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# Foster Carers' Receptiveness to New Innovations and Programmes: An Example from the Introduction of Social Pedagogy to UK Foster Care

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## Abstract

Foster carers characterise a highly diverse workforce that shares the choice to provide a home and family for children who can no longer reside with their family. This diversity makes supporting and providing for carers' training needs a complex task for fostering services. Understanding what might influence their engagement in training would be useful. This article outlines themes related to foster carers' engagement with social pedagogy, using data from the Head, Heart, Hands (HHH) programme evaluation. Analysis of interviews with seventy-six foster carers over a period of three years is presented. The emerging themes were used to devise an illustrative typology of receptiveness to training. The themes relate to the perceived impact of HHH on their practice and compatibility with the existing children's social care (CSC) system. The article explores the factors that may influence foster carers' positioning within the typology. The contributions that such a typology might make to the wider evidence base across CSC, in terms of the implementation and potential impacts of intervention, are discussed.

**Keywords:** foster carer, receptiveness, social pedagogy, training, typology

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## Introduction

Innovation and the introduction of new interventions have been an integral component of the children's social care (CSC) sector in recent years (e.g. [McDermid et al., 2015](#)). This is partly a response to the public and political scrutiny placed on the effectiveness of the wider system of CSC to protect and promote the well-being of children and families ([Laming, 2009](#); [Munro, 2011](#)). Equally, the prioritisation of innovation and intervention in policy must be understood in the context of a prolonged period of financial austerity and real-term cuts to public services ([National Audit Office, 2018](#)), alongside evidence of the impact of growing economic inequalities on child welfare in the UK ([Bywaters et al., 2018](#)), as well as economic and social pressures on families, including foster carers.

The emphasis on innovation has included a range of different specialist programmes introduced to foster care in the UK, including adaptations of international practice ([Biehal et al., 2012](#); [Knibbs et al., 2016](#)) and initiatives within the Department for Education (DfE) CSC Innovation Programme ([Beek et al., 2016](#); [McDermid et al., 2016a](#)). Within the Innovation Programme, funding was made available for organisations and local authorities to initiate innovative projects designed to 'rethink' and improve services for vulnerable children and families ([Department for Education, 2016](#)). The subject of this article, the Head, Heart, Hands (HHH) programme, is another example of an innovative approach in UK foster care, where its implementation was funded by a consortium, and led by the Fostering Network, the largest UK foster care charity and membership organisation for foster carers. HHH aimed to develop the skills and confidence of foster carers through training informed by the theory and practice of social pedagogy.

It is largely agreed that one way of effectively supporting vulnerable children (and their families) lies in training staff responsible for providing support ([Crosland et al., 2008](#)). This includes foster carers, by ensuring they are trained to increase their capacity to meet the needs of children, by implementing support structures, underpinned by training. Foster carers are recipients of training programmes and may subsequently apply the learning to their own practice for the benefit of the children in their care. As such, foster carers may be central conduits of new innovations as they translate the information learnt into their practice. They are core components of such innovations, or to use the implementation science parlance, key 'implementation drivers' ([Ghate, 2016](#)). However, studies have highlighted the lack of evidence that foster carer training has a measurable impact on foster carer practice or children's outcomes (e.g. [Sinclair et al., 2005](#); [Everson-Hock et al., 2012](#)). Other studies have noted that even when foster carers report that they enjoy

training, the extent to which learning is transferred into practice is low (e.g. Pithouse *et al.*, 2002).

The use of implementation science or an implementation lens (Fixsen *et al.*, 2005) in CSC has been burgeoning in recent years, predominantly driven by the need for a better integration of research into practice (Ghate, 2016). Principles of implementation science indicate that participation and engagement of stakeholders are vital when trying to innovate and change practice (Cabassa, 2016). Assimilating training into practice requires both knowledge and expertise about the intervention and local-context specific knowledge, skills and understanding about the settings in which it will be used (Cabassa, 2016). Within the context of the introduction and expansion of programmes designed to support and enhance foster care, it is advantageous to consider the extent to which foster carers might be receptive to new programmes and to understand the key factors that inhibit and enable foster carers to engage with such programmes.

This article outlines themes related to foster carers' engagement with social pedagogy, using data from the HHH evaluation to devise an illustrative typology of receptiveness to training. The article explores the factors that may influence foster carers' positioning within that typology, along with the contribution that such a typology might make to the wider evidence base across CSC, in terms of the implementation and potential impacts of intervention.

