May I come to visit you at work?
– An associate professor in close heels of a practitioner

By Bodil Klausen, associate professor, VIA Social Studies, Horsens
Translated into English by Mariann Handgaard, VIA Social Studies, Aarhus

Background
I walk and talk with two colleagues on our way from work to a pizzeria. We meet two young people, who greet me: “Hi, how are you?” That in itself is not unusual but to me it is a strong and positive memory as it actually takes place in Sligo, a town in the northwesterly part of Ireland. The two colleagues work at a university college, IT Sligo (https://itsligo.ie/) and we have been collaborating internationally for years. It is my last night in Sligo after giving lessons and having worked with “Teaching Mobility programme”.

During my stay I have been on a number of research visits at a local youth centre, following in close heels of the social care worker Caroline Costello, who works with young people who are involved or at risk of becoming involved in criminal or anti-social behaviour. And two of these young people, two brothers, now greet me: “Hello, hi, how are you?” Naturally, I gladly return their greeting and later at the pizzeria my two Irish colleagues smilingly ask me about the young brothers, finding it funny, that it is me, a foreigner, who meets acquaintances in the street in Sligo.

‘Shadowing’ – in close heels of a practitioner
It was a good experience to teach and to discuss with the Irish students and colleagues, but best of all was the opportunity to follow the social care worker Caroline Costello. I met Caroline when working with the EU-project ‘HIP’, a project that not only involves international colleagues from universities and university colleges, but also professionals/practitioners working with young people at risk. In the HIP-project: “HEI Inter-Professional module – co-created by marginalized youth, practitioners and students” (http://hip.via.dk/) we have been working on including the voices and perspectives of the young people in the teaching interdisciplinary collaboration at the social studies. After having met Caroline at the two first HIP-project partner meetings in Denmark and Romania I became so absorbed listening to her talk about her job that I began to search for an opportunity to visit her at her job.

Photo: Bodil Klausen and Caroline Costello
Over the years I have been involved in working with young people living in social housing sectors in Horsens (e.g. Klausen, 2012). In general, I am very keen on keeping updated about research into the different kinds of useful competences and skills that are needed and available in the work with young people at risk. That is why I catch every opportunity to follow and experience the work of skillful professionals in their dealing with young people. Within research that kind of work is called ‘shadowing’ – it is a recognized qualitative research method to investigate the praxis of individuals – and is highly recommendable. (Read more about the theoretical aspects of the method, e.g. in Kristensen, 2016, and McDonald).

**How and what?**

Caroline Costello’s workplace is YAPS (Youth Action Project Sligo), and it is a joint collaboration between the police and social authorities NCYCS, working with young people between 12 and 18 years, who are involved in criminal/anti-social behaviour or are at risk of becoming involved in this behaviour. In short, they work with each young person either individually or in small groups to give them competencies, which they can use in order to divert away from crime. They also work on improving relationships with other young people, the local community, and the authorities. The young people together with the social care worker choose the activity, often quite common, everyday activities, which are uncommonly difficult for these young people.

I “shadowed” Caroline for several days. Beforehand Caroline had made a schedule, which offered me the opportunity to interview her employer, to visit different hotspots, where YAPS has activities, but most of all, I had the opportunity to participate in various activities with children and young people - e.g. homework assistance with four siblings and also taking part in different activities making cakes. Each activity lasted one hour and the young people either worked alone or two together with one or two social care workers.

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“It’s annoying”

One day I participated in making cakes with two brothers. They had previously decided to make muffins. The two social care workers had done the shopping and the kitchen was ready when the two brothers arrived on time (an important part of the programme). They went along taking on an apron, washed their hands and got hold of the recipe and found the ingredients and the tools. When I was introduced, I asked permission to take some photos during the activity. Apart from that I kept my distance and the other four seemed to forget my presence. The two social care workers small talked with the young people during the activity. It looked rather cosy and the brothers were polite. At a time, the youngest brother set himself out to make icing out of butter and icing sugar, but apparently the butter is rather stiff and several times he exclaims, “It’s annoying!” – And it becomes rather annoying for me to listen to him. I count him saying, “It’s annoying” at least 15 times. The social care workers show him how to get a better grip at the bowl, still ‘small talking’ about the muffins or whatever the talk is about. Not one single time he is asked to stop complaining.

