

# Developing Social Pedagogy as an Academic Discipline and Professional Practice: Learning from the Finnish Experience

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## *Introduction*

Social pedagogy has a very country-specific nature concerning the use of the concept, theory debate and practice applications (Kornbeck & Rosendal Jensen 2009). Every country in which the concept occurs has been obliged to create its own interpretations of the nature of social pedagogy as a discipline and professional practice. The preconditions of development of social pedagogy as a functional system vary from country to country. These are connected with country-specific economic, social and cultural factors. Although social pedagogy cannot be exported from one country to another, there are many common questions to be discussed and we can learn from each other.

This article introduces the Finnish experience. The concept of social pedagogy is relatively new in Finland, and there is no tradition of research and theory building based on this concept (Hämäläinen 2012b). Nevertheless, since the end of the 19th century, there have been many kinds of activities in Finnish society in which social intentions have been promoted by educational means. The specific profession of 'social educator' was even established in the 1920s and maintained until the 1990s, when the educational system for social professions was reformed and this title was abolished. Since the beginning of the 20th century, especially after the World War II, the concept has also been occasionally referred to in the social and educational scientific literature but without attempts at outstanding theory building.

In fact, particular academic interest in the concept of social pedagogy has been shown since the end of the 1980s. This interest was essentially connected with the development of social work as a professional system. Although the concept of social pedagogy was mentioned in passing in some social and educational sciences text books after the Second World War, there was no tendency to develop social pedagogy as a branch of studies or a domain of educational theory until the 1990s. Nor was it used in connection with professional social work before the 1980s. In this historical context, it is well-founded to say that social pedagogy is a new affair in Finland, although the idea of the cohesiveness of social and educational interests can be found in various forms of social movements and professional activities.

This article focuses on the experience of the aspirations to develop social pedagogy in Finland as an academic discipline and a professional practice from the 1990s until the present day. The aim is to identify the most important questions which have arisen during this process over the last 20 years. Attention will also be paid to the future prospects. In order to offer an overall picture of the process of establishing social pedagogy as a functional system, considerations are focused

on the development of social pedagogy as a scientific discipline in terms of research and theory building, a branch of education in terms of training programmes and academic degrees, and an occupational field in terms of trade and business.

### *Developing social pedagogy as a branch of academic education*

Historically, the concept of social pedagogy came into use in the middle of the 19th century in Germany (Kronen & Müller 2010). From the outset, different understandings of the concept have existed, and a variety of theories have been generated. Social pedagogical schools of thought are influenced by different social theories and philosophies of science, ethical issues and even political interests. Social pedagogy has to take shape as a particular scientific discipline in the midst of diverse understandings, traditions and ideas.

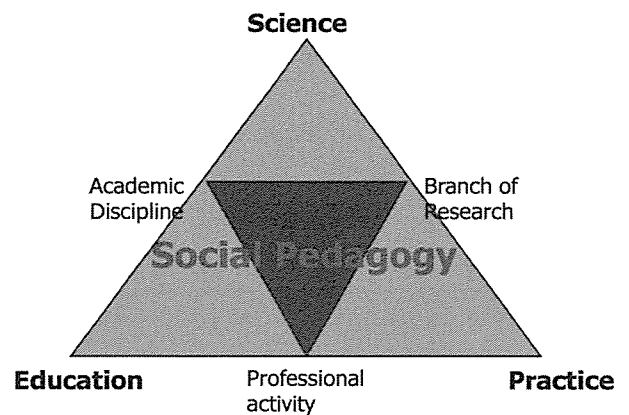


Figure 1. Social pedagogy as a functional system (Hämäläinen 2012a)

As a functional social system, social pedagogy consists of the elements of science, education and practice (Figure 1).

Without research-based theory building, social pedagogy cannot develop as a discipline, which, for its own part, is necessary for development as a branch of education. Theory building of this kind also lays the foundations for the development of social pedagogical expertise and practice.

