

I Will Advocate for the DNA of Social Pedagogy:

Relationship Work is Professional

Social educators possess unique relational competencies. This is nothing new. What is new is that they need a language to express it—and to celebrate it as part of their professionalism, says sociologist and VISO specialist Marie Louise Stochholm, who guides social educators on how to do so.

June 15, 2023



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A citizen with a developmental impairment and autism is walking in the forest with a social educator. Suddenly, the citizen becomes distressed and anxious. The social educator walks slowly and calmly over to him and stands right next to him. If the social educator had leaned his head a bit further forward, it would have seemed threatening, but not in this instance. With his eye contact, he signals to the citizen: I am here with you, I'm not pressuring you, and I'm not afraid—we'll stay in this together until it passes, and then we'll move on.

Although relationship work can be difficult to articulate, it is deeply professional, and social educators are extremely skilled at it—but not at discussing it. This is the view of sociologist and VISO specialist Marie Louise Stochholm.

"That was top-notch professional relationship work," observes sociologist, supervisor, and VISO specialist Marie Louise Stockholm enthusiastically.

She then attempted to write down what the social educator actually did. To do this, she imagined viewing the situation in the forest through a camera lens. She wrote:

"I see the social educator walking very close to the citizen. He meets him with kind eyes. He walks slowly. The relational background music is a feeling of presence, a sense that 'you are safe with me'. The social educator is focused on ensuring that the citizen feels cared for and loved."

"In this description, many might be inclined to use factual descriptions and theoretical terms because there is a perception that it is more professional. But relationship work is deeply professional. And it's something that people in social pedagogical practice are extremely skilled at. This is nothing new. What is new is that we need to talk about it," says Marie Louise Stockholm.

Practice and Talk

This is precisely her key message as one of the speakers at the 21st AIEJI World Congress, themed 'Social Educators Change Lives'. Here, she will advocate for the relational competencies, which she describes as the DNA of social pedagogy and the work of social educators.

"The relational interaction unfolds the moment the social educator walks through the door and uses their relational competencies to establish a sense that in this interaction, the citizen can feel safe. Relational competencies are not something that resides in an individual's gut or falls from the sky. They are something that social educators can work on systematically as part of their professionalism. But we need to practice it, and we need to talk about it within the staff group and between the social educator and the citizen," she says.

However, even though Marie Louise Stockholm is ready to make this case, it is with a certain humility. She doesn't necessarily have the answer to what the right language is.

"I just see a great need for us to have the conversation about the relational interaction using the words we have at our disposal," she says.

VISO specialist

A VISO specialist is an expert affiliated with the Danish national Knowledge and Special Advisory Organization (VISO), which provides free, nationwide guidance in the social services sector and special education. VISO specialists handle complex cases and offer knowledge and advice to municipalities, citizens, and institutions. Marie Louise Stockholm is a VISO specialist with expertise in developmental disabilities and autism.



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Marie Louise Stockholm, sociologist and VISO specialist



A Seed Took Root

When the journalist meets Marie Louise Stochholm, it's at the Danish consultancy firm SOPRA, which she co-founded. Here, she seldom spends much time. It mainly happens on the days when she stops by to pull models like 'Low Arousal 2 Well-being Plans' and 'Low Arousal 2 Well-being Islands' from stacks of teaching materials that stand shelf after shelf. On other days, she is out in social pedagogical workplaces—teaching or supervising social educators. And when she's there, she always talks with both staff and citizens about their relational interactions.

The seed for this particular interest was sown around the dinner table in Marie Louise Stochholm's childhood home, where discussions unfolded as a form of live supervision between her two social worker parents.

But the seed truly took root in Marie Louise Stochholm when, as a young student, she gathered data for her dissertation from three residence facilities. There, she noticed that social educators distinguished between methods as something cold and distant and relational work as where the warmth was. At the same time, it was deeply embedded in the staff's professional identity to work relationally as a means to an end. They even talked about relationship work as an approach.



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Marie Louise Stochholm needs to constantly balance between immersing herself with professionals in how we talk about practice—and spending time in close contact with citizens. "If that balance tips, I can feel it, and I start to doubt whether I'm being helpful," she says.

"It wasn't just about interaction for the sake of interaction, but interaction for the benefit of the citizens. Since then, I've been deeply interested in how one can work systematically, methodically, and professionally with relationships."

The Voice on the Shoulder

Admittedly, Marie Louise Stochholm can get quite tired of hearing herself refer to an old dissertation as a source of truth.

"But it was a turning point for me personally. Since then, I've wanted to talk about professional identity with anyone, anytime. And articulating professionalism in relationship work is an old passion that has never left me. Fortunately, we've gained more research and theory on the subject since then, but I don't see it being integrated into practice to talk about it," she says.

A significant barrier, according to Marie Louise Stochholm, is the voice of an old professional sociologist on many people's shoulders, whispering that professionalism is about knowledge expressed with difficult words—with two lines under the answer.

"I would like us to have another voice saying: We are professional when we reflect on and articulate what we do and when we talk about our interaction with the citizen as a tool. A tool that we can further put on the table at staff meetings, so we can examine it—and examine the citizen's relational preferences—on par with when we talk about the need for structure or her sensory sensitivity," she says.

Struck by a Need for Development

The old professional sociologist's whisper has been fueled by what Marie Louise Stochholm describes as a 'development itch'—where the perception is that one has only succeeded professionally when the citizen has acquired a measurable skill.

"It's unfortunate when, instead, one could focus on the fact that contact has been established with a citizen who has shown signs of well-being, meaning, and connection through our relational interaction. That's huge and should be shouted from the rooftops at a residential home," she says, continuing:

"For example, I was at a place where they were playing Uno. 'Don't think we play Uno all the time,' they said. But I hope they did. Because I could see that there was a direction to it and that the citizen was having a great time. It's unfortunate when good practice flies under the radar because one doesn't feel that what one is doing is professional enough.

