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http://www.lboro.ac.uk/media/www/lboroacuk/content/ccfr/publications/HHH_Impact_on_FC_CYP_T2_FINAL.pdf

PUBLISHER

Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University

VERSION

VoR (Version of Record)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

McDermid, Samantha, Helen Trivedi, Jenny Blackmore, and Lisa Holmes. 2019. "Developing the Art of Social Pedagogy: The Views and Experiences of Foster Carers and the Children and Young People of Head, Heart, Hands: The Second Year". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/21668>.

**Developing the art of social pedagogy:
The views and experiences of foster carers and the children and young people of Head,
Heart, Hands: The second year.**

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July 2015**

Head, Heart, Hands is a four year programme, led by The Fostering Network, to explore the impact that the introduction of social pedagogy has on foster carers, the children and young people they care for, and the wider system that supports them. This summary report forms part of an extensive independent evaluation into the impact of the Head, Heart, Hands programme led by the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR), Loughborough University, in partnership with the Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation. The report draws on data gathered from a sample of foster carers and the children and young people placed with them, to provide an overview of their views and experiences of the programme between July 2014 and July 2015.

Key Findings

- The last 12 months can be described as a time of embedding social pedagogy further into foster carer practice, deepening understandings of the approach, and the beginnings of tangible examples of the impact that it is having on children and young people.
- Enthusiasm for social pedagogy remains generally high among foster carers, with the majority of the sample identified as Engaged Adopters of the approach. Those carers who reported that social pedagogy has very little or no impact on their own fostering, still acknowledge that the Head, Heart, Hands programme is valuable to the wider fostering service.
- The foster carers describe social pedagogy as a way of thinking, which has built on their existing knowledge, validated intuitive approaches, and given permission to care for children in a way that felt natural to them. The principles and models have provided tools to unlock foster carers' practice that can be mentally referred to when encountering everyday events and challenges.
- Reflection is a key principle emphasised by carers, offering opportunities to acknowledge the importance of the 'self' in fostering. Recognising the impact that values, beliefs and experiences have on the foster carer, the child and social care staff is reported to have resulted in better relationships and more adaptive fostering practice that is tailored to the needs of the child. Foster carers also report experiencing increased confidence in their own practice and more effective conflict resolution.
- Concerns about the relationship between social pedagogy and the "wider system" continue to be prevalent among foster carers. The term "wider system" was variously used to refer to a range of elements of children's social care, including social care staff and the team around the child, the fostering service, the local Children Services Department, national policies and cultures associated with the national picture.
- The extent to which foster carers feel confident that the approach will be adopted by the "wider system" is reflected in their levels of enthusiasm with the programme overall. Concerns were raised that resistance in the system may limit the impact that social pedagogy may have on their own practice, and on children in foster care as a whole. It should be noted however that foster carers report that there have been pockets of progress in the right direction but there is still a long way to go. It is commonly acknowledged by carers that the impact of the programme may be limited until the Learning and Development courses are offered more widely, to more foster carers, and staff, most notably children's social workers.

Background

Six demonstration sites (across seven locations) are participating in the Head, Heart, Hands programme¹. The programme consists of a number of activities including: Learning and Development courses provided to up to 40 foster carers per site, employment of Social Pedagogues, 'momentum groups'² and reviewing the policies and procedures of fostering services through a social pedagogic lens. Social pedagogic support and expertise is being provided by the 'Social Pedagogy Consortium'³.

In June 2014 the evaluation team produced a report exploring the emerging views and experiences of the foster carers and the children and young people in the first 18 months of the evaluation ('Baseline'). That report highlighted that social pedagogic practice is not a set of methods that can be distinctly identified, or a skill that can be acquired, but an 'art form' that needs to be developed⁴. The foster carers interviewed in the first report, while generally positive about social pedagogy, were at varying stages of conceptualising the approach and how it may be translated into practice. The majority of foster carers conceptualised social pedagogy as an approach or a way of thinking. Others, however, understood it to be a set of tools that could be applied to particular circumstances. There was some evidence in this first stage that those foster carers who held this view were least likely to be enthusiastic about social pedagogy and the programme per se. The general view of foster carers was that social pedagogy would positively impact their practice, and there was some evidence of increased confidence among foster carers as a result of the Learning and Development courses. Concerns were raised, however, about the extent to which the wider system would facilitate the widespread adoption of social pedagogy, and consequently the impact that it could potentially have.

