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Special issue: *Social Pedagogy in the Nordic countries*

Editorial

## Editorial: Special issue on social pedagogy in the Nordic countries

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### Abstract

This *International Journal of Social Pedagogy* special issue on *Social Pedagogy in the Nordic Countries* generally stems from Hämäläinen's (2012) definition of two main developmental lines of social pedagogy: a line of social care and welfare activities preventing and alleviating social exclusion, and a line of social education supporting growth into membership of society. In the Nordic countries, both of these lines exist in social pedagogical discussion, research and practice. The special issue aims to both discuss the existence of these lines as such and show examples of social pedagogical work in the arenas of both general and special social education.

**Keywords:** Nordic social pedagogy; NERA social pedagogy network; Nordic countries; two developmental lines

## Insights into social pedagogy in the Nordic countries

Theoretical discussions and practices concerning social pedagogy have deep historical roots in the Nordic countries. Explicit use of the term ‘social pedagogy’ probably first appeared in Denmark, where it can be found in an article published in 1901 (Dahl, 1901; ref. [Winther-Jensen, 2011](#)), although social pedagogical ideas arrived there from Germany even earlier with the first kindergartens in the 1870s. It was in the field of practice where social pedagogy started to develop in Denmark: people in kindergartens and later in other areas of child welfare, like children’s homes, looked for new ideas from the reform pedagogical movements and social pedagogical practices in Germany. Thus social pedagogy was brought to Denmark and developed as practice and not as theories or philosophical considerations. The term ‘social pedagogy’ came into wider use only in the 1960s, especially related to residential homes for children and young people ([Rosendal Jensen, 2016](#)). In Sweden, the history of social pedagogy dates back to 1908, when courses in social pedagogy were introduced for staff working in institutions meant for people, both children and adults, who were in need of social support ([Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016](#)). Soon after, social pedagogy became connected especially to work with children in residential institutions ([Eriksson and Markström, 2009](#)).

In Norway the development of social pedagogy as a field of practice is closely connected to the education and profession of child welfare pedagogues. The first courses for child welfare pedagogues started in 1951, preparing people to work primarily in child welfare institutions. This education has traditionally been defined as social pedagogical ([Stephens, 2011](#)). In Iceland social pedagogy has emerged very much in the practical field, more specifically in work with disabled people. Education for social pedagogues in this field started in the 1950s, and the development of Icelandic social pedagogy is closely connected to the fight for disabled people’s rights ([Jóhannsdóttir and Ingólfssdóttir, 2018](#)). In Finland social pedagogy as a term and as a field of theoretical discussion is relatively young compared to other Nordic countries, dating back to the 1990s. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century there were many social movements in Finland, like the Settlement movement and the temperance organisations, that have later been considered social pedagogical by their aims and practices, since they provided support and help with social issues for people through educational activities. However, the concept of social pedagogy did not gain ground in Finland, neither in social work nor in education, although there were connections to German pedagogical discussions of the early twentieth century and later to Swedish ideas of social pedagogy as a form of community work ([Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016](#)).

Today social pedagogy looks quite different in different Nordic countries. In each country social pedagogy has lived through ups and downs, and it is not easy to tell in which direction it is going right now. Based on discussions with Nordic social pedagogy researchers and teachers and with the help of some recent articles that estimate the status of social pedagogy in these countries, I will sketch a quick overall picture of social pedagogy in the Nordic countries – but I will do it with great caution. It should be considered more as an educated guess than a result of a thorough literature review. It may, however, provide the reader of this special issue with a framework that helps to see these articles as parts of a bigger picture.

