

## Guests of the Journal

### Interview with Mette Christiansen (September 2021)

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Mette Christiansen, originally from Denmark, has been living in the US for more than 30 years, dedicating her time there to improving the situation for vulnerable people using social pedagogy, through hands-on work in residential programs, conference presentations, trainings, and teaching at the college and university level. She began her academic career at a two-year college in a human services program, State University of New York (SUNY) Dutchess, as a fieldwork supervisor and adjunct. Since 1997, she has been teaching at the State University of New York at New Paltz in the Concentration in Human Services program in the Department of Sociology. In 2003, she became the director of the program.

This interview originates from when we met at the *International Social Education and Social Pedagogy Online Conference: Creating Hope in Dystopia*, where she talked about the history and state of social pedagogy in the US together with Daniel Schugurensky (Arizona State University) and Kiaras Gharabaghi (Ryerson University), who spoke about social pedagogy in Canada. Being a topic that seldom comes up on this side of the Atlantic, I thought it would be interesting for our readers to hear more about this.

#### **Mette, when did you personally first encounter social pedagogy?**

All people in Denmark know the term social pedagogue. In the US, if you encounter a social worker, you do that most often because there is a problem, so then you go and see a social worker. In Denmark, everybody, including little kids, knows a pedagogue. We use the terms “pedagogue/ social pedagogue” sometimes interchangeably even though there are different focuses in the professions. So, growing up in Denmark, it was a part of the vocabulary, a part of the culture. Everybody knew about pedagogy. It is so common. Children who go to daycare centers encounter pedagogues with a day care focus, or they encounter social pedagogues if they are involved in services. As I came of age, I just knew I wanted to work in the field of social something, either as social advisor or as social pedagogue. By the time I left Denmark, there were, I believe, 36 professional schools in Denmark educating social pedagogues, and only 4 schools for social advisors. Over the last couple of decades this has changed, and the professions are now situated at larger campuses. Social pedagogy remains, however, the predominant profession when it comes to working directly with people.

#### **What do you appreciate most about social pedagogy? What groups have you worked with?**

It gives us a variety of opportunities. I started working in day care before and during college, thinking I might want to do that. Through my three internships, I worked with people with disability and at a children’s home. I ended up being in a commune in my third internship, in a halfway house for people coming out of prison, mental health institutions, and substance abuse treatment centers. The latter is what I wanted to do. Being 24, however, I wasn’t able to get a job; people thought I was too young for this kind of work, so I ended up in the disability field. Just because of how the education was at that point, I was exposed to many different parts of social pedagogy. And I do find that attractive as a profession. It also speaks to the fact that it is a generalist education; you get some basic skills that you can apply in many different fields. After I got my degree, I worked in Denmark for four years.

**How did you end up in the US?**

I was in my late 20s and, mainly for personal reasons, I felt I needed a change. I wasn't married, and I had opportunities to do different things. In my last job in Denmark, I worked with people with autism. They also had hearing impairment, and several were Deaf. At that point in my life, I had developed an interest in the Deaf community. So, through a Danish organization, I applied for a job in Nairobi, Kenya, working with Deaf kids. The job wasn't ready. At that time, I came across an opportunity in my union magazine to promote social pedagogy in the US. So, I interviewed for that. It was an American organization run by a social worker who had spent a lot of time in France and developed professional relationships there. Through these connections, he'd learned about the French "éducation spécialisée", which is a French term for a social pedagogue. He ran residential agencies in the US for children in the child welfare system and was unable to hire educated people to work directly in the life space of children. He thought it was outrageous that this was the situation in the US, so he wanted to introduce social pedagogy across the United States.

**So instead of going to Africa, you decided to promote social pedagogy in the US? What was your first impression when you came to the US?**

I arrived in New York in 1988 at an agency that was servicing children and youth with autism. Already having had 10 years of experience in the field, I was completely shocked. In addition to any kind of cultural differences and shock you have when you go to a different country, the level of care was basically a human rights violation. As we go through our education as social pedagogues and other human services professions in different countries, we learn that there is all this knowledge in the US; the American research is amazing, great universities, and smart professors and researchers. All of this, however, is at the academic level. When I arrived at the unit to work with the children, there was a lack of staff; instead of two overnight persons, there was only one. Several other positions were lacking staff. The kids that I worked with had some of the most severe disabilities I had encountered: children taking off their skin, blinding themselves by banging their heads, and there were just not enough staff. The staff that were hired were people with a high school diploma, a clean driver's license, and a clean child abuse record. Initially I thought it was just this agency, but I learned from other pedagogues in the exchange program that this is how it was across the US. Sadly, 33 years later it is still the same.