## Social pedagogy

The HHH programme was grounded in *social pedagogy*—an approach that can be understood as being holistically concerned with the whole development of the whole person, within society. Mollenhauer (1983/2014) frames the pedagogy in terms of the intersection between upbringing (*Erziehung*, in German)—including 'the interplay between help, protection and the impact of cultural structures' (p. 22)—and the formation of the self (*Bildung*). As a theoretical discipline and framework for policy and practice, social pedagogy is predicated on a series of ethical and philosophical considerations about the inherent value of human beings and the importance of emancipatory and democratic practice (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011).

Moss (2007, p. 6) argues that social pedagogy can be understood as 'a broad concept that encompasses learning, care and upbringing' or as the bringing together of the head, heart and hands (Cameron and Moss, 2011) for the task of working with people. It is an amalgamation of professional knowledge, drawing on a range of social science disciplines and critical self-reflection ('head'), empathy and the use of one's own experiences and personality ('heart') and practical actions and activities

(‘hands’). It is principally concerned with practices that facilitate ‘the integration of individuals into a society, and the fulfilment of human potential’ (Cameron, 2016, p. 203). Berridge *et al.* (2011) note that social pedagogy is not a set of techniques that can be easily learnt but a perspective that pervades all areas of practice. In this sense, social pedagogic practice is ‘not so much about *what* is done, but more about *how* something is done’ (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012, p. 33).

In many European countries, social pedagogy is well-established as a professional qualification for work with children and adults across multiple sectors (see Hämäläinen, 2003; Petrie *et al.*, 2006), but at the time of the research social pedagogic approaches had been little used in UK CSC (Berridge *et al.*, 2011; McDermid *et al.*, 2016b). The HHH training, grounded in social pedagogy, aimed to create an ontological shift in the foster carer, seeing their relationship with the child in novel ways that emphasise social connections, co-creation and meaning-making in everyday lives. In line with social pedagogic theory, emphasis on *democratisation* entails attention to the power relations between adult and child, such that the adult seeks to work *alongside* the child rather than taking the lead. Emphasis on the child’s *lifeworld* (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009) entails recognising everyday social interactions as opportunities to support, stretch and encourage the child. In practice, this may involve providing opportunities for ‘common third’ experiences, whereby joint activity provides a non-hierarchical relational and communicative space for carer and child to learn about each other, sharing pleasures and/or challenges and co-creating new understandings together (Boddy, 2011). ‘Common third’ activities may include managed risk-taking or novel experiences, taking participants out of their comfort zone.

## Methods

### The study

HHH ran between 2012 and 2016 with the aim to introduce social pedagogic principles into UK foster care. The programme was led by the Fostering Network and funded by a consortium of seven charitable funders. Interim and final evaluation reports were published throughout this period. This is the first academic output from the evaluation and was submitted for review later than intended due to periods of parental leave and moves between academic institutions by team members. These moves also resulted in the team no longer having access to the project data that were archived at their former institution.

The programme was implemented in seven fostering services (three in Scotland and four in England); two independent fostering providers and five local authority fostering services. The locality type of the services

participating varied with a regional spread of city and county-wide services. Social pedagogic Learning and Development training courses were provided to foster carers and staff. These consisted of a one-day Taster session, a two-day Orientation and an eight-day Core course. In total, 234 foster carers and 69 fostering service staff attended the Core courses across all seven sites. Following those, a series of groups were held in each of the sites to support the continued embedding and application of the approach. Social pedagogically qualified professionals (social pedagogues) were employed within the sites to undertake a range of tasks, including supporting foster carer learning and practice, raising awareness of the programme and undertaking specific work with foster carers and the children for whom they care.

The study used a mixed-method, longitudinal approach. The findings presented in this article draw on data gathered through one-hour semi-structured interviews with 76 foster carers who participated in the Learning and Development courses. Views of social care personnel and those of children in care living with HHH trained fosters were also collected as part of the wider evaluation. Data collection was organised into three discrete periods: Time 1 in 2012–2013 ( $n=26$ ), Time 2 in 2014 ( $n=40$ ) and Time 3 in 2015–2016 ( $n=57$ ). Some foster carers were interviewed at multiple time points, each being nine to ten months apart, whilst others completed a single interview. The interviews explored the foster carers views and experiences of the programme (e.g. 'What were the learning and development courses like for you?'), the extent to which they had implemented the principles of HHH into their practice (e.g. 'Are you doing anything differently since attending the Core course?') and the impact that it had on them, the children placed with them and their fostering service (e.g. 'What difference has that made to you or the children and young people who live with you?'). Transcripts of the interviews were analysed using a thematic framework method (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013). This process began by using the original research objectives for the evaluation and was influenced by concepts generated inductively from the data.

