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**Insights into social pedagogical research and discussion in Northern Europe –
Report from NERA2018 Congress in Oslo**

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Abstract

The 46th NERA Congress was held on March 8th to 10th 2018 at the University of Oslo. The Nordic Educational Research Association (NERA) brings together researchers in the field of educational sciences in the Nordic countries. An essential part of the association and the congress are NERA's 24 networks organised around different subject areas in educational sciences such as early childhood research, youth research and more. There is also a network for social pedagogy. Its aim is to develop and strengthen the cooperation between researchers and professional groups, engaged or interested in the field of social pedagogy, in the Nordic countries and even wider in Northern Europe like in Poland and Germany. It is currently coordinated by six researchers from five different countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Poland and Sweden.

Report from sessions

The theme for NERA 2018 congress was Educational Research: Boundaries, Breaches and Bridges. The Social Pedagogy network organized four sessions during the congress which dealt with topical issues in the field of social pedagogical research. These sessions included two roundtable discussions, the first one focused on sensitive research and the second on social pedagogy at

schools. In addition to the roundtables was one symposium considering research in the area of asylum seekers and refugees, and one session for traditional paper presentations. The countries that were represented in network sessions were Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Finland, and Poland. The sessions awakened animated conversations among participants. One common topic of the discussed issues related to the role and transformation of social pedagogy in changing societies. The sessions of the social pedagogy network were opened up by the roundtable discussion on sensitive research. The leading question for the short presentations of the roundtable participants was how to research in cooperation with extremely vulnerable people. We heard two interesting presentations by Irena Dychawy Rosner from Malmö University (2018) and by Aneta Ostaszewska from the University of Warsaw (2018) that guided us to a discussion about how to support the participation in social pedagogical research of, for example, women working in prostitution so that not just their anonymity and well-being during the research process are secured but also their autonomy and agency could be supported. The research examples shown in the presentations were so fascinating that the following discussions filled all remaining time of the roundtable although we had planned to have four presentations instead of two.

The second session following the roundtable was a traditional paper presentation session. This session also had one last minute cancellation which we assumed was due to the flu season – so we had two presentations by Jan Arvid Haugan from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and Vilborg Jóhannsdóttir from the University of Iceland. Jan Arvid's presentation was on 'Coping strategies and resilience in upper secondary school'. He shared with us some social pedagogically interesting findings about the background factors behind school drop-out. He himself told us that he was not familiar with the social pedagogical discussion but he had thought that his research findings could be of use in our field when we are trying to find out ways how to support the integration of young people. And he was certainly correct. Vilborg's presentation was very interesting for another reason: it was about Icelandic social pedagogy, which differs quite a lot from the understandings of social pedagogy in other Nordic countries. In Iceland, the social pedagogical practice concerns almost only work with people with disabilities. The professional education, role and perspectives of social pedagogy have developed in line with the paradigm change rooted in the CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), which has replaced the medical understanding of disability by the social relational understanding of disability. For example in Finland, the social pedagogical discussion and practice have focused very little on people with disabilities.

The second roundtable was on social pedagogy at schools. There were four short presentations leading to a common discussion about the role that social pedagogy and social pedagogues have and could have at schools in different Nordic countries. Vilborg Jóhannsdóttir shared more thoughts on social pedagogy in Iceland, concentrating on the work that social pedagogues are doing in inclusive schools. Their role seems to be very essential in supporting the education of disabled children and young people in 'normal' schools but is, at the same time, quite controversial. Amela Pacuka from the Oslo Metropolitan University asked us in her presentation "What is social pedagogy for?" She had a very critical perspective towards social pedagogy as it is practiced in Norway at schools: trying to find a balance between measurement, quality assurance, testing and relations work. Margareta Fehland and Mikael Boregren from Malmö University presented a project that they have been working on developing a new way of listening to kids in school. Their presentation roused a lively discussion about empathy and about the possibility for teaching empathy in social pedagogical studies.

Interestingly, discussion around empathy and about teaching empathy has recently awakened in the Finnish social pedagogical discussion. Eija Raatikainen, Leigh Anne Rauhala and Seija Mäenpää from Metropolia University of Applied Sciences published an article about professional empathy called 'Qualified Empathy: A key element for an empowerment professional' in the Finnish journal of social pedagogy. It is available online in English (Raatikainen, Rauhala and Mäenpää, 2017). The last presentation in the roundtable was about social pedagogical thinking at schools in Finland, presented by Elina Nivala from the University of Eastern Finland. It described social pedagogy as an approach rather than a profession, meaning that different professionals at school can have a social pedagogical orientation in their work: A teacher, a special education teacher, a school social worker and even a school nurse can have a social pedagogical mindset in their work e.g. when building pedagogical relations and working holistically with the pupils, supporting their participation and finding ways to strengthen the school community and well-being of everybody at schools. All of them can be considered social pedagogues at schools if they want to develop their work based on social pedagogical thinking.

The last session organised by the Social Pedagogy network was the symposium called 'How to research in the area of asylum seekers and refugees'. It included originally six presentations: two from Finland and four from Denmark. The two presentations from Finland were 'Acts of citizenship in reception centre' by Päivikki Rapo, and 'Life on hold? – A research project on agency and belonging of asylum seekers' by Elina Nivala, both of them from the University of Eastern Finland.

The Danish presentations were 'How do asylum-seekers experience a sense of meaningfulness in their everyday life in asylum-centres' by Anna Ørnemose, Lene Løkkegård and Lis Leleur, and 'Creating a sense of meaning in connection to school attendance of unaccompanied asylum seeking children' by Nadia Klarsgaard & Kasper Drevsholt, all of them from the University College of Northern Denmark (UCN).

The symposium had a wonderful opportunity to provide an arena for comparative discussion about social pedagogical asylum research, which is a relatively new field in both countries. Discussions were animated but there could have been more time for comparative perspectives. This shows the need for more research and discussions on this field between different countries. One of the discussed topics concerned asylum seeker women and their possibilities to participation. According to observations of Danish researchers in an asylum center in Denmark, asylum seeker women were denied to get their own spaces. This was augmented with ideas of gender equality in Danish society. In Finland, the challenges on physical spaces of reception centres have also been discussed. Rapo (2018) made an ethnographic research in a Finnish reception centre for her master's thesis. In the observed reception centre, women's fragile position was understood and it was taken into account but even then some restrictions of spaces were noticed only later. It will be interesting to follow how practices related to gender will transform in reception centres, as questions concerning gender, religion, culture and participation in Western societies are challenging. It is obvious that knowledge on participation and agency of asylum seeker and refugee women is much needed, and social pedagogical research could provide valuable perspectives and tools to produce it.

Summary

All in all, the presentations and discussions during the sessions showed us very clearly that there is a lot of interesting research and work being done in the field of social pedagogy in the Nordic countries. They also illustrated explicitly that the traditions in social pedagogical discussion and practice do differ quite a lot between Nordic countries. Due to this, there should be more discussion about how social pedagogical practices have developed historically in different societies and how they are defined theoretically. It is important to discuss critically how social pedagogical work is in practice but it is also of utmost importance to discuss how the practices are understood and represented in theory: what is it that categorizes something as social-pedagogical? How can it be conceptualised, and what makes it different from other fields of practice? The same goes to research: are there some elements that make research social-pedagogical?

We hope that the next NERA congress in Uppsala, Sweden on March 6th to 8th will provide an arena for discussions as lively as the previous one and offer even more opportunities for critical reflection and shared moments of new understanding. We welcome all new researchers interested in social pedagogy to join us there.

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