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The Pedagogical Relationship: Between the Child's Experience and the Adult's Responsibility. Inspirations and Interpretations in Phenomenological Pedagogical Practice

ABSTRACT

This article presents several contemporary approaches to the pedagogical relationship within the tradition of human science research. The idea and characteristics of the unique relationship between an adult and a child have long been central themes in this tradition. The article also examines this relationship in the context of post-war criticism and revision of the concept of the pedagogical relationship. A significant focus is placed on the child's experience and the issue of asymmetry, which is a defining feature of individual approaches to the pedagogical relationship at each stage of its development.

Of particular importance in this reflection is the ethical dimension explored by researchers interested in the concept of the pedagogical relationship and the methodology of phenomenology of practice as developed by Max van Manen, and inspired by Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy. The article briefly traces the evolution of thought on the pedagogical relationship, from the so-called "first inversion" (Hermann Nohl), through the "second inversion" (Gert Biesta), which

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suggests that the awareness of the adult's limitations and doubts should be recognized as an integral part of pedagogical theory.

The discussion demonstrates that the asymmetry between the child and the adult, which takes on a distinctly ethical character, remains the core issue of the pedagogical relationship. The concept of a pedagogical community is highlighted as revealing a particular ethical value in this context.

Introduction

The concept of the pedagogical relationship has a very long philosophical tradition, dating back to the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. In the introduction to the collection *No Education Without Relation*, Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin highlight the contributions of Wilhelm Dilthey. It was Dilthey who identified one of the fundamental tasks in reconceptualizing the curriculum and phenomenological research in pedagogy. In 1888, he stated that the study of pedagogical reality must begin with describing the educator's relationship with the student (Bingham, Sidorkin 2004: 8). From that moment on, the pedagogical relationship—understood as the emotional bond between the teacher and the student (or the adult and the child—became a central theme, or, more critically, a challenging problem for the historically defined pedagogical branch of the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*) (Klafki 1970: 58).

Building on this groundwork, Norm Friesen observes that it is somewhat coincidental that Hermann Nohl is widely regarded as the pioneer of the theory of the pedagogical relationship. A student of Dilthey, Nohl positioned himself as a unifying figure within the "movement" that framed pedagogy as a theory centered on the relationship between the educator and the learner. However, as Friesen notes, while pedagogical studies rooted in the educator-student relationship have their origins in Dilthey's work, Dilthey emphasized not only the significance of this relationship, but also the descriptive methodology best suited for such research (Friesen 2017: 744). At the core of Hermann Nohl's influential concept is a profound affirmation of the primacy of the student's and teacher's experiences, with a particular emphasis on overturning their "traditional" hierarchy. Instead of prioritizing the teacher's experiences, expectations, and challenges

in the pedagogical context, Nohl attributed significant importance to the experiences of the child and young person.

The article briefly outlines the evolution of reflections on the pedagogical relationship, tracing it from the so-called "first inversion" (Hermann Nohl) to the "second inversion" (Gert Biesta). It emphasizes that acknowledging the limitations and uncertainties of the adult should be seen as an integral aspect of pedagogical theory. Particularly significant in this context is the ethical dimension explored by researchers influenced by Max van Manen's concept of the pedagogical relationship and the methodology of the phenomenology of practice, which draws inspiration from Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy. This perspective opens avenues for contemporary pedagogy informed by phenomenology and leads toward the development of educational theory and research, which ranges from William Pinar's autobiographical phenomenology and his approach to education, based on postmodern philosophy and psychoanalytic techniques, such as the method of Currere (Pinar 2015)—to phenomenological studies of the lived experiences of students and teachers, children and adults, situated in the realities of their daily lives (Van Manen 2015). In the continued development of Max van Manen's ideas, researchers such as Tone Saevi and Norm Friesen have made significant contributions to advancing the understanding of the pedagogical relationship.