## Participants

Foster carers were recruited through postal invitations sent to all programme participants via the participating fostering services. Researchers also attended group meetings to inform carers of the opportunity to take part in an interview. The evaluation also included an online survey to foster carers which invited them to participate in an interview. Of the 76 foster carers interviewed, 36 offered long-term fostering placements. Fostering experience ranged from being a new carer at the start of HHH to fostering for more than twenty years ( $M=11.5$  years).

Regarding these contextual factors, the interview sample was broadly representative of those who took part in the HHH Learning and Development courses.

The study obtained ethical approval from the Loughborough University ethical advisory committee and support from the Association of Directors of Children's Services in England and the Association of Directors of Social Work in Scotland. All participants gave informed consent before taking part.

## Findings

Analysis of the data suggests that two main themes were related to the foster carers' willingness to engage with the programme: perceived potential impact on their practice and their views of the programme compatibility with the existing system.

### Potential for impact on practice

The extent to which engagement with HHH was perceived to add value to individuals' own practice was a key theme. Given that the sample was self-selecting, it might be expected that many of the foster carers reported high levels of existing sympathy to the programme approach. The assertion that 'I am doing this already' (or words to that effect) emerged in many foster carer interviews, but in different ways, expressing varying levels of commitment to HHH. Indeed, only two foster carers who participated in the interviews reported that the social pedagogic approach of HHH was entirely new, and words such as 'reinforced' and 'reminded' were frequently used. Reported prior familiarity with the core tenets of HHH was viewed as a facilitating factor by some and as inhibitory by others.

When prior familiarity with the principles and values explored in the training courses was conceptualised positively, the programme was perceived to have confirmed *intuitive* approaches to caring. For these carers, the theoretical framework of social pedagogy provided a cohesive framework to underpin practices and, as one explained, ideas on which to 'hang' existing perspectives. The programme provided these carers with the language to articulate the values and practices that they reported to be natural, 'It's given me the vocabulary to be able to describe what's going on, to myself and sometimes to others'. Interviewees who expressed this view described feeling more confident about their skills as foster carers as a result, and that this could benefit them in professional interactions, such as contributing to decision making and engaging with CSC staff during supervisions and looked after children reviews.

In contrast, other carers took the view that *because* they were already familiar with the core tenets of the programme, HHH was less relevant, and would not have an impact on their practice because they were (in their characterisation) '*doing it already*'. These foster carers had enjoyed the training (only one did not) and they were not negative towards HHH itself; rather, their openness to it was limited by the perceived lack of relevance to their own development. They thought it would not make a difference to their practice because the principles introduced through the programme were good foster care practice under a new name.

These patterns may reflect how the initial presentation of the programme—as having the potential to transform the way fostering would be viewed in the future—could have raised participants' expectations. This framing may have enthused programme participants to engage, but when anticipated levels of change in their own practice, or more widely across the fostering service, were not achieved in the expected time-frame, some participants described feeling disappointed:

I really enjoyed the course and I was very enthusiastic when we did it ... , and then after the course it was a bit of ... yes a disappointment, I feel it has been faded away a bit.

Participants also reflected on the delivery style of the course which appeared to have impacted some carers' views about the potential to influence practice. A few commented that the emphasis on non-hierarchical participatory engagement within the sessions made them feel 'uncomfortable', or reported frustration about the time taken for introductions and welcomes at the start of sessions:

When you've got twenty people on a course, right, and they all introduce themselves, and they all say how they're getting on and so on ... it's not the ideal way of training someone, in terms of use of time.

These frustrations impacted their receptiveness to the training content and a small number of foster carers ( $n=3$ ) indicated that the courses did not sufficiently explore how to implement the approaches in practice, or consider the complexities of children's needs.

