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Respecting Students’ Developmental Potential and Reflecting on Personal Experience: Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski’s Perspective on Teaching and Education (1864–1934)

ABSTRACT

In 2024, we commemorate the 160th anniversary of the birth and the 90th anniversary of the passing of Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski—a philosopher, Jesuit, teacher, educator, and author of widely read and highly regarded works on education, particularly esteemed in German-speaking regions. Despite his roots in a prestigious Polish noble family who lived near Lviv, Dunin-Borkowski’s contributions to educational thought have regrettably remained underappreciated in Poland. This article endeavors to shed light on specific facets of Dunin-Borkowski’s pedeutology through an in-depth examination of his pedagogical autobiography. The focal points of analysis include his profound belief in the formative influence of teacher figures in shaping one’s identity as an educator. Moreover, the author delves into Dunin-Borkowski’s commitment to identifying and nurturing individuals with above-average potential, primed to assume leadership roles in society. The author also places significant emphasis on Dunin-Borkowski’s advocacy for recognizing and honoring the inherent potential of students, a principle that continues to resonate in European pedagogical discourse from the late 19th to early 20th century and beyond.

KEYWORDS

pedeutology, teacher,
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educating leaders

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Artykuły i rozprawy

Articles and dissertations

Introduction

The year 2024 marks the 160th anniversary of the birth and the 90th anniversary of the death of Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski—a world-renowned scholar of Spinoza’s philosophy and a teacher, pedagogue, and educator. He authored several influential monographs on education, many of which saw numerous editions between the wars. This Polish nobleman from Lviv, later a German Jesuit, spent his entire life studying and working in Western Europe, and wrote almost exclusively in German. The aim of this article is to present selected strands of his pedeutology.

In Poland, Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski’s publications, especially in the field of pedagogy, have not been analyzed in detail. An exception is the work of the Catholic educator Jan Andrzej Kuchta (1900–1946), who was influenced by Dunin’s views on the trust-based relationship between the teacher and the student (Kostkiewicz 2013: 529–531). Polish philosopher and psychologist Fr. Paweł Siwek SJ also synthesized Dunin’s pedagogy in his posthumous memoir published in the Warsaw journal *Przegląd Filozoficzny* [*Philosophical Review*] (Siwek 1935). Fr. Siwek’s text included a biography of Dunin, which was recently revisited by Jacek Rodzeń in an article examining Dunin’s view on Einstein’s theory of relativity (Rodzeń 2022).

In this study of Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski’s pedeutological views, I used the method of personal document analysis, focusing foremost on his intellectual and educational autobiography (Dunin-Borkowski 1926), which he wrote in 1926 at the age of 62. This work was composed in response to a request and offered his pedagogical observations from the standpoint of his long career as a teacher and educator (11 years at the Austrian Jesuit institution “Stella Matutina,” 8 years at a boarding school for grammar school students in Bonn, and 10 years as a spiritual director at the seminary for priests in Wrocław).

My goal was not to create a new pedagogical biography of Dunin-Borkowski, as he had actually written one himself, albeit within the brief framework required by the publisher. While any autobiography is inherently historical, Dunin did not compile his as “a witness, describing things he had seen or heard,” intended as “the basis for

reconstructing the actual objective course” of events (Znaniński 1976: 154). Rather, he subjected his life experiences to a form of psychological analysis, making a determination of his “impressions, perceptions, notions, feelings, emotions, desires, dispositions, [and] inclinations.” Concurrently, he approached his life like a sociologist who reflects on his surroundings and on “in what character the objects that compose them enter into his consistent conscious personality” (ibid.: 155).

Most importantly, Dunin crafted his autobiography as an educator, outlining the ideals and educational philosophies of his era and the ways in which they were put into practice. This autobiography also serves as an educational document, which allows us to probe into his character and to “apply, in contemporary educational practice, the ideas learned through this research endeavor” (Szulakiewicz 2004: 7). Dunin-Borkowski’s autobiography is a quintessential ego-document—a source that reflects self-perception and

presents a personal account of oneself, others, and events. A common feature of all texts that can be described as ego-documents is that they provide information on the author’s attitude towards value systems and their evolution over time. They also reveal the author’s state of knowledge and life experiences. (Szulakiewicz 2013: 67).

Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski’s text embodies all the elements typical of autobiography as described by Władysława Szulakiewicz, who writes that, in this genre

the author focuses primarily on himself, his actions, the successive stages of his life, the turning points in his biography, and the value system he adheres to—his successes and failures.... Autobiography is thus an attempt at self-knowledge, as autobiographers endeavor to record their own story, and this results in a literary work that offers insight into their personality. (Szulakiewicz 2013: 68)

For me, Dunin-Borkowski’s autobiography provided the impetus for attempting to understand his pedeutological insights by situating them within the broader context of his pedagogical and religious beliefs, as well as by considering the potential impact of the intellectual milieu in which he studied and worked. At this point, however, an important remark must be made: despite being well-read in pedagogical literature, Dunin-Borkowski, when formulating his educational concepts, including his views on pedeutology, almost

completely disregarded scholarly sources. Instead, he relied heavily on his extensive experience as a teacher and educator, coupled with careful observation of his students. He commented on this approach candidly: “Books and lectures, even by eminent and important authors, have not influenced me even nearly as much as thinking through the problems myself and creating educational concepts based on my own observations” (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 8f.). This does not suggest that his views on teaching and education were entirely original. Rather, they grew out of the Ignatian tradition in which he was initially shaped as a student at the Jesuit grammar school in Feldkirch and later as a student under the guidance of Jesuit scholars in classical and modern philology, philosophy, and theology.

Three prominent themes in his *pedeutology* and conception of the teacher seem to be relevant and thought-provoking for contemporary educational theory and practice.

Teachers and pedagogues inspired by personal role models from the past

The first point to which Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski draws attention is the importance of personal role models for those entering the teaching profession. Young teachers or candidates for teaching may draw inspiration from pedagogues they admired during their own school years. In his educational autobiography, Dunin-Borkowski notes that positive memories of one’s own teachers are very rare, but for current teachers, they are a real treasure (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 9). Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on this statement, but merely notes that he himself had few teachers who played an important role in his life. However, he mentions that in the three Austrian schools where he studied—the grammar school at the Benedictine Abbey in Kremsmünster, the Theresian Academy for the nobility in Vienna, and the Jesuit institution “Stella Matutina” in Feldkirch—he never experienced unfair or demeaning treatment from his teachers.

Dunin-Borkowski considers only one of those teachers to be an exceptional figure: Friedrich Slameczka (1843–1913), his class teacher in fifth and sixth grades at the Vienna Theresianum. Slameczka, a fairly well-known classical philologist from Lviv like

Dunin-Borkowski, taught at the Austrian state gymnasium in Cieszyn and published a short article on Sophocles in its yearbooks (Slameczka 1869). He later taught Latin and German at the Theresian Academy and eventually served twice as principal of the Vienna Academic Gymnasium (Akademisches Gymnasium) (1888–1889, 1905–1906). Dunin-Borkowski remembers him as an extraordinarily gifted educator. He writes that Slameczka's sense of justice, calm strength, conscientiousness, and love of order kept all the boys in line, even though he never used punishment or had outbursts of anger (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 8).

From Dunin-Borkowski's description of Slameczka's attitude, his character and teaching successes, we can infer that Slameczka was an important personal role model. The affection seems to have been mutual, as Slameczka exchanged letters with his former student even 30 years later, when Dunin-Borkowski had become a prominent writer and educator at "Stella Matutina" ([*List Friedricha Slameczki do Stanisława Dunina-Borkowskiego*] 1905, July 9).

Dunin-Borkowski also mentions three other teachers, all Jesuits, whom he considered "far beyond the average" (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 8). The first was Augustin Link (1819–1886) who taught at Feldkirch for 23 years as a renowned music teacher and organizer of musical life, transforming "Stella Matutina" into a regional center of church music (Link, P. Augustin. *Musikpädagogie* 1971). Another exceptional teacher for Dunin-Borkowski was Johann Nepomuk Fischer (1843–1893), also based in Feldkirch, Austria, where he served as professor, prefect of studies, and college rector. He helped secure state teaching rights for the Jesuits in Feldkirch (Koch 1934: 558). The third notable teacher was Aloisius Piscalar (1819–1892), one of the pioneers of the Feldkirch center, first director of the grammar school, teacher of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and religion, and rector of the college (Koch 1934: 1428). These three educators were all leaders in Jesuit education of the time and contributed to the high standard at "Stella Matutina," which became a popular school for many noble families from Germany and Austria-Hungary, including prominent Polish families.

Dunin-Borkowski does not specify what qualities he admired in these educators, but his mention of them by name indicates that they left a positive impression on him and may have inspired

him during his 11-year tenure as a teacher and pedagogue at “Stella Matutina.”

