Editor’s notes: Socio-pedagogical knowledge expertise across the social care sectors in Northern Europe

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Abstract
A major challenge in contemporary welfare societies is the delivery of services affirming people’s expectations for their life standard, health and social care services. For decades, there has been a search to understand new ways of conceptualising social pedagogy as a field of practice, as a theory, and as a programme design and implementation. Despite the growing body of literature on social pedagogy, to date, little has been written on the subject of the unique complexities of social pedagogy knowledge expertise when bridging the supporting relationships between an individual and the social dimensions in his/her world.

Based on research conducted in Northern Europe, particularly focusing on Denmark and Sweden, the aim of this special issue of International Journal of Papers of Social Pedagogy (PSP) on Contemporary Issues in Social Pedagogy in Northern Europe is to convey the central importance of social pedagogy for the study of vitality and diversity behind social pedagogy thought. The presented research projects in this special issue are, in their foundation, associated with a constructivist approach that views the body of knowledge development as an active and cooperative process of knowledge construction and its application in social pedagogy discipline. This article intends to provide a general perspective concerning the presence of various knowledge forms according to the search for, and implementation of, thinking and acting in a social pedagogy inspired way, and working under various conditions.

Keywords: welfare regimes, professionalization, social pedagogy, social work, doing knowing

Introduction
In general, socio-pedagogical practice and research places its focus on a person-centred perspective, including diverse selective mechanisms that can contribute to social exclusion, marginalisation and stigmatising processes existing in a social context. Several researchers have noted the correspondence between social work and social pedagogy (Eriksson, 2014; Righard and Montesino, 2012). In Sweden, the social pedagogy subject is partly integrated in social work educational agendas and less cultivated as core social pedagogy educational programmes. Social pedagogy’s existence within social work agendas of practice has caught the imagination of academics, researchers, practitioners and policy makers because it is responding to the needs of socially vulnerable people and preventing poor social conditions. Until recently, Danish social pedagogy had problems in establishing itself as an academic discipline, despite having a strong foothold as a profession (Winter-Jensen, 2011).

The prevailing understanding of the possibilities for service provision for socially exposed people consists, overall, of a person-centred perspective and an institutional perspective. On the micro-level, the social pedagogy social work role requires a strengths-based approach to access the existing resources and change potentials around the service user (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009). There is a basically framework position for the person-centred perspective, which practitioners may adopt by addressing service users’ life circumstances from four basic components in preventive work: empowering strategies and mobilisation, appreciation of client’s cultural and ethnic preferences, adapting responsive communication strategies, and cultivating appropriate collaboration within an individual’s support system as well as the significant authorities (Dychawy Rosner, 2017). The institutional perspective considers institutional conditions such as, among others, socio-political influences, existing social segregation, lack of resources, and insufficient collaboration between involved authorities that have an effect on individual development and well-being. This places a necessary focus on occurring risks connected to what Lipsky (1980) observed as the “processing of people into clients, assigning them to categories for treatment by bureaucrats”. The service-giver must avoid fragmentation of an individual’s life world and strive to be a critically reflective practitioner grasping the helping situation in a holistic way including an array of individual, moral, societal and legal features.

There is no one particular explanation of social pedagogy social work development. Nevertheless, this article sets out some theoretical considerations and points towards possible ways of developing socio-pedagogical work across various contemporary dimensions
regarding the knowledge development and expertise of the subject. This article provides a holistic mantle, which encompasses applied social pedagogy knowledge expertise to all aspects of social life systems, for instance, institutions, legal frameworks, interpersonal relations and cultures that are created by social reality. I discuss how diverse aspects of knowledge forms relate to social pedagogy within social work practice. My main thesis is that many ways of knowing exist in the rationality of social pedagogy practice and theory in relation to understanding people’s vulnerable life situation, their existential problem, and how to intervene.

