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Summary 250 words

Early intervention has always been part of the lexicon of social education. In recent years, a logic of people 'at risk' and risk factor analysis, in order to predict and then prevent problems, has become orthodoxy. Risk assessment is focused less on professional judgement and more on the use of 'Big Data' and predictive analytics. Such systems degrade both the decision-making powers of professionals and participatory ethics, in which those affected by decisions have a right to be involved in the making of those decisions. External mechanisms and new technologies take precedence over internal, dialogue-informed, social and human-oriented processes. An obsession with certainty undermines the essential value of uncertainty as (as Dewey argues) a necessary feature of democracy. Arguably, a new prejudice now exists: one of 'at-risk-ism'. What practices might resist this? Only those that are 'uncertainty-appreciative', that create spaces and places for the people social educators work with to assert control over their lives, and the systems that judge them. Such social practices are necessarily re-imagined as strongly democratic, where people can learn to criticise one another, and collaborate in caring and creative ways, for mutual benefit. These practices start to look, as Dewey also suggested, deeply philosophical and community-oriented. Hence 'Community Philosophy' becomes a philosophy, a pedagogy and a methodology much needed at this time.

Keywords: Risk, Prevention, Uncertainty.

Thinking, and acting, philosophically in relation to risk: social education in an era of Big Data

A context: the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm

Social education is often seen as a form of 'prevention'. What's implied is a practice that aims to prevent people from experiencing lives that can be harmful to themselves and others, or at least minimising that harm. Historically, the social educator has relied on professional judgement to make decisions about how best to achieve this. Sometimes this means observing and seeking to understand behaviours and lifestyles that cause harm. At other times it is a matter of judging that harm is likely to occur in the future. This likelihood can be understood as a form of 'risk' – of, for example, educational failure, involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour, poor health, and, more recently, even the risk of becoming radicalised and of engaging in violent extremism. The logic validates 'early intervention' as a means to prevent these futures. Usually, this sits in a broader context of professional practice, in which social educators aim to support the development of individuals' capacities and positive social behaviours in the belief that this will support individual and community flourishing. And yet, a shift in focus away from the latter is apparent, toward prevention, and focussed on individuals rather than communities.

While social educators, among a wide range of social practitioners, have long been expected to manage these risks, in recent times there has been a greater emphasis on intervening in the lives of those considered 'at risk' of such problematic futures. A range of technologies has emerged, ostensibly designed to support professional decision-making. Invariably, these technologies are based on a regime of risk assessment often referred to as the 'Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm', a concept attributed to the British criminologist, David Farrington. Farrington's concern was for crime prevention, although now the paradigm extends to a wide range of social ills. His approach, which he claimed was valuable due to its simplicity, was to "identify the key risk factors for offending and implement prevention methods designed to counteract them" (Farrington, 2000) . This could then be used "not only to identify variables to be targeted but also to identify persons to be targeted in an intervention

programme" (ibid.). For Farrington, low intelligence, low esteem, impulsiveness, experience of abuse and neglect and other familial problems were the primary risk factors.

Again, this sits in tension with a value-based context; in which the social educator tries to think critically about what, and how, and by whom, judgements are made about what constitutes 'good behaviour': are they, in the judgements they make, perpetuating social injustice, or acting in ways that address and transform punitive social realities? This tension is also manifest in the demand (and desire) to evidence one's professionalism – on the one-hand, in technocratic terms, through, arguably, artificial 'metrics', and, on the other, the use of evaluation mechanisms more in-keeping with a 'social' practice.

Influence on policy and practice

These ideas have had a significant influence on social policy, and subsequently the work that state actors, including many social educators, do. The policy agenda of the UK Labour government from 1997 – 2010 illustrates this focus on prevention and early intervention:

We need far earlier intervention with some of these families, who are often socially excluded and socially dysfunctional. That may mean before they offend; and certainly before they want such intervention. But in truth, we can identify such families virtually as their children are born.

(Blair, 2006)

Blair's words ushered in an intensive programme targeted at 'dysfunctional' families, implicitly viewed as a potential source of criminality. This programme included the UK government's Youth Crime Action Plan, which inferred potential criminals could be identified in advance and future criminal behaviour averted. In practice, information was (and continues to be) collected in relation to an individual's 'risk factors', thereafter risk analysis performed, and then those identified as 'at risk' targeted for intervention.

There are dilemmas here; the experienced social educator will often have strong relationships with those they work with, to the extent they feel they 'know' that person and the communities of which they are a part. Furthermore, they will assess situations as 'risky', as against 'risky behaviours', thereby acknowledging the complexity of these situations and the need to avoid taking a definitive position on how people might behave in relation to these circumstances. Put simply, the social educator recognises that different people are likely to respond differently to similar situations; and that it is essential to consider context, including the effect of structures and systems might have on human interactions. This is an important and vital response to an ideological context increasingly predicated on individuation and fragmentation. The challenge though is to reflect upon this complexity, including the situations, factors and specificities that may give rise to particular behaviours as well as the interventions that might avert problematic behaviours *and* promote human flourishing.

