Hesitating with the Pedagogical Relation: Origins and Interpretations

The pedagogical relation, the idea of a special relationship between educator and educand, has long been a central theme in interpretive and philosophical studies of education. Broader concern with "student-teacher relations" and "pedagogies of relation" is also common across educational discourses. German educationist Herman Nohl was the first to define the phrase "pedagogical relation" in 1926. Others have followed in his wake, with Max van Manen introducing the concept into English some 65 years later, and Gert Biesta drawing attention to it more recently. Despite ongoing interest, Nohl's original characterizations have yet to be translated and their subsequent development reviewed. This paper inaugurates this task, while also taking time to hesitate—to point out its problematic moments and challenges.

The pedagogical relation, the idea of a special, emotionally-charged relationship between teacher and child, has long been a "problem" (Klafki 1970, p. 58) in German educational theorizing, and more recently, also in English-language discussions (e.g., Saevi & Husevaag 2009; Biesta 2010; van Manen, 2015). In the introduction to their 2004 collection, *No Education without Relation*, Bingham and Sidorkin point out that 'there is a long philosophical tradition of emphasizing [educational] relations' in philosophy in general, going back as far as Plato or Aristotle. Speaking of these relations generically, Bingham and Sidorkin highlight Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger as providing important and much more recent contributions to this tradition. Each of these three figures, it turns out, was deeply influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey, who inaugurated the study of the human sciences, and who famously declared in 1888 that "the study of pedagogy …can only begin with the description of the educator in his relationship to the educand" (p. 8).

Given the attention converging from various quarters on this topic, it is valuable to revisit its conceptual origins in the work of Hermann Nohl, and to see how his original understanding may have been subsequently affirmed, adjusted and critiqued—explicitly or otherwise. This paper undertakes such an examination, and argues with some significant hesitation and qualification that it remains important today.

Nohl's classic definition of the pedagogical relation is that it is a "passionate (or "loving," *leidenschaftlich*) relation between a mature person and one who is becoming, specifically for the sake of the latter, so that he comes to his life and his form" (1933, p. 22). Nohl's initial articulation of this relation is grounded in a central question for educational thinking defined by Friedrich Schleiermacher (whose work Dilthey studied closely): "What does the older generation actually want with the younger?" (1826, p. 38). Schleiermacher saw education as an unavoidable and profoundly normative intergenerational enterprise in which the older generation takes care of and also prepares the younger for (what they imagine as) the future. On the level of "lived experience" that Dilthey brought to the fore, this means that education is marked by a division between the experience and lifeworld of the older generation, the teacher or *educator*, and the experience and lifeworld of the younger, the *educand*.

Teacher and pupil both experience the world in fundamentally different ways: one as an independent (and responsible) adult or professional, the other as a child, dependent on adults in stiuations often beyond the child's own control. Asserting both worlds as constitutive of all educational situations, Nohl starts off by saying that educational prescriptions have traditionally been concerned with the experiences of the adult or educator. Nohl then proposes an "inversion" (*Umdrehung*), a replacement of the worlds and concerns of adults exclusively with those of the student or child. The consequences of this inversion, Nohl says, are "far-reaching, and shape each

and every moment of education" (p. 152). Nohl describes this in terms of "the basic stance" of what he calls the "new education" or "pedagogy:"

> This basic stance …is decisively characterized by the fact that its perspective is unconditionally that of the educand. This means that its task is *not* to draw the child towards… specific, predetermined, objective goals…. Instead, it sees its goal in the subject and his/her physical and personal realization or unfolding. That *this* child here comes to her life's purpose, that is [education's] …autonomous and inalienable task. (p. 152)

Nohl applies the word "stance" or "attitude" to this pedagogy to emphasize that the adult's identification and attunement with the child's experience is not only a question of emotional disposition and attunement, but that it is also *personal* in nature (a point later referenced by van Manen).

After WW II, Nohl's pedagogical relation was taken up by a range of German and other educationists. In in a 1955 text that also served as a teacher training textbook into the 1980s, the Dutch educationist M.J. Langeveld outlines the pedagogical relation in terms very similar to Nohl's. "The essence of the relationship" between educator and educand for Langeveld "is that it is a relationship of authority" (Levering, 2012, p. 137). "True obedience," as Langeveld himself says, "consists in following the authority that is recognized" by the child. Further echoing Nohl, Langeveld emphasizes that it is *love* and significantly, also *trust* that binds educator and educand, and that allows both to

> find the courage to risk this trust and to exercise and follow authority... In this love the child, who in his natural [state of] helplessness gives his trust, and which in its absolute spotlessness lifts the educator and grants him spirit for his task and trust in himself. (1965, p. 55)