Later, when I ask them about it, no one remembers him saying ‘annoying’ so many times in that short period. They tell me, that the young man – as most of the young people who come to the centre – has difficulty keeping focus and attention to an activity. They very easily give up on things and have difficulty finishing them. Both young people were deeply involved in gang crime, and they were ordered by the police to come to the centre. For 6 months they hardly said a word. The family wanted the boys to leave the gangs and supported the effort, and that made a change. There had been a long haul engaging the boys before this baking activity. All the activities were characterized by the importance of creating a product together, e.g. cakes, and during the process they trained different skills: The quite obvious ones such as, kitchen hygiene, reading and understanding of a recipe, how to use and handle different kitchen tools etc.. The social care workers did not take over for the young people. Maybe, if necessary, they showed how to handle a tool, but they eminently left everything about making the cakes to the young people, but at the same time they stood close by, ready to support them.

Photo: Baking with young people at YAPS
It was interesting to see and hear how they communicated with the young people. They constantly guided both verbally and with body language. They were attentive and followed the lead of the young people. They talked about everyday matters from school, leisure time, and family. It seemed very relaxed and easy, but I observed, that the social care workers were highly concentrated and focused at the young people. The process of making the cakes took exactly the scheduled time of one hour: Allowing time to greet each other, get started, the process of making the cakes, and finally to celebrate the result, the fine muffins with icing. The boys ate one muffin each and the rest of the muffins ware carefully wrapped to bring home to the family. Everything was carefully planned but looked so relaxed and easy.

**Themes of interaction**

Afterwards, reflecting together with the social care workers, I remembered Karsten Hundeide’s 8 themes of interaction, which are divided into 3 forms of dialogue:

**The emotional-expressive dialogue**
1. Expressing positive and loving feelings
2. Seeing and responding to the initiative of the child
3. Establishing a dialogue of turn-taking (also non-verbally)
4. Confirming and praising the child for what he/she does well

**The meaning oriented and expansive dialogue**
5. Focusing and shared attention (establishing inter-subjectivity)
6. Mediation of meaning and enthusiasm
7. Expansion / explanation / comparisons beyond the present situation

**The regulative dialogue**
8. Regulation:
   a. Planning step-by-step
   b. Graded support or scaffolding
   c. Limit-setting in a positive way
   d. Challenging the child

It was just what I had been observing in practice:
The two social care workers:
1. Showed positive feelings and that they were fond of the young people
2. Adjusted themselves according to the young people and followed their agenda and initiative
3. Talked with the young people about things of their interest and tried to start an ‘emotional’ dialogue
4. Showed approval and complimented the young people for what they were able to do
5. Assisted the young people to focus their attention in order to create a shared experience in relation to the surroundings
6. Gave meaning to the young people’s experience of the surrounding world by describing their shared experience and by showing emotions and enthusiasm.

7. They enlarged and explained the experience they shared with the young people.

8. Assisted the young people to control themselves by setting borders in a positive way – by guiding them, showing them positive alternatives, and by planning together.

What does it take for a social care worker to ‘dance’ with such effortless ease. Surely, it requires a lot of knowledge, preparation and practice, but also personal competences. The young people at risk, who are given voices in the EU-project, demand social care workers, whom they can trust and are able to establish, engage, and maintain relationships. Overall, very reasonable demands, but what does it take? My best guess is so far, after having observed many very skillful social care workers such as Caroline, that the social educator training includes not only subjects as communication and forming relationship, cf. Karsten Hundeide’s description of the eight interaction themes, but also includes three forms of ‘personal professional competences’. The expression is inspired by Helle Winther (Winther, 2012).

**Personal professional competences**

The practice of the professional personal competence can be divided into three categories:

1) **Contact to yourself:**
   Contact to your own body and personal feelings, the ability to stay focused and present, the ability to work with heart and mind maintaining a professional focus and a private sphere.

2) **Decoding communication and building relation:**
   The ability to see, listen, sense and feel. The ability to decode/read the verbal as well as the bodily communication. The ability to build a confidential relation to others. The ability to draw the line.