This summary report provides a highly digested summary of how the foster carers and children and young peoples' journeys have developed over the previous 12 months (between July 2014 and July 2015: 'Time 2'). It is not intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evaluation to date, but rather to offer an overview of the views and experiences of foster carers and the children and young people placed with them, on the following four key questions that were posed to the evaluation team by the central programme:

1. How are foster carers conceptualising social pedagogy?
2. Which key principles of social pedagogy most resonate with foster carers?
3. To what extent are foster carers adopting social pedagogy into their everyday practice?
4. What has been the impact of the programme on foster carers and the children and young people they care for?

Forty foster carers, caring for a total of 56 children and young people, were interviewed at Time 2. This includes three group interviews consisting of 11 participants. Fourteen of the foster carers had been interviewed for the first evaluation report. The majority of interviewees were long term carers (n=32:80%). A wide range of fostering experience is represented in the sample, ranging from between one and a half to more than 40 years. The average (mean) length of time caring was 6 years. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting primarily of open questions about foster carers' understanding of social pedagogy and the impact it has had on them and their child in the last 12 months.

Eleven interviews consisting of 15 children and young people have been included in this report. Three were completed with a foster carer present at the request of the young person. The children were aged between nine and 19 years old. Fourteen of the children were in placements that could be described as 'long term', and one young person was currently staying with foster carers under 'staying put'

¹ For more information on Head, Heart, Hands go to <https://www.fostering.net/head-heart-hands#.VZD6APIVikp>

² These variously named activities consist of regular meetings open to those who attended the core Learning and Development courses, to refresh, share and continue to explore social pedagogy and how it translates into practice.

³ The Social Pedagogy Consortium is a group of practice and academic specialists from Jacaranda Development; Pat Petrie, Professor Emeritus at the Institute of Education, University of London; and Thempra Social Pedagogy.

⁴ Eichsteller, G. and Holthoff, S. (2012) 'The art of being a social pedagogue: Developing cultural change in children's homes in Essex.' *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*. 1, 1, 30-46.

arrangements. The children and young people had been living with their current foster carers for between seven months and 15 years.

In total, 248 foster carers have attended the Head, Heart, Hands Learning and Development courses. This report, therefore, represents a 'snap shot' of a small sample of the carers participating in the programme (16%). The time period covered by the report is the second of three distinct evaluation timeframes. A final report will be produced in the Autumn of 2016, which will bring together data gathered from follow up interviews with foster carers and the children and young people they care for, with a quantitative analysis of the placements and experiences of all the children and young people placed with foster carers who attended the Head, Heart, Hands Learning and Development courses. This final report will provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the programme and test the extent to which the emerging findings outlined in this report are generalizable to a wider population of carers.

Conceptualising social pedagogic practice: Foster carers' enthusiasm for social pedagogy

- The evidence suggests that over the previous 12 months there had been a shift in thinking away from the idea that social pedagogy is a set of tools, to conceptualising it as an approach or a way of thinking. A majority of carers (n = 38, 95%) conceptualised social pedagogy as an approach, with some describing social pedagogy as both an approach and method (n = 10). Fourteen of those foster carers stated that social pedagogy affects the whole person; it '*infiltrates*' all aspects of life (n = 14).
- All but one of the foster carers mentioned a particular principle or model when describing social pedagogy or the impact that it has had. There was a sense that the models offered a key to 'unlock' elements of practice that were either intuitive and not yet fully realised, or to develop elements of practice even further. Five foster carers explicitly reported that the models were helpful in their understanding of social pedagogy and how to apply it to their practice. The principles and models could be described as an '*aide-memoire*' that could be referred to in their everyday practice.
- A set of 'ideal types' of carers were identified in the first evaluation report to demonstrate the extent to which the foster carers reported to be enthusiastic about the programme and social pedagogy. These are outlined in Box 1. Almost three quarters of the foster carers interviewed for this report were Engaged Adopters (n = 28:70%); 22.5% were Cautious Optimist's (n = 9) and 7.5% Defended Sceptics (n = 3).⁵
- Of the 14 foster carers that were interviewed at Baseline data collection, three foster carers were Defended Sceptics (21%), three were Cautious Optimists (21%) and eight were Engaged Adopters in that first period (57%). At the second time period 12 had remained in the same group over the previous 12 months. One foster carer who was previously a Cautious Optimist became an Engaged Adopter. One of the Engaged Adopters became a Cautious Optimist during this data collection. This carer showed that although they are positive about the impact that social pedagogy has on their own practice, there was reticence about the prospect of social pedagogy having an influence on the wider social care system.
- The high levels of enthusiasm for social pedagogy identified in the sample aligns with the reflections of the Head, Heart, Hands site leads, who report very low attrition rates. Only two sites reported that foster carers had dropped out of the programme, with one foster carer leaving the programme in one site, and two in another.
- Foster carers reported that their enthusiasm for social pedagogy was enhanced as they began to see an impact of the changes they have made to their practice on the children and young people they care for (n = 7). Enthusiasm was lessened where the perceived levels of receptiveness of the system, and those personnel working in it, to social pedagogy was questioned (explored further below).