**What has been done to improve the situation since then?**

The director of the agency that I worked at had travelled to Scandinavia several times, and he had learned about social pedagogy. He wanted to create change, so we arranged for a study trip to Denmark (by the way, he and I have now been married for more than 30 years, and he is the reason why I am still in the US). We invited people from the State of New York, including government officials, college professors, and residential agency directors to go to Denmark to see how things are done. They saw educated people in Denmark working in the life space of children and adults in children's homes, day care centers, residences for people with disabilities and mental health issues, etc.). It was a profession. The people working were unionized, they had a common professional language, they were professionals, and they received a living salary.

**Did the trip motivate them to work for change?**

When they returned to the US really inspired – both with the practices they saw and with the educational preparation – a group of us then developed a local grass roots organization called the Mid-Hudson Coalition for the Development of Direct Care Practice. We went to the state university, the public university, as opposed to a private one, in order to make the education affordable for direct support workers. We approached the Department of Sociology, because we had a good connection there; two professors had travelled to Denmark on the study trip. Back then, in 1991, it was called Concentration in Direct Care Practice. For the first two years, the grassroots organization funded the program and the Mid-Hudson Coalition provided scholarships to students working in the field, so they

could be part of it. The first two years there were two Danish professors, who co-ran the program with the American professor who was the director of the program. After the first two years, the college decided that this was a viable program and took over all the funding, including hiring the faculty member responsible for the teaching of the courses and the curriculum development.

**You have been directing Concentration in Human Services since 2003. How did you get to work there?**

Yes, the first two years there were two Danish professors who co-ran the program with the American professor. I was hired to do so in 1997 after getting my master's and after working at the community college. Because social pedagogy is not understood and recognized in the US, I decided to get my master's in social work. Social work is a known and recognized profession in the US, and the closest to social pedagogy, so it made sense for me to pursue this degree. But I knew I wanted to promote and introduce social pedagogy. Since I never dreamed of becoming a social worker, I wasn't sure what to do with my degree, so I visited different agencies, I called people I knew, and I called a colleague at the local two-year community college. Coincidentally, she said that she was just about to call me, because the human services program at the college had been awarded a grant to hire an extra person to teach direct support workers, who worked in the field so they could obtain a certificate in human services and direct support. I worked there for three and a half years. At that point, the faculty member who worked with the sociology professor in the Concentration of Human Services program left, and I applied and was hired as a lecturer in Concentration of Human Services at the State University of New York. When the person in charge of the program retired, I took over and have been the director since 2003.

**How would you characterize the current theory and practice of social pedagogy in the US?**

The thing is that because social pedagogy doesn't exist in the US, I keep coming back to what the situation is for people who work in the life space of people needing some kind of support. Daniel Schugurensky, who I presented with at the social pedagogy conference, has written an article about traditions in the US that really are social pedagogical traditions. These traditions and the practices that followed have lost out to a more clinical way of practicing. Most social workers spend very little time with the individual clients they work with. They are the case managers or therapists, and they are not working in the life space of clients. They could be great, and they might do great work, but they generally only see clients for half an hour or an hour a week. The people working in the life space with individuals needing support are the paraprofessionals without education.

