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Title	Ethical and relational leadership in a complex world: the use of the Human Learning System and social pedagogical leadership framework to navigating complexity
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/49841/
DOI	##doi##
Date	2023
Citation	Charfe, Lowis orcid iconORCID: 0000-0002-8018-4676 (2023) Ethical and relational leadership in a complex world: the use of the Human Learning System and social pedagogical leadership framework to navigating complexity. <i>International Journal of Social Pedagogy</i> , 12 (1).
Creators	Charfe, Lowis

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. ##doi##

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Perspective

Ethical and relational leadership in a complex world: the use of the Human Learning System and social pedagogical leadership framework to navigating complexity

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Submission date: 1 March 2023; Acceptance date: 23 August 2023; Publication date: 23 November 2023

How to cite

Charfe, L. (2023). Ethical and relational leadership in a complex world: the use of the Human Learning System and social pedagogical leadership framework to navigating complexity.

International Journal of Social Pedagogy, 12(1): 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2023.v12.x.016>.

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open access

International Journal of Social Pedagogy is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic brought into sharp focus the complexities and challenges facing social work and social care organisations. Using theory, ethics and practice, this article aims to critically explore an ethical and relational approach to leadership that can help navigate complexity in social work in the UK. Explaining the emerging Human Learning System, this article argues that this paradigm can offer an alternative to the new public management, with its focus on the three core aspects of *markets*, *matrix* and *management*. Key to this discussion is the social pedagogy leadership framework, which aims to assist the navigation of complexity in direct practice and support positive organisational cultures and systems as discussed within the Human Learning System. The leadership framework is informed by the principles of social pedagogy, which are seen as an ethical philosophical approach to leadership and direct practice. It places human relationships and rights within

the everyday and at the heart of leadership and organisational change – as Berit Bae has stated, human rights must be applied in the everyday, not just in certain situations. Using the philosophical principles and core ideas of social pedagogy and the Human Learning System, the framework is designed to support leadership, which is relational and ethical at its core, while also assisting the navigation of uncertainty and the complexities of the work undertaken by modern social work and social care organisations.

Keywords social pedagogy; leadership; ethics; relational; complexity; Human Learning Systems; management

Introduction

In the UK, there is growing awareness and recognition that not only is social work and social care facing a funding crisis after years of austerity policies, but there is also a growing crisis within the workforce made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic (Butler, 2021). Against this backdrop, the sector continues to see growing demand for welfare services, coupled with supporting children, their families and adults who are experiencing multiple and complex needs (Fish and Hardy, 2015). Positioned within this situation, this article aims to explore the impact and importance of the introduction of ethical standards and the effect and influence they have on leadership, as well as the central role they play in anti-oppressive and human rights-based practice. The author would like to state from the outset that they acknowledge and admire the work that UK social workers undertake in very difficult situations and to highlight that this article is not critical of their everyday practice. Most people are drawn to the profession because of a desire to challenge inequality and social injustice, as well as to support positive changes in people's lives (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021). This desire often clashes with social work procedures and systems (Pawar, 2019) and can lead to feelings of moral distress (Weinberg, 2009). This article sets out an argument that the profession therefore needs ethical and relational leadership that supports social workers to adhere to these deep-rooted moral values and desire to work in anti-oppressive ways.

Focusing directly on leadership, this article does not add to the discussion around the differentials and connections between management and leadership (Sullivan, 2016). The rationale being that ethical leadership, from a social pedagogical viewpoint, is situated in the everyday practice of all practitioners and is not reliant on authority, job title or managerial position with organisations.

Starting in the 1990s the UK has seen a steady shift within social work from befriending and offering assistance to more formalised statutory services and packages of care and support. Ruch et al. (2010) have highlighted the damaging effect that moving from a 'welfarist approach' to the 'marketisation of welfare' (p. 23) has had on the relation aspect of support being offered by social work. Moving it from 'nurturing and supportive to contractual and service orientated' (Ruch et al., 2010, p. 23). Government agendas, legislation and policies have shaped and presided over this ideological shift (Evans, 2016).