A history of risk analysis and the shift from internal to external

Social educators have always engaged in a process of risk analysis, though many will not have thought about what they do in this way. As noted, they review circumstances, observe behaviour, and consider the effects of wider contexts. They may draw on their own cultural theories or refer to their (often on-going) professional education and engagement with research. Fundamentally, they will also be engaged in dialogue with individuals and communities, in the principled belief that what they learn through this dialogue constitutes an essential form of knowledge that could, and should, inform their work. In effect, their risk analysis has been a product of tacit knowledge, reflective practice, and a democratic process of engagement with those they work with.

Increasingly, though, practices have been influenced by the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm. Its effect has been accelerated by the advent of multi-agency, multi-disciplinary teams. Here, judgements about risk have increasingly been taken by more formal groupings of practitioners from a variety of backgrounds. For example, the social educator might now work alongside police officers, crime prevention personnel,

health workers and those from the education sector. Where a concern about a person has been raised by one or more, all will contribute to a formal process of assessment. On the basis of their knowledge and experience of the individuals in question, each will score that individual against a series of broader classifications of risk. These include neighbourhood and community factors (e.g. environmental and demographic indices, but also levels of service provision); socio-economic indicators; and familial and individual characteristics (from perceived parenting problems to academic issues such as poor attendance and disciplinary infractions at school). Ultimately, the scoring system generates an overall level of risk and the individual is classified as low, medium or high risk. In an often resource-poor context, the latter are constituted as 'targets', part of a caseload identified for 'intervention'. And these targets are given back to individual practitioners, who are only too aware that their ability to make decisions about whom they work with has been reduced through this process.

If now we consider the impact of today's world of 'Big Data', machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI), we can see that control over this process of risk analysis continues to be wrested from individual practitioners. And even though they had some influence on data collection and data analysis as part of multi-agency teams, now, many more, external, datasets and data systems come into play and affect the decision-making process. Advocates of these new technologies typically assert: "New data sources and big data analytics are creating a step-change in our understanding of children's needs and outcomes. Better understanding increases the accuracy of predicted need and [the capacity to] offer help much earlier." (Selwyn, 2018). Furthermore, "Intelligence is being integrated to create a single view of the child, including a wide variety of partner data (including from education, social care, health, benefits, housing, marketing and social media) (ibid.). Wearable technologies, predictive analytics and 'behavioural insights' are the new technologies that can "build the science behind services"; "commissioning will [in the future] be quicker with artificial intelligence supporting decisions" (ibid.).

In sum, we see the inexorable shift from practitioner-focussed decision-making to that by external systems; as this section's heading suggests, from the internal (in the sense

of relationship-based) to the external (in the sense of data-oriented). It is time now to review some of these claims.

A critique

There are echoes here of Blairon's (2011) concerns about evaluation; it, too, moves from a system significantly under the control of practitioners to one where decisions are made by external systems. Blairon challenges this shift, and the assumption that evaluation has to be conducted by external actors to be objective; and that objectivity is implicitly superior to the subjectivity of internal evaluation processes, wherein the judgements of practitioners and the people they work with are given high status. By contrast, new technologies tend to drive further externalisation. In terms of data, it's easy to observe what Blairon is talking about. Increasingly, the information used to make decisions is wholly statistical, and 'distant' – in the sense of being less to do with the specificity of the individual and more to do with comparators. For example, a young person's school test scores may be used to predict futures, even though these are abstracted from large data sets and can only ever be understood in relation to other pupils, sometimes even nationally. Furthermore, almost all data is relayed in statistical terms, which give it the aura of objectivity. Given cultural norms, this is seductive; objectivity is connected to science after all. But, on closer inspection, much is clearly subjective. Take, for example, the number of incidences of behavioural infractions at school. While these can indeed be counted, each instance is a product of individual school cultures; some schools are more authoritarian than others, as are the individual teachers making such judgements. The same can be said of other metrics, such as 'community disorganisation'; 'lack of attachments'; 'poor parenting'; 'family dysfunction'; 'impulsivity'; 'lack of motivation'; and of course 'low IQ', which is unquestionably a disputed concept.

Advancing these mechanisms as 'science' – the implication being that risks can be measured with great confidence and appropriate responses more accurately determined – becomes questionable, perhaps even a form of 'scientism': a process masquerading as science, replete with the possibility of bias, prejudice and discrimination. I suggest what's happening is indicative of a new prejudice – 'at-risk-

ism' – where systems of risk analysis, aided, abetted and accelerated by new technologies use predictive analytics to label people (especially young people) on the basis of speculative data interpretation rather than anything substantive.

A particular concern for social educators is the diminution of value ascribed to the voice of individuals and wider communities, as this contradicts a deeply-held commitment to a 'thick' version of participation. In this, participation represents a principle, in which those affected by decision-making are afforded the right to be involved in the making of those decisions.