Consequently, social pedagogy in Finland has been developed as an academic discipline consisting of research, theory building and a branch of studies in higher education. Social pedagogy exists as a degree programme in one of the country's ten multidisciplinary universities (University of Eastern Finland). Fifteen (of twenty) universities of applied sciences offer degree programmes in social studies, which are more or less linked with the concept of social pedagogy (Semi 2006). At the university, social pedagogy can be studied at BA, MA and PhD level without a professional qualification. Universities of applied sciences offer BA and MA degrees with professional qualifications. Essentially, in both fields of higher education, social pedagogy has been viewed as a theoretical framework for many kinds of professional activities and different professional groups rather than as a particular profession.

In the course of their social pedagogy studies, students familiarise themselves with social pedagogical theory building and practice applications. Attention is paid to social pedagogical schools of thought, theory traditions and opportunities for applying social pedagogical expertise in practice in different contexts. Interaction of theory and practice, and thinking and doing are emphasised. Instead of theoretical and methodological dogmatism, attention is paid to creative thinking and doing.

There is an unavoidable need for relevant textbooks regarding the academic studies in question when establishing a degree programme. A great deal of good literature is available in German and Spanish dealing with the theory and history of social pedagogy. The younger generation in Finland, however, is not particularly familiar with the German language and even less with Spanish. For this reason, only a relatively small number of students can benefit from the German and Spanish literature. Initially, the lack of literature in either Finnish or English constituted a particular challenge to the development of study programmes. This challenge was faced by producing new study materials rather than by translating foreign materials into Finnish.

The first Finnish textbook on social pedagogy (Hämäläinen & Kurki 1997) introduced the traditions of social pedagogy developed in both German and Romance language and cultures. Since then, the Finnish understanding of social pedagogy has been strongly influenced by these two traditions, although many original thoughts and definitions of policy have also been generated. In the 2000s, Finnish scholars collaborated increasingly with experts from other Nordic countries in which the social order is very similar. Swedish textbooks have also been utilised as they have been published (e.g. Eriksson & Markström 2000; Madsen 2006; Eriksson & Winman 2010). Some materials have been published in collaboration with Nordic colleagues (Gustavsson, Hermansson & Hämäläinen 2003). As Finland is a bilingual country, most Finnish people who study at the high school level have language proficiency in Swedish.

In Finland, social pedagogy has been viewed as a theoretical framework for civic education in modern society, for example from the points of view of “a welfare society in a global age” (Nivala 2008) and the idea of “life-long learning where personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability support one another” (Niemi 2011). Theory building has covered both formal and non-formal aspects of education. Social pedagogy as a functional social system is seen to have capacity for contributing to the cohesion of society, welfare and sustainable development.

In developing social pedagogy as an academic discipline, attention has been paid to different philosophies of science, social theories and understandings of human nature. Social pedagogy has not been fixed or reduced to any particular epistemological, ethical or anthropological theory. In any case, the Finnish experience shows that it is important to process fundamental philosophical questions which concern knowledge, society and the nature of human development. By the same token, it is important to remember that an academic discipline can only be based on scientific values without dogmatism or ideological fixations. In this sense, social pedagogy has been developed as an open system based on scientific debate and the criticism of scientific community.

One central question that appeared in Finland during the development of social pedagogy as an academic discipline was about how social pedagogy relates to other individual sciences. In Finland, the common response has been that social pedagogy stands between social and educational sciences, gaining benefits from and contributing to both fields. Administratively, social pedagogy has been developed as a particular branch of research and theory building within departments of social and educational sciences. This has not meant that social pedagogy is viewed only as a multi-disciplinary entity. It has also been developed as an independent individual science with its own questioning, through which it complements the scope of social and educational research.