### Perceived compatibility with the system

The extent to which the foster carers believed the current local and national structures across CSC would facilitate individual carers practising social pedagogically was a key theme that shaped levels of enthusiasm for the programme. Apprehension regarding compatibility with the wider system was the most cited concern regarding the effectiveness of HHH, in addition to being the primary reason given for a more cautious level of personal openness. When asked to define the wider system,

foster carers highlighted a range of arenas including their supervising social worker, their fostering service or local authority, along with national regulatory and policy frameworks. There was also substantial variation in the perceptions of the foster carers in terms of whether they considered themselves to be part of the wider system, see [McDermid et al., \(2016b\)](#) for further analysis. Those foster carers who believed the wider system could facilitate social pedagogic practices perceived HHH to be a force for change in the system, and were more receptive, ‘The one thing that I perhaps feel is a plus about it is, that, higher up the, in the department, that maybe they will be allowing us to take more risks, you know?’

Others perceived the system and social pedagogy as incompatible and this made them less enthusiastic about the programme as a whole:

It’s like trying to fit social pedagogy into a system it doesn’t fit with; when [foster carers are] skilled up we should be able to make decisions but I don’t think the system or social workers are necessarily up for that.

This comment contrasts with our earlier observations about the ways in which HHH could increase professional confidence for some foster carers, raising the question of whether new learning is seen as worth the effort, if the intended improvements are made in a context that is inherently preventative of such change. Around a third of all foster carers interviewed reported that the impact of the programme would be hindered unless fully supported by senior leaders, and by the revision of local authority policies, procedures and regulatory frameworks to better reflect the programme’s principles: ‘[Policies and procedures] clash with social pedagogy, they really do, you know, and that is the big issue’.

Even when foster carers expressed a strong desire to practice in a social pedagogic way, some raised concerns that the system would not facilitate the approach, and consequently reported some reservations about fully engaging in HHH. The evaluation also identified examples of conflicting views and practices between foster carers who had engaged in the programme, and others responsible for the care of the child, who had not. In some cases, social workers, or senior managers unfamiliar with HHH specifically over-ruled foster carers’ decisions or actions when they were practising approaches advocated by the programme. One carer wanted to take their fostered child to a theme park, in line with the principle of the ‘common third’, but was told to delay the trip until a full risk assessment was completed. Similarly:

The team that we had were very, I would say, against it. Yeah. ... The children’s social worker... could understand where we were coming from, and wanted to support us, it’s when it got higher... that even the social workers were getting shut down.

This lack of congruence was particularly acute when foster carers experienced challenging periods, e.g. in the case of allegations or

placement disruptions. In such instances, foster carers reported that the way the service addressed those difficulties had been at odds with what they had learnt through HHH.

In contrast, others interpreted fostering services' involvement in HHH as empowering, granting permission for them to practice in a way that was described to be natural to them. As one carer noted 'We're doing it already, but [felt like I] had to hide it. Now [I] feel empowered'. For those whose supervising social worker had also attended the Core courses, this sense of authorisation was enhanced by the common knowledge they shared, leading to a congruence of approach. It was also evident that reassurances at a service level enhanced commitment to HHH. For instance, foster carers from one site had been involved with the adaptation of forms used in supervision and reviews to better reflect social pedagogic approaches. In another, foster carers were involved in the planning and delivery of additional social pedagogy training. These activities were interpreted by foster carers as evidence that the sites were committed to HHH, and enhanced their overall enthusiasm for the programme.

## Receptiveness typology

Based on the two themes outlined above, a macro theme of 'receptiveness' was identified. Receptiveness as a concept has been defined as the willingness to listen or accept new ideas. Receptiveness is required for new knowledge acquisition, and skill development amongst a target learner group in training programmes. It, therefore, stands that—without learner receptiveness to the new practice, ideas or knowledge—creating any change to thinking or practice will not be successful. Foster carer receptiveness was influenced by the level of motivation for and commitment for the programme, willingness to consider the approach holistically as applicable to lifestyle and openness to adopt new approaches into their practice. Furthermore, receptiveness was influenced by the extent to which the approach was perceived to be integrated into the fostering service and wider CSC. Based on the views expressed in these areas of receptiveness, trends emerged and different 'types' of receptiveness were identified amongst the group of foster carers. It was possible to organise participants into three broad 'ideal types', described in [Figure 1](#). These ideal types became the receptiveness typology. Broadly speaking, the Engaged Adopters could be described as those who were most receptive to HHH, highly positive and enthusiastic about the programme and social pedagogic approaches. At the other end of the spectrum, the Defended Sceptics were the most ambivalent about HHH. The Cautious Optimists were somewhere in the middle of these two groups. The categories should not be conceptualised as