It seems that in Denmark the practical field of social pedagogy is well established and professionalised (e.g. [Winther-Jensen, 2011](#)). Danish social pedagogy has for historical reasons a strong connection to kindergartens and to residential care of children and young people. A Danish speciality in the field has been combining social pedagogy with special pedagogy, which means working with people who have some diagnosed special needs, e.g. disabilities, but instead of segregating them from the society into institutions social pedagogical work aims at integrating them into the society ([Rosendal Jensen, 2016](#); [Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017](#)). These are strong fields of practice in social pedagogy even today, but there are other areas as well, like youth work (e.g. [Langager, 2011](#)), work with immigrants and with elderly people. All in all, social pedagogues in Denmark are recognised as professionals in legislation and there is a professional education stream for them in university colleges ([Rosendal Jensen, 2016](#); [Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017](#)). Nevertheless, in Denmark there remains relatively scarce theoretical discussion and research concerning social pedagogy as a theoretical phenomenon, its roots and its particular characteristics as a science. Social pedagogy started as practice and has remained practice. Theoretical discussion has been

quite practical in its nature, concerning e.g. the proper relationship between a pedagogue and a child, the concept of ‘the common third’ as a mediator in relations and also ethical questions. Research has concentrated very much on developing and evaluating practices (Rosendal Jensen, 2016). Niels Rosendal Jensen (2016, p. 116) has therefore warned about Danish social pedagogy having ‘become an instrument in labour market policy’, which means a shift from equality principles of social pedagogy to individualist neo-liberal ideology. According to him social pedagogy should be questioning this development and emphasising empowerment and democracy. The practices should be guided by stronger basic research and theoretical discussions about the purpose of social pedagogical work.

In Sweden social pedagogy has not gained as strong a position in the professional field as in Denmark, but nonetheless it has developed into a wide field of practice. From the 1960s to the 1990s social pedagogues worked mainly in residential institutions for children and young people with social, psychological and physical difficulties. In the 1990s working areas started to widen to include other age groups and many types of problems, e.g. alcohol and drug abuse, mental health problems and criminality. Areas of adult education and questions concerning e.g. multiculturalism and immigration at the same time became of interest for social pedagogy. Work with children and young people has also since become more diverse, now including e.g. preschools, schools and free-time activities. The qualifications for various work positions for social pedagogues have not been very clear, though. This has at least partly to do with rapid changes in academic education in social pedagogy. At first in the 1970s, social pedagogy was designated as an academic study program in its own right, but later it was made part of social work education as a field of specialisation (Eriksson and Markström, 2009; Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016). About ten years ago, social work programs were changed to become generic and remove specialisations, and social pedagogy disappeared as a term from the curricula (Cederlund, 2015), except for in one university where it still exists in a bachelor degree program combined with social work education (Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016). The last few years have shown signs of a more positive development, when some universities have renamed their study programs so that social pedagogy appears in their curricula anew. Another positive development has happened in lower-level non-academic studies in the so-called folk high schools, where social pedagogy study programs have been started. Those who graduate from these programs are called social pedagogues and work e.g. in residential institutions, at schools as school social pedagogues and in elderly care (Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016). Research in the field of social pedagogy was lively in Sweden especially during the first decade of the new millennium, and concerned both the nature of social pedagogy as a theoretical and practical field and its practices and applications in different contexts (Eriksson and Markström, 2009; see e.g. Eriksson and Markström, 2000; Eriksson and Winman, 2010). Today researchers are, however, somewhat worried about the future of social pedagogical research, because many of them are already close to the age of retirement (see also Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016).

In Norway social pedagogy has very much stayed in its original areas. Social pedagogical practice is for the most part about working with children, young people and their families whose life situations are somehow difficult. It is closely connected to the profession of child welfare pedagogues, who have a helping role in different kinds of emergency situations in the lives of children and young people. They work with pedagogical methods, trying to prevent and correct problems. Child welfare pedagogues have traditionally worked in residential institutions, foster care services and child welfare services, and they still do. In addition to these organisations, there are more and more child welfare pedagogues working in different kinds of free-time contexts and activities for children and young people, like in youth clubs and in voluntary organisations for children with special needs. The most recent working environment to emerge for child welfare pedagogues is, according to Storø, schools, where they do both preventive work in the community level and individual support work with socially marginalised pupils (Storø, 2013; also Stephens, 2011). The education of child welfare pedagogues is via a bachelor degree, offered at various universities (or university colleges) but based on a statutory national framework. Until very recently, the framework has clearly stated that the work of child welfare pedagogues is social pedagogical work, and there have been clear definitions of the social pedagogical contents of the studies. However, this has now changed and the social pedagogical basis of child welfare pedagogues’ work is no longer stated in the

framework. At the time of writing, it is still unclear what this change will mean to the social pedagogical field of practice in Norway. What is clear, though, is that the new situation deeply worries those people who identify themselves and their work with social pedagogy.