Since the 1980s one of the most dominant forces in shaping the administration of public services such as social work has been the new public management (NPM) paradigm. Based on the three pillars – markets, managers and metrics – and underpinned by public choice theory (Ferlie et al., 1996), it aims to manage outcomes with significant emphasis on 'standards and performance measurement' and to provide 'value for money' by increased competition (Worsley and Wylie, 2020, p. 79; Evans, 2016), standardised assessments and packages of care. NPM fits squarely into the conservative paradigm (Krumer-Nevo, 2016), asserting that these market forces, standardised processes and outcomes (Evans, 2016) are the best way to deal with poor individuals and families, and laying the blame for the inequality and poverty that the poor face squarely at their feet due to the perceived character deficits that they are said to display (Krumer-Nevo, 2016). People – whether staff, individuals or families receiving packages of care or support – are viewed as inherently untrustworthy, selfish and in need of control (Lowe et al., 2021). With regard to leadership, NPM states that this lack of trust means that people must be managed by extrinsic motivation, punishment and reward (Evans, 2016; Lowe et al., 2021), with a continued push for professional practice as the means of a command-and-control management strategy (Laloux, 2016).

In more recent years there have been discussions and debates about the ongoing issues with NPM around the lack of real service reform and improved outcomes for service users within the sector,

which has led many to argue that we are now in a post-NPM world (Reiter and Klenk, 2018). But no matter what terminology is used – whether it be NPM, post-NPM or new public governance – there are still fundamental problems in the direct practice and operation of public services such as social work and social care (Hood and Dixon, 2015; Evans, 2016). These are largely systemic issues such as large caseloads, workforce burnout, the ongoing impact of poverty and lack of early support services due to austerity measures, coupled with growing multiple and complex needs. As Evans (2016) has rightly highlighted, poorly designed systems and processes will always overshadow any well-meaning and ethically based practice. Therefore, much more focus and support is required for leadership that assists the development of day-to-day practice within public services that are ethically rooted in supporting humans to flourish (Cottam, 2021) and helping people live a good life (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2019).

The development of 'leadership' and professional practice

Within social work and social care there is a growing emphasis on leadership, its link to professional practice and the importance of this in the direct work undertaken by social workers (Scourfield, 2018; Worsley and Wylie, 2020). To highlight this link, the two largest UK social work organisations play a major role in defining what is meant by the terms *professional* and *leadership* in everyday practice. Social Work England is the regulatory body that holds individual social workers' registrations in England, and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the largest independent membership organisation for social work professionals. The professional standards held by Social Work England (2019) and the Codes of Ethics held by the BASW talk about professional development and the links to leadership. The professional capabilities framework (PCF) also held by BASW (2021) is more explicit, with domain 9 of the PCF titled 'Professional Leadership'. This domain sets out how students and social workers need to be engaged in personal and collective leadership in order to advance 'social work's purpose, practices and impact' (BASW, 2021, n.p.).

As Sullivan (2016) stated, 'Social work is a mission-drive and values-based profession' (p. 54). As a result, transformational leadership has been seen as a way of developing effective leadership within the profession. The major stumbling block with this approach has been that it is embedded in a managerial approach, focusing on efficiency, value for money and meeting outcomes (Kinder, 2012) all modelled on a business approach (Lawler, 2007). Yet, due to the relational, moral and human rights-based aspects of the nature of social work – that it is at its core a *public service* and that leadership is enshrined in the professional capabilities of the profession (Sullivan, 2016) – there is a need to consider the importance of ethical leadership and how it can support practitioners to in their everyday practice.

If we can acknowledge that paradigms such as NPM have a very limited impact in finding solutions to reducing inequality in a complex world, then a solution that focuses on simple answers is not a silver bullet. What is needed is a complexity-informed paradigm that supports professional practice underpinned by ethics and theory. From a social pedagogical perspective, and using Bauman's (1993) work on postmodern ethics, ethical leadership is grounded in the belief that as there are no universal ethical codes, we must take personal responsibility to act ethically. Being able to live and work within complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity means that we must develop a moral and ethical competency that is not technical, rational or instrumental (Bauman, 1993). Social pedagogical leadership supports practitioners to understand and embed this in their practice.