Reflecting on these teachers, Dunin-Borkowski adds an important remark: neither they nor any other people served as models for him to be “slavishly” imitated (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 8). He also cautioned his students against copying others, adding that the same applies to modeling oneself on any great historical figures. Such figures may have been inspirational, but it would be completely unnatural to try replicating their life goals, motivations, or specific behaviors and personality traits. For Dunin-Borkowski, memories of influential teachers and authority figures hold significant value in shaping the personalities of future or current educators, and contribute to their personal and professional growth. However, for obvious reasons, these memories should inspire rather than lead to mindless imitation of their models.

Focusing on gifted students

In his remarks on the role of teachers and pedagogues, Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski emphasizes the importance of focusing on particularly gifted students. In his autobiography, he acknowledges developing an aversion to mediocrity through his interactions with young people, which led him to believe in the need for careful selection of students and special attention to those with exceptional talent or strong character (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 9). The education of leaders, directors, and outstanding personalities is a recurring theme in his pedagogical writings, where he openly advocates for elite education over an egalitarian approach.

What underpins this emphasis on educating above-average students? Dunin-Borkowski’s background likely played a significant role—coming from an influential noble and intellectual family in Lviv, coupled with his own remarkable intellect, may have contributed to a worldview that sometimes limited his understanding of those underprivileged. His unique intellect was evident not only in his extensive and insightful works on Spinoza’s philosophy (spanning over 2,500 pages), but also in the impressions he left on those who knew him. Even Benito Mussolini acknowledged this remarkable Jesuit in a solemn speech before the Italian Senate on May 25,

1929, marking the signing of the treaty with the Holy See, calling him “the most outstanding scholar of Spinoza” and “a man of great intellectual ability” (Siwek 1935: 135). Similarly, Josef Pieper (1904–1997)—a prominent German Catholic philosopher and leading neo-Thomist of the twentieth century who met Dunin-Borkowski in 1925—wrote that Dunin-Borkowski was among the few people he had met in his life that he could, without hesitation, call wise (Pieper 1976: 73). Thus, Dunin-Borkowski was exceptionally talented and naturally gravitated toward spending time with similarly gifted people, including his own students.

The Lviv nobleman’s predilection for exceptional individuals was also shaped by his family upbringing, especially under the influence of his mother. Stanisław was strongly attached to her throughout his life. In one letter, he described her as “a woman distinguished by her strength of spirit and magnanimity, a modest yet majestic woman, who, by her very appearance, aroused respect and silence” (Pummerer 1935). After his father’s tragic suicide at age 33, his courageous mother sent him to boarding schools hundreds of kilometers from home, so she raised him up mainly through her lengthy letters, which he regarded as “literary and ethical masterpieces.” In these letters, she urged him to be “independent, prudent, and reliable” (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 7). Consequently, he developed a lasting aversion to any kind of mediocrity.

Dunin-Borkowski’s focus on gifted students was undoubtedly also influenced by his Jesuit formation, which followed studies at the prestigious scientific and educational establishment run by the Jesuits at Feldkirch. From its inception, the Jesuit order had emphasized training the elite and admitted its representatives into their ranks. Further selection involved allowing only those young Jesuits who scored higher than *mediocritas* (average) on exams to advance to the full three-year course of philosophy and then the four-year course in scholastic theology (*Ratio atque institutio studiorum SJ* 2000, Provincial Rules, no. 19.11). It was these graduates of these studies who were assigned to teach the lower grammar school grades, while those completing theology moved to teach the upper grades. This process functioned as a positive selection for the teaching profession: only gifted and well-prepared individuals became teachers. As a result, these educators, willingly or unwillingly, often had a better

understanding of students like themselves and little patience for weaker students (unless they came from influential families). Consequently, teachers tended to dismiss underperforming students from school or informed their parents that their sons would likely not succeed in further studies.

Although Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski was active in the newly re-established Society of Jesus (revived in 1814), he embraced the order's traditional focus on cultivating unique individuals who were, currently or in the future, likely to play significant roles in society. This leadership-oriented training, characteristic of the Jesuit order, stemmed largely from a deep admiration for its founder, Ignatius Loyola, a proud and influential member of the Basque nobility. Loyola was raised with the expectation of becoming a leader—someone who would command respect and strive to “mean more” (*valer mas*), aspiring to be stronger, wealthier, and more prominent than others (García Mateo 1991: 27). Later, as a result of his spiritual awakening and conversion, Ignatius redirected his ambitions toward serving the “Eternal King,” but even in this, he sought to excel and distinguish himself (Loyola 2019, no. 94). His great ambition set a standard for the Jesuits, who sought to emulate him.

