

## *Guests of the Journal*

### Interview with Lotte Junker Harbo<sup>a</sup> and Svend Bak<sup>b</sup>

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#### **How do you describe social pedagogy (from a theoretical and practical point of view) in Denmark? In which institutions can we find social pedagogues?**

Harbo, L. K., Bak, S.: In our opinion, social pedagogy is best described as a situated practice that draws on what can be seen as a spectrum of different theories, practices, experiences, values and approaches. In that sense it is difficult to describe exactly WHAT social pedagogy is – it depends on the situation, the problem and the context and on the ability of the practitioner to conduct complex analysis in-the-moment. That said, there is a strong tendency in Denmark towards inclusion in both theory and practice, and recognition as both an underlying value in practice and an approach.

The Danish social pedagogical tradition explicitly relates to humanistic values as well as solidarity, and has a strong orientation towards supporting people in participation in different communities. In that sense social pedagogy is a political discipline.

You can find social pedagogues in all sorts of institutions/organizations:

- in homes for children and young people who have suffered any kind of abuse or neglect or are disabled in any way
- in homes for adults with disabilities
- in social psychiatry
- in prisons
- in homes for elderly people who suffer from dementia
- in outreach programmes for families
- in street work
- in youth clubs
- etc.

In fact, nurseries and after-school arrangements for young people started as social pedagogical initiatives back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a support for working-class families, to ensure both the everyday conditions for the children as well as the parents' opportunities to engage in labour.

#### **What are the main thoughts of social pedagogy in Denmark? Where can we find the roots of these ideas?**

Harbo, L. K., Bak, S.: As suggested above, Danish social pedagogy has a strong political nerve and an orientation towards solidarity, democracy and participation. The roots are to be found in Grundtvig, Peter Sabroe, Bang Mikkelsen, Pestalozzi and Natorp, to mention only a few. These days we have a group of Danish thinkers who are developing the discipline: Bent Madsen, Jan Jaap Rothuizen, Niels Rosendal, Lotte Junker Harbo and Karsten Tuft, all engaged in the Danish Association for Social Pedagogy.

**How do you describe the relationship between social pedagogy and social work in Denmark (highlighting both the diversity and connections)?**

Harbo, L. K., Bak, S.: The main difference between the two disciplines is the focus that social pedagogy has on education as a key to support inclusion in society. Second, the pedagogical paradox is an important element in social pedagogy (How do you support children/human beings in developing their own identity, skills and the ability to exceed what they have learnt from being with you. How do you develop authority in a person by taking part of the authority away from the person?). Another difference is the philosophical element in social pedagogy and the obligation to ensure that what 'you work for' is in line with the wishes of the person; that is what it is all about.

I think the connections are best seen if you talk about street-level social work (as opposed to civil-servant-based social work) – then the two approaches/disciplines share values and approaches and a common orientation towards the freedom of the individual in a given society.

**Important topics of social pedagogy include social inequalities and social inclusion. How does social pedagogy work with these phenomena in Denmark?**

Harbo, L. K., Bak, S.:

- On an individual/group level through participation in ordinary political activity. Through supporting political action taken by specific groups (right now related to Covid – the homeless)
- Through the trade union (SL), which every now and then expresses its opinion in public and through its close relations with political parties.

**What is the linking element between the past, present and future in social pedagogy?**

Harbo, L. K., Bak, S.: An interesting question! Thanks! We wish to say education, but we have been in a period of time where social pedagogy has not been a top priority when it comes to the education of pedagogues. However, we believe that this is now about to change. There is a strong need and pressure from different stakeholders (local authorities, politicians, organisations that hire social pedagogues, associations that represent the users) for the knowledge and practical skills that social pedagogues offer.

**What are the current main challenges for social pedagogy?**

Harbo, L. K., Bak, S.: To ensure and describe itself as a discipline and to maintain and sustain the values of democracy and solidarity. The welfare state seems to absorb the more critical elements of social pedagogy, and there is a need to ensure that both the political and the philosophical elements are as strong as ever.