In Iceland the development of social pedagogy has been very much about the professional development of people working with disabled people in different contexts, first mostly in institutions but later also in growing numbers at schools and free-time environments. Nowadays practices address all age groups but have remained in the area of disability. This professional group has created connections to professional organisations of social educators and social pedagogues in Europe, which has supported its development into a recognised profession. However, connections to wider theoretical discussions in the field of social pedagogy seem to be quite scarce thus far, since the theoretical cornerstones are more in the field of disability studies and human rights frameworks (see [Jóhannsdóttir and Ingólfssdóttir, 2018](#)).

In Finland social pedagogy has since the 1990s been developed as an academic discipline. The development of the field could be defined as theory-led, because theoretical discussion about the roots and the self-understanding of social pedagogy has been strong compared to practical development. Theoretical reflection in Finland has considered both German and Romance traditions of social pedagogy; the Nordic discussions have also been followed closely ([Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016](#)). Practices that are explicitly defined as social pedagogical have started to develop since the early years of the new millennium, when study programs in social pedagogy in two universities and several universities of applied sciences began training both academic experts and practical professionals who identify themselves with social pedagogy. The tradition of socio-cultural animation has been central in the development of practices ([Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016](#)). Socio-cultural animation has its roots in post-war France and it is considered a social pedagogical field of practice e.g. in Spain. It highlights the participation of people in social, cultural and educational activities in their communities that aim at transforming their everyday lives, making the communities better places to live in and thus changing the society through everyday culture ([Kurki, 2000](#)). Research in the field has been more about social pedagogy itself, its historical roots and its theoretical understandings than social pedagogical research on social phenomena and on practical work ([Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016](#)) but this emphasis seems to be changing, since there are more and more researchers applying social pedagogical theoretical frameworks in their own areas of interest (e.g. [Häkli et al., 2018](#); [Matikainen et al., 2018](#)). All in all, in Finland social pedagogy has been developed as an academic discipline and a multi-professional field, with a general idea that social pedagogy can form the theoretical foundation for work in several professions in the educational and social fields. Thus, social pedagogy has not been developed as a single profession but as a way of thinking based on social pedagogical theories and as an approach stemming from this thinking and being applied in many different contexts by different professionals ([Hämäläinen, 2015](#); [Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016](#)). This strategy has led to a wide range of areas where social pedagogy is practiced and researched, but at the same time social pedagogy has remained quite unknown to wider public, because it is not visible as a professional title.

### **The special issue: ‘Following the two developmental lines’**

The idea for this special issue on social pedagogy in the Nordic countries was developed in the NERA Social Pedagogy Network. NERA is the Nordic Educational Research Association that provides a platform for Nordic researchers in the field of educational sciences and supports collaboration between them and the international community. Every year NERA organises an international congress in one of the Nordic countries. The heart of NERA and of the congress are NERA’s 24 networks that are organised around different subject areas in educational sciences; there is a network for social pedagogy, too. The Social Pedagogy Network aims at strengthening cooperation between researchers and professionals engaged or interested in the field of social pedagogy in the Nordic countries and even more widely in Northern Europe.