| <i>The Engaged Adopter</i>  | <i>The Cautious Optimist</i>  | <i>The Defended Sceptic</i>   |
|---|---|---|
| <p>These foster carers exhibited considerable enthusiasm for the programme. Typically they spoke passionately about HHH and showed commitment to adopting social pedagogy in everyday practice, across a range of contexts. They perceived the system as permitting, or as having potential to change to accommodate, pedagogic approaches.</p> | <p>These foster carers demonstrated a general interest in HHH or identified with key principles. This group were, more likely to discuss limitations of the approach compared to the engaged adopters, and displayed more tentative discourses about its transformative potential (e.g., for the wider system).</p> | <p>These foster carers exhibited the greatest uncertainty about the extent to which the programme will inform their own practice (while acknowledging that it may be helpful for others). Everyone in this group criticised the wider system, and perceived the programme to be of greater value to that wider system than to their own practice.</p> |

**Figure 1:** The typology of receptiveness, adapted from *McDermid et al. (2016b)*.

entirely discrete or static, rather as three points along a continuum spectrum (see [Figure 1](#)).

Based on the analysis of interview transcripts, grouping carers into these three types were piloted. Most were categorised as Engaged Adopters across all time points, ranging from just over half of the sample at Time 1 and Time 3, to almost three quarters at Time 2. The Defended Sceptics represented the smallest proportion of foster carers in each time point, with less than a fifth at Time 1 and Time 3, and less than a quarter at Time 2. Whilst all foster carers were invited to participate in follow-up interviews, just over a third of the sample participated more than once. Due to changes in sample participation rates across time points, it was not possible to rigorously analyse changes over time, but we recognise a degree of fluidity within the typology across different points in time. Those foster carers who became less enthusiastic about the programme over time reported the primary reason being a perceived lack of support for the approach across the wider service.

In terms of the potential to impact practice, the assertion that ‘I am doing this already’ was mentioned in many interviews with foster carers, in each of the three types in the typology. However, the way this was expressed differed between those who found the approach permissive to current practice (Engaged Adopters) and those who felt HHH was not necessary because they were doing it already, and others should attend the training instead (Defended Sceptics). Cautious Optimists often described the HHH principles as able to influence their practice, but only at particular times, rather than offering a whole new approach. Similar to Engaged Adopters, this group often felt the approach validated their current practice. Those who were less enamoured with the learning style,

and therefore perceived little relevance to their own practice, were categorised as Defended Sceptics.

Views could also be grouped regarding the perceived compatibility of the programme with the wider system. Defended Sceptics and Cautious Optimists had concerns that HHH would not be implemented across the wider system, which hindered their receptiveness. Engaged Adopters, on the other hand, often spoke positively about the programme's potential to facilitate system change, and this enhanced their overall view of its worth.

Given the variation in participant characteristics, including levels of experience, we conducted further analysis to explore whether the groupings were associated with key contextual indicators, including length of time fostering, placement type, number and age of children and the programme site for which they foster. No meaningful relationships were identified between these factors and the receptiveness typology.

## Discussion

Foster carers are a diverse workforce, involving adults with a variety of demographic characteristics and socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and varied caring experiences and skill sets. Conversely, reviews have highlighted similarities in the motivations of foster carers, which are predominantly altruistic, as such, what they share is the choice to provide a home and family for children who can no longer reside with their family (McDermid *et al.*, 2012; Sebba, 2012).

Any innovation that is effective in one context will only be effective in another if the wider system context is receptive. Similarly, an effective programme will not achieve the desired outcomes if the system is hostile (Ghate, 2016). When examining the effectiveness of an innovation, account must be taken of what Ghate (2016, p.4) calls the 'invisible infrastructure' that surrounds it. As noted in the Introduction section, for programmes that seek to train and equip foster carers, the carers themselves act as central conduits of innovation and might be considered a core component of that invisible infrastructure. Understanding their receptiveness to training programmes is vital in ensuring effective implementation. The typology of receptiveness emerging from the HHH evaluation, and piloted with foster carer interviews, provides key insights into elements that may help or hinder responses to training. The remainder of this article will explore how these insights might be applied in the implementation of other programmes.