## *Social pedagogy as a professional practice*

One fundamental question of social pedagogical practice concerns whether or not social pedagogy should be seen as a particular profession or a field of many professions. In addition to this, other key questions concern features of social pedagogical action – especially aims, methods and organisational grounds – and the nature of social pedagogical expertise. Theoretical analysis is needed in order to develop social pedagogical practice. A key question applies to the attribute ‘social’, which can be used in different contexts with different meanings. We can ask what actually makes pedagogy ‘social’.

Organisational frames of social pedagogical practice differ between countries. Not only is this variation connected with different theoretical understandings, but also with different social orders in general (Hämäläinen 2012a). Finnish society is basically built on the Nordic welfare ideology, in which the public organs are largely responsible for promoting welfare. The welfare system is primarily financed by taxes. In this context it is natural that the fields of professional practice of social pedagogy are primarily looked for within the welfare system.

An essential distinctive circumstance between individual societies in their use of the concept of social pedagogy and establishment of social pedagogical practice is how social pedagogy relates, on the one hand, to the civil society, and, on the other hand, to the governmental organisations. Societies have distinctively diverging welfare infrastructures and features of civil society. In Finland and other Nordic countries, there is a tradition of the coexistence of an extensive public welfare system and a well-developed civil society consisting of diverse activities of non-governmental organisations. In this context, social pedagogical practice has been developed primarily within the system of welfare services for which the public authorities are responsible (Eriksson 2010). In some other countries, social pedagogy is more about the affairs of the civil society.

The understanding of the nature of social pedagogical practice has an influence on the conception of social pedagogy as a discipline and a professional system. A decisive point is how social pedagogy as a discipline relates and contributes to different professional activities. Even the Nordic countries differ from each other in this question. The title ‘social pedagogue’ – in the strict sense of a profession – is formally acknowledged only in Iceland. In Denmark (e.g. Erlandsen 2012; Rosendal Jensen 2011) and Norway (e.g. Stephens 2009; 2011), social pedagogy has mostly been developed as a particular profession (see also Kornbeck & Rosendal Jensen 2009), whereas in Finland and Sweden, social pedagogy has, for the most part, been developed as an educational principle without being fixed to a particular profession – with a few exceptions. In Sweden the title ‘social pedagogue’ is used for particular work in schools and institutions but without the corresponding educational title. In Sweden, one can study to be a social worker under the educational title ‘socionom’ and then go on later to work as a ‘social pedagogue’. In Norway and Denmark, social pedagogy is a subject in training programmes for child welfare workers; but only in Denmark can qualified individuals call themselves ‘social pedagogues’. The question is complicated because of the flexibility and change of professional boundaries and titles.

There are some special issues in modern society which social pedagogy as a professional practice has to face: expanding multiculturalism, changes in requirements in the job markets due to the development of information and communication technologies, the growing divorce rate, the ageing of the population, the increase in social insecurity and exclusion, and ecological threats. In Finnish society, these signs of modernisation have been visible and considered in social pedagogical theory building (e.g. Niemelä 2011). Social pedagogy has been developed as a particular social science which combines social and educational perspectives. Education, in theory and practice, is considered in the light of analyses of the nature of social mechanisms of the modern society. Attention is paid to opportunities to educationally improve people's potential for social integration and emancipation, well-being and participation. Social pedagogy aims at contributing to social development through education.

The question of how social pedagogy relates to social work seems to be relevant in all countries in which both concepts are in use. Principally, there are four different stands: (1) social pedagogy is subordinated to social work in terms of a particular paradigm or orientation; (2) social work is subordinated to social pedagogy as one professional field; (3) social pedagogy and social work are identical; and (4) they are completely different (e.g. Merten 1998). In Finland, social work and social pedagogy have been developed as two different major disciplines, although their connectedness has been identified. Social pedagogy has been defined as a potential theoretical framework for social work (Hämäläinen 2003), which for its part has been viewed as a research-based academic profession (Hämäläinen 2012c), and social pedagogy as an academic discipline, which contributes to different professional activities, including social work.