⁵ The sample of foster carers interviewed at Baseline differed from those interviewed for this report. The proportions of each group identified in the samples cannot, therefore, be directly compared.

Box 1: responses to Head, Heart, Hands: the 'ideal types'

- I. **The engaged adopter:** These foster carers can be characterised by exhibiting a considerable enthusiasm for adopting social pedagogic practice. Typically these foster carers spoke passionately about social pedagogy and the impact that it may have. They show a commitment to adopting the approach into their everyday practice, and in a range of contexts or situations.
- II. **The cautious optimist:** The foster carers in this group demonstrate a general interest in social pedagogic practice or identify with key principles. This group are, however, more likely to make reference to the limitations of social pedagogic practice compared to the engaged adopters and displayed more tentative discourses about its wide reaching transformative potential.
- III. **The defended sceptic:** The foster carers in this group exhibit the greatest degree of uncertainty about the extent to which social pedagogic practice will inform their own practice, while acknowledging that it may be helpful for other carers. Although not exclusive to this group, all of the foster carers in this group criticised the wider system and perceived social pedagogic principles to be of greater value to the wider system than to their own practice.

- A small number of carers described social pedagogy as a completely new way of working (n = 4). However the largest proportion described it as familiar to their existing approach (n = 25). Social pedagogy built on or extended their fostering (n = 4), or has changed the way carers think about fostering as usual and their practice (n = 5). One foster carer reflected the perspective of many when explaining that while it may be the case that many people naturally practice in a way that is pedagogic, social pedagogy enables them to be more *conscious* of their caring.
- Other carers reported that the Head, Heart Hands programme gave them permission to practice in a way that was more instinctive to them, but they had previously felt unable to actualise (n = 6).
- Most carers have found the depth of their understanding of social pedagogy to have enhanced over time (n = 21), with two stating their understanding was the same as when they had concluded the Learning and Development courses. Both of these carers reported that they would like more training.
- Foster carers' depth of knowledge (n = 14) and enthusiasm for the approach (n = 8) has also been enhanced by the ongoing development and 'momentum' activities. The peer support that has developed around the Head, Heart, Hands activities (including momentum activities) was identified as being useful for foster carers' understanding and adoption of social pedagogy, as well as fostering more broadly.
- Ten foster carers held the social pedagogues in particular high regard, and one young person described the pedagogue as "awesome". Of these foster carers, six said the social pedagogue has specifically helped enhance knowledge and understanding in their approach.

The adoption of social pedagogic practice: The principles being adopted and their impact

- The overwhelming feeling across the sample was that social pedagogy has begun to positively impact a range of areas, albeit to differing degrees across the sample. Only one of the foster carers interviewed reported that they have not changed their own practice since attending the Learning and Development course. This carer reported that they were already practicing in a pedagogic way

prior to the Learning and Development courses, and therefore the impact on their own practice had been minimal.