Burke and Hutchins (2007) identified that CSC staff receptiveness to training is influenced by the extent to which that training is perceived to be relevant to an individual's own practice, and is seen to assist in their development. Similarly, our typology reveals that foster carers'

receptiveness may also be linked to the extent to which the programme was believed to make a specific contribution to their own practice, in the context of the systems within which they work. As explored above, the perceived relevance for an individual may not depend on the techniques or intervention being new. For some foster carers, the familiarity of the social pedagogic principles of HHH was a motivating factor for engagement. Rather, those implementing a programme with foster carers must be able to articulate the contribution that the programme might make to an individual and their practice, whether that contribution takes the form of providing *new* insights or skills, or enhances and builds on *existing* practice. As [Clarke \(2001\)](#) identified, training in social services agencies may create knowledge gain; however, tangible results in terms of changes to behaviour or performance in a workplace are less clear cut. HHH was described by foster carers as providing a theoretical and practical framework through which they could think about their existing knowledge of good practice. [Shove et al., \(2012\)](#) describe social practice as being formulated from three core dimensions; material, e.g. objects and activities; competency, e.g. skills, knowledge and techniques, and meaning, e.g. values and ideas. Programmes that seek to instigate a change in practice commonly focus on the material, or competency, but are less likely to focus on the meaning dimension of practice ([McDermid et al., 2014](#)). In contrast, HHH focused on the meaning dimension. The result being, though foster carers may not have dramatically changed what they were doing in practice, they reported making different meanings about their actions, e.g. being more reflective and intentional in their actions ([McDermid et al., 2014, 2016b](#)).

The HHH evaluation also found that it is essential to present the benefits of a programme realistically, and that the narrative of transformation often used at introductory events may have been unhelpful in the longer term, setting the expectation of change too high and resulting in disappointment (and waning enthusiasm) when hopes were not fulfilled. As we have written elsewhere, the discourse of transformation may also have alienated some who felt wholesale criticism of existing practice was implied ([Ghate and McDermid, 2016](#)). Providing a clear and realistic expectation on the specific contribution of a new programme or intervention may be vital to ensure recipients' enthusiasm in the initial implementation stage and throughout the programme timeframe.

The research has revealed contradictory findings regarding the programme's contribution. Defended Sceptics tended to be less enthusiastic because HHH was perceived to be introducing an approach that they were 'doing already'—whilst others might benefit, they themselves would not. But both sceptics and optimists also suggested that the principles advocated by the programme were (at worst) in direct contradiction to current approaches to care, or (at best) difficult to implement in the current context. Some foster carers expressed both sets of views within a

single interview. In other words, whilst HHH represented how they practice (or how they would like to) within their own household, they felt that this was not viewed to be aligned with practice(s) within the wider system. This may reflect wider discourses around the perceived trend towards an increasingly regulated approach to care, at the expense of child-centred, nurturing and relationship-based approaches (Munro, 2011; Murphy *et al.*, 2013 ). The Engaged Adopters tended to perceive the programme as enabling wider system change, to align with their own views on care. Similarly, Hatton (2013, p. 98) writes about the potential of social pedagogy in the UK to 'challenge current social structures' as well as an approach for individual development. For other foster carers in HHH, it further cemented their own frustrations with the wider system trend towards a 'tick-box' culture.

The typology suggests that foster carer receptiveness may be influenced both by individuals' interpretations and understanding of the programme, and how the programme fits with existing notions of practice. Kegan and Lahey (2009) make a conceptual distinction between 'technical' and 'adaptive' challenges. Technical challenges are overcome by completing a particular set of tasks or by following a predetermined set of rules or processes. In contrast, an adaptive challenge requires individuals to incorporate technical skills into an existing mindset and to interpret how those skills might be deployed in any given situation. Each challenge must be addressed with the matched approach: adaptive challenges cannot be addressed through technical means. The existing practice of carers requires them to meet the adaptive challenge of upbringing children, which should be met by an adaptive mindset. In line with social pedagogy's emphasis on critical reflection, values and principles (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011), the HHH programme may be closely aligned to adaptive, rather than technical approaches. This might explain why for many carers this approach resonated with their existing skillset application—because the approach being taught fit with the everyday adaptive challenges of upbringing—but clashed with their perceptions of a technically focused, rigid and risk-averse system. The difference in receptiveness lies in their understanding of the potential to change that system.

