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International Cooperation between Social Pedagogues

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Commentary

International Cooperation between Social Pedagogues

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Social pedagogues and social educators are a group of professionals that are rarely acknowledged for their actual work and expertise. In many countries, they are often juxtaposed with social workers, or other types of educators, with no regards to the specific field of knowledge and underlying theories that social pedagogues have attained through their education and training. Knowledge and theories distinguish social pedagogy, in theory and in practice, from that of social work and other professions.

I was recently in Moscow where I attended the congress of the Russian Union of Social Workers and Social Pedagogues. The president of the union, Antonina Dashkina, received well-deserved applause when she told the audience that the following day she would meet the Russian president, Mr. Medvedev, with 20 social workers, in order to receive a medal of honor for the work they did during the extreme heat wave and severe forest fires that Russia experienced last summer. The point was that other professions, such as firemen and paramedics, had already received their medal of honor a while ago, and that Ms. Dashkina had fought to get one for the social workers too. However, I am sure that most of the social pedagogues in Russia were also affected and worked hard too during the heat and the fires—but their work is less visible.

In Denmark, we have a saying, “Only a fool doesn’t fear the sea.” Witty heads have turned this into, “Only a foolish regional politician doesn’t fear the uproar of parents,” referring to the fact that parents are a powerful group, especially parents with children in regular day care. Most people know somebody with their child in either day care or in school; few people know somebody with a child with developmental disabilities or a criminal record. Surely, this is a good thing, but this also means that the social pedagogues working with marginalized groups get less attention, although their work is just as important as any school teacher’s or social worker’s.

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So, we must tell our politicians about the work we do and the expertise we have in regards to persons with developmental disabilities, troubled children and youth, and other marginalized groups. We must tell them how we make a difference in terms of assisting them to be a part of society and live their lives in self-determination, citizenship, participation, and inclusion. We must tell people that, although our work may seem invisible, because it is carried out in corners of society that few people ever see or even are aware of, the effects of it are great; and without it, without the professional expertise and assistance that is put into the lives of those persons who for one reason or another are in a life situation where they can easily fall overboard, our societies would be poor.

As the president of the International Association of Social Educators, AIEJI, my main objective is to make us stronger as a profession, and make us heard. AIEJI (www.aieji.net) was founded in the aftermath of the second world war when the high commissioners of France, Germany, and the Netherlands held a meeting to discuss what to do with the many children and youth left orphaned after the war—how to ensure their education. Soon, many other European countries joined and so, AIEJI was initially created as a joint European project focused on children and youth. AIEJI is French and means “Association internationale des éducateurs de jeunes inadapté.”

Today, AIEJI has grown and also represents people working with persons with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities, and the organization has spread beyond the borders of Europe. One of the means to make us stronger as an organization and to give us a voice is to obtain NGO-status within both the UN and EU systems. Another important activity is to produce policy papers and discussion papers that define our common professional standards and point out the challenges we face. With this kind of work we can manifest ourselves as a profession with common international standards and a common framework. In concrete, in 2006 AIEJI published the paper “The professional competencies of social educators—a conceptual framework,” which sets a common ground for the competencies a social pedagogue must have, and recently published the discussion paper “Working with persons with developmental disabilities—the role of the social educator,” which talks about the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the challenges it represents to social pedagogues in practice. Through 2011 AIEJI will work on a similar paper regarding the role of the social educator when working with troubled children and youth. Eventually, AIEJI will also collect and produce knowledge in order to point to differences in policy making, methods, and results.

However, in order to establish AIEJI as an international platform for social educators and social pedagogues we need to gain more support from professional organizations and individual members who are interested in this joint, international collaboration. A great source of enthusiasm and new memberships is the AIEJI World Congress held every 4th year. The

congresses are great international events where social pedagogues and social educators from all over the world get a chance to meet. For many of them, it is a unique opportunity to meet fellow colleagues from other countries with whom they can exchange knowledge and professional experiences in their specific field of work. The last congress was in Copenhagen in May 2009. I know that several professional and personal friendships were founded back then and many participants shared their new contacts with colleagues back home who later arranged study trips to go and learn from one another. When this sort of thing happens, it makes me a very happy person because this is the core of international relations—this is what it is all about: to get to know each other, exchange knowledge, and learn from each other. It is through this we strengthen ourselves as a profession; it is through this we develop as a profession; and it is through this we establish how and why we make a difference.

Therefore, international collaboration is very important. It can take many forms: writing a paper or article together, conducting a survey, going on study trips, taking part in online discussion forums, performing volunteer work in other countries, and so forth. At the very base of it is the inspiration it spurs, the new knowledge it produces, and the feeling of knowing that all over the world there are people working with the same challenges as you, but using other methods to handle them. And from this we can learn, from this we can grow, as practitioners and as persons.