There are predominantly two main fields for social pedagogical practice in Finland: the systems of education and welfare. Within the education system, social pedagogical expertise can be applied both in the fields of formal and non-formal education. With regard to formal education, school welfare workers, in particular, and also special teachers, career advisers and even ordinary teachers at all academic levels can benefit from a social pedagogical standpoint and expertise. This is because the whole educational system is carrying out a social political function of welfare. Correspondingly, in all fields of non-formal education, such as youth work, and within the system of liberal adult education, options for professional applications of social pedagogical expertise can be identified. Within the system of welfare, professional applications mainly concern social care services covering both open care and residential care activities that are applied to different kinds of psychosocial problems and needs in all age groups.

Historically, social pedagogy addresses the early modernisation due to which families lost capacity to carry out their duties of caring and upbringing, socialisation was increasingly shattered, and an increasing number of children and young people had problems fulfilling the requirements of society. This is still a valid basis for the development of social pedagogy as a discipline and professional practice. Modern societies continue to become ever more complex, increasingly causing problems of social integration. This aspect has played an important role in the Finnish understanding of social pedagogy in theory and practice. Reasons for the importance of the development of social pedagogy as a discipline and professional expertise have been given on this basis in order to justify social pedagogy, both in the academic system and as a field of professional expertise.

In Finland, social pedagogy, as a practice field, has been seen, on the one hand, as a form of non-formal community and activity education which promotes active citizenship and human development through social participation and civic activities. On the other hand, social pedagogy has been understood and developed as a formal professional activity within the educational and welfare system. The concept of social pedagogy has been used as a theoretical umbrella for many kinds of formal and non-formal social and educational activities rather than an exact field of professional practice.

### *The position of social pedagogy within the system of education*

#### FORMAL EDUCATION IN FINLAND

In order to understand the Finnish experience and the conception of social pedagogy in Finland, it is necessary to examine the Finnish system of education. In general, Finnish society is based on the idea of improving competitiveness through education (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012). The political aim is to become the most well-educated and competent country worldwide. This is an essential part of the Finnish social order, together with the ideas of extensive social security and equality for which the public organs are responsible. High-level education is seen as a foundation for the development of competitive innovations, which are considered essential for success in international competition.

The Finnish system of education is an important part of modern society in which social development and the employment of people is essentially based on education (Figure 2).

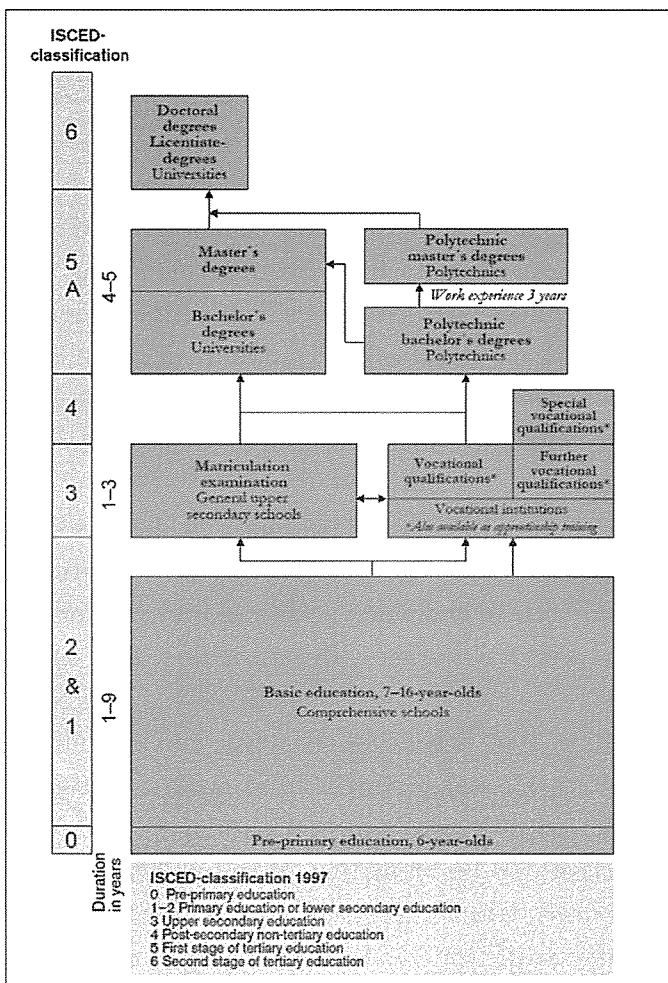


Figure 2. The system of education in Finland (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012)