Social pedagogy and the Human Learning System: their synergies and use as a basis for ethical and relational leadership

The Human Learning System (HLS) began based on research by Collaborate CIC and Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University. It has grown to include the Centre for Public Impact and various third-sector organisations working to support the progression of HLS within the public sector in the UK and internationally. Working with a complexity-informed approach, the three aspects of *human, learning* and *systems* focus on how people involved at all levels within public service can embrace *the messy* to provide better social outcomes (Lowe and Pilmmer, 2019). A core aspect of this is the development of cultures that support ethical and relational leadership, that does not seek to grab and maintain power or authority, but rather be system stewards (Lowe et al., 2021) that take a *distributed leadership* stance (Bolden, 2011) in supporting organisational and practice changes.

There are many synergies between how HLS and social pedagogy can support ethical and relational leadership, the first and most obvious is the focus on the relational as central to social pedagogy and the *human* part of HLS. As with social pedagogy, the *human* domain in HLS is based on recognition of diversity and inner held strengths of each individual and the importance of the relational aspect of any leader (Lowe et al., 2021). Masters (2021) has highlighted the importance of qualities such as 'curiosity and flexibility, authenticity and vulnerability, abilities to build trusting relationships, and a willingness to share power' (p. 367), seeing these as fundamental in building empathic, authentic and trusting relationships that are the foundation stone of all social change (Lowe et al., 2021). With regard to ethical and relational leadership, a focus on learning aligns with the understanding of the complexity and uncertainty of the work that social workers deal with on a daily basis. There is never a clear answer to problems and therefore there need to be ongoing 'cycles of adaptation and innovation' 'holding on to what is strong and improving what is wrong' (Masters, 2021, p. 363) and embedding learning from these cycles. Learning, like relationships, is seen as critical in pushing social change forward. Creating cultures and supportive environments where learning is embedded in all areas of practice with the remit of enabling continual improvements and using data to support this learning is vital (Lowe et al., 2021). Again, the synergy with holistic learning set out in the diamond model (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012) and Gardner's (1992) multiple intelligence theory is clear to see. Finally, *systems* are the connections and relationships that exist within society, as well as being members of communities and organisations. This recognises the interdependence that we all have. For positive social change to happen, there need to be healthier systems with collaboration and co-production at their centre. With regard to ethical and relational leadership, within the system domain, both informal and formal authority must be acknowledged and understood. It must also be accepted that authority can be a hindrance and create barriers to positive change. As Masters (2021) has stated, we all look to leaders with authority to 'keep things the way they are, providing protection and order' (p. 365). The power structures and dynamics at play must also be acknowledged as part of ethical and relational leadership. HLS highlights that the most effective leadership creates a shared purpose and agreed ethical practice between practitioners and organisations within the public sector (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021).

There are some synergies between HLS and social pedagogy, even though they are distinctly different. Where social pedagogy is embedded in public sector practice in other countries, the human rights aspect of the poverty-aware paradigm (Krumer-Nevo, 2016) is used not only to direct practice but also to challenge structural conditions that lead to inequality. In the UK, it could be argued that social pedagogy has so far focused mainly on direct and relational practice and that there is a need for an equal focus on using human rights to challenge structural discrimination and inequality. Social pedagogy has an important part to play in helping to shape ethical and relational leadership within this human rights and anti-oppressive paradigm.

From a social pedagogical perspective and based on Bauman's (1993) work on postmodern ethics, ethical leadership is grounded in the belief that as there are no universal ethical codes we must take personal responsibility to act ethically. Being able to live and work within complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity means that we must develop a moral and ethical competency that is not technical, rational or instrumental (Bauman, 1993). Social pedagogical leadership builds on this and, at its core, is focused on human flourishing, with care and responsibility for others (including colleagues and other professionals, as well as the individuals and families that we work alongside). It develops processes that support contextualised decisions, embraces creative practice by active subjects and has an understanding of universal human rights that informs all aspects of moral life. Social pedagogy leadership also accepts that knowledge is co-constructed and recognises the values of people's unique potential and their differing perspectives of the world around them. It also invests in capacity building and developing human capital (Sergiovanni, 2005); encouraging cultures of care, curiosity, reflexivity and learning, as well as understanding the importance of relational practice (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021). Leadership should be based on acts and recognition of solidarity (Honneth, 1995), reducing *otherness*, seeing relationships as a basis of knowledge and co-learning, and as central to the co-production of knowledge and practice.