This special issue brings together academic papers from Finland, Iceland and Sweden. There was an open call for papers, which was spread out through NERA Social Pedagogy Network and through national networks in the field. Unfortunately, there exists no extensive Nordic network for social pedagogy that could reach most of the researchers in the field, and obviously the call for papers could not reach everybody who could have been interested in writing an article for the special issue. Therefore, we do not

have articles from all Nordic countries, and on the other hand there is an overrepresentation of articles from Finland. Thus, this special issue does not give a comprehensive picture of social pedagogy in the Nordic countries. Instead, it shows examples of research and theoretical discussions that are topical in the field at the moment. The articles do not have as their objective to describe or compare social pedagogical theory or practice in the Nordic countries at large. There are two articles included that aim at supporting a broader understanding of the nature of the social pedagogical field in one particular country (the article by Cedersund, Eriksson, Ringsby-Jansson and Svensson considering Sweden, and the article by Jóhannsdóttir and Ingólfssdóttir considering Iceland). Most of the articles are, however, addressing some specific research questions in the field without an explicit intention to define what social pedagogy is in their context. This special issue is thus much more about social pedagogical research in the Nordic countries than about descriptions of something called Nordic social pedagogy.

The theme for the special issue is ‘Social pedagogy in the Nordic countries – Following the two developmental lines’. The theme refers to professor Juha Hämäläinen’s (2012) definition of two main developmental lines of social pedagogy: a line of social care and welfare activities preventing and alleviating social exclusion, and a line of social education supporting growth into membership of a society and thus contributing to e.g. active citizenship. According to Hämäläinen, the first two German educationists that used the term ‘social pedagogy’ had different understandings of it. Karl Mager was a school reformer in the mid 1840s who wanted to highlight the need for a theory of education that considers the social connections of education and is thus a counterforce to individual pedagogy. For him social pedagogy was about education in the society and into membership of the society. Mager’s contemporary Adolph Diesterweg used the term at about the same time but with a different meaning. Diesterweg was also a school reformer but for him social pedagogy was especially about fighting against poverty and social misery via pedagogical means, and in a close connection to social-political aims of increasing social equality (Hämäläinen, 1995, 2012).

The first two definitions of social pedagogy created the ground for two different interpretations of the aims and main contexts of social pedagogy, and these two interpretations can be identified in the historical development of the field (Hämäläinen, 2012; see also Rosendal Jensen, 2016). It is quite clear that the theoretical thinking of the first of the big German social pedagogy theorists, Paul Natorp, follows the understanding of social pedagogy as a theory and practice of education in and through community. Natorp saw social pedagogy as a very broad field when he stated that all pedagogy should be understood as social pedagogy. For him, social pedagogy considered every member of the society, not only those living in vulnerable situations or suffering from social problems. On the other hand, the second big theorist of German social pedagogy, Herman Nohl, interpreted social pedagogy following the more narrow understanding. For him, social pedagogy was first and foremost a pedagogical theory of social help. He developed social pedagogy as a system of professional social education aiming at alleviating social ills and supporting the growth of young people in crisis situations and suffering from hard life conditions and social exclusion (Hämäläinen, 1995, 2012).

In Germany the Nohlian understanding of social pedagogy gained ground during the 1920s and 1930s. It became the predominant interpretation of the field, supported by Gertrud Bäumer’s influential definition of social pedagogy in a 1929 German pedagogy handbook as ‘a third field of education which is neither family nor school’ that takes care of the education of those children and young people whom families and school cannot educate (Bäumer, 1929, p. 3). This has become the basis for understanding social pedagogy on the whole in Germany and in many other countries, although the field has since those times broadened to include other age groups and many forms of social exclusion. It is seen as a field that has a close connection to the field of social work, because it works with the same questions of vulnerability and social misery, only with an educational starting point (e.g. Hamburger, 2003; Hämäläinen, 2012). However, this is not the whole picture of social pedagogy.