Despite the deeply conservative, even problematic nature of mixing "authority," "love" "obedience" and "helplessness" in this way, the pedagogical relation has more recently been articulated in terms rather more germane to contemporary understanding. Otto Friedrich Bollnow, a student of Herman Nohl, provides an influential account which also affirms the centrality of trust. However, it also adds to this the fundamental human emotion of *hope,* consideration of possible disruption, as well as the closely related notion of the *pedagogical atmosphere*. Bollnow defines the latter as referring to "all those fundamental emotional conditions and sentient human qualities that exist between the educator and the child and which form the basis for every pedagogical relationship" (1989, p. 5). Bollnow acknowledges, however, that this relation and the surrounding atmosphere in which it develops always faces the disruption as a threat but also a productive possibility—simply due to the uncertainty that plagues the modern educational situation, as well the lives of both teacher and student. Referencing the "philosophy of dialog" of the Jewish thinker Martin Buber, Bollnow gives prescient emphasis to partnership, confirmation and importantly, *dialog* as all being indispensable in the pedagogical relation and in the broader pedagogical atmosphere.

In more recent Anglo-American incarnations of the pedagogical relation, there is no explicit acknowledgement of Bollnow's and Buber's emphases on dialog, confirmation and partnership. Instead, a notion with similar Hebraic origins—Emmanuel Levinas' "the other"—plays a crucial role in reframing and updating the concept. Deeply influenced by Langeveld, van Manen echoes Langeveld's emphasis on the helplessness of the child, and has broadly noted, for example, "that within the terms of relational ethics the vulnerability of the other has become the

weak spot in the armor of the self-centered world" (2015 p. 202). The pedagogical question then becomes: How should adults respond to this vulnerable educand as wholly "other"? Or as van Manen puts it: How can one "'identify and 'form' oneself in the everyday experience of the pedagogical encounter… in the life of the child?" (2014, p. 609).

Van Manen responds to his own question by saying that such self-identification and -formation "is only possible if one does not lose oneself in this identification but, in spite of and even thanks to [it], remains oneself and at the same time empathically lives in the situation of the other—the child" (p. 609). Similarly, the title of a 2009 article by Saevi and Husevaag asks whether, in the pedagogical relation, the "child" is actually "seen as the Same or [as] the Other?" The authors' concluding response is that "our challenge as adults and pedagogues is to become more attentive to the experience of the child and to acknowledge the child's utter otherness as the basic precondition for pedagogical relational practice" (2009, p. 37).

Still others engaging with the same "human science" pedagogical tradition, have highlighted a rather different experiential and relational moment: that of "interruption," "discontinuity" and "hesitation" in the pedagogical relation. Gert Biesta, who has worked to link Germanic and Anglo-American contributions—including the notion of Nohl's pedagogical relation—has recently emphasized the importance of

> explor[ing] aspects of educational processes and practices that reveal gaps, interruptions, distances, and disconnections—not in order to refute the idea of educational relations but to add a moment of hesitation to our thinking about education and about educational relations in particular. (2010, p. 10)

Biesta's concern is not with proximity and identification but with their disruption. While Biesta does not deny the importance of the pedagogical relation itself, it appears that he sees the solution to its challenges as lying neither in "becom[ing] more attentive to the experience of the child" nor in "empathically liv[ing]… the situation of …the child."

Returning now to Nohl's original inversion of child and teacher lifeworlds, Biesta can be said to enact a significant inversion of his own. The educators experience and lifeworld is not to be simply ignored or suppressed for the sake of the child's. Instead, the adult's world becomes relevant precisely *in* and *because of* a passionate or loving relation with the educand. Biesta illustrates this by drawing attention not to adult care for the child, but the child's dialogical address to *me*, the adult. When thus addressed, Biesta explains, "it is not for me to recognize the other, but rather to recognize that the other is addressing me—that I am being addressed by another human being." "[I]f any recognition is involved" in such a situation, Biesta further emphasizes, "it is recognition that is directed toward the *self*, not toward the *other*" (2013, p. 6).

In *Discontinuity in Learning* (2013), Andrea English offers a similar emphasis—although she does not mention the pedagogical relation explicitly. Tracing "discontinuity" in Dewey, Herbart, Bollnow and in more recent German educationists, English concludes her study by advising teachers to discern those interruptions which are appropriate or productive from those which are not:

> Teachers can begin to ask themselves how they would establish this distinction by reflecting on the negativity of experience within their own learning history with their former teachers and educators in and out of school. This reflection can begin by asking oneself, "Did I learn *in light of* or *in spite of* that teacher's actions?" (p. 150)

Similar to Biesta, English sees the initial step not as the educator's identification with the educand, but instead, in teacher recognition of and reflection on his or own lifeworld experience.

Both the theory and practice associated with the pedagogical relation still clearly remain a "problem" in English-language discourse just as they did in Germany and the Netherlands. However, despite the problematic nature of the pedagogical relation, and the hesitation to which this might give rise, the pedagogical relation remains relevant and important. And it is precisely owing to the possibility of its hesitation, interruption and disruption that it maintains this pertinence today.

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