**Can you specifically describe your own social pedagogy practice? What does social pedagogy mean to you?**

Bak, S.: Social pedagogy must, in a never-ending process, open up new possibilities of participation for the people we work (together) with. This of course means that you have to adapt to and understand the desires and competencies of the citizens you work with (together with), and adapt to and understand the possibilities available in the society in which you work. On one hand this calls for a strong and insisting solidarity with the citizen, and on the other hand a critical approach to the societal conditions (politics!). It also calls for creativity to make the conditions in which you work capable of performing this task. By conditions I mean:

- Your knowledge and competence
- The knowledge and competence of your colleagues
- The organisational setting (management and cooperation) and the room for competent and creative effort it creates
- The systemic (political) conditions for performing social pedagogy.

Participation is a complex concept. It of course means taking part in societal activities (education and work), but it also refers to being integrated in human group activities.

In this context the quality of the communities is of great importance. So it is also an important focus for social pedagogy to develop a high level of quality in the groups/communities that you are responsible for.

The values of social pedagogy can be summed up in the concept of solidarity.

**How has social pedagogical practice changed during your time in this field?**

Bak, S.: From a primary focus on care to a stronger and predominant focus on developing the societal integration of the citizens you work with. This of course means that the ideas and the methods have changed a lot. This does not mean that care has disappeared from social pedagogy as an important element, but that the context in which it is used has changed.

**Could you describe the activities of the Danish Association of Social Pedagogy? What are the priorities of the Danish Association of Social Pedagogy?**

Bak, S.: The organisation must follow closely the development of social pedagogy. This must take place on as high a scientific level as possible, and at the same time in close contact with the practice/reality of social pedagogy. This also means that the organisation must have a critical focus on the societal conditions for performing social pedagogy, which means a strong focus on the societal conditions of the citizens we work (together) with.

We publish a journal twice a year with the best researchers and practitioners we can find as contributors. We have seminars connected to these publications, and we work closely together with educational institutions and with the trade union of the Danish social pedagogues. Our next journal will focus on low arousal as a method in social pedagogy. This autumn the topic will focus on social pedagogical work with school children and youngsters in their spare time (after-school institutions, youth clubs, street work). The spring edition 2022 will focus on social pedagogical work with handicapped children and adults.

**Does the current Covid situation affect social pedagogy practice? If so, how?**

Bak, S.: Yes, it does. For instance, a lot of youngsters are deeply hurt by the demands of isolation. A lot of social pedagogues are involved in looking up these youngsters, and they try in different and creative ways to alleviate the effects. Isolation may be the key effect of the Covid situation that social pedagogues can do something about in a lot of different contexts. And a lot of social pedagogical activity is going on as a result of that. Quite a few social pedagogues have been publicly critical as to the isolational effect of the lockdowns. In that sense they live up to my criteria for good social pedagogical work.



Lotte Junker Harbo is associate professor at VIA University College, continuing education. Here she focuses her research and lecturing on different aspects of social pedagogy and social work, including how the children, young people and adults that social pedagogy and social work is supposed to help, encounter and perceive that help. In that sense, and in a perspective inspired by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, she explores help and the borders of help.



Svend Bak is a trained social pedagogue. He finished his education in 1978, and in the following years he worked as a social pedagogue in various institutions. In the late 80s, he started doing courses for pedagogues and worked as a pedagogical consultant in a larger town administration. After that he started teaching in a college that educated pedagogues. He earned a master's degree in social pedagogy and took an advanced course in organizational development. For the last 15-20 years of his working life, he worked as a teacher and consultant at a large institution that does on-the-job training for educated pedagogues, and carried out many development projects in the social pedagogical field. He retired from this job in 2014, and now he nurtures his interest in social pedagogy as chairman of the Danish Association of Social Pedagogy, and is active in other ways connected to his lifelong interest in social pedagogy.