Knowledge and social pedagogy expertise

The focus on meeting people’s needs in the social pedagogy field of practice has stimulated a strong interest in searching for effective social pedagogy and social work to client-centred service practices. Many researchers have emphasised the importance of awareness of an individual’s life world attention and recognition of the social when providing support to vulnerable groups (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009). Other researchers utilise the concept of social pedagogy thinking and social work specificity to develop a socio-pedagogical social work approach for client-sensitive social pedagogy practice (Eriksson, 2014). Dychawy Rosner (2016) emphasises awareness of an individual contextual landscape of social life characteristics in client-centred help practices provided to different vulnerable groups in terms of socio-pedagogical social work actions across socio-ecological structures.

Social pedagogy takes into account expert forms of knowledge, and it is embedded in time, place and context (Hallstedt and Högström, 2005). Drawing attention to actual human social existence in a given vulnerable situation of an individual means that there is a fine line between the social pedagogy nature of knowledge, ideas of human action, and care providers’ use of knowledge.

If we refer to the work of Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics, 2009) we are remained of three types of knowledge. Aristotle distinguished between episteme, techne and phronesis. Episteme concerns knowledge and universals that remain in time and space and is built on analytical rationality. Techne is related to craftsmanship and to art. It is context-dependent, and concerns pragmatic and instrumental rationality. Phronesis involves practical knowledge and skills. It is also context-dependent, pragmatic and relates to weighing up values connected to praxis. More recently, Thompson and West (2013), exploring practice wisdom, recognised
Hudson’s conceptual model framework of knowledge. Hudson (1997), provides insights regarding four knowledge groups that professionals draw upon in their professional roles: empirical, theoretical, procedural and meta-cognitive knowing.

While it is not easy to identify a single definition of knowledge, the professional body domain traditionally considers it to be based on theoretical knowledge (van Bommel, Kwakman and Boshuizen, 2012; Thompson and West, 2013). However, the idea that knowledge forms development must be rooted in experience and put into a context (Kolb, 1984; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Knowing when and how to apply social pedagogy knowledge expertise adopted to service users is preoccupied with the implementation of diverse knowledge forms and intimately bound with notions of the learning process. Practitioners must know what they are doing and why they adopt one course of action over another and consistently reflect on how they can improve the provided supporting practices. Their doing is also linked to their potential to transform diverse forms of knowledge, which consist of facts, concepts, principles and theories. Sometime it is conscious and decided, while, at other times, it can be more heavily based on intuition as a tacit dimension of knowledge (Polanyi, 1967).

There has also been great recognition that, if the creation of knowledge and development of professional capability takes place in a real context, it is both cognitive and social. A relation-bound view of knowledge is generated in human interactions, e.g., using different outlooks when measuring strengths and supportive environments in encountering individuals’ needs, providing assistance or change (Hallstedt and Högström, 2005; Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009). This constructivist way of thinking of developing a body of knowledge has triggered some researchers to question knowledge as being located or delocated from the system of meaning in which it is embodied (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Blom (2009) theorises on the hypothesis of “un-knowing” as the location of knowing both within and outside of ordinary knowing. Thompson and West (2013) draw on a range of theories conceptualised on practising knowledge and wisdom. The practice phronesis is seen as a dynamic process incorporating insights, skills, values and recognition of personal strengths and limits. Duality tensions and contradictions in navigating practice are recognised in social pedagogy (Eichsteller and Cameron, 2017) and social work regarding the social dimensions of human conditions (Tsang, 2000), for example, in the worker-client relationships being without conflicts of power or cultivating relationships in the spectrum of care and control conflicts. To allow sufficient deeper reflection on diverse contradictions, a dialectical approach may
provide a conceptual tool to capture complexity of various manifestations at work and knowing development process. Bailey (2003) and Tsang (2000) take a broad definition taking dialectics as a contradictory relationships or activities involving some conditions and their opposites.

Adams, Dominelli and Payne (1998) draw on the consciousness-raising techniques endorsed by Freire (1972) to empower service users and help them to understand and acquire knowledge and skills for taking control over their lives. This understanding includes knowledge of specific service users, their context and problems, as well as knowledge of intervention approaches, diverse methods and their effectiveness (von Bommel, Kwakman and Boshuizen, 2012). These forms of knowledge may be practical, experimental and inhabiting skills, e.g. knowhow. A strong focus on practical knowledge application is said to create a domain body of knowledge as a system of vocational meaning in itself (Blom and Morén, 2010).