For foster carers, or any CSC practitioner, to engage with a new programme, they must not only be able to see how that programme will impact their own practice, they must also be reassured that any changes in practice they make will be supported by their wider systems context. The findings of the HHH evaluation were not unique in this respect. Other studies in the UK, and internationally, suggest the extent to which social pedagogic practice can be embedded into different contexts has been affected by the culture of the wider child welfare system (Lorenz, 2008; Stephens, 2009; Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012) and regulatory framework (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2008; Berridge *et al.*, 2011). Receptiveness

can thus be understood as multi-layered: in the individual, regarding the perceived and actual commitment to the approach across the whole organisation (Berridge *et al.*, 2011; Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012), and within the wider child welfare system. Other implementation studies of interventions into CSC have identified similar challenges – such as when social workers were not clear about the purpose and practices of that intervention (McDermid *et al.*, 2016a). In such cases, a lack of knowledge of a programme may be experienced as lack of support, hindering foster carers' receptiveness if they doubt the programme will be supported. Ensuring congruence of approach through all parts of the system, and identifying where there is flexibility in the system to accommodate new approaches, may be a core element of ensuring receptiveness to training interventions.

Any new programme is implemented into a pre-existing system. Assessing a new programme's potential 'fit' with existing systems is therefore a critical step in the 'exploration stage' of implementation (Ghate, 2016). The flexibility of the existing systemic strongholds needs to be assessed for suitable programme preparation to occur, before any initial implementation action. Innovations need not align perfectly with existing services—and innovation is typically sought to create change, or challenge, to processes in the existing system. However, the fit should be analysed carefully to effectively anticipate and mitigate potential points of disturbance, which can thereby be managed more effectively (Ghate, 2016). In the context of fostering services, analysis of existing approaches and attitudes of staff, the culture created from the group, and regulatory restrictions should form part of the exploration of a programme's 'fit' with the system to ensure effective implementation. In the European countries whose work has informed the HHH approach, social pedagogy is not a 'method of practice', but is a theoretical discipline embedded throughout child welfare systems, including national legislation, policy and professional regulations for practice (Boddy, 2013). As reflected in our findings, this has implications for the 'fit' of HHH in a UK context of public sector austerity characterised by a narrowing focus on child protection, rather than a broader conceptualisation of 'safeguarding' (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014).

Whilst this study had a good geographical spread, the sample of interviewees was self-selecting and some fostering services also adopted a self-selection process for participation in the training. It may be that the sample is biased towards carers who felt an alignment to the approach and were particularly motivated to participate in the training and the subsequent evaluation. This should not impact the typology—although it is possible that other types (perhaps those openly hostile to the training) might have emerged—but it may have influenced the relative balance of types within the wider population of HHH participants. As just over a third of foster carers took part in more than one time point interview, it

was not possible to make a robust analysis of changes in receptiveness over time. The development of a tool for measuring the dynamics of receptiveness may be a useful future step given the continued focus on the implementation of new practices in CSC.

## Conclusion

Service innovation is often used to describe the situation many public services find themselves in when required to adapt their models and service provision due to a policy refocus or budget cuts. This includes the implementation of new programmes designed to do 'more with less'. The DfE Innovation Programme and other similar innovation initiatives represent a modest investment in a sector that has otherwise faced substantial financial constraints. The National Audit Office estimate that in real-terms government and council tax funding for local authorities reduced by 28.6% from 2010–2011 to 2017–2018, and a growing number of authorities are using financial reserves in unsustainable ways to balance their books (National Audit Office, 2018). These changes come at a time when growing pressures on CSC, including rising rates of children entering care, correspond to increased family poverty (Bywaters *et al.*, 2018).

Programmes that are effective in one setting must be *implemented* effectively to ensure maximum benefit (Ghate, 2016). As fostering services seek to address the challenges of providing high-quality care services within an adverse economic climate, consideration should be given not only to the effectiveness of the programmes themselves, but also the most advantageous implementation approach. The first step in this process is ensuring that those who the programme seeks to benefit are receptive to, and engaged with it, which depends on perceptions of 'fit' between the programme and the wider CSC system. Our research suggests that—even when participants value the principles and approach of an intervention—their engagement will be limited if they believe the wider system is not receptive to that approach.

The typology outlined in this article was developed and piloted as a way of understanding foster carers' receptiveness to the HHH programme, but has potential relevance for other models of intervention or innovation. The characteristics of each of the 'types' outlined in this article may provide some insight into the factors that inhibit and facilitate engagement with new programmes, particularly with respect to perceptions of service flexibility. These insights may support fostering services in responding to policy drivers for innovation and implementation of new programmes, to ensure that foster carers can envisage benefit from new programmes within the wider systems in which they practice.

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