Professional practice and the professionalisation of social work – the devil is in the detail

Before turning the discussion to leadership, it is important to critically reflect on the terms *professional* and *professionalism*, due to their continued link to leadership. In his book on social work leadership, Scourfield (2018) began his discussion by exploring these terms and went on to link them to the competencies set out for social work practice. It is important to acknowledge that the link between the terms *professional* and *leadership* is not unique to social work but can be found in wider discussions of leadership within the public sector (Masters, 2021). Scourfield (2018) acknowledged that the terms *professional* and *professionalism* are socially constructed and can be interpreted in various ways, adding to the complexity of a common definition and understanding. He went on to state that the terms are linked to knowledge and expertise and the ability to be 'trustworthy, consistent and ethical', as well as reflective in practice (Scourfield, 2018, p. 23). It is curious that *leadership* is often prefixed with the word *professional*, and that if not used together, leadership seems to appear less valid and will not adhere to the required professional standards. These terms are overused and yet rarely defined, and when combined they become vague and meaningless. That is not to say that professionalism is not important. There is a growing obsession around professional practice and the professionalisation of social work, social care and other public services. To say that something is professional does not make it so.

It could be argued that this increased attention on professionalism in social work and social care is linked to a steady shift in focus on developing professional competencies in practice. Social work has moved from befriending and offering assistance to more formalised statutory services that provide packages of care and support; requiring practitioners to work in what is seen as a professional manner (Ruch et al., 2010; Worsley and Wylie, 2020), thus, we are told, requiring higher levels of professionalism in practice.

There is no question about the need for legal frameworks and principles, policy guidance in direct practice, and that levels of professionalism are necessary. This is especially true when considering the complex welfare and safeguarding issues faced in the direct work undertaken by social workers. Yet the overreliance on systems, the standardisation of assessments and procedures, the focus on outcomes and an obsession with evidence-based practice has led to the *professionalisation* of social work practice. How social workers comply with formal systems, follow manualised approaches to practice (Harbo and Kemp, 2020), meet targets, outcomes and timescales, as well as recording their work on IT systems, have become the primary indicators and signs of a *competent* and *professional* social worker. Yet, this focus on efficiency and certainty in reaching and fulfilling the *desired outcomes* denies the realities, complexity and challenging nature of modern social work practice (Harbo and Kemp, 2020; Smith, 2020). It also draws us away from the 'purpose, practices and impact' (BASW, 2021, n.p.) intended to underpin professional leadership. As highlighted by Lowe et al. (2021), this push by the NPM approach has led to social workers and managers being made to operate in a 'magical fantasy world' (p. 17).

If we are being forced to work within and navigate this magical fantasy world that is dehumanising to all involved (Lowe et al., 2021), while professional leadership is about 'purpose, practices and impact' (BASW, 2021, n.p.), then there needs to be a discussion around the part ethical and relational leadership can play in the reshaping practice, organisations and systems. If the focus on an often-misunderstood term such as professional leadership has played a part in leading to a more technical approach to social work, then I argue that there must be a shift to developing *ethical leadership*, guiding a move away from the technical rational approach to practice (Trevithick, 2014). The framework that I have developed aims to assist with the development and embedding of ethical and relational leadership in all aspects and levels of practice and organisational culture.

A move to ethical leadership in the everyday and organisational

Both concepts of *leadership* and *ethics* have been widely debated individually alongside the complexity of finding common definitions, understandings and implementation into everyday practice (Corbella and Ucar, 2019). This article does not intend to contribute directly to these debates but rather uses them as a starting point for the social pedagogy leadership (SPL) framework.

The distinction between leadership and management continues to be debated and argued with regard to exploring the term *leadership* and is reductive in nature. It naturally leads to one being seen

as better than the other, rather than seeing the interconnectedness and need for both depending on the context and situation. I therefore focus on what I see as the two important domains within which they operate: the *everyday* and the *organisational*. As Masters (2021) has stated, 'neither should ... be seen as an either/or: systems change is best achieved as a collective endeavour, partnering across difference, with multiple actors from all parts of the system playing – and being enabled to play – complementary roles' (p. 364).