The broader understanding of social pedagogy following Mager and Natorp and thus seeing the area of social pedagogy as one of social education in and toward the membership of communities and society, is alive in some countries. In the Spanish tradition the double understanding of the character of social pedagogy has been emphasised since the definition by José María Quintana (1984/2000) of social



pedagogy as both the science of social education and the pedagogical science of social work. Before his definition, the Spanish tradition was more about societal education in general than about pedagogical help, and this understanding has been strong in the Spanish discussion, although the close connection to social issues has been more and more highlighted in the field since the 1990s (e.g. Pérez Serrano, 2004; Trilla, 2000). The idea of social pedagogy as a broad field of social education can be recognised in definitions where e.g. areas like environmental education or intercultural education are seen as parts of social pedagogical work (e.g. March Cerdà et al., 2016). Another example of a country where the predominant understanding of social pedagogy – or social education as the term has been translated there – has until very recently followed the Natorpian line is Japan (Kawano et al., 2016).

In many countries there are traces of the wider understanding of social pedagogy to be found in areas like kindergartens, adult education (e.g. Rosendal Jensen, 2016), youth work and work with elderly people. In these contexts the starting point for social pedagogical work is the idea of supporting the personal and social growth processes of everybody in their everyday life. For example, in youth work and work with the elderly the target groups are the young or elderly people in general, not just some ‘at-risk’ youth or socially excluded elderly. The aim of the work may be to provide them meaningful social activities in their free time and possibilities for self-development in social relations. The starting point for social pedagogical work is thus not always a predetermined assumption of some kind of problem or vulnerable life situation. Walter Lorenz states very strongly the idea of the wider understanding of social pedagogy, referring to Hamburger (2001, 2003): ‘Social pedagogy thereby affirmed, and this is the key characteristic distinguishing it from social work, that it is not primarily “deficit-oriented”. It regards all children, and indeed all human beings, as, on the one hand, in need of educational guidance for the full development of their potential – and, on the other hand, as capable of always developing themselves further, provided the requisite resources are available’ (Lorenz, 2008, p. 636). Nonetheless, in many countries the mainstream self-understanding of social pedagogy is based on a deficit- and problem-orientation.

## The articles

The articles in this special issue will show that in the Nordic countries both of the developmental lines and thus understandings of social pedagogy exist in social pedagogical discussion, research and practice. As will become clear, the two understandings are not totally separate and in practice they are often quite tightly intertwined. Identifying them in different practices can still be valuable in strengthening the self-understanding of social pedagogy as a wide and diverse field of science and practice that has a lot to offer for today’s societies. In ‘Social pedagogical practices in Swedish welfare contexts’ Elisabet Cedersund, Lisbeth Eriksson, Bibbi Ringsby-Jansson and Lars Svensson explicitly use the framework of the two developmental lines when taking up the task of analysing three case examples from social pedagogical settings in Sweden. In addition to Hämäläinen’s theorisation, they use in their analysis Lisbeth Eriksson’s three models of social pedagogical work, namely adaptive, mobilising and democratic (Eriksson, 2014), and Bent Madsen’s three discourses, treatment, action and negotiation (Madsen, 2005). With these analytical tools they draw a picture of social pedagogical practices in the social and historical context that is the Swedish welfare state, facing as it does challenges of immigration, a segregated labour market and the deteriorating legitimacy of the welfare system.

Other articles in this special issue do not deal explicitly with the framework of the two developmental lines but they present some theoretical discussions, research findings and practical approaches in the field of social pedagogy that can be situated either in the area of the so-called ‘general social education’ – that is, education for all supporting the membership of the society – or in the area of so-called ‘special social education’, that is, pedagogical support for those with special social and educational needs. In ‘Fostering transformational teacher agency in Finnish teacher education’ Minni Matikainen, Perttu Männistö and Alekski Fornaciari are most clearly adopting the broad understanding of social pedagogy as societal education supporting the growth of the members of the society. They start from the idea that social pedagogy, and in their case critical social pedagogy more specifically, can form the framework for teachers’ work at elementary schools. Based on their research into an alternative programme in teacher

education, they look at the challenges and possibilities of teacher education in fostering teacher-students' transformational thinking and acting.