Adult and child: change of places

Hermann Nohl defines the pedagogical relationship through two distinct approaches. The first, which is clearly "progressive" and "striving for reform," is outlined in his 1926 article *Gedanken für die Erziehungstätigkeit des Einzelnen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Erfahrungen von Freud und Alder*. This article focuses on pedagogical involvement with poor, socially, and morally vulnerable youth. In it, he describes the pedagogical relationship as a unique, creative bond that connects the teacher and the student (Nohl 1926: 153). He then presents an outline of his concept, which, as Friesen notes, contains numerous ideas that distinguish it from the teacher-centered understanding of the student-teacher relationship that we often recognize today (Friesen 2017: 744).

The second significant approach in Nohl's thought appears in his 1933 article *Der pädagogische Bezug und die Bildungsgemeinschaft* from the *Handbuch der Pädagogik*. This work is less revolutionary than his 1926 article. It presents definitions and descriptions of the pedagogical relationship that have since become some of the most frequently cited and discussed in English- and German-language literature on the subject. Here, Nohl defines the pedagogical relationship as an affectionate (loving, tender) connection between a mature individual and a young person who is just beginning to traverse life and discover their identity (Nohl 1933: 22).

Nohl's reflections were further developed and grounded in a question posed by Friedrich Schleiermacher: "What does the older generation really want from the younger generation?" This question carries a profound ethical significance that surpasses its philosophical and theoretical implications. What do we want for and from our children in this world? What do we owe them? What do we expect of them? In the context of these questions, education is understood as an intergenerational endeavor in which the older generation nurtures the younger and prepares it for the future.

This means that education is marked by a division, a split between the life-world and experiences of the older generation (the teacher, the pedagogue) and those of the younger generation (the student). Schleiermacher, like Dilthey and Nohl, points out that this division and interdependence between generations are prerequisites for all pedagogical reflection, engagement, and experience. Schleiermacher and Dilthey recognize this division as a collective, phylogenetic phenomenon. Nohl and other scholars of the pedagogical relationship explore its ontogeny, conceptualizing it as a "didactic structure" that connects the teacher and student (Mollenhauer 1968: 21).

If one considers that these two worlds—the world of the child's life and that of the adult—are constitutive of the entire educational situation, one cannot overlook the statement with which Nohl begins. He argues that all recommendations in the field of education have traditionally sprung from the experiences of the adult, shaped by their concerns, difficulties, and goals. In response to this, Nohl suggests an inversion (*Umdrehung*), a change of places between the world of the adult and their concerns and the world of the child. Nohl notes that this shift has far-reaching consequences, influencing

every moment, stage, situation, and event that makes up the educational process. In a key passage from his 1926 article, he describes this inversion as the fundamental position of what he called "new education" (Nohl 1926: 152).

Post-war revision of the concept of the pedagogical relationship

Nohl's strong emphasis on the love, authority, and responsibility of the adult, as well as the mutual love, obedience, and trust of the child, may now appear somewhat old-fashioned, if not problematic. Such a perspective, Norm Friesen stresses, fails to account for the fallibility of the adult, particularly given that errors in this relationship can be magnified by the actual or expected obedience, love, and trust of the child (Friesen 2017: 744; Klafki 1970: 84–91). German criticism of this concept of the pedagogical relationship, which is particularly prevalent in German-language literature, focuses on another issue, namely, the extent to which the pedagogical relationship refers—or fails to refer—to what Nohl called "the predetermined goals of the state, Church, law, and economics." This line of criticism dates back to Theodor Litt, who accused Nohl of neglecting the influence of "objective forces" in pedagogy (Litt 1927/1967: 116).

The same critical voice grew even louder after World War II. In 1968, Klaus Mollenhauer argued that the pedagogical relationship, along with Nohl's assumption of it as the most fundamental relationship, cannot be fully subjected to reflexive engagement. The implementation of pedagogical suggestions, he observed, always presupposes the adoption of a specific image of society (*Gesellschaftsbild*). The criteria for evaluating a pedagogical concept are inherently tied to a particular understanding of society (Mollenhauer 1968: 24–25). Building a vision of the pedagogical relationship, therefore, requires considering the full range of social roles on which both the teacher and the student depend, personally and socially. Consequently, to understand what is appropriate in this relationship, one must also understand what is deemed appropriate in a given culture and society.