When exploring everyday leadership it is important to acknowledge the leadership skills of individual and small collectives of social workers in collaboration with people receiving support, to push forward positive and ethical practice. Everyday leadership does not require any formal responsibility within an organisation, such as being a team leader or in a management role. Rather, it is about focusing on the position or power that we must all make positive changes within the everyday that can support well-being, learning and growth (ThemPra, 2017), as well as the development of HLS within practice and organisational culture and systems. As highlighted in the HLS (Lowe et al., 2021), there are real limitations to believing that experts have the answers to complex problems. In complex environments and when dealing with uncertainty there is no one expert who has all the answers; what is needed is collaboration and learning from a range of people who have knowledge that can be used to find healthier solutions. This also acknowledges that social workers are not experts with all the answers to the problems; rather, they have the skills and ability to work in a more equitable way, trying to reduce power dynamics and being open to working in partnership with the people that they support to promoting system change (Lowe et al., 2021; Social Care Futures, 2021). As BASW (2021) has highlighted in its code of ethics, leadership is about developing direct practice and knowledge that ultimately helps to provide better support to the people accessing or engaged with social work services.

The *organisational* acknowledges the more formal aspects of leadership within organisational structures, systems and policies. Within the current NPM systems, it sits with people who have managerial roles and responsibilities. Both these aspects of leadership should be regarded as important and interdependent if there is to be a significant shift within the working practices and delivery of services within the public sector. The SPL framework explained in this article is based on the belief in ethical leadership and the moral purpose of the work undertaken by social work organisations. Set out in the human domain of the HLS there is an acknowledgement that at the heart of all public services is the shared aim of supporting people to flourish (Cottam, 2021). Therefore, the systems that are developed play a vital role in enabling and assisting practitioners, teams and organisations to fulfil this moral purpose. It is in advancing and improving these systems that ethical and relational leadership has an important part to play. As Lowe and French (2021) have stated, we can feel so overwhelmed by the interconnection and 'complex webs of relationships, interactions and interdependencies' (p. 77) that we feel unable to effect positive change. Ethical and relational leadership can assist organisations and teams to define their 'system of interest' (Jackson, 2019), to identify and put a boundary around an aspect of the wider system and the relationships within this section that they feel are important to focus on changing. In doing so, ethical and relational leadership ensures that these decisions are made equitably, with openness and transparency around power dynamics, and that the core moral purpose of the work is at the centre, anchoring all decisions. It also helps embed the behaviours that nurture healthier systems, as identified by Lankelly Chase (Nabatu, 2020), which focus on perspective, power and participation.

SPL framework and its use in practice

A human business like a human being is both incredibly complex and utterly simple.
(Keswin, 2019)

This epigraph captures the essence of the human business of social work. It also links to the much-used social pedagogical phrase, 'it depends' (Charfe and Gardner, 2019), which acknowledges that context is everything. Social pedagogy acknowledges that there is no simple intervention that *works* to tackle a problem and, as Biesta (2010) has stated, that is why 'What Works' does not work. Complex social issues do not have simple one-size-fits-all solutions and social pedagogy supports us to be able to work with uncertainty, tension and complexity by the use of guiding principles and navigation points (Jensen, 2018). But to be able to do this effectively there needs to be supportive organisational cultures, healthy and supportive systems and an awareness of the ecosystems that we work within (Laloux, 2016).

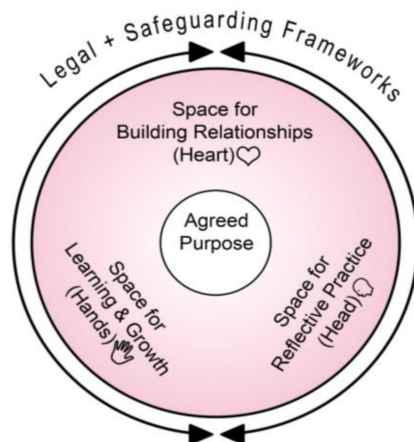
Due to the complex nature of the work and the world around us, it also means that the framework I have developed is not a list to be worked through or a recipe to be followed (Lowe and Pilmmer, 2019; Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017). Rather, this is a map with an anchoring point in the middle that links us to our ethical orientation and the moral purpose of our work. It gives us navigation points to reflect on and guide the development of our ethical and relational leadership as we traverse the complexities of working with human beings as part of social work organisations and wider social systems.