In "Positive recognition" as a preventive approach in child and youth welfare services' Jouni Häkli, Riikka Korkiamäki and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio move slightly in the direction of understanding social pedagogy as pedagogical support in different kinds of need situations, but ultimately their article opposes this move. Drawing from recognition theories they write about the need to see and encounter all children and young people in their everyday lives for 'who they really are', respectfully supporting their agency in things that matter to them. They describe the process that has led them to move from 'early intervention' strategies that concern children and young people in challenging life situations to supporting a practical orientation called 'positive recognition', one that all professionals working with children and young people in general can adopt. Working with a 'positive recognition' orientation can end up preventing marginalisation without any specialised and individualised interventions aimed at children or young people at risk of marginalisation.

In 'Social pedagogy in a human rights context: Lessons from primary schools in Iceland' Vilborg Jóhannsdóttir and Jóna Ingólfssdóttir take us to a classical field of social pedagogy, namely to work with people with disabilities. Work with disabled people could be defined as belonging to the Nohlian tradition of social pedagogy because it is quite clearly about working with people who have special needs and who could be considered to be at risk of being marginalised or who at least live in a vulnerable position. However, when considered through the human rights and inclusive education perspectives that this article provides us, the setting is not as clear as it would first seem to be. If disability is understood, as it is in the CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability), as 'a phenomenon emerging out of interactivity between impairment and disabling modes of socio-economic organizations' then social pedagogical work with disabled people is not about supporting them to live with their impairment but is instead about creating an environment where disabled people, like anyone else, can live a meaningful life as members of the society. This inclusive idea brings work with disabled people closer to the wider understanding of social pedagogy as societal education. The need for special support remains there but the starting point in work with disabled people should not be prevention of marginalisation but support for the full development of their potentials as individuals and as members of communities and the society.

In 'Social pedagogy-informed residential child care' Eeva Timonen-Kallio and Juha Hämäläinen finally take us to an area of social pedagogical work that is clearly following the Nohlian tradition: social pedagogy as prevention and alleviation of social exclusion and as 'pedagogical help' for children and young people in difficult life situations. They present to us the need to develop a theoretically more solid foundation for professional expertise in residential child care institutions, where e.g. 'homelikeness' and relation orientation have been central principles. They argue that homelike care should be complemented with professional competences that make it possible e.g. to take into account better the special needs and difficult experiences that the children and young people in residential child care are carrying with them.

In 'Pictorial meaning-making in a community project in Helsinki. Freirean interpretations of a dialogical process' Aino Hannula guides us through a photography project that aimed at alleviating the marginalisation of a group of unemployed people and supporting their political agency in Finnish society. This article is also situated clearly in the area of social pedagogy as 'special social education'. Using Paulo Freire's ideas of dialogue and voice creation, combined with Vygotsky's and Mezirow's concept of meaning-making, it shows how a participatory and creative process can turn the everyday experiences of marginalised people into a pictorial voice that both makes the margins more visible to other people in the society and supports the active citizenship of those marginalised. This analysis again makes visible the interwovenness of the two developmental lines: pedagogical support for those living on the margins of the society is not only about helping them to get along and have a decent life but is also about supporting their participation in the society and thus about citizenship education.

In 'Inequality as a social pedagogical question' Sanna Ryyänen and Elina Nivala go theoretically deeper into the understanding of the Nohlian line of social pedagogy. They ask if we actually know what we are dealing with when in our work we meet people with different kinds of social problems and difficulties, and whether we recognise that these can be situations of deep-rooted social inequalities.

The article takes one step towards systematising a social pedagogical understanding of social inequalities. The article locates itself in the critical tradition of social pedagogy and shows how social pedagogy as a field of science and practice has developed from more conservative reactions to social questions toward critical and even radical questioning of the mechanisms in society that sustain social inequality. Göran Therborn's (2013) theory of the dimensions and mechanisms of inequality and equality is looked at from a social pedagogical perspective, and as a result a set of social pedagogical tools to increase equality is presented.

### Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship, and/or publication of this editorial.

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