It is the social pedagogues' responsibility to bring back this missing ingredient, to ensure that the power of creativity to enhance an individual's life chances is fully realized for everyone (Hatton, 2020: 2).

> **Reflect upon your experience of art as a child. What artistic opportunities did you have? Were there any limitations to the art experiences that you were able to access?**

As Loris Malaguzzi observed, the way that children think and understand is nuanced, rich and impossible to define in just one, singular way (Malaguzzi, 1996). Art is often a child's first method of communication, even before vocabulary and writing develop (Adu and Kissiedu, 2017). Limiting children's self-expression to just words and numbers ignores the wealth of communication that can be conveyed through brush strokes, mark-making and sculpting in both

two and three dimensions. This is this premise at the heart of the integration between social pedagogy and art. Children, in their formative early years, seek out opportunities for creativity without encouragement (Ershadi, 2020). Sticks in the woods become pencils in the mud, food is an exploration of colour and texture, discarded cartons and packaging become robots, houses and rockets. This is a child's first language and one that they openly and willingly share with those around them. A social pedagogue ensures that children have access to and make the most of these creative opportunities as they know that within these experiences, children are also learning the social skills they need for successful lives (Warwick Commission, 2015). In group activities like these, children will be learning to collaborate, negotiate, compromise, articulate and imagine: fundamental traits that will accelerate them on their journey towards the fulfilment of their limitless potential. Schools should design their curriculum with arts and creative media at their core to empower and embolden all children (Stobbs, Solvason, Gallagher and Baylis, 2023) to be successful and socially conscious citizens.

Social pedagogy is underpinned by the principles of a truly holistic education that redirects the traditional flow of learning from teacher to student, instead acknowledging the child's central role in the discovery and understanding of the outside world (Eichstellar and Holtoff, 2011). It is impossible for a child to develop truly holistically when exposed to a limited diet of just reading, writing and maths. Instead, artistic learning opportunities need to be on a par with STEM subjects to ensure an individualised and child-specific education that unlocks a child's natural gifts and supports the fulfilment of their unlimited potential (Smith and Boyd, 2008).

The argument for an arts rich education during childhood is gaining traction (National Society for the Education of Art and Design (NSEAD, 2023) but an additional challenge for the social pedagogue is what comes after. Evidence demonstrates that the inclination to innovate and create deteriorates rapidly as we grow older (Land, 1996) and for most of us, we see the evidence of this in our own lives where art has often been confined to our childhood. Society teaches us that art is something that children do, and our own lack of engagement in art as adults in turn, teaches children that art is something that 'grown-ups' grow out of (Eisner, 2002). A social pedagogue recognises the role of art in the magical relationship between a human and their world and seeks to use this as a tool to reengage both children and adults with their own existence. This is no easy task when for most adults, by the time an opportunity arises to rediscover art, the

familiar feelings of self-consciousness and -doubt in ones' capabilities as an artist have set in, presenting significant challenges for social pedagogues attempting to reconnect adult learners with art. There is no shortage of evidence to support the ongoing health and social benefits of art at all stages of life (CLA, 2017; Warwick Commission, 2015) but only the lucky few, with encouragement from families or education, maintain their enthusiasm for creativity into adulthood without significant intervention. This leaves a wealth of untapped potential that can be explored and nurtured though a social pedagogical approach.

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Do you still engage with art as an adult? Do you feel that your education encouraged you artistically?

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Johann Heirich Pestalozzi conceptualises holistic education in his 'head, heart and hands' model (Pestalozzi, cited in Heafford, 1967: 61) which describes how an individuals' mental, moral and physical development should be perfectly balanced throughout all pedagogical practices. Engagement in art lends itself organically to these three aspects of development. The 'head' is developed as art encourages the acquisition of knowledge that transcends simple facts and figures and instead creates learning opportunities within culture, heritage and the world around us. Art appeals to the 'heart' by encouraging socially active practices that shape an individuals' moral compass through the strong precedent for the power of art as activism (Dufour, 2010) and using art to respond to societal issues and social justice gives individuals a voice, encouraging connections with the world as global citizens (Juntunen and Partti, 2022). The physicality of experiencing art through a wide range of media and scale allows development of 'the hands' as individuals engage their whole bodies through sensory exploration, manipulation of materials and the learning of new techniques and processes that rely on both gross and fine motor control (James, 2013). In the same way that social pedagogues open their minds to the whole person, art opens our minds to the world around us (Eisner, 2002). The benefits of art transcend the physical act of making or doing. By utilising art as a tool that engages us with our own existence, we open ourselves up to the joy that comes from noticing, appreciating beauty and being present, experiencing the awe and wonder that occurs naturally within our own environments. Art carries the unique ability to balance our head, heart and hands by providing