Within the system of education, social pedagogy can be studied mainly in the first and second stage of tertiary education, i.e. in research universities and universities of applied sciences, and to some degree also in some vocational qualification programmes. Conversely, pre-primary, primary and secondary education belongs to the potential fields of social pedagogical practice.

In Finland, the term social pedagogy refers, per se, to the whole human lifespan. This means that social pedagogical theory building and practice are seen to concern all age groups, as has also been the case in many other countries (Kornbeck & Rosendal Jensen 2011; 2012). Thus, social pedagogical applications and activities take place in the fields of early, youth and adult education. There are even

aspirations to develop applications for elderly care (Kurki 2007). Institution-specific specialisation has been advanced, for example, as social pedagogical practice in child day care, child residential care, child protection activities in terms of open care, social work with families, school social work, popular education in adult community colleges and folk high schools, and different kinds of recreation for children, adolescents and adults.

An important question in the development of social pedagogical practice concerns the position of social pedagogy in relation to the school. In some countries, such as Estonia, social pedagogy has been developed as a particular occupational field in schools within the system of compulsory education (Kraav 2003). Conversely, in some other countries, such as Germany, it has been seen as a particular field in outside-of-school education. In Finland, social pedagogy is seen as a source of pedagogical expertise in the fields of formal and non-formal education. Within the school system in particular, social pedagogy has been viewed as a field of school welfare work. It has even been labelled “social pedagogical school social work” in terms of a particular paradigm of school social work (Kurki, Nivala & Sipilä-Lähdekorpi 2006) and also as a theoretical framework for school education in general, unifying different professional groups for shared responsibilities and cooperation (Hämäläinen 2011). Since the Finnish school system traditionally implements both an educational and social political mission in society, it is natural that social pedagogy is also viewed as a part of this context.

Overall, social pedagogical practice has been developed both in terms of education for people with special needs such as disabled people, the unemployed and offenders, and in terms of education in general, such as citizenship education for all people of different ages and life contexts. Correspondingly, the theory of social pedagogy has been seen as dealing with more or less special educational issues or to be general by nature, dealing with socialisation and preconditions of human development in a modern society in general. Along both lines of social pedagogical thinking and action, educational practice is seen as being closely connected with the social conditions of modern society. In this sense, social pedagogy is viewed as a discipline which discusses the person-society relationship in modern society.

All kinds of social and psychosocial problems of modern society have to be faced in social pedagogical practice. In the special educational conception of social pedagogy, the aspiration to deal with different social and psychosocial problems, in particular, characterises social pedagogy. Its identity as a field of educational practice and professional system is based on this attribute, while in the general educational conception of social pedagogy, the need to deal with social and psychosocial problems goes with the nature of education in modern society. Social pedagogy is not particularly for the special needs of people, but in modern society, the processes of human growth and socialisation are shaped by special needs which are linked to different social and psychosocial problems.

In Finland, social exclusion has been seen as a special area of social pedagogy. Social exclusion is a complex phenomenon of modern society which is increasingly based on high-quality know-how achieved through education. Not all young people fulfil the requirements. Those who drop out from the educational system have a weak position in the job market. Consequently, poorly-educated people are at risk of long-term unemployment. Often they also drop out of active

citizenship, meaningful leisure pursuits and even significant human relationships. Social exclusion is about a discrepancy between the citizen and society. This has been seen as the special challenge and field of expertise of social pedagogy as a discipline, theory building and educational practice.