- Foster carers reported that they are more confident about their own practice since attending the Learning and Development courses (n = 13). A number of carers reported that having tools or models to refer to along with the theory or language that underpins (albeit existing) approaches to caring was important for encouraging carers that they were *along the right lines* (n = 6).
- It was evident that reflection continues to be central to the social pedagogic approaches emerging in the sites and was mentioned by 30 foster carers either explicitly or implicitly. Carers report that reflection has improved their practice, their confidence and their relationships with the children and young people they care for. A number of foster carers described taking time to *stop and think* enabled them to be more intentional about their practice and interactions with the children and young people they care for (n = 13).
- Reflecting on the day's events and how they might have handled situations differently was reported to improve practice and helped foster carers feel more confident about how they are meeting the needs of the children they are caring for (n = 10).
- A thread that was woven throughout all of the data collected was the recognition of the 'self'. While the notion of '*Haltung*'⁶ was only referred to explicitly by a small number of respondents, it was implicit in the majority of the interviews. Foster carers reported that awareness of the impact of one's own values, beliefs and experiences on actions influences how they interpreted and responded to their own behaviour and the behaviour of others. Foster carers reported that the concept improved their practice overall and improved the way they interacted with the children and young people and the social care staff they worked with.
- The data suggest that *Haltung* is underpinned by reflective practice. Foster carers also reported being more self-aware, taking more time to consider their own expectations, and parenting experiences (n = 7). The impact of this has been to enable the foster carers to be more conscious of the interactions they have with the child or young person and acknowledge what they bring (both positive and negative elements) to those interactions.
- Reflective practice was also reported to offer foster carers a better awareness of how the child or young person in their care was feeling, or why they may be reacting to events and circumstances in a particular way (n = 15). As a result foster carers reported developing deeper relationships with the child or young person they care for, (n = 5) and being more conscious of tailoring the type of care offered to suit that child's needs (n = 6).
- A number of foster carers highlighted the emphasis that social pedagogy places on the child as an individual in their own right, reporting that the approach facilitated the nurturing of their sense of identity, and helped foster carers to help children and young people make their own decisions and to ensure that their voice is heard and acted upon (n = 11). Foster carers reported that they are more conscious of empowering children and young people to make their own decisions (n = 13), negotiate house rules together and to create more equal relationships between the child and the foster carer (n = 5) since attending the Head, Heart, Hands Learning and Development courses.
- The Diamond Model⁷ was mentioned in 10 interviews with foster carers reporting that emphasising children's strengths had helped develop children's self-esteem and secure deeper and more stable relationships. In one case a child with very low self-regard reported that before coming to live with the foster carer "*I hated myself, now I don't*". The foster carer reported that application of the

⁶ 'The term '*Haltung*' literally translates 'stance' and in the concept of social pedagogy refers to how our ethos, mind-set, attitude, values and experiences influence how we view ourselves, others and our actions. See more at: http://www.thempra.org.uk/concepts_haltung.htm#sthash.1bbuk9K4.dpuf.

⁷ The Diamond Model proposed that by working to a person's strengths, or the diamond within, rather than their weaknesses, facilitates better well-being, empowerment, relationships and holistic learning. For more information see: http://www.thempra.org.uk/concepts_diamond.htm.

Diamond Model helped the carers to be more conscious of working with the child to help them see their own strengths.

- The combination of slowing down, being more intentional and reflective about the way foster carers interact with the child or young person, and the model of non-violent communication (n = 11) was reported by the participants to improve the way that conflicts are addressed in the fostering household. The participants reported that is not necessarily the case that conflict occurs less frequently, rather it is dealt with more effectively (n = 11).
- Three foster carers reported that the potential breakdown of their placement had been averted as a result of a more social pedagogic approach to foster care. The foster carers reported improved communication between the foster carer, the child and the social work team aided the resolution of difficult situations. The foster carers reported feeling more able to admit that there were difficulties and to ask for help sooner, along with foster carers feeling more confident in their own skills to keep going through the more challenging periods.
- The Common Third⁸ was mentioned by 16 evaluation participants. While the children and young people did not use the term common third directly, four reported that doing things with their carers was an important and enjoyable part of their lives. The sharing of household chores, including cooking and gardening was mentioned by a number of participants (n =10) as providing opportunities to share in the Common Third and enabling everyday life to become meaningful.
- There continues to be some disparity between how the foster carers conceptualised the common third: only four carers referred to sharing in an activity that was new to both parties (key to the Common Third). However, those carers reported that the sharing of a new activity helped to bring equity between the carer and the child or young person, and helped them to develop their relationship.

