

VIEWPOINT THE COMMON THIRD

It ain't what you do it's the way that you do it

An activities focused form of relationship-based social work from Denmark has vital lessons for practitioners in the UK, says **Jameel Hadi**



There is renewed interest in the relationships between individuals and communities. But what do we mean by the term relationship?

Does this refer to therapeutic casework, is it person-centred or does it involve building an individual's social capital? How do these relationships relate to building strengths, rather than self-responsibility or protective factors?

The Common Third provides an alternative to working with an individual as a client or patient and locates people we work with as resourceful.

The Common Third originated in Denmark as a practical expression of the connectedness between relationships and learning within social pedagogy. In Denmark, the term 'client' or 'service user' is a negative expression. Danish Sociologist Nanna Mik-Meyer in her book *To Create a Client* argued that if you meet around someone's problems they identify with these and it stops them moving on.

The Common Third involves two individuals or a group, sharing an everyday activity. Examples include sharing time together (reading a book or watching a film together), a practical task (gardening or cooking) or creative activity (art or music). One or other participant may be the teacher or all involved can learn and grow together.

The power of activity is that it creates a shared space beyond the issue or problem – a 'third', that brings people together creating shared values, norms and rules.

The person and process are not the means but an end in itself reflecting values of inclusion, equality and self-determination. This takes into account a person's aspirations, motivations and potential to contribute. It means recognising how individuals experience the world and that this is a consequence of both upbringing and experiences. Therefore, the process of change involves people taking part by sharing ideas, dialogue and planning rather than as consumers or problems to be fixed.

This creates the basis for the relationship. Creative activities play a significant part in the training of social pedagogues. It is through 'doing' that we become active in the world, unleashing our potential for growth and establish relationships. Possibilities determined by the

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individual, not bureaucratic outcomes. The role of the professional is to recognise the importance of reciprocity in relationships. This requires the professional to make 'judicious use of themselves' by distinguishing the private from the personal and professional and engaging people in holistic change using the head, heart and hands.

As Danish philosopher Michael Husen explains, a party only exists in a true sense if the individuals have shared history of activities. This means that changes in the environment and the person go together.

There is a tradition of activities within families, social care and community settings in the UK. The significance of activities goes beyond engagement tools that are diversionary or secondary to the main business. Play is not frivolous. The Common Third provides a way of enriching and validating the use of activities, creating new possibilities in how people view themselves and their relationships to others.

Case study

A young man with learning disabilities attends a special school and is socially isolated and dependent on his parents. His parents accompany him to a local community after school club. Previously he has only attended disability clubs. He is initially apprehensive, as are his parents and the other children. In the beginning, he has trouble joining in the game of short tennis so a volunteer leader joins him off court and they begin hitting the ball to each other. Soon other children begin to take it in turns to play with him, sharing smiles, laughter and conversation. The group, which now includes the young man, return to the court, improvise, and create new challenges within the game. The young man's coordination improves and he begins to learn names and socialise with the other children. Eventually he insists that his parents leave him and he becomes a volunteer leader.

What is going on here? The person is taking part in a 'fun' activity, where they build their self-efficacy and capabilities. The professional task was to value the activity and person.

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