Social exclusion has been considered as a characteristic of modern society. Attention has been paid to the fact that people's life courses are increasingly tinged with problems integrating into social life. In many ways these problems are caused by excluding social structures. In social pedagogy, the interconnectedness of pedagogical and political strategies has been emphasised. Where the pedagogical view is focused on opportunities for influencing through the processes of human development and education, the political activity is aimed at influencing social structures, institutions and law.

### *The nature of social pedagogical expertise*

The understanding of the nature of social pedagogy as a discipline manifests itself in the conception of social pedagogical expertise. This conception consists of two fundamental questions: what social pedagogical know-how is about and where it arises.

In Finland, social pedagogy is not viewed primarily, if at all, as a set of educational methods and techniques, but as a particular way of educational thinking, dealing especially with the discrepancy in the relationship between a person and society. The professional expertise is not seen as being about a command of special educational methods and techniques, but about a creative course of educational action aiming at the promotion of social participation, integration and the ability to act. Attention has been based on the fact that citizenship is not only a statutory right but also a personal feature which can be achieved through education and human growth (Nivala 2008). Social pedagogical expertise is about processes of and preconditions for active citizenship.

The Finnish debate on social pedagogical expertise has been relatively strongly influenced by the tradition of socio-cultural animation (Hämäläinen & Kurki 1997; Kurki 2000). This is a particular philosophy of education which has been developed mostly in the Romance languages and cultures (especially Spain, France and Latin America). It concerns the theory and practice of activity education in which the importance of participation and communal life for people's personal development and well-being are emphasised. The basic idea is to mobilise people towards common action in their communities, which improves the quality of their personal and social life. In this context, Finnish social pedagogy is closely linked to ideas of inclusion and personalisation, as it is widely understood in the international debate (Hatton 2013). Participation is seen both as an educational method and a highly desirable value in human existence.

In Finland, social pedagogy has been developed to some extent as a field of 'alternative pedagogies'; a kind of alternative to the prevailing philosophy and forms of education which occur in the official system of education. This kind of understanding of social pedagogy has also been one root of the



German tradition of social pedagogy which, since the early stages, has benefited from different pedagogical movements in which creative, person-centred, democratic and community-based methods have been applied and developed. Social pedagogical thought and theory building have not been fixed on any particular movement. It is also important to say that social pedagogical expertise is not only specified as an alternative pedagogy, but is also applied to the professional fields of the welfare system, especially social and health care services and educational organisations.

Students of social pedagogy become familiar with different creative methods of education and they learn to understand the opportunities of creative activities for pedagogical work. Some students tend to specialise in particular methods, for example in music therapy, art therapy, adventure education, and community care. Social pedagogical expertise has been seen as concerning pedagogical communication, as recently described by some British scholars (Cameron & Moss 2011; Petrie 2011). An important theoretical aspect, even a theoretical basis of social pedagogical expertise, is the theory of communicative action which, also in contemporary German debate, has been seen as a fundamental element of social pedagogy (see Rauschenbach 1999). From this point of view, social pedagogical expertise is not only about communication as a personal skill but also about strengthening the capacity of communities, including families, to learn to communicate and develop themselves as communicating societies in terms of self-learning.

Social pedagogical expertise occurs in different contexts and has a context-specific nature. The pedagogical expertise needed in early education differs from youth education which, for its part, differs from adult education. The demands of pedagogical know-how also vary according to the organisational conditions; for example, there are special professional requirements in residential care. There is a wide system of welfare services in the Nordic countries based on well-regulated professional qualifications. In this context, social pedagogical expertise manifests itself mostly in terms of additional value for professional expertise in different occupations. In Finland, social pedagogical expertise has predominantly been viewed as a combination of educational and welfare know-how where, in the words of Cameron and Moss (2011), “care and education meet”. Many university students of social pedagogy are already qualified professionals, such as youth workers, kindergarten teachers, social workers, nurses, school teachers, occupational therapists, etc., and the studies of social pedagogy add to their professional expertise.