Social pedagogy within social work practice occurs in a predefined administrative and institutional aspect (Lipsky, 1980). This implies the non-normative possibility for support of the service user’s life situation with regards to his/her unique problems. Blom and Morén (2010), using different outlooks on social work scenarios, found it to be based in the field of tension between institutional and individual structures. The practice arena of multiple angles of approaching action domains point to the professional’s ability to assemble and tailor specific solutions for the existing unique problems by combining various knowledge elements in many different and authentic ways. Schön (1983) uses the term reflection-in-practice to convey the dynamism and holism of the critical subjectivity and knowledge in action. The process of reflective practice set out by Adams, Dominelli and Payne (1998) identifies important ways of thinking and of exploring the angles of particular complexity and angles of practice. This entails a conscious looking for clues to important issues from many different perspectives, viewpoints and approaches. Correspondingly, Thompson and West (2013), distinguish between different contexts in which various types of knowledge may be applied. They argue that professional decisions are determined by the subjective combination of experiential knowledge and practical intuition adjusted to the specific character of the type of work at hand.
Summing up, the concept and creation of professional social pedagogy knowledge depends on an individual’s personal framework, the social reality creating meanings for this knowledge, dynamic pressures of practice, and existing value-based motives. The process may be procedural or incorporating intuitive tacit knowledge (Schön, 1983; Tsang, 2000). It can be motivated to act upon, and reflective if building up professional expertise. In general, this process allows the practitioner to reflect confidently on new challenges and problem solving. Confident action and reflection provides commitment to higher self-efficacy and confidence in the function of professional activity, context and the culture in which it occurs (Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 1998; Bailey, 2003; Blom, 2010).

Closing remarks
Knowledge presenting a clear rational for social pedagogy within social work practice, does not merely engage at the functional level of practice, for example, the what and the how of specific situations, but also the highest levels of context, such as legal rules’ translation into operational policies and procedures by local authorities and structural factors which exclude some groups from sharing in the lifestyles of the wider society. The ability to make sense of what is going on allows practitioners to develop a holistic and integrative use of knowledge. This opens up another area, where an individual’s knowledge capital creates a unique platform for knowledge transfer and critical debates.

Another important concern raised in this article is that of social pedagogy. The social pedagogy field of practice needs to respond to the richness of pedagogy theorising, explanation and anthology. Not all practice shares the state of being the same model, but are instead a social construction of many forms of interpretations, which are incorporated in it. These writings contend that the universal affirmation of human forms of knowledge has the potential to contribute towards the development of, and gaining insights into, the role and expectations of social pedagogue’s service provision.

Formal organisations and their pragmatic pressure dominate most of our social landscape. Being part of an organisation, however, means giving up some of one’s self-government. To benefit episteme, techne and phronesis development in social pedagogy and practice, practitioners need to recognise and venture beyond the simple task-based solutions and contextualise dialectics of their learning. Complexities in the knowledge and its diverse forms of development can provide both meaningful challenges and promising directions for further
enlargement. How this can be achieved, however, remains the subject of further practice and research.

This special issue presents a collection of a wide range of research connected to systems of providing social pedagogy within social work and social welfare care in contemporary Nordic societies. It touches upon many different disciplines such as social work, social pedagogy and diverse political orientations. Similarly, most relate directly to the existing situation in various parts of Northern Europe around the themes of inequalities of power, welfare and inclusion on a broad basis for understanding how support is organised in relation to social care support, welfare benefits and service receiver integration to the community. In general, both theoretical administrative and pedagogical capital are discerned in these subjects. All of these dimensions represent several legal rationalities and there is no one best way of conducting practice, but instead, there are many experiences and initiatives that would strengthen the social pedagogy’s complex matter.

The articles that follow in this issue continue to illustrate the struggles to minimise risks of vulnerability and draw attention to how areas of public and private life spheres can create barriers as well as opportunities for shared experiences, collaboratively building alliances and encouraging people to take control about decisions in their lives. Reflecting on the studies, this account can tell us something about the social pedagogy narrative and public narrative that operates powerfully in relation to vulnerable people and its embodiment in professional knowledge narratives.

References


