

**Some aspects of the relationship between social pedagogy and society**  
*Klaus Mollenhauer (first edition 1964, Beltz Verlag, Weinheim and Basel)*  
*Translated by Patrick Tidball*

*publication for educational purposes only*

Social pedagogy is the theory and practice of education – not of education in general or education in relation to groups or society at large, but of an area of pedagogy. As such, it has a specific historical and social locus: it is a component of the pedagogic system produced by industrial society. Accordingly, anything which may be stated about social pedagogy may be meaningfully stated only in relation to this society. From its very beginnings and in all its embodiments it has been a response to the problems of this society which have been transformed by the social pedagogue into educational tasks. To the present day, a variety and richness of invention are apparent in these responses which express more than just the dimensions of the task: to change the phenomenon of education itself. If one is to summarise in a common theory or associate with this theory such diverse phenomena as youth-group activities, a juvenile offender's solitary confinement, treatment of difficult children in a home, career advice, a photography group in a youth leisure centre (*Heim der Offenen Tür*), a children's playground, the work of a youth welfare office director, a social worker's conversation with a mother, protection for young people against dangerous advertising and so on and so forth, then it is first necessary – since this theory is to be a pedagogic one – to enquire into the concept of education which is inherent in the practice of social pedagogy.

The question appears futile, for is it not the case that both the literature of educational science and everyday language possess a concept of education which has not only proved practicable but which also seems entirely apt to encompass current practice in this field? Yet on closer examination several difficulties soon emerge. The customary meaning of the word “education” – intentional, planned activity on the part of an adult in relation to a child or young person through personal connection and in the form of an ethical, volition-based relationship – gained currency in a society in which educational responsibility was confined to the domains of the family and school. It comprises two ideas in particular: the Enlightenment notion of rational and rationally controlled development of the individual; and the personalistic notion, the view that a person's personality can develop only through concrete encounter with persons who have already undergone this development. The first of these notions essentially consists of a terminological definition – the meaning of the word “education” might also be defined differently – while the second is based on a recurrent experience. However, this meaning of the word has not only a social locus – i.e. the family and school (and, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the borstal too) but also a historical horizon. It belongs to a society in which pedagogic

reflection had already begun but was as yet inchoate and in which there was certainly not yet any question of consistent “pedagogisation” of society, though this was already embedded in the consciousness of “enlightened” society. While in its first meaning the word is optimistic and progressive, in our century its second meaning has engendered a trend of resignation regarding this sort of rationalistic credulity: ideology and counter-ideology. Accordingly, critique of our civilisation generally proceeds on the basis of the personalistic approach. Confidence in progress and scepticism regarding its possibility and value are brought together in a single formula, the concept of education.

Between the two meanings of this term lies not only the contradiction between rationalistic thesis and personalistic counter-thesis, however, there is also the period of 150 years which gave rise to what we have now learned to call “industrial society”. While the scope of pedagogic responsibility widened ever further, entering society, touching new groups of people and bringing forth new institutions, both consciously and unconsciously the idea still obtained that the family and school were the “true” realm of education. Social pedagogy developed in parallel and through individual methods which were hardly coherent initially, but it evolved above all in the absence of a summarising and foundational theory which might have elevated the common features of this new educational trend into a form of practical awareness. Despite this, however, social pedagogy is confronted particularly acutely with the specific problems of industrial society, as is