

Information

Imagining a Global Alliance for Social Pedagogy and Social Education

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Over the last few years, there has been an increase in global collaborations around social pedagogy, with the formation of transnational research networks, collaborations between international journals, joint international conferences and online events, as well as the cross-national creation of a Massive Open Online Course in Social Pedagogy across Europe. Having been involved in some of these endeavours, it has been exciting for us to see that both practitioners and academics in many countries are very eager to learn about social pedagogy traditions elsewhere in the world. We have noticed first-hand that the emerging developments of social pedagogy in countries without an explicit tradition, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, have greatly benefited from a better understanding of how social pedagogy has evolved as a profession and/or academic discipline in countries where it is well established. At the same time, professionals in these countries have gained new inspiration from the passion, curiosity and initiative that has characterized these new developments.

As the world faces a variety of challenges, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the resurgence of populism, the climate catastrophe, and the rise of artificial intelligence, it is even more important to counter the ensuing social inequalities in educational ways. To do so effectively and meaningfully, all of us in social pedagogical and social educational professions are called upon to learn from and with each other. This is why we decided to explore the idea of forming a global alliance that can help facilitate greater dialogue and networking at a transnational level, thus adding further to the strengths of the many national associations already in existence.

Our organisations – the Social Pedagogy Association based at Arizona State University and ThemPra Social Pedagogy, a social enterprise leading developments of social pedagogy in the UK – recently partnered up to organise two international conferences and a joint webinar series. As part of these discussions, we pondered the question how we could maximise the opportunities for global collaborations at a time when Zoom meetings are the ‘new normal’. Although both our organisations were set up with a clear geographical focus (on the US and UK respectively), we are working well beyond these national boundaries, prompting us to consider whether other organisations were interested in collaborating around a common cause of promoting social pedagogical responses to social issues. We therefore decided to contact social pedagogy associations and other leading organisations in the field with an invitation to discuss whether they were interested in the idea of developing a global alliance and to imagine what this might look like.

To be inclusive and make it possible for people to join the conversation irrespective of the time zone in which they live, we ran 90-minute sessions in the morning, afternoon, and evening of February 19th, 2021. We were delighted to have over 20 participants in each session who represented national associations, journals, networks, and umbrella organisations invested in social pedagogy and social education. Participants came from 24 countries across the globe, including nations where social pedagogy is not well known yet as well as those with a longstanding tradition. We were also delighted that several of the *Sociální pedagogika* editorial team joined us.

The conversations across the 3 virtual sessions were vibrant and imaginative and demonstrated clearly the appetite for the idea. The key themes that emerged from the conversations centred on the following possibilities:

- **Developing understandings of social pedagogy and social education:** This touches on questions about how we can collectively develop the field of social pedagogy, including research, theory and practice, so as to make it globally recognisable. Whilst there are country-specific differences, there are a lot of commonalities too, particularly with regards to our ethical orientation. These can help shape a transnational social pedagogical perspective. A global alliance could provide a creative space to share understandings and learn from traditions in other countries.
- **Social pedagogy and social education journals:** There are now several international open access journals focussed on social pedagogy and social education. These all play an important role in the international discourse and in promoting social pedagogy more widely, and a global alliance would connect well to the journals' respective aims. In addition, open access provides unprecedented opportunities to collaborate across different journals, and we have already taken some steps towards this.
- **Joint projects:** To find meaningful responses to social issues, a global alliance could help both researchers and practitioners share ideas and collaborate on projects. This area sparked various ideas ranging from a database to share research findings, to networking opportunities around shared thematic interests, joint conferences, and collaborations between academic institutions. Many of these initiatives are, of course, already happening, and the question is how a global alliance could further strengthen them, facilitate more inclusive access to the opportunities available as well as enable the creation of new initiatives.
- **Outreach to promote a social pedagogical perspective:** Many contributors mentioned the importance of promoting social pedagogy as a perspective amongst related professions and wider society. Interestingly, this point not only seemed relevant to participants from nations where social pedagogy developments are still in their infancy, but was also echoed by representatives from countries where social pedagogy is established but has been disappearing or merged with other professions.
- **Shared goals and connections:** There was a strong sense of community amongst participants and an appreciation that it is important to feel connected to people who 'get you'. Many therefore felt that it is crucial to nurture a global community of social pedagogues and social educators (and related professions). At a time where our societies are faced with complex challenges, the fight to address social inequalities can feel exhausting, lonely and never-ending. This makes it all the more important to have a global community where people can offer each other courage, inspiration and support.
- **Building and regulating social pedagogy and social education as professions:** Whilst social pedagogy and social education aren't recognised professions in all countries, several participants highlighted the need to develop a clear professional identity, which requires a certain level of standardisation of qualifications and academic programmes. This linked closely with endeavours to raise the status of social pedagogy and social education and lending it legitimacy in the eyes of other professions.