Given that participation is often popularly understood as 'working with', this shift can be characterised as a return to the earliest models of practices that were intent on 'doing to', and where the dominant narratives were of 'saving' and 'rescuing' people. Accordingly, it becomes reasonable to argue we are witnessing the re-emergence of a culture of rescue, under the guise of 'early help'. This, in turn, affects how we interpret ethical principles. Typically, youth workers (for example) strive to respect and promote young people's rights to make their own decisions and choices, the only caveat being where their or others' welfare is seriously threatened. However, we might say now that an 'inverse caveat' exists, that when systems of risk analysis judge negative outcomes nigh on certain, the caveat 'unless the welfare or legitimate interests of themselves or others are seriously threatened'[1] takes precedence. The commitment to participation becomes 'risky', and to be avoided. The system thus becomes 'risk averse' with respect to democracy.

This shift from 'working with' to 'doing to' raises important philosophical questions about the ethics said to underpin many social practices, including social education. As participatory ethics are eroded so too is the much deeper commitment to support and advance people's autonomy and self-determination – undoubtedly a manifestation of democratic practice. This is exemplified in the increased prescription of people's needs. Data management systems and data analytics now determine not just what people need but how these needs should be met, regardless of what these people

[1] A narrative typically found in the Code of Ethics statements used by youth work organisations.

might say. And yet many social educators realise that working in non-institutional settings – in civil society – demands they engage in a process of negotiation about such needs. In an 'internal' model, what Blairon refers to as 'interne' (in contrast to the 'externe' described), needs are determinedly dialogically, and dialogue valued as an essential system of learning, of 'intelligence-gathering'. People are respected as experts in their own experience; what they have to say is regarded as highly important. Practitioners contribute their own perspectives; contestation and accommodation ensues. Ultimately, a negotiated position is arrived at, based on intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivations and it is this negotiated position that shapes the form and function of the work.

Prescriptive systems also determine *who* are to be objects of intervention; we might therefore add practitioners to the list of those who are disenfranchised from decision-making. Increasingly, they are told who they should work with. For social educators with community work dispositions, this constitutes the very 'caseload' orientation to practice they often seek to avoid. This is not to say social educators' sympathies lack pragmatism: they know that telling people what their needs are, without listening to what they have to say, almost always makes it impossible to develop relationships with them. They know that trust-based relationships are critical to engagement and effective practice. By contrast, systems-based approaches presume that these relationships exist, or are at least easy to come by. While this might be due to naïvety, it is more likely this orientation reveals an increasingly authoritarian culture of 'non-negotiable' intervention, which demands people make 'positive choices': the focus now is on externally-valued outcomes, rather than those emerging from a democratic process.

Moving on: Community Philosophy as a practical response

What might a schema look like if it took these concerns into account? What forms of practice are needed if long valued principles are to be re-asserted? The crux of the matter appears to be attitudes to uncertainty. While Big Data is advanced as a means to predict futures with ever greater certainty, Dewey suggests, uncertainties are not only inevitable, but must be valued if democracy is to prosper. And, "*If there are*

genuine uncertainties in life, philosophies must reflect that uncertainty." (1957: 382). His pragmatism and belief that democratic virtues are learned through the experience of democracy guides us to uncertainty-appreciative practices.

Community Philosophy (CP)[2] has been born of this tradition. Influenced by the practice of Philosophy for Children (P4C) and the use of Community of Enquiry (CoE) methodologies, CP makes explicit the social educator's intrinsic concern for the social. It is in every sense a social practice, a methodology that practitioners can use to think together, *and with* the people they work with: a participatory ethic means outcomes should never be prescribed; that outcomes 'come out' of a democratic process.

There's politics here too; stating 'we learn better together' is an embodied response to the fragmentation of people by data 'metrics'. And the social becomes a medium for Collaborative thinking, which constitutes, alongside Critical, Creative and Caring thinking, the '4Cs' at the heart of Community of Enquiry methodology. Each has an important role to play; the latter emphasises respect for people's feelings and emotions – care is taken to engage in a manner that does not actively solicit confrontation. On the contrary, in the spirit of social education, CP supports and accompanies people on journeys of learning, and especially learning that informs social action. As in the spirit of dialogue, the aim is to learn through critical conversations. The Critical emphasises concept analysis; not only questioning and problematising concepts, but also modifying pre-conceptions. This is essential to reflecting on, and challenging, ways of working, being and relating to people.

It is though Community Philosophy 'generative' features that are most respectful of uncertainty. Communities are supported not just to answer questions but generate in a creative way (therein the fourth 'C') the questions *they* consider important. They become active citizens, participating in (in the aforementioned 'political' sense of the word) deliberative democracy, taking control of both questions and answers, challenging and re-formulating power relations. This provides an on-going template

[2] The internet hosts numerous links to the theory and practice of 'Community Philosophy'.

for engagement with the world of digital technologies; critiquing them, subjecting them to enquiry, and demanding access to coding rationale – making them transparent. In this, data systems should be made accessible; comprehensible; usable; and assessable. In sum, this both protects against denialism (Big Data is here to stay) but begins the process of enabling citizens to take control of these systems. Were these data systems considered 'services', just as social education is and should be, they too should be under the control of the people, as this is as important a characteristic of democracy as can be imagined.

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