It is important to be clear about what is meant by *systems* from a social pedagogical leadership point of view. This focuses on the web of relationships and interactions between human actors and environmental factors and conceptualises systems at different levels. These can be seen as ‘the life of each person we support is a system (hyper-local); our teams and organisation are a system; the interplay between different people and organisations locally is a system; and each nation can be seen as a meta-system’ (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021, p. 389). It is crucial to consider systems’ thinking and action if we want to provide meaningful support, as outcomes in people’s lives are invariably linked to and influenced by these complex relationships and interactions (Lowe et al., 2021). If the moral purpose of our work is human flourishing, ‘we must recognise that this does not rely solely on the quality of our support but also on the wider relationships and environmental factors’ (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021, p. 389). This then requires a change in perspective, and instead of attributing specific outcomes to the support given, we understand ‘that we are contributing towards outcomes through our practice’ (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021, p. 389). Meaningful outcomes require healthy systems, and a social pedagogical perspective can guide the development of systems thinking and the embedding ethical and relational leadership into practice by the use of theories and practice that focus on interdependent relationships and the structural aspects of direct practice.

Legal and safeguarding boundaries

Key aspects of the SPL framework (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021) are outlined in Figure 1. At the outer edges is the boundary of the legal and safeguarding frameworks within which all social workers operate. This starting point of the framework is aimed at assisting practitioners to strengthen their ethical and legal literacy by first understanding the legal and safeguarding policies and processes within which they work – how the various laws and policies direct and shape their role and remit; how these influence their spheres of interest; and how these shape and define everyday practice and organisational culture. It is important that ethical and relational leaders understand the use of legislation and policy in supporting positive change, as well as the positive change to the organisational systems. Central to this is the importance of human rights and, as Bae (2012) importantly points out, these are rooted in the everyday and not just in certain situations when professionals or legislation deem them to be necessary. These cannot be ignored and should be understood through the social pedagogical lens of social justice (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). Social pedagogy leadership demands a high level of legal literacy that focuses on the ethical foundations and *Haltung* (the value base and moral compass) of each piece of legislation and policy. How these can be used to challenge, support or empower people to take control or make positive changes within their lives are matters that a social pedagogy leader should be considering. This also links to human rights and protections and draws on Honneth’s (1995) theory of recognition, which identifies that wider social recognition happens only when laws and policies uphold our moral and legal rights as citizens. Honneth (1995) argued that this aspect of recognition connects to the ability to develop a sense of self-respect: only when we are aware that we have legal protections do we know that we are a valued member of society. As Smith et al. (2017) have written, ‘One becomes a bearer of rights if socially recognised’ (p. 15).

Figure 1. SPL framework (Source: Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021, p. 392)



Agreed purpose

At the heart and direct centre of the framework in Figure 1, and anchoring the work of social workers, is the agreed purpose (Charfe and Gardner, 2020). HLS identifies the importance of the moral focus, social pedagogy leadership is centred on a shared understanding of this agreed moral purpose – the framework asks ethical and relational leaders to assist practitioners to have a clear understanding of the moral purpose of their work. We are therefore required to discuss with our colleagues and gain an understanding of this shared moral purpose. On an organisational level, it also requires that ethical and relational leaders hold managers and organisations to account and that clear systems are in place to support people to flourish (Lowe et al., 2021). This relies on much more than just having a mission statement defining the intended purpose, it is more about how organisations and the systems that they develop actively assist practitioners to work towards this moral aim. It is about organisations allowing the development of a culture that supports everybody to stay rooted to this moral purpose. As Laloux (2016) argued, we are all searching for ways to improve collaboration and cooperation within an organisational culture that also nurtures our abilities and allows us to flourish in our work. We need to understand and be aware of our own moral compass and value base, as well as that of the organisations we work for. This, and the shared purpose, should be something that we continue to reflect back on and check that our actions demonstrate these are alive in practice at all levels (Charfe and Gardner, 2019).

Space for relationships, learning and development: navigation points of the framework explained

Between the legal and safeguarding boundary and the agreed purpose at the centre is the space for every aspect of the work undertaken to be guided by the head, heart and hands (Smith and Whyte, 2008). There are clear and defined links between this social pedagogical theory developed by the social reformer and educator Pestalozzi (1746–1827) and the three domains of the HLS. Pestalozzi identified the need for balance between the three aspects of our *head*, *heart* and *hands* for the promotion of true social pedagogical practice (Charfe and Gardner, 2019).