Thus, it became apparent that both the assertion that the pedagogical relationship is independent of such social factors (as Nohl claimed) and the idea that it should align with them (as Langeveld suggested) are problematic. Placing these factors in the same

framework will almost certainly lead to a rigid reproduction of social reality and the emergence of new issues, while arguing for their autonomy will always be fraught with the risk of veering into arbitrary interpretations and dangerous idiosyncrasies.

In 1970, Wolfgang Klafki revisited the issue of the pedagogical relationship, developing his reflections based on the essential features of Hermann Nohl's concept. However, his conclusions included a cautionary critique, based on a detailed comparison between the "authoritarian" pedagogical style he associated with Nohl's ideas and an approach he viewed as better serving "social integration" and as being more "democratic" (Friesen 2017: 748; Klafki 1970: 84–91).

As Friesen noted, Otto Friedrich Bollnow, a student of Nohl and Heidegger, offers another important perspective. Bollnow enters the discussion on the pedagogical relationship in a distinctly affirmative manner. His approach does not explicitly reject love and obedience but instead redefines them by emphasizing trust, hope, and dialogic reciprocity. Bollnow referred to "dialogical existentialism," stressing that in a pedagogical relationship (as in any dialogical encounter), the absolute, unconditional affirmation of each participant is a necessary condition. Accordingly, when the educator's intentions encounter sensitivity and openness to cooperation from the student, the pedagogical relationship can reach its full potential. Both Nohl and Bollnow refer to such concepts as devotion, openness, and trust from the child/student. They describe the teaching process in terms evocative of family life, in which the student-teacher relationship develops into a personal, intentional bond that becomes a reference point for the child's understanding of reality and their own experiences (Friesen 2017: 748).

Critics of pre-war pedagogical concepts, such as Wolfgang Klafki and Klaus Mollenhauer, argue that the pedagogical relationship, when embedded in family analogies and focused on the inner world of experiences, lacks a broader social perspective. They contend that such a concept, inherently tied to a specific ideological system, fails to acknowledge or address how families and schools perpetuate social and class-based inequalities.

Ethical nature of the pedagogical relationship

In his efforts to establish a suitable place for the concept of the pedagogical relationship in English-language discourse, Max van Manen acknowledged the influence of Hermann Nohl, though he was particularly shaped by the views of Martinus Langeveld. From Nohl, Van Manen adopted three key features of the concept: the personal and intensely experienced quality of the pedagogical relationship, its intentional focus on the present and future of the pupil, and its distinctive "directed quality"—its orientation toward the pedagogical relevance of the child's current situation (Van Manen 2015: 119).

However, Langeveld's influence was far more relevant to Van Manen's concept. Friesen points out that the influence that Van Manen attributes to Langeveld stems from Van Manen's deep conviction that the pedagogical relationship in everyday life is fundamentally an ethical relationship (Friesen 2017: 149). Friesen emphasizes that this idea should be traced back to both Nohl and Schleiermacher. Nevertheless, the essential elements of Langeveld's reflections bear a striking resemblance to Nohl's ideas. While Langeveld stresses the importance of love, obedience, and authority, he viewed the pedagogical relationship, as Friesen notes, as closely allied with the influence of the Church, the state, and other "objective forces."

This point, along with several others in Langeveld's reflections, was not explicitly discussed by Van Manen, who was primarily—if not exclusively—concerned with the deeply felt ethical and practical nature of the pedagogical relationship (ibidem). It is clear, however, that Nohl, Langeveld, and Van Manen agreed on several points. One of those points in particular proved to be more than just a prerequisite for understanding the pedagogical relationship: the primacy of primordial consciousness and lived experience over criteria associated with theorization and rationality (Van Manen 2016: 53). "In no way do we take the general concept or axiom as our starting point," Langeveld stated. "Instead, we must start from the phenomenon itself and how it is present in this experience that we all share, if only we are willing to acknowledge its meaning" (ibidem).