The children and young people

- The children and young people characterise their relationships with their carer's as good. Six children and young people choose to call their foster carers 'mum' and 'dad'. In addition, one of the main reasons given for feeling settled into the foster family, or for liking their carers, was how included they had been made to feel by the foster family (n=4).
- While they did not refer to reflection directly three young people reported that they were given opportunity to 'cool off' following conflict, so that they can talk situations through with their carers in a calm way. The children and young people reported that they valued this approach.
- Five children and young people explained that they could volunteer their ideas to carers and have their own input into decision making if they wanted. One child explicitly says that the carer decides on the activities for the family.
- The majority of the children in the sample do not attend their Looked After Children Review meetings. It should be noted however, that the children did not report that they would like to attend. Rather that they are happy for their carers to represent them, or that they are 'perfectly happy' in the foster family so it did not seem relevant to attend the meetings. Two young people who attended the review meetings described them as 'boring'. One foster carer reported that since attending the Head, Heart, Hands Learning and Development courses, the young person also sits in on supervision meetings with the supervising social worker. It was agreed that all parties found this approach useful.
- Only five children and young people specifically spoke about their social worker. Two indicated they were happy with their worker, one explaining though there had been changes to who her social

⁸ A Common Third activity is one that is used to strengthen the relationship between individuals, including the foster carer and the child. The activity can take any form, such as cooking, fixing a bike or colouring in. The activity must however, create a commonly shared situation that brings the individuals together in a way that creates equality between them.

worker was she is able to get on with whoever it is. Another child mentioned high workloads for social workers as a reason why they were difficult to get hold of sometimes. One child simply said they found their social worker 'boring'.

Social pedagogy and the wider system

- The baseline evaluation report highlighted some challenges regarding the extent to which the 'wider system' is likely to be receptive to social pedagogic approaches and concerns about the 'system' continue to feature in the second data collection period. The term "wider system" was variously used to refer to a range of elements of children's social care, including social care staff and the team around the child, the fostering service, the local Children Services Department, national policies and cultures associated with the national picture.
- The extent to which the 'wider system' is likely to be receptive to social pedagogy was identified as the biggest barrier to the programme having the maximum impact (n = 18). Some carers were of the view that perceived or actual resistance in the 'wider system' impacted the extent to which they are able to adopt social pedagogy within their own practice, thereby limiting the impact. These carers emphasised the importance of the social care staff in the team around the child also adopting the approach. Others reported that while it had been possible to fully integrate social pedagogy into their own caring, unless social pedagogy was adopted across children's services as a whole, fewer children would have the opportunity to experience the benefits of the approach.
- The extent to which foster carers believed that the system would either adopt or facilitate pedagogic approaches impacted foster carers levels of enthusiasm, with those who were least positive about the capacity of the system to change being the least enthusiastic about the programme overall.
- However, emerging evidence suggests that foster carers may be more positive about the potential receptiveness of the system to social pedagogy in this data collection, compared to Baseline. A small number of foster carers reported that social pedagogy has substantial potential to improve the wider system and two reported that they have already observed a move away from the more instrumental 'tick box approaches' that characterised descriptions of the system in the Baseline data collection period. Working more collaboratively with their supervising social worker was identified as a key driver towards a more positive view of the system.
- A small number of foster carers raised concerns during the Baseline data collection about the extent to which their fostering service was committed to the approach. These concerns appear to have lessened over the previous 12 months, with some foster carers acknowledging that their fostering service was committed to social pedagogy (n = 7). Activities such as liaising with foster carers on the policies and procedures went some way to encouraging foster carers that the approach was fully supported by the site. For instance, foster carers from at least one site had been involved with the adaptation of the forms used in supervision and reviews to better reflect social pedagogic approaches to practice. This was highlighted by these carers as a very positive activity, re-assuring them that the fostering service was committed to the approach, and enhancing their overall enthusiasm for the programme.
- The sensible management of risk (in contrast to the avoidance of risk) was identified as presenting the most conflict with the current fostering culture, with five foster carers, reporting feeling limited in what they were able to change about their own practice in this regard due to constraints placed on them by their own worker or the wider system. However, it should also be noted that there were two examples of issues (such as the fostering child staying over at a friend's house) being dealt with in a more 'risk sensible way' following the Head, Heart, Hands Learning and Development courses.
- Improvements to the relationship between social pedagogy and the system were most evident when considering foster carers' relationships with front line workers. While a small number of carers

reported that they did not feel part of the team around the child (n = 3), 12 foster carers reported that relationships with professionals (most notably their supervising social worker) had improved in the last 12 months. Improvements to these relationships were associated with attending the training together, which resulted in foster carers having a better understanding of the pressures and circumstances of social care staff and being *on the same page* in relation to practice. Where both the foster carer and the supervising social worker attended the Learning and Development courses, the most positive perspectives of the impact of social pedagogy could be identified.