The three aspects of head, heart and hands aim to aid ethical and relational leaders to facilitate continuous reflection on how we stick to the moral purpose of our work and keep our 'values alive in practice' (Charfe and Gardner, 2020). Leaders need to reflect on where and how there is space for building relationships, space to critically reflect and learn, and space to experiment and develop, which are all anchored to the shared moral purpose of the work being undertaken.

Space for building relationships: where and how does this happen in practice?

With clear links to the *human* in HLS, the SPL, used within the everyday, supports ethical and relational leaders to consider and develop opportunities that allow true relational practice to be developed. This relational practice is underpinned by a human rights approach (Krumer-Nevo, 2016) that promotes 'symbolic capital'; challenges 'stigmatisation, discrimination and 'Othering', and 'hears the voice' and recognises the 'knowledge of poor people' (p. 5). This focus on the *relationship* acknowledges our interconnectedness and interdependence, as well as ethical practice and the importance of leaders developing space for active participation and collaboration to promote positive change. 'Irrespective of our role within systems, from a social pedagogical perspective we are all called upon to display moral leadership in our work. By reducing hierarchy, focusing on equity, and working alongside people, we can ensure that ethics are at the heart of collaborative practice' (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021, p. 393). Using social pedagogical theories such as the three pillars (Charfe and Gardner, 2019) to guide the professional boundaries of these relationships, or the common third (ThemPra, 2017) using everyday activities to build relationships, can be helpful within everyday SPL.

With regard to SPL in the organisational, the framework requires people with leadership responsibility to reflect on spaces where relationships between staff, teams and the wider organisation can be built and sustained. These are based on mutual trust, recognition and psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019). As Hoffer Gittell (2016: vii) has stated in her relational organisation theory, 'Organizational change does not start with the adaptation of new structures ... Rather, it starts with participants changing their patterns of relationships'. According to Hoffer Gittell, these important relationships are characterised by having the key ingredients of shared goals, knowledge and mutual respect. Whether considering the everyday or organisational aspects of the SPL framework, the key points are that every aspect of public sector work is rooted in the real lives of people with important webs of interconnected and interdependent relationships (Lowe et al., 2021). These must be recognised and nurtured at all levels for positive social and organisational change to happen.

Space for learning and reflective practice: where and how does this happen in practice?

As Thompson (2009) has held, some local authorities and public sector organisations do not foster learning or reflective environments and can have an *anti-learning culture*. Instead of focusing on evidence-based practice, which has led to a more manualised approach to practice (Harbo and Kemp, 2020; Smith, 2020), the SPL framework takes an approach of evidence-enriched practice (Andrews et al., 2020). This requires ethical and relational leaders to use theory and research as navigation, learning and reflective points to guide practice rather than following a prescribed course of action.

Social workers work within a complex world of uncertainty and as a result there is a need for flexible practice that can only truly happen with reflection and reflexivity. There may not be easy and quick solutions to the problems faced, and while this can be challenging, social pedagogy assists us in 'sitting with' this uncertainty and seeing it as a valuable learning opportunity, a part of the journey that supports our human development (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021). This type of learning requires us to critically reflect on past ways of working, to consider our understanding and the narratives that are being used to explain or justify this, as well as being open to new ways of thinking and working. Within this domain, ethical and relational leaders need to be able to support reflection and reflexive practice with a focus on the use of the everyday as a learning opportunity to explore systems and practice developments. Social pedagogical reflective tools and frameworks such as Greenaway's (1994) *facts, feelings, findings* and *future*, as well as the SMITTE model, can be helpful (Molbaek-Steensig, 2019).

At an organisational level, SPL highlights the need for an emergent learning approach in practice and organisations. This supports ethical and relational leaders to understand and accept the complexities and uncertainty of the work we are undertaking. Within HLS there is an emphasis on moving away from targets and outcomes and towards developing a positive error culture where reflection and learning drive improvements. Social pedagogy sees learning as driving growth and that the ability to

adapt practice as a result helps to improve organisational functioning as well as ultimately meaningful person-shaped outcomes (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021).