In Van Manen's reflection on the pedagogical relationship, another influence becomes particularly noticeable. Similar to the works of Stephen J. Smith and Tone Saevi, this is the influence of Emmanuel

Levinas, especially his understanding of the category of the *Other*. This framework is used to present and deeply understand the concept of the pedagogical relationship as an encounter between the adult "self" and the "other"—the child (Friesen 2017: 150). Friesen identifies two key works that frame this discussion: Stephen J. Smith's *Risk and Our Pedagogical Relation to Children: On the Playground and Beyond* (1991) and Tone Saevi and Heidi Husevaag's *The Child Seen as the Same or the Other? The Significance of the Social Convention to the Pedagogical Relation* (2009).

In these studies, the problem of referencing external social forces is no longer the central issue. Instead, ethics within the pedagogical relationship itself, as well as the "otherness" of the child or young person and their vulnerability and defenselessness, take center stage. Van Manen insightfully noted that only an ethical perspective—one rooted in the vulnerability of the *Other*—can provide access to the deepest layers of the pedagogical relationship. The child's vulnerability becomes a weak point in the armor of the egocentric world (Van Manen 2015: 202). In the pedagogical context, this vulnerability is understood through how the adult interprets the child's subjective situation and their own intentions toward the child. To what extent can the teacher respond to situations the child or young person cannot articulate? An example of this kind of pedagogical thinking, inspired by Levinasian ethics, is an article by Saevi and Husevaag. The authors ask how the child is perceived within the pedagogical relationship: as "the same" or as "the Other." Their conclusion is clear: the challenge for adults and educators is to become more attentive to the child's experience and to recognize the child's total otherness. This recognition, they argue, is a necessary condition for effective pedagogical practice (Saevi, Husevaag 2009: 37).

Van Manen noted that Nohl described the pedagogical relationship between teacher and child as an "intensely experienced relationship" (Nohl 1982: 135–136). In doing so, Nohl emphasized that, for the child, the pedagogical relationship is more than just a means to the end of reaching maturity and education; it is, above all, an experience that shapes the entirety of life and reveals its meaning throughout. Our relationship with a true teacher—someone in whose presence we experience a higher dimension or deeper meaning of our "self," genuine growth, and personal development—may

be deeper, more significant, and have farther-reaching consequences than relationships of friendship or love. In the pedagogical relationship, whether in the experience of being a parent, teacher, or mentor, a part of our life finds its fulfillment. This relationship is not merely instrumental; it finds its meaning and significance in its very existence. The relationship itself is a passion, with its own trials and joys (Van Manen 1994: 143).

For the child as well, the teaching relationship is part of life. Among the various relationships we form throughout our lives—such as friendships, romantic relationships, and professional connections—the genuine relationship with a teacher is one of the most fundamental and formative that most strongly shapes our being in the world. What distinguishes the pedagogical relationship is the teacher's unique responsibility for young people and their ability to consciously mobilize their awareness, will, and desire to guide and shape their influence (Van Manen 1994: 144).

Reciprocity of the pedagogical relationship

Post-war criticism and revisions of the concept of the pedagogical relationship have brought forth many new angles of interpretation. Friesen noted that the concept has faced significant difficulties since its inception. Chief among these is the ultimately unfulfilled commitment to a specific focus on the experience and individuality of the child. This commitment should occupy a central place in the consciousness of parents, teachers, pedagogues, and caregivers, prompting practical responses and actions from adults. These themes are particularly present in the works of Bollnow and more recently in the publications of Andrea R. English and Gert Biesta.

Friesen makes it clear that, given the inherent weaknesses and fallibility of adults in the context of the pedagogical relationship, a second fundamental inversion is necessary. This is the domain where pedagogically engaged adults most profoundly experience their own state of "limbo"—their hesitancy, uncertainty, and vulnerability. In this space, adults are forced to confront their perceptions, thoughts, experiences, and limitations, as well as the broader institutional and political contexts in which these challenges manifest themselves (Friesen 2017: 744).