3) **Leadership of a group or situations:**
   A professional overview, charisma, centering, transparent leadership of a group or situations. The ability to be in charge of the room with a balanced and bodily grounded authority.

It seems so natural and easy, but everyone who has been working with young people at risk knows very well how difficult it can be to master all three competencies at the same time. As an associate professor, I need to experience competent social care workers in order to be sharp in my teaching in relation to practice. And we need to include training of the personal professional competences in our teaching. So thank you to Caroline and all other practitioners who allow associate professors to be “shadows”. You are making our educations better.
One of the young people was very interested in the fact, that I came all the way from Denmark to visit the centre. Beforehand he had told Caroline, that he wanted to meet me. He and his family are members of the travelling community. Travellers are an ethnic minority group, who has been part of the Irish society for decades. I met him to take part in activities together with Caroline to a kind of interview. He told me about his life and his family and what it meant to be ‘Travellers’. He invited me to come and visit him and his mother and to see their caravan. I gladly accepted the invitation and together with Caroline I went to the place, a public parking place, where his siblings, parents, and five dogs live in a large caravan. He and his grandmother occupy another caravan at the same parking place.

He even asked Caroline to arrange a meeting for me and her to interview two employees from Sligo Traveller Support Group, which is a local Traveller organization (www.stsg.ie/). He is very proud to be a Traveller and was sincerely happy, that I took interest in the special culture of the travelers. Therefore, he wanted me to get more information than he himself was able to give. It was really a fantastic experience for me to talk to this young traveller, to visit his family and to interview two employees from the Traveller’s organization and hereby get an insight in their culture.

Statistically, the rate of unemployment among Irish Travellers is higher than for the population in general. “The labour force participation rate among Travellers was 57.3 per cent compared with 61.9 per cent for the general population”. The current accommodation is often unsuitable and located on the outskirts of towns, and can create tensions in the local community. Members of the travelling community are often discriminated, and sometimes treated as outcasts. As the Travellers may have experienced prejudice, they can feel defensive in the meeting with non-traveller professionals. For that reason, it may be difficult to establish a good dialogue initially. As I was interested in asking all kind of questions about the relation between Travellers and settled people the staffs answered patiently and were very forthcoming about the Traveller culture. They laughed when I e.g. asked if I would be able to see the difference between a traveller and a settled person among people in the street. They told me, that they wanted the social care workers and teachers to address the young people as being children of Travellers. In a way, I – as a naïve foreigner – became a kind of icebreaker in relation to some of the normally rigid problematics, e.g. in relation to not being settled and the differences in the upbringing of boys and girls in the Traveller Culture.

When visiting the family in their caravan I asked them to characterize a good social care worker/ teacher. The answer was remarkably short and precise and rather universal: A good social care worker/ teacher pay attention to and remember the name of the

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children and wish them happy birthday. Sadly, the answer indirectly shows, how the Travellers feel, that they are not welcomed.

**Ethics**

During the EU-project we have often discussed if it was ethically acceptable to invite a third party into the practice of working with young people at risk and how it was possible to do so in a constructive manner. My experiences from Denmark and abroad show, that if the contact is made by competent professionals, it is in fact ethically acceptable, many young people could benefit from being hosts and experts of their own life. The young people I have met have been happy to speak about and show me parts of their everyday life. The social care workers have been happy to get sparring practice from someone who knows how much pedagogical effort it takes to work with young at risk in order to create comfortable everyday situations. That is why I was very happy to meet the two brothers, who greeted me with the usual “Hello, hi, how are you?” And in fact they looked pleased to see me.

**Literature**


Danish website: www.icdp-dk.dk/hvad-er-icdp.aspx


Seonaidh McDonald is a Senior Research Fellow at Aberdeen Business School. https://core.ac.uk/download/files/84/1575856.pdf


About the author

Bodil Klausen is Master in History of Religion and associate professor at VIA University College; Faculty of Education & Social Studies in Horsens. Formerly trained as a social educator. Teaches in subjects as citizenship, social innovation, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Especially interested in social deprived housing estates and how the social education programme can become an active partner in the local community. Through long-standing engagements in development projects a formal partnership has been established with external partners in a social deprived housing estate with the specific aim of involving young people to act as role models.

Photo: Bodil Klausen