The skilling-up of the social work and social care workforce is not enough on its own to make the changes that are so urgently needed, and therefore within the *organisational* level, ethical and relational leaders must find ways of assisting embedding learning into everyday practice at all levels. Using data as a means of supporting learning, and not just providing proof of outcomes and targets being met, is crucial (Lowe, 2020). It is also not about the management or control of staff; rather, learning is seen as fundamental to every aspect of helping to make an organisation or staff team flourish by developing skills and knowledge around autonomy, trust and appreciative enquiry. Linking to learning as a management strategy, Lowe (2021) has highlighted the important points of co-design and co-creation of knowledge and the importance of this being used to design not organisational systems or programmes, but an environment where there is a shared purpose and space to experiment and reflect on the learning that takes place. Ethical and relational leaders play an important part in the nurture and growth of these spaces.

Space for experimentation and development: where and how does this happen in practice?

One of the current issues with social work and social care is strategic planning – where the aims, goals and development of the work is decided more often than not by strategic management and performance management groups (Evans, 2016; Lowe and Hesselgreaves, 2021). These groups are often far removed from actual day-to-day practice or service delivery and the plans they devise are filtered down through the organisation. As Lowe and Hesselgreaves (2021) have pointed out, ‘those at the top set the strategy and then seek to control the action of those below, extrinsically motivating them to follow the strategy through the use of performance management’s reward and punishment mechanisms’ (p. 58). Again, this becomes a command-and-control strategy (Laloux, 2016) that is ineffective when working with complexity.

From an everyday leadership viewpoint, the SPL framework aids ethical and relational leadership to pay attention to the *doing* and from a social pedagogical perspective it is important that this is done in collaboration with the people that we work alongside. It is also about enabling the co-construction of navigation points and guiding principles to make situated professional judgements in a complex world. In everyday practice, ethical and relational leaders need to feel confident in their use of creativity and be able to think outside the box, to try something new, using creativity as applied imagination (Robinson, 2001) to experiment. This is crucial when understanding that what has worked once may not work every time. Creativity and experimentation are important in helping develop new skills and knowledge, including cooperation and sharing, self-assertion, self-control, being able to take turns, and empathy (Ogden, 1997, cited in Storo, 2013). This domain of experimentation and development, also helps cultivate and utilise critical thinking, questioning, reflection and curiosity, as well as developing creative practice (Eichsteller et al., 2014).

From a leadership perspective, Lowe and Hesselgreaves (2021) have made the important point that ‘Outcomes cannot be purchased or “delivered”, they have to be explored. If we care about outcomes, then the purpose of our leadership practice is to enable this learning and exploration to happen effectively’ (p. 56). Within the organisation, SPL can encourage ethical and relational leaders to develop environments for exploration within legal and safeguarding boundaries. HLS has developed an effective learning cycle (Lowe and Hesselgreaves, 2021, p. 60) underpinned by the awareness that managers and strategic planners do not and cannot predict the correct outcomes of the work being planned. Therefore, there must be a safe environment for exploration and experimentation and learning that shapes redesign if needed (Lowe and Hesselgreaves, 2021). Overseeing these learning cycles, ethical and relational leaders (Lowe and French, 2021) can support active engagement and ensure that there are ‘meaningful participatory processes that genuinely value the skills, knowledge and abilities of each member of staff, as well as recognise their potential to contribute in different but equally important ways’ (Charfe and Eichsteller, 2021, p. 395).

Conclusions

There is a growing awareness of the need for radical change within the social work and social care, with more organisations questioning the effectiveness of NPM in setting organisational cultures and practice (Evans, 2016; Lowe, 2021). The negative effects of which are deeply felt within current social work practice (Harbo and Kemp, 2020; Smith, 2020). From this, there is a paradigm shift happening with the development of HLS that centres on the moral purpose of the work. With relational practice, learning and more human systems being central to HLS, there are clear synergies with social pedagogy.

Informed by ethics as first practice (Moss, 2001), the SPL framework supports the development of ethical and relational leadership. The framework, using a complexity-informed approach, has been developed as a navigation tool and guide for reflective points and not a manualised approach for dealing with the complexities of current public sector working (Harbo and Kemp, 2020). Linking to key aspects of social pedagogical theory and practice and HLS, it helps practitioners, managers and organisations reflect on and manage the complexities of social work and social care while anchoring them to their *moral purpose*, with the aim of supporting the flourishing of every human involved.

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my thanks and appreciation to Aidan Worsley, Gabriel Eichsteller and Ali Gardner for their constructive feedback on the manuscript draft and their ongoing support.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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