- Ten foster carers reported feeling more confident with other professionals since completing the Head, Heart, Hands Learning and Development courses, in part due to the provision of a shared language through social pedagogy. Seven carers reported that Head, Heart, Hands has given them permission to practice in a way that they would have naturally done so before Head, Heart, Hands, but may not have felt able to due to (perceived) system restraints.
- The participating foster carers placed an emphasis on the flattening of the hierarchy associated with the team around the child. A number of foster carers reported that they believed that foster carers should have more influence on the decisions that are made concerning the children and young people they care for. Two foster carers reported feeling at the 'mercy' of the children's social worker when it comes to decisions about the child and three reported that the lack of delegated authority prohibited the extent to which social pedagogy could be adopted fully into practice. To some extent, this had been borne out through the improved relationships between carers and their supervising social workers as noted above.
- While a number of carers reported there is still some way to go regarding the status that is afforded foster carers in the life and decisions of the child (n = 12), others suggested that things have improved since the beginning of Head, Heart, Hands (n = 12).
- Despite positive enthusiasm for the approach, a substantial proportion of the foster carers reported that the impact of the approach would be limited until more staff and foster carers are trained (n = 12). Concerns about the lack of engagement from children's social workers continued to be a feature in the second data collection period. However, foster carers (and children and young people) acknowledged that resources and workloads (n = 17) may limit the extent to which that training can be rolled out universally.

Conclusion

Where the previous data collection period could be described as a time of understanding the nature of social pedagogy and how it might be translated into practice, this latest period could be described as a time where foster carers are starting to develop the art of social pedagogy and embed it into their everyday realities. As a result there is some evidence that foster carers are beginning to see the impact that the approach may have on themselves and the children and young people they care for. Some, but not all carers, report that social pedagogy has become 'second nature' or instinctive. However, questions about the receptiveness of the wider system to the approach suggest that it is not yet the case that social pedagogic practice could be described as the norm for the entire fostering service. Despite these concerns, the data collected for this report would indicate that the direction of travel is a positive one.

The carers in the sample are more likely to describe social pedagogy as a 'whole approach', or way of thinking, than those included in the first data collection, and exhibit high levels of enthusiasm for the approach. Over 90% of the sample could be described as either Engaged Adopters or Cautious Optimists. However, it should be noted that the sample was self-selecting. These findings are therefore, tentative due to the potential sample bias. These findings will be tested on a larger sample at the end of the evaluation, in October 2016.

The impact of social pedagogic approaches to foster care are beginning to emerge, and the foster carers report that adoption of the core principles and models (most notably Reflection, Haltung, The Diamond model and the Common Third) are having a positive effect on their practice, and ultimately the children and young people they support. Foster carers report feeling more confident in their own practice, able to address conflict more effectively, and more included in the team around the child.

However, concerns regarding the extent to which the 'wider system' will be receptive to social pedagogy remain prevalent among the sample. While the foster carers acknowledge that there is support for the approach across their own local fostering service, they also note that the impact of the programme will be limited until the wider culture of Children's Social Care becomes more aligned to social pedagogy. The data identified a number of examples where foster carers report being 'on the same page' as their supervising social worker and how this was a fundamental facilitator for their own practice. However, where this joint approach was not in place, foster carers were sceptical about the extent to which pedagogic approaches would be as effective as possible. It was universally acknowledged that widening the reach of social pedagogy, by enabling more foster carers, social care staff and others who work with fostered children, will be fundamental in ensuring that the positive impact emerging from these interviews, can be sustained.

For more information about the evaluation, please go to

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/ccfr/research/exploring/project---head-heart-hands.html>

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