Contrary to the traditions of social pedagogy in some other countries, the Finnish understanding of social pedagogical expertise is not about a particular occupation, but about general educational know-how which is relevant to all occupations in the professional fields of welfare and education. As a discipline, social pedagogy has a multi-professional nature: it contributes to all occupations that deal with the processes of human development and aim at advancing people’s well-being. Social pedagogical know-how applies particularly to the educational practice which concerns people’s growth towards active citizenship in terms of social participation, aims at strengthening their capability to self-care in terms of functional social action, and promotes their accountability and autonomy as moral people in terms of socially responsible members of their communities and society.

The Finnish understanding of the nature of social pedagogical know-how does not focus only

on “working with children and young people”, although this has been the case, for example, in the UK (Cameron & Moss 2011) and Norway (Storø 2013). The Finnish understanding also focuses on adult education, which is also the case in Sweden (e.g. Eriksson & Winman 2010). This means that adult education organisations are also seen as options for social pedagogical expertise, especially the fields of non-formal adult education, which comprise many kinds of activities taking place in community colleges, folk high schools, summer universities, adult education centres and sport institutes. Theoretically, concepts such as lifelong learning and active citizenship, which are particularly relevant to adult education, have also been embraced in social pedagogical research and theory building (e.g. Niemelä 2011). Moreover, in Finland, adult education has also been developed as an academic discipline consisting of corresponding research activities, theory building and university study programmes. As a discipline and field of expertise, adult education is older, more established and better known than social pedagogy.

Social pedagogical expertise has, to some extent, been seen as representing an alternative to the prevailing opinion in social and educational professionalism. Students of social pedagogy familiarise themselves with the most important reform pedagogical movements and creative educational methods. In both social care and the field of education, social pedagogical expertise is often seen as offering an alternative standpoint and way of thinking, in which creative and community-based considerations are emphasised in theory and practice. Social pedagogy is expected to improve and partly even replace the prevailing welfare and educational practices. Sometimes it is introduced as a reform-oriented approach, which offers an alternative to bureaucratic system-centred professionalism.

Social pedagogical theory building deals with and is originally shaped by philosophical anthropology and moral philosophy. As such, social pedagogical expertise can be seen as comprising issues from these fields. On the whole, the Finnish understanding of the nature of social pedagogical expertise is consistent with the idea of “making human life better, or contributing and doing what is good” through education (Gustavsson 2010, p. 19). Students of social pedagogy in Finland widely study theories of human nature and ethics. In this sense, social pedagogical expertise is fundamentally about the theoretical understanding of preconditions, opportunities and restrictions of education within the contexts of the modern society, and the capacity to bring this understanding into practice creatively within the systems of welfare and education. This is not only about adaptation to the prevailing infrastructure, but also about contributing to development.

Social pedagogical expertise cannot be reduced purely to educational practice. It is based on academic education, thus it is also relative to the fields of research and administration. Some graduates have been placed in organisations of higher education as researchers and educators.

### ***‘Community pedagogues’ and ‘social care workers’***

Although social pedagogy is not defined in terms of a particular occupation, it plays an important role, especially in two professionally-oriented study programmes offered by the universities of applied sciences. It is exceedingly difficult to translate the degree titles of these programmes

exactly. The title 'community pedagogue' is based on the study programme of 'civil activity and youth work', which aims at expertise in the fields of youth popular education. The title 'social care worker' is based, generally speaking, on the study programme of 'social services', which aims at expertise in the fields of welfare. It embodies many kinds of professional activities within the wide system of social and health care. As mentioned above, in the Finnish welfare system, the profession 'social worker' is separated from the title 'social care worker'. Qualified social workers are educated to Master's degree level in the research universities.