The issue of the teacher's (and theorist's) sensitivity and responsibility is also evident in Nohl's reflections on the pedagogical relationship, as presented in Gert Biesta's address to the Society for the Philosophy of Education in 2012. As if responding to Bingham's and Sidorkin's work *No Education Without Relation,* Biesta titled his paper *No Education Without Hesitation.* Biesta begins by acknowledging Hermann Nohl's canonical articulation of the pedagogical relationship in 1933. He explains that his aim is to explore aspects of the educational process and pedagogical practice that involve disruption, distance, and a lack of connection. He does not intend to subvert the concept of the pedagogical relationship, but to incorporate moments of hesitation into reflections on education and the pedagogical relationship in particular (Biesta 2012: 10).

As Friesen reminds us, Biesta's concern lies in the inconsistency, alienation, and lack of transparency of the self that arise in the relationship between the adult and the child (Friesen 2017: 153). Biesta does not undermine the importance of the pedagogical relationship as such. However, he also does not propose that greater attentiveness by the teacher to the child's experience, or a stronger effort to avoid losing oneself in empathic identification with the student, would provide a solution. Instead of reiterating the gesture of inversion that Nohl viewed as a prerequisite for the pedagogical relationship, Biesta establishes his own meaningful inversion. According to him, as suggested by Lippitz and English, the teacher's experience of life and the world cannot simply be disregarded or suppressed for the sake of the child (Biesta 2012: 10).

The subjectivity of the adult, Biesta argues, becomes crucial not in spite of or in opposition to the pedagogical relationship but precisely because of its role in fostering an intentional and affectionate bond with the student. The key moment in this relationship, he explains, is defined neither by respecting, listening to, or accepting the child, nor by attempting to adopt the child's subjective perspective. Instead, it is a moment that brings to the fore the reciprocity of references highlighted earlier by Bollnow. Biesta reminds us that adults and teachers inevitably experience being addressed or "called" by children or students. To hear what a child is saying, in this context, is less about actively listening and acknowledging and more about being passive—receiving something. Biesta refers to this as a process

of "being an addressee." Speaking to the child in these terms shifts the focus; listening and recognition can be seen as acts of kindness or goodwill, but being an addressee suggests the opposite dynamic. It is not even a matter of acknowledging another person, but of recognizing that another is addressing me. I become the recipient of another's human existence. If any kind of recognition is at play here, it is directed toward the "self," not toward the other (Biesta 2012: 6).

In this process of being the addressee—becoming the recipient of something brought by a child or student—it is not that the teacher is simply asked to recognize the child and their challenge. Rather, the teacher is called to recognize themselves as being addressed. This moment, which Biesta refers to as "hesitation," allows the teacher to perceive themselves as taking action, deciding, and being called to take action. Whatever the child's world of lived experience or subjectivity may be, the adult is confronted with their own experience and subjectivity. By entering into a relationship with the child, the adult is "thrown" back into a relationship with themselves. At the same time, it is crucial not to interpret this oscillation literally (Friesen 2017: 153). This process is particularly evident in specific feelings and signs—temporary or recurring doubts and uncertainties. Such feelings, hesitations, and disturbances on the part of the adult are constitutive of the pedagogical relationship, as they reflect the adult's responsibility for the child's world of life (Biesta 2012: 154).

This very awareness of fluctuations and disruptions creates the possibility of addressing critiques of the pedagogical relationship, particularly those that argue it is isolated from the broader social and political context in which it operates. When confronted with this context, it becomes clear that the teacher is also in confrontation with themselves, as a member of a flawed, tainted, and contested adult world. In order to be able to respond to the child, to react vividly to the child, and to take responsibility for the child, it is therefore necessary to also take responsibility for oneself. This, in turn, requires acknowledging the significance of one's professional or parental role and the broader social and political influences and factors that continuously shape it (Biesta 2012: 154).