strength, focus and discipline to our thoughts; warmth, imagination, originality and enthusiasm to our hearts and giving order and resolve to our will (James, 2013: 5).

Social pedagogy, with art as a key ingredient, aims to provide human interaction and experiences that gently take the people experiencing them to a place of emotional self-sufficiency and resourcefulness; where the tools to find solutions to problems can be accessed from within (Böhnisch, cited in Eichstellar and Holthoff, 2017). Similarly, engaging with creative, artistic practice encourages the notion of process over product, and develops resilience and critical thinking, skills that are invaluable to creating a mind-set of self-reliance (Zarobe and Bungay, 2017); one of the fundamental aims of the social pedagogical approach.

The Transformative Potential of Art in Fostering Connections and Understanding within Diverse Communities

The need to create is a fundamental part of what makes us human (Golden, 2015). Since time began, there is historical evidence of humankind's pursuit for outlets of aesthetic expression. Although there have been nuances in style and medium, the need to create has been a constant, transcending geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic boundaries. In an increasingly diverse world, the creation of art has the power to connect communities through a shared language that allows a two-way transfer of skills and knowledge (Bublitz, 2019).

Within art there has always been a predisposition for historians and educators to label different artists and movements, thus creating invisible segregation between the people and cultures from whom the art is conceived. As formal education in England moves further away from a holistic approach and more towards a knowledge-based curriculum (Hirsch, 2006), so the tendency for educators to put art genres into boxes has been exacerbated. Whilst art education moves towards knowledge of individual artists, art genres and timelines, many educators have lost sight of the fundamental basics of art for art's sake (See and Kokotsaki, 2016). A more formal approach to art also disrupts the alignment of art with social pedagogy. Social pedagogy is concerned with those moments where opportunities for creativity are presented with no fixed start or end point. The 'product' of the endeavour is all about the shared experience of the making, the risks taken,

and the solutions found; and ultimately the connections and collaborations built between the participants that cannot be separated from the artwork itself (McLennan, 2010). It is in this place that we develop holistically, in the safe space that art creates, where the tools for resilient and emotional self-sufficiency can be practiced and eventually honed (Böhnisch, cited in Eichstellar and Holthoff, 2017).

Using art to connect diverse communities is distinctly more nuanced than simply teaching learners about the artistic contribution of the many cultures of the world. Social pedagogues care less for the product of a culture's aesthetic history than for the people within it (Eichstellar and Holtoff, 2011). Where art is at its most powerful, it brings people together through projects based on understanding, collaboration and empathy (Peloquin, 1996). A common theme in community art projects used by social pedagogues is that of identity (White and Ricarte, 2023). This could be using art to explore one's own identity, create curiosity and empathy with the identity of others, or examine the parallels between the evolving identities of participants within a group by making connections between everyone's heritage and identifying shared futures. Looking at the artwork of a culture in isolation encourages analysis of difference, whereas examining the artistic preferences and experiences of the individuals within the project itself, encourages connection and understanding of our commonality (Lowe, 2000).

Why is understanding identity an important theme within social pedagogy?

One such contemporary art project explores how art can facilitate the articulation of social and cultural values to build relationships between children and families from different faith backgrounds. Anna Hickey-Moody and Mia Harrison explore how the concept of socially engaged arts practice (Bishop, 2012: 7) can be used as an 'affective pedagogy' (Hickey-Moody, 2012: 79), that aligns with social pedagogy in its underlying principles of relational education. Here, the artist practitioner uses art to create feelings of empathy and understanding which provides participants with a new sense of shared resourcefulness that emerged from belonging within a community of practice with common goals and aspirations (Wenger, 1998).