**One of your professional interests is the professionalization of human services. Could you tell us more?**

As I said before, especially in residential care and the child welfare system, there are no requirements for the staff working in the life space. Some states require some training (a week or two weeks) before you get to actually work with people, but you don't have a common language and common theoretical base, because it is not a profession. There is no cohesiveness, no pride in the profession, no base of knowledge. The staff turnover is horrendous. Young people, who get into the field enthusiastically to work, get discouraged for two reasons: one is that they don't get paid a living salary; the pay is so bad. Then a lot of workers have to work two or three jobs in order to sustain themselves and their families, which means they don't have time to be with their families, and they are exhausted. The second reason is that they also burn out because the system doesn't support them, because there is no profession. So, these young people coming in very enthusiastically, leave very quickly. They go back to the university to get a professional degree and a professional job. The people who stay are predominantly women, often women who are already disadvantaged, often women of color. It is a woman's profession of uneducated, well-meaning, sometimes very talented people...who are just not able to do the job effectively, because of the constant turnover and lack of support. Of course, when working with traumatized children in the child welfare system or with children with disabilities, they need

consistency, safety, continuity, and, because of the constant turnover, it becomes a very unsafe environment. This is true for the staff and, of course, for the people receiving support. A child welfare expert from the field of direct care once said that the requirement for such a job is the ability to “fog a mirror”, which is just to breathe, basically no requirements. If you don’t have a profession, it is difficult to argue why you should have better pay, why you should have better working conditions. It is really a vicious cycle.

**What is the relationship between the Concentration in Human Services program and Social Pedagogy? How do you integrate social pedagogy in the study program?**

The Concentration in Human Services program was originally called Concentration in Direct Care. Just before I took over the position as director of the program, I got questions from people in the field such as: “why would I go and study something at the university that I don’t need the degree for? It doesn’t make sense; then I’d rather be a social worker, psychologist, or a mental health counselor”.

At the community college level, the two-year level, there are human services programs all over the country. They are very good programs, but, of course, the field is not rewarding their degree, because they don’t necessarily get paid better. However, we changed the name of the program to Concentration of Human Services to align ourselves with the programs that were already there to educate people working in the life space.

We are integrating social pedagogy in the choices of assigned readings, practices, and concepts. It has really helped that over the past 15 years or so, there is much more very good and accessible literature in English on social pedagogy available. Originally, when I started, the literature was very inaccessible and esoteric. We now integrate concepts like “the common third”, “the 3Ps”, and “it depends” in addition to social constructivism, *haltung*, and much more. And, of course, we also rely on a lot of theories that are used in social work. The social work content in the US is very good. The problem is that these well-educated professionals do not work in the life space of people. We have a program that is inspired specifically by the Danish model, but also more generally by a European model. The students appreciate it. They go out on their three internships. And then they see that it is not really practiced out in the field. So, there is a divide.

However, based on the feedback we get, I know that we are socializing the students into the social pedagogical framework that they bring with them. But, as a former Danish professor who used to teach at our program said: “It is like putting a square peg into a round hole”. They come out with a strong sociological foundation, understanding social inequality, intersectionality, and different oppressive forces, and have a solid knowledge and understanding of social pedagogy. But they enter into an environment where the educated people are in offices, and the uneducated people are working “on the floor”, in the life space, working hands-on with service recipients. And for them to survive professionally and economically, they have to get into these offices where the professionals are. So, we still have a huge void of educated people.

In the disability field, there are some good initiatives happening. Formal training of workers in the disability field is happening all over the country. However, training, I believe, is not enough to develop a profession. Education is needed. We have tried to professionalize the field of human services via education for decades, and we have hoped that the agencies would hire the graduates, give them better salaries and different responsibilities, but the field, unfortunately, hasn’t changed. There are at least two reasons for this lack of change. First, the agencies don’t have the funding to do it. The funding that agencies get is allocated to specific services, and agencies cannot just change the funding allocations. The second reason, and I think I said it in my presentation, is more a question of worldview and culture. The United States considers itself a country that does things right, the country that has the knowledge, “the greatest country in the world”, so to speak. Consequently, people, including people in the field of human services, don’t look elsewhere. Why would you look elsewhere when you live in the best country in the world? So, I see it as part of my responsibility and commitment to expose people to different models. This has had an impact. I have taken students and professionals to South

Africa, Germany, Denmark (in addition to arranging trips to Italy and Spain), and participants come back with a new vision of how things can be different. This is incredibly inspiring. Because if you don't have a vision that things can be done differently, you are not going to try to make them different.