According to the curricula descriptions, the expertise of 'community pedagogue' relates primarily to professional activities in popular youth education: youth work, youth policy, leisure activities, and civil action. The know-how applies both to the skills of educational communication and skills for planning, development, cooperation, and management in this context. This profession is closely connected to the Finnish Youth Act (2006/72), according to which local authorities are responsible for establishing the preconditions for versatile youth education, leisure activities, development of local youth policy and adequate welfare services for young people. The prevention and alleviation of young people's social exclusion is an important aim therein.

The expertise of 'social care worker' is more indefinite. There are relatively big differences between the universities in terms of defining the aims and contents of studies. The legislation is also relatively complex. According to the Law of Professional Qualifications in Social Welfare (2005/272), for example, a social care worker who is certificated by a university of applied sciences is qualified for the post of kindergarten teacher if his or her study programme has included at least 60 credit points (one year) in early education or social pedagogy. In fact, this is the only detail about how the term social pedagogy has been mentioned in the Finnish welfare legislation. In any case, social pedagogy has been integrated as a discipline and a theoretical framework, more or less, to most of the study programmes of 'social care workers'.

The examples of 'community pedagogues' and 'social care workers' show that social pedagogical expertise has been developed in terms of particular training programmes in higher education concerning both the fields of popular education and care work. This corresponds to the theoretical understanding of the nature of social pedagogy as a discipline, which consists of the synthesis of social and educational considerations, welfare and culture. Social pedagogical expertise applies to the professional activities in the fields of education and welfare, combining these two fundamental dimensions of social life in theory and practice.

## *Conclusions*

What can we learn from the Finnish experience of establishing social pedagogy as an academic discipline and professional practice? At least following:

1. Social pedagogy cannot be developed as a professional practice without theory building and developing social pedagogy as a discipline. Theory building benefits from familiarisation with the history of social pedagogical thought and different country-specific traditions. The development of a theoretical basis is a necessary term for the development of social pedagogy

- as a discipline and a system of education. It is essential to deal with different philosophies of science, epistemological orientations, and methodological approaches of research.
2. The conception of social pedagogy varies in the midst of diverse moral philosophies, concepts of man, political interests, and concepts of knowledge. It benefits from social theories dealing with ethical, political and educational issues. It is manifested in different national traditions and is shaped by country-specific social, political, economic and cultural conditions. Country-specific conditions must be taken into consideration in developing social pedagogy in an individual country.
  3. It makes sense to construct practice applications by defining the nature of social pedagogical expertise in the various fields of professional activities of social care and education. The decisive questions which must be faced concern the nature of social pedagogical expertise.
    - a. How does social pedagogical know-how relate to the system of care and educational professions: is it a question of one particular occupation or a discipline for various social and educational professions?
    - b. What issues does social pedagogical expertise concern: is it rather about education or welfare?
    - c. Which organisational and functional contexts are relevant for pedagogical expertise in theory and practice:
      - i. residential care vs. open care
      - ii. public vs. civil activities
      - iii. early vs. youth vs. adult education
      - iv. school vs. outside-of-school activities
      - v. special needs vs. human development, socialisation and well-being in general

The Finnish experience points to the importance of a wide understanding of social pedagogy as a concept, discipline, expertise, and professional practice. The key point is educationally to assist the processes of human development through which people learn to deal with their living conditions, fulfil their moral responsibilities in different roles, and become active citizens.

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# Developing Social Pedagogy as an Academic Discipline and Professional Practice: Learning from the Finnish Experience

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## **Abstract**

This article deals with the Finnish experience of the development of social pedagogy as a system of academic discipline and professional practice. The aim is to introduce the conception of social pedagogy as it is understood and constructed in Finland. The understanding, theory building and applications of social pedagogy vary from country to country. In spite of this, there are many common elements. There are good reasons to review country-specific experiences in order to learn from each other and to deal theoretically with the diversity. The Finnish experience shows that the term 'social pedagogy' is rather complex, and that there is a need for clarification of the different ways of using the concept. It also shows that it makes sense to view and develop social pedagogy as a discipline consisting of reciprocal theory building and practice applications.