For Ignatius Loyola, the *Spiritual Exercises*—steeped in his personal religious experiences and reflections—were the main tool for forming future Jesuits and influential laypersons associated with the order. The conscientious execution of these *Exercises* (hours of meditation combined with an examination of conscience) was intended to lead retreatants to reorient their lives. However, Loyola believed that only individuals with strong desires and ambitious goals should undertake the full *Spiritual Exercises*. As Dunin-Borkowski observed, for those lacking these traits, it was better to offer a sort of “Ersatz” of the *Exercises*—a smaller taste or preview, nothing more (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 19). Not only did Dunin-Borkowski himself complete the full, rigorous 30-day *Spiritual Exercises* twice in his life, then repeated an abbreviated version annually, and frequently led others through the process. He also authored a biography of Ignatius in which he portrayed him as a man of great ambitions (Dunin-Borkowski 1930). This immersion in Ignatian spirituality likely had an impact on Dunin's psyche and outlook, leading him to adopt

a selective approach with his students concentrating on unique individuals who demonstrated exceptional potential.

Dunin-Borkowski condemned the exceptionally harmful tendency in schools at the time —consistent with educational regulations—to treat all students equally and to strive to make them more alike. In his view, this stifled the growth of students with strong character by placing them in the same line as those of average ability. Dunin-Borkowski insisted that “one must not offer the same thing to everyone, even though we may be accused of bias; even though students deprived of attention may look at this with envy” (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 19). He argued: “One must have the courage to distinguish between the leaders and the crowd. One must have the courage to devote much more time to the chosen few than to the rest of the mass. Even if the latter bear thirtyfold fruit, the elect bear a hundredfold” (ibid.). Therefore, for Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski, the fundamental condition for education and upbringing is a careful selection of students.

This approach may seem shocking to contemporary readers who advocate the commendable, albeit utopian, claim that all students should be treated equally and who hold the *a priori* (as it is not supported by research) view that all students have the same developmental potential. Dunin, who began publishing on pedagogy at age 54 after years of experience as a teacher, would strongly disagree with this statement, even though he was employed in institutions chiefly attended by students from families with high cultural capital. Even among them, he recognized diversity in intellect, motivation, and diligence. However, he also cautioned against bringing excessive attention to gifted students at the expense of the average—an effort he described as “a real art” (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 19). He did not elaborate on what this pedagogical virtuosity was supposed to entail but formulated a general Jesuit principle: education is not about achieving success, but about making an effort (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 9).

In summary, Dunin’s answer to the question of whether a teacher should treat all students equally is a firm “no.” The focus, he argued, should be on cultivating the development of those students who have leadership potential, though this does not mean completely

neglecting average students. In their case, great success might not be achieved, but the teacher's efforts will remain significant.

Appreciation of the developmental potential of students

If a teacher or pedagogue wants to shape strong characters and raise future leaders, should they use some form of coercion? Dunin-Borkowski would answer this question with a clear “no.” Just as Carl Rogers (1902–1987), two generations younger, viewed the psychological relationship between therapist and client as a model for the educational relationship between teacher and student, so the German Jesuit was convinced that the school classroom relationship should be modeled on the dynamic between the leader of an Ignatian retreat (*Spiritual Exercises*) and its participants.

Josef Pieper pointed out some features of this relationship in his memoirs of a 30-day retreat he attended near Basel under the direction of Fr. Dunin-Borkowski. Pieper described Dunin as a master who displayed “a generous showing of appreciation [to the retreatant], ... an ability to reveal to him infinite dimensions of freedom, and, above all, a compelling kindness.” Pieper recalls: “When I entered his room, I immediately got the impression that not only was I welcome, but that he was waiting only for me, as if no one else was going to visit him again that day” (Pieper 1976: 74). The master/teacher shows the retreatant/student kindness and appreciation for his uniqueness.

Dunin-Borkowski emphasized that only what the retreatant discovers and understands on his own brings true satisfaction. Therefore, the master must not deprive him of the opportunity to make his own discoveries or impose his own beliefs. In the language of the *Spiritual Exercises*, this principle is expressed as follows: “Let [the retreat master] permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord” (Loyola 2019, no. 15). Similarly, a teacher should allow the student to discover knowledge independently, form their own judgments, and deepen their understanding of themselves and the world.