**What would help those working in the life space of vulnerable people?**

Education! I have noticed a difference between people who are educated and people who are not – regardless of their personal attributes. Educated pedagogues already have the educational scaffolding. They have knowledge and practical experience. When you then add additional training to this knowledge and experience, it becomes sustainable. Educated pedagogues stay in their profession. They don't leave. They might go to a different agency, work with a different population. But they still have a foundation of knowledge and experience. For the American life space, direct support workers, there is no scaffolding, because one person comes with a high school diploma, one with different work experience and when they receive training, it has nowhere to go...;there is no scaffolding, so to speak. You have this work force of people who are not a cohesive group.

**There is a huge difference between teaching theory and practice in the field of social pedagogy...**

We teach about the strength perspective, the ecological model, we teach about intersectionality, we teach about so many helpful and important theories and concepts, but the people working in the life space of vulnerable people are not getting that. Consequently, the services and interventions are often ineffective and, at times, even abusive. As I said before, when you have such a horrendous turnover of staff, it is very unsafe for the children. If you are unsafe, you are going to close down or you are going to act up. And if you have staff who cannot decode that behavior, then the risk is that it becomes a very, very violent environment. There is a lot of physical intervention as a reaction to the kids' behavior. And, importantly, acting out as a result of the staff's actions or inactions...If the staff weren't constantly new, they would know the people they are working with, and they could prevent this unsafe environment. There is a law limiting physical interventions, but the people working in the field say they still feel unsafe; everybody feels unsafe. It's a very stressful working and living environment, which is another reason why people do not want to stay in the field. It is simply too hard, too stressful, and too dangerous.

**Is it possible to build a social pedagogical profession in the US?**

Starting a new profession takes a lot of time and requires political will. Sustainable changes are not going to happen, I believe, until there is an education, a professional license (to determine and limit who the workers in the life space are), and a union. In Denmark, most professionals are unionized, and the union has two functions: it acts as a traditional trade union, such as working for better salaries and better working conditions, but it is also a professional union which collaborates with educational programs and offers and promotes further professional training and professional development. In the US, even social workers, despite truly being a profession, don't have a union. We only have a professional organization. Consequently, there is no one advocating for better working conditions and salaries.

**How has the COVID pandemic affected the field? And could social pedagogy help?**

COVID has affected the field of human services very dramatically. There is a shortage of staff everywhere, in all professions. We just tried to hire a bus for a field trip with the students. The bus is there, but the company does not have any drivers. The field of human services is in a total crisis right now. I have a private Facebook group for our former and current students. Frequently in recent months, former students who are working in the field have posted in this group: "If anybody wants to work for our agency, we have all these jobs...".But there are no people to fill these jobs. I am a mother of a young man with disabilities, and he has had the right for a support worker for 20 hours a week for several months now, but there are no workers. Before COVID, around 33% of positions were not filled

in many residential agencies. Therefore, people working in agencies were forced to work overtime. Now it is a total crisis. A student of mine used to work with people with disabilities, now she works in a coffee shop, and she is paid the same. She said she couldn't handle the stress. Of course, social pedagogy could help, but we don't have it – yet!

**So what is your final message to our readers?**

Despite the challenges that we have, whether it is the US, the Czech Republic, Denmark, or any other country, the community of people dedicated to social pedagogy is just so inspiring! I truly believe in the social pedagogy profession and will continue my efforts promoting it in the US and elsewhere!

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Mette Christiansen is originally a social pedagogue from Denmark. Mette has provided services in both Denmark and the US to a variety of populations, including children and youth in foster care, children and adults with autism and other developmental disabilities, adults in the criminal justice, mental health and substance abuse systems, and deaf children, youth and adults. Since obtaining her Master's in Social Work degree in the US, she has provided individual, group, and family therapy and consulted to agencies seeking to improve their quality of services. Mette began her academic career at the State University of New York Dutchess as a fieldwork supervisor and adjunct, and since 1997 has been at the State University of New York at New Paltz, teaching in the Concentration in Human Services program within the Department of Sociology. Mette became the Director of the Concentration in Human Services program in 2003. Mette's teaching is informed by her social pedagogical work and her extensive international experience working with various populations. Mette's areas of research and professional interests include professionalization and educational socialization of human services and social workers, as well as international social welfare. For the last 25 years, she has facilitated and conducted study abroad social welfare courses in Denmark, Germany, Italy, and South Africa.