This is not an exhaustive list, of course, and only an initial attempt at summarising all the brilliant ideas discussed in these sessions. It is also worth highlighting that participants brought up a range of questions that need further exploration, including how a global alliance would be funded. While the realisation of some of the above ideas would certainly require financial resources, we believe that many can be realised by streamlining existing initiatives and working together to raise awareness of events and existing networks, many of which are currently online. For instance, we are hosting the

International Social Education and Social Pedagogy Online Conference 'Creating Hope in Dystopia', which will take place from 22-24 June, 2021 (details at www.socialpedagogy.org). We are hoping to bring together participants from across the globe to engage with the conference theme and develop closer ties – in ways that reflect many of the ideas mentioned above. In addition, if all of us contribute in whichever way we can, then we can collectively progress many more of these ideas. We feel that this is an excellent starting point, because it means that the global alliance is brought to life collectively and can grow further in the future to encompass new ideas and directions.

We will continue to be as inclusive as possible in developing the idea of a global alliance in this spirit. All too often, great initiatives are stifled from the outset when those who have come up with an idea shape it by determining the outcome and deciding how best to achieve this outcome before involving others. This approach reduces others' opportunities for meaningful involvement, to bring in their creative ideas and take responsibility. We recognise the limitations of our own imagination and the centrality of engaging with others at the point where the idea is open-ended, so that a clearer vision can emerge from the breadth of contributions and a greater number of people feel a sense of ownership in bringing the idea to life. We are still at the very beginning of this initiative and keen to move forward in shaping a global alliance together with all who feel it could be a valuable endeavour. The next opportunity for this will be at the International Online Conference in June, and we hope you will join us then. You are warmly invited to get involved in developing a global alliance and sharing your ideas on how we can collectively bring the idea to life.



Gabriel Eichsteller is a co-director of ThemPra Social Pedagogy. He has studied social pedagogy, social work and sociology of childhood in Germany, Denmark, and the UK and has gained international practice experience in play work, youth work, children's participation and advocacy. Together with his colleague Sylvia Holthoff, he developed and facilitated the first UK social pedagogy course as part of a pilot project in 2007, which ultimately led them to set up ThemPra. Gabriel has been leading on projects with a range of children's homes and ThemPra's Erasmus+ project developing a Massive Open Online Course in Social Pedagogy across Europe. Since its inception in 2009, he has been co-ordinating the Social Pedagogy Development Network, and he is also a co-editor of the International Journal of Social Pedagogy published by UCL Press.



Kara O'Neil, M.A. is currently serving as Co-President of the Board to the Social Pedagogy Association. She holds an MA in Social Cultural Pedagogy from Arizona State University, and is currently pursuing a doctorate in Social Pedagogy from Leuphana University in Lüneburg, Germany. Kara previously served as the English Language editor for the Papers of Social Pedagogy – Poland, and formerly served as a co-founder and Executive Officer of the Social and Cultural Pedagogy Graduate Organization (SCP-GO) at Arizona State University. She has worked in a variety of care-settings, to include residential homes for children with special needs, residential retirement homes, and more recently as a co-founder and Board President of the Foster Children's Rights Coalition. She works closely with international partners toward the shared goal of expanding the reach and understanding of Social Pedagogy worldwide. Her academic interests include the global history and understanding of social pedagogy, children's rights, political literacy, cultural and transnational relationships, and social media in relation to social change and social movements. She is passionate about progressive social transformation and cultural literacy.