

Lectio praecursoria¹

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Child support aims to help youngsters in their developmental needs. When the situation of youngsters seems so acute that the regular support would be overwhelmed, intensive pedagogic treatments are taken into account.

Such treatments promise to offer a different setting and to apply special pedagogic or therapeutic methods to endure the challenging behavior and change the burdened situation of the youngsters. In the case of treatments abroad, this shows in a radical setting change to create a new start. When pedagogic measures seem exhausted, which is often the case with hard-to-reach youngsters, the transition to more restrictive systems like juvenile psychiatry or juvenile justice seems inevitable.

Here, intensive pedagogic measures count as a final rescue concept to avoid restrictive measures. Pursuant to that, there are high hopes towards such measures to help young people with an intense need. It is difficult to grasp what intensive pedagogic treatment means. It might be compared with a black box we barely know about. With regard to professional and ethical demands on social work, it seems about time to learn what is special about these treatments.

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With this in mind, I considered it necessary to explore the reality of intensive pedagogy beyond the perspective of merely evaluating its effectiveness. The aim of my study was to comprehend and to explain the nature of intensive pedagogic practice.

For this, I focused on an exemplary case of intensive pedagogy abroad, the EAL Project in Finland. EAL is the abbreviation for the Project's name "Erleben, Arbeiten und Lernen" (in English: Experiencing, working, learning).

I used a qualitative research design following the grounded theory approach of Corbin and Strauss as well as the particular perspective of Clarke's situational analysis.

The data contained field visits, 14 interviews with educators working in the Project, and some conceptual documents written about the Project.

With this approach, I chased three questions in my research:

- The first was: What are the characteristic patterns of pedagogic action in the EAL Project?
- The second targeted: What are constitutive elements used to implement these patterns?
- And finally: What are the traditions of thought behind these patterns?

The EAL Project addresses youngsters between the age of 15 to 21 that are considered to be hard-to-reach clients. This designation is associated with intense behavior problems, attachment issues, and a history of previous unsuccessful support measures.

They count as hard-to-reach because they reject, avoid and escape support attempts. The Project takes a tandem of one youngster and one educator from Germany to a farm in a rural area in Finland. There, they live together for 6 months under basic circumstances. Lacking the comfort of machines or technical devices, they have to work together to manage their daily life and to fulfill their basic needs with their hands' work and joint force.

At first glance, the situation at the farm appears as a so-called pedagogic province. This concept was framed by Rousseau in his work "Emile". It denotes a space that was intentionally created for the personal learning of young people. It is detached from the usual environment of the youngster and controlled by the educator. This idea was picked up and transformed by diverse scholars.

Particularly in social pedagogy, the pedagogic space is a frequent object of reasoning: Scholars discuss aims, characteristics, and constitutive elements of pedagogic interventions and their setting conditions.

Taking a closer look, in EAL, this province comes along with force and a high level of power of the educator.

Here, the province is a closed setting that makes the youngsters extremely dependent on the adult. It is overwhelming in its existential challenges. At the same time, the new environment deprives the youngsters of most of their previous coping strategies. Such conditions are prone to turn characteristic determinants like joint work or secluded life in the nature into a total institution that is characterized by force, abuse, and punishment. That brought me to the question of what makes EAL a pedagogic enterprise and what demarcates EAL from a setting of power?

To get to the bottom of the question if the black box of EAL contains rather punitive or pedagogic means, I had to go deeper into the interaction between the key worker and the youngster. That is why I scrutinized pedagogic key situations that I found in the data.

Such situations represent a significant accumulation of pedagogic actions, usually followed by developmental progress. I immersed myself into 6 key situations using Clarke's situational analysis. In the end, I developed 3 categories that subsumed what was going on in these situations:

- The first was: "The experiential potential of the setting"
- The second comprises: "The setting related power position of the educator"
- And the third explains: "The opportunity and time for trust-building granted by the setting"

These categories corroborate that experiences are regarded as the main means of personal development in EAL and that the key workers are responsible for constructing and maintaining these learning situations. They are supported in this by the setting conditions, strengthening their power position. Another effect of the new setting is that the key workers are enabled to build pedagogic relationships. The bonding is more or less forced at the beginning but it is up to the key worker to use the setting features, to build a relationship and reduce the power aspect.

I used Bronfenbrenner's approach on the ecology of human development to develop an abstract core category that incorporates all of the previous findings.

Bronfenbrenner's terminology helped me to express the emerging patterns in the EAL pedagogy and integrate them to the core concept of the "experience laboratory".

The experience laboratory connects to the idea of the pedagogic province. It integrates the relocation abroad in a contrasting and demarcated setting, the deliberate power imbalance of the educator to construct learning experiences, and the particular responsibility of the educator for achieving a trustful rapport.

Like a laboratory, the EAL setting is deliberately designed to offer high experiential potential and grant the key worker control and responsibility for the necessary variables to activate and modulate learning situations.

In the laboratory, the power position allows control that should be used to create and confront experiences and then change to the side of the youngster to accompany and maintain them. In the demanding, opportunity-laden setting, relational aspects are considered to offer security, guidance, and support.