Conclusion

At the heart of the issue of the pedagogical relationship lies the question of asymmetry between the child and the adult, which takes on a distinct ethical dimension. With this in mind, it is worth rediscovering the concept of the pedagogical community in today's context. What is the foundation for creating such a community? Van Manen identifies three related but distinct pedagogical phenomena that define the pedagogical experience and the pedagogical encounter through which it unfolds. As Saevi reminds us, it is essential to recognize that the pedagogical situation—a concept central to the definition of pedagogy—belongs to a specific and particular context. We are always situated within a distinct setting, but what distinguishes a pedagogical situation from others is the teacher's pedagogical intention and the way in which they orient themselves toward the student (Saevi 2005: 16).

The key, Saevi explains, is that the teacher perceives the situation they share with the student in a distinctly pedagogical way, different from how other adults might view it. The pedagogical situation evolves and acquires characteristics that distinguish it from other types of human relationships. Its essential feature, which forms the basis of its pedagogical nature, is the teacher's focused attention on the student's *being* and *becoming*. Through this attention, the teacher intends to discern what is beneficial for the student across various dimensions of human development (Saevi 2005: 16). For the relationship to truly develop, the student must respond to the teacher's intentions. Saevi reminds us that the pedagogical relationship is inherently triadic: teacher and student are jointly oriented toward a specific subject and the world in which meaningful processes for them are unfolding at that moment. This triadic nature does not diminish the personal quality of the relationship. The teacher not only transmits knowledge but, in a sense, embodies what they teach—the teacher *is* what they teach.

The teacher is expected to discern the most appropriate course of action for the student in any given situation. How the teacher acts will either support or inhibit the emergence of what Van Manen refers to as the pedagogical moment. In each situation, the teacher must demonstrate, through their actions and their relationship with

the specific child, what is most beneficial and exclude what is not (Saevi 2005: 16–17). It is worth noting the concept of "pedagogical seeing" as developed by Saevi. What does it mean to "see pedagogically"? Saevi explains that it involves understanding and experiencing the student in accordance with specific pedagogical and ethical standards. To see a student pedagogically means to serve their good, and strive to comprehend the pedagogical value of one's own or others' actions while respecting the life of that particular child. The teacher's effort to see the child in this pedagogical sense is one of their greatest challenges.

Seeing pedagogically in this way is an unparalleled goal due to the complexity and unpredictability of the pedagogical relationship. To see with pedagogical eyes is to practice pedagogy as a way of being and acting that intentionally moves toward the student or child, focusing on helping, caring for, and supporting their personal and educational growth (Saevi 2005: 17). Pedagogical practice should be characterized by a sense of connection and should aim to foster community. Pedagogical practice understood in this way is implicit in the relationship and is defined as a personal, normative, asymmetrical, and responsible encounter between the teacher and the student. It is envisioned as a form of community—a shared interaction—that enables the student's existence and entry into the world of human and educational potential. Importantly, the teacher cannot truly become a teacher without the consent of the student (Saevi 2005: 17).

This sense of community clearly brings to light the issues of asymmetry and reciprocity in the pedagogical relationship. As Carina Henriksson observes, the pedagogical relationship can be described as both mutual and asymmetrical. It is the teacher who assumes responsibility for the growth of the individual entrusted to their care. Understanding this responsibility intellectually is not the same as experiencing it in practice, and experiencing it in practice differs from experiencing it authentically. To practice and embody responsibility means ensuring that each child under an adult's care can benefit from the awareness that good pedagogical practice is anchored in mutual recognition and identification. However, this mutuality is always asymmetrical, as it is undertaken by individuals in unequal positions (Henriksson 2012: 119).

Good pedagogical practice always involves a movement toward "suspension," transcending this inequality and overcoming any barriers that may arise. Passion and motivation do not emerge externally in this relationship; rather, they are intrinsic to the pedagogical relationship itself, which serves as both the motivation and the passion driving this practice (Henriksson 2012: 119).

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