Marie Louise Stochholm

- Graduated as a sociologist in 2005 from Roskilde University, specializing in pedagogical professionalism.
- Previously worked as an educational consultant at Specialisterne, an IT company for young people with autism, and at the Center for Autism's youth clubs.
- Was the deputy head at Carpe Diem, a respite care institution for children and young people aged 3 to 18 with autism.
- In 2008, she co-founded the company Danish consultancy firm with Trine Uhrskov, where they developed the recovery-oriented tool Low Arousal 2 (LA2) to promote well-being and reduce the number of violent incidents.



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Marie Louise Stochholm, sociologist and VISO specialist

The Path to the Goal

The 46-year-old sociologist would go so far as to say that social pedagogical methods and interventions don't work without a relationally competent interaction.

First, it's crucial that the citizen has a sense that the social educator cares about them. Secondly, the citizen may have countless interventions behind them, so the window for new interventions and well-meaning social educators is just barely ajar. And thirdly, many citizens are what she calls hypersensitive in the relational interaction.

"Their mental Geiger counter goes off very quickly. So, if there is relational noise—if, for example, I furrow my brow because I register a strange sound—they react to it. In other words, we must be ultra-sharp to ensure that the support we offer is attractive and meaningful. The relational aspect is a huge part of that," she says.

Press the Professional Person Machine

As a VISO specialist, Marie Louise Stochholm is called in when a citizen is in a high degree of distress and, for example, has isolated themselves, is self-harming,

"I'm not suggesting that we should robotically clone each other, or that everyone in the workplace should start doing fun and games because the citizen finds Lizzy's fun and games amusing. But I do believe that we should be able to talk about it," says Marie Louise Stochholm.





Marie Louise Stochholm always asks the citizen, if possible, what's troubling them in their relational interaction. "I've learned a lot along the way," she says.

or is acting out. When she starts a program, she typically makes a list of the interventions that have been tried. Sometimes there is also a status description. But there is rarely a summary of the character of the interaction.

Marie Louise Stochholm therefore always asks the citizen for negative feedback on their collaboration to tune into their relational preferences. She might also ask the citizen to imagine a professional person machine, where different buttons can be adjusted: old or young, fast or slow-talking, male or female, encouraging or calmer. And then she asks the citizen: Which buttons would you press? Similarly, she asks the staff group: What do you imagine he would press? Who would come out? To answer this—especially if the citizen doesn't have verbal language—one can work with a so-called 'strived insider perspective' (see box).

Another approach might be to ask a colleague to observe the relational interaction with a citizen and then reflect on it together afterward.

"The social educator hosts the relationship, so it's essential to reflect on what it is about oneself and the interaction that the citizen can use, and what one, conversely, should try to tone down. And one must dare to enter that reflection space with colleagues and talk about which forms of interaction one believes the various citizens thrive in," she says.

Use the Words You Have

When Marie Louise Stochholm herself attempts to find words for it, she reaches for everyday



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Marie Louise Stochholm, sociologist and VISO specialist

words and metaphors such as being 'like a stewardess', 'like a military governor, or 'like a grandmother'.

"Many people think it's less professional because it doesn't sound particularly technical. But my entire point is that we must dare to do it anyway. Because all we have is our language. Let's try to use some metaphors. You could also call them positions that we can turn up or down," she says and continues:

"It might be that a citizen prefers fun and games. It could be that he gets allergic reactions if we offer too much advice. It might be the activities, the tone of voice, or the way we look at him that makes the difference. And when a colleague has figured it out, we can follow some of the same paths. I'm not talking about making rigid mappings of interactions, but rather about discussing it as naturally as, for example, the citizen's sensory sensitivity and need for structure."

But what about chemistry? And what about the authentic and personal relationship? Marie Louise gets these kinds of questions all the time.

"There's a tendency to cast an almost divine glow over relational work, and that kills the conversation. We shouldn't change ourselves or clone each other, but we should talk about what we're already doing. We should talk about how, when we're with 'Sarah,' we are extremely clear and speak slowly. And when 'John' comes in, there's more speed, a louder voice, and a livelier approach," she says.

We have to swallow it

Marie Louise Stochholm is fully aware that it takes a secure staff environment to be able to say: 'I think you should dial down your compassion for Tom.' Because interaction is tied to one's personality when you use your body language, eye contact, and tone of voice.

"It's incredibly problematic if we don't say it, because then Tom suffers. If he has to compensate for me talking too much, looking too worried, or sipping coffee in an annoying way, he drops out of the interaction. And if, as a staff group, we are not systematic in having a language for it, Tom will be a test subject for new forms of interaction every time he changes residence," she says.

And in the end, it's not just Tom who suffers. It affects the entire field of social pedagogy.

"If we can't articulate our professionalism, we deserve criticism. We have to swallow it. But the truth is that we are not just taking a walk or playing Uno. When we work with relational competence, it is a highly professional encounter."

Strived insider perspective

Marie Louise Stochholm has contributed to developing the recovery-oriented tool Low Arousal 2 (LA2) to prevent, manage, and learn from violent incidents to create better well-being and reduce violence.

LA2 involves the professional working with the citizen to investigate and incorporate the citizen's inside perspective, which includes the citizen's experience of their well-being, resources, networks, coping strategies, stressors, hopes, and dreams. From this, the professionals' shared professional approaches are further developed.

LA2(u) is a support for LA2, aimed at citizens with developmental disabilities, cognitive challenges, and/or without verbal language. Here, models are supported with expressive graphics, and the inside perspective is supplemented with a so-called strived-for inside perspective, which is a systematic investigation of the citizen's experience of being themselves.