The laboratory is designed to force interactions and encounters between the participants. It obligates the participants to meet and interact. Due to that, the interaction does not depend on trust or relationship in the first place.

With regard to the responsibility of the adult in the laboratory, it should be the task of the educators to move beyond force. They are responsible to work towards a pedagogic relationship to be able to get rid of force as the motor for interaction.

If a relational level is successfully achieved, the laboratory transforms from a potential setting of power to a resource in the pedagogic interaction.

My analysis concluded by identifying the history of ideas behind the project's pedagogic patterns. At first glance, EAL might appear like a restrictive or even punitive measure with the aim to remove troubling youngsters from the community and punish them for their undesired behavior.

Taking a closer look at the professionals' actions revealed a different spirit behind EAL's practices: Instead of disciplining the youngsters, EAL created an environment designed to overcome obstacles for getting in touch and increase their individual and social capabilities to bring them back to social cohesion.

That connects EAL's practice with social pedagogy and reform pedagogy, movements dawning in Germany at the beginning of the 1920s that are still relevant in the German pedagogic practice today. The experience laboratory can be understood as a pedagogic province with strong orientation on the young person's developmental stage and educational need as the starting point of pedagogic action.

EAL's orientation on participation and cohabitation does not only target the empowerment of the youngster. It also emphasizes the need for person-centered interventions.

Here, the EAL project follows the ideas of psycho-analytical pedagogy. It connects to Aichhorn, Bettelheim, and Redl, in their understanding of the treatment of problem behavior: Living together, understanding the need, and reacting accordingly while observing the impact of and reaction to the pedagogic intervention in order to draw new conclusions for future actions. The setting is used as a laboratory: On the one hand, as observation field and data source; on the other hand, as an experimental space and training area with controlled and changing variables.

These notions were picked up in lifeworld and milieu oriented approaches. Here, Nohl, Thiersch, and Böhnisch connect to the discussion about the biographic genesis of (problem)behavior and the respective treatment for it. Understanding behavior as a learning effect on previous experiences allows to change it by offering new and positive experiences, constructed and maintained in the laboratory.

According to my findings, the responsibility to create rapport is implemented by using the setting-related power to construct a learning situation and then change to the youngster's side to support coping. This insight reveals the connection between EAL practice and the idea of the pedagogic relationship coined by the social pedagogue Herman Nohl. This idea represents another traditional root of EAL that was passed on and developed over time. Today, Gahleitner is a strong advocate of the pedagogic relationship particularly in hard-to-reach cases that has many intersections with relationship construction in EAL. In her approach on trauma pedagogy, learning situations are implemented as corrective relational experiences embedded in joint coping of everyday life.

Finally, the analysis showed that the setting factors play a constitutive role in the construction of and confrontation with experiences.

The key workers emphasize the significant role of the setting conditions and the daily structure. This corroborates the core category

of an experience laboratory that is created deliberately for a pedagogic purpose and connects EAL to lifeworld- and milieu-oriented approaches. Böhnisch's conception of the milieu can be regarded as a strong theoretical reference point for EAL: Personal learning takes place in and by means of the environment, with the educator acting as a broker between the individual and the environment. The pedagogic space is understood as a resource and a purpose of the pedagogic intervention. The environment in Finland increases the power position of the adult and the dependency of the youngster. At the same time, the setting offers learning potential and a safe space to explore and to try.

At this point, I will conclude my presentation with some theoretical and practical implications. The experience laboratory offers support ideas rooted in social pedagogic theories. It defines power, relationship, and experiences as the main pillars of EAL's pedagogy, and adapts core social pedagogic aspects to its hard-to-reach target group. But my results also revealed potential conflicts with children's rights and ethical principles of social work. Some of the measures mentioned in the interviews are often close to the border of child support rules, in the German as well as in the Finnish context. Sometimes, they even cross these borders.

This fact brings me back to the profession-theoretical intention of my study. I think that my results should not be understood as a best practice model for working with hard-to-reach youngsters. It should rather be an inspiration to transform the support system that falls short for them. The findings might inspire practitioners how to create support that is more accessible and effective for diverse educational needs. It might also inform support and training for key workers in intensive pedagogy.

My study shows the inevitable dilemma of balancing power and support in pedagogy. This dilemma needs further research to gain orientation and content to ensure reflective practice according to the ethical and professional standards of social work. That way, practice-oriented research can contribute to developing compatible and accessible knowledge to guide and inspire professional practice.

Although my research largely focused on the German context, practically and theoretically, it is still possible to dock it to a wider international audience. Due to its abstract but still practice-oriented character, the experience laboratory is connective to different social work cultures. Many countries experience the challenge of hard-to-reach youngsters. Not many countries use social pedagogic ideas as a framework

of thinking. But most are familiar with bridging concepts such as person-in-environment approaches, experiential or outdoor pedagogy. These approaches targeting informal learning offer a good starting point for an international audience to dive deeper into social pedagogic ideas and help to use the experience laboratory as an inspiring framework of thinking for their own practice.