It would be perfect—writes Dunin-Borkowski about the *Spiritual Exercises* if the content presented to the retreatant were concise and substantial, without forcing anything on them or extracting anything by force. The grace-guided soul seeks, ponders and finds on its own. Meanwhile,

the person leading the retreat should always be nearby, ready to help, walk alongside, ask questions, and offer explanations. (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 20)

According to Dunin-Borkowski, this is an accurate picture of how a teacher or pedagogue should relate to their students. He professes that he has always strived to be guided by respect for his students and for their developmental potential. He writes:

Discovering the unique form of each individual person, sensing what is primordial and formative in him or her, accompanying the student on their developmental path without imposing or even suggesting my own person or way of doing things—all this I have always considered to be my main task ... Unfortunately, despite my most sincere intentions, I did not always succeed in adhering to this principle. Authentic, independent young people are very delicate and sensitive, but they can also be infinitely grateful when they perceive this delicacy in the educator. (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 20).

Undoubtedly, such words could be spoken by many representatives of the New Education movement.

But should a teacher perhaps resort to some form of coercion when faced with the immaturity of their students? Dunin approaches this question in the following way:

One must be patient, persevering, cheerfully forbearing, and allow time and natural developmental processes to heal certain weaknesses themselves, rather than prematurely overwhelming the struggling young soul with exorbitant ideals. For, in that case, such a soul would learn self-deception, conceit, and even hypocrisy. (Dunin-Borkowski 1926: 20)

Like Célestin Freinet, who belonged to a younger generation and followed a different educational philosophy, Dunin-Borkowski allows his students to wander and learn in the dark because he is patient and trusts in their natural developmental processes.

No form of coercion is needed to shape strong individuals. On the contrary, gentle handling enables them to develop according to their natural inclinations and external conditions. This way, they are not molded in the fashion of closer or more distant authorities, but instead fulfill their own potential.

Conclusion

If one were to remain faithful to the pedeutological guidelines developed by Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski, one might not discuss his ideas and legacy at all. He insisted that teachers and pedagogues should work out their own educational credo based on interactions with individual students, especially those who are exceptional. This Polish nobleman, whom contemporaries describe as a remarkably modest man despite his significant academic and educational successes, would certainly not want to be considered a personal model teacher or educator to be imitated.

In his teaching, educational activities, and writings on pedagogy, he concentrated on the importance of raising leaders—strong and decisive people—while firmly rejecting any form of coercion or violence, even symbolic. Instead, he advocated for discreetly accompanying students and trusting in their natural developmental processes. In this regard, intentionally or not, Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski's views came close to those of prominent figures in the New Education movement and could even be counted among them, although it is uncertain whether this association would have mattered to him. As Josef Pieper writes:

In his conversations with me, Dunin never spoke about himself or his own affairs, even later when I met him among friends. I learned, by chance, from someone else that in many countries he is a well-known authority on research concerning Spinoza. I had not heard him ever even mention Spinoza's name. Also, from others, much later, I learned that this always cheerful man had suffered all these years, all his life, from severe headaches. (Pieper 1976: 74).

This article provides only an outline of Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski's views on the teacher and pedagogue. A fuller exposition would require further research into his other pedagogical works, especially his books, which were numerous and which enjoyed great popularity (*Reifendes Leben* 1920; *Führende Jugend* 1922; *Schöpferische Liebe* 1923; *Miniaturen erzieherischer Kunst* 1929; *Jesus als Erzieher* 1934). Reading these texts is not easy due to the author's rather complex argumentative style and the use of Schwabacher script in which they were printed. Unfortunately, Dunin-Borkowski did not have time to complete the systematic work on pedagogy he had been

preparing, as he died suddenly on May 1, 1934. All his notes were destroyed by the Gestapo when they began occupying the Munich Jesuit house on April 18, 1941 (Stasiewski 1959: 198).

Undoubtedly, however, his thought is worth studying, as it constitutes an interesting alternative to the views of the representatives of the New Education movement. On one hand—like them—it emphasizes the uniqueness of each student, values their latent potential, and calls for the teacher's respect for their developmental potential. On the other hand, it avoids the mythologizing of the child, the overemphasis on the child's subjectivity to the detriment of external elements of education, and the one-sided elevation of "heart and hand" over "mind." In this form, it can also serve as a compelling source of inspiration for contemporary pedeutology.

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