Their project engaged children and their parents in collaborative art that encouraged participants to explore an 'intrafaith future' built on discovering shared values and cultural connections (Hickey-Moody and Harrison, 2012: 2). Participants were asked to create papier mâché sculptures that displayed key values in the form of 'special stickers' that represented the ideals fundamental to each of their cultural beliefs (Hickey-Moody and Harrison, 2012: 6). Quickly, individuals recognised that despite the myriad of different cultures and religions represented within the group, the key themes that emerged shared commonality such as 'service' and 'faith' (Hickey-Moody and Harrison, 2012: 6).   The shared art project gently encouraged children and their parents to engage in open, honest and empathetic dialogue that shaped new ways of thinking and built lasting relationships that transcended class and culture.   Feelings of 'otherhood' were eroded, and participants focused instead on their many similarities. The materiality of the process of creating art provided a mechanism for cultivating friendship and belonging where individuals instinctively sought to find common ground and connection (Hickey-Moody and Harrison, 2012).

The success of such a project may seem the product of chance, but the role of the social pedagogue is integral to the planning and implementation of such an endeavour. Activities must be carefully planned to incorporate all participants' 'direct experiences, their living contexts, their life skills and the strength of their self-responsibility' (Grunwald and Thirsch, 2009:132), creating a predictable space where mutual decision-making values both individuals and the collective (Eichstellar and Holtoff, 2011: 20). The social pedagogue must know 'when to persist and when to back off', whilst carefully balancing the authentic and meaningful development of relationships alongside the maintenance of appropriate boundaries (Eichstellar and Holtoff, 2011: 27). The practitioner inevitably maintains a degree of pedagogical responsibility, which creates a power imbalance between practitioner and subject, but this responsibility must be maintained to safeguard all within the experience, whilst respecting the individuality, dignity and free will of those involved (Husen, 2022: 8). This means that the social pedagogue must choose activities carefully to recognise participants as experts in their own lives and to meet them in their everyday realities (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009:132).

Art as the Common Third

Art is used by many social pedagogues as a way of strengthening relationships through a mutually appreciated, everyday activity that encourages collaboration between practitioner and individual working at the same level. This activity is described as 'the common third' where the shared purpose or experience bridges the gap between individuals who are brought together in pursuit of a common interest accessed as equal participants (ThemPra, 2015: 2). This could be an external problem or issue to be solved where individuals work together to achieve a common goal, or a new skill to be learned where all parties approach the activity as novices ready to learn together. This principle exemplifies social pedagogy's commitment to learning and personal development as indistinguishably important from the development of long-lasting, healthy relationships (Hadi and Johanson, nd: 3).

Choosing art as the common third allows development of cooperative relationships where all parties have permission to be vulnerable and all voices can be equally heard. The artistic process also encourages a mutual understanding and mobilisation of each individual's available, internal resources and encourages a shared appreciation and discovery of life's many dimensions (Dworak-Peck, 2024: 9). The visual arts naturally support the expression of unconscious emotions that can then be explored in the safe space of a collaborative activity (Stobbs, Solvason, Gallagher and Baylis, 2024). Selecting an art process in which both parties are novices creates opportunities for communication, problem solving and negotiation, all of which are significant from a social pedagogical stance in the holistic development of all individuals within the experience. By employing a shared art activity as the common third, 'personal development through purposeful engagement' is encouraged alongside the cultivation of trusting relationships (Parker, 2020: 7).

Social Pedagogy and Community Art
Although the common third can be used between two individuals to harness the therapeutic benefits of the artistic process, the affiliation between art and social pedagogy has fostered many tangible benefits within larger groups to build belonging and cohesion within communities. As Lowe (2000: 1) explains, 'Community art serves as a catalyst for community because it is both the setting for group solidarity building and the symbol of group identity'. Participation in a

shared visual art project encourages communities to discover things about themselves whilst fostering understanding of the group's collective identity (Flood, 1982).

Shauna Lowe discusses an example of such a project in her community development project in which an artist, fulfilling the role of the social pedagogue, facilitated communities working together through the common third of designing and installing a mural to enhance their local environment (Lowe, 2000). Through this project, residents who previously described themselves as individually isolated and disconnected, came together to create a mutual piece of art that represented the diversity of cultures within the community. The benefits of this project were overwhelmingly positive with participants describing the social bonds, solidarity, collective identity and common mood that emerged from the experience (Lowe, 2000: 1). The sense of belonging that developed through the process of planning, designing and painting the mural encouraged the inclusive and connected community described by Tönnies as 'gemeinschaft' (Tönnies, 1967: 1) where social relationships develop organically and are built on shared ideals and values (Lowe, 2000: 380). The project developed this ideal sense of community through the coexistence of Tönnies' three types of gemeinschaft: kin, neighbourhood and friendship (Tönnies, 1967) and enhanced participants independence as well as interdependence (Eichstellar and Holtoff, 2011: 25).

Lowe attributes the success of this project to the way that the social pedagogue created opportunities for structured interactions within the community setting, establishing a culture of inclusive decision making, developing a shared goal with a physical outcome and ensuring that the common mood was both playful and light-hearted (Lowe, 2000: 381). This project illustrates a set of foundational principles that could be used by a social pedagogue to develop similar projects that could also harness the power of art to empower individuals from diverse communities to become connected, collaborative and interrelated. Through this focus on the human element of art, communities can be encouraged to learn and grow together whilst exploring and promoting the potential of each individual (Romeo, 2018).

> Using Lowe's criteria, think about another example of a community art project that could support individuals to come together through a shared artistic purpose.

Conclusion

Art and social pedagogy are natural allies, encouraging participants to embark on a journey of self-discovery that connects them to their own lives in the present and encourages optimism for the future (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Only by prioritising genuinely holistic human development, can education fulfil its true purpose – to improve quality of life for all and create engaged, responsible and self-sufficient citizens. By creating connections within communities and a sense of belonging within diverse populations, a social pedagogical approach to art is a powerful tool to encourage individuals to draw on the resources and attributes that exist within themselves, as well as their contemporaries, emancipating all members of the community and creating a well-balanced society. The lack of value ascribed to art within all phases of education prevents individuals from accessing the many proven health and social benefits that art participation can bestow (CLA, 2017) and the absence of a holistic approach to education contributes to a society that is becoming less connected and more divided.

Effective use of art within a social pedagogical context prioritises the value of community and recognises the power and potential of the people within it. Encouraging shared creativity and explorations of our own heritage by identifying the things that bring us together as global citizens empowers communities to seek social change and challenge injustice through their own self-reliance and resourcefulness. Whereas traditional education encourages competition and comparison, social pedagogy and art encourage connection, collaboration and the commitment to change for the betterment of everyone. Embracing the freedom of self-expression harnessed by 'art for art's sake,' the social pedagogue can create authentic connections between themselves and participants, that evolve through shared understanding and purpose. By creating artistic opportunity that engages all elements of the head, heart and hands through a mutually purposeful

'common third,' the social pedagogue can elevate the self-worth and resourcefulness of all participants, creating the natural conditions within which all can thrive.

Summary Points

- Access to art is a fundamental ingredient of a holistic education and has proven health and social benefits at all stages of life.
- The use of art as a common third activity strengthens relationships between individuals and within communities.
- The use of art within social pedagogy must be carefully planned to engage all aspects of the head, heart and hands. It is the process of exploration through art where the journey of self-discovery and relationship building exists.
- Exploring themes of identity and cultural heritage through art encourages individuals to gain a greater sense of self-awareness and draw parallels between themselves and other members of society.

Recommended Reading:

A brief learning framework for artist pedagogues by Helen Chambers and Pat Petrie: https://static.a-n.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/abbreviated_learning_framework_for_artist_pedagogues.pdf

Key Research Findings: The Case for Cultural Learning, Cultural Learning Alliance: https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CLA-key-findings-2017.pdf

Socially Engaged Art and Affective Pedagogy: A Study in Inter-faith understanding by Anna Hickey-Moody and Mia Harrison: https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/29/socially-engaged-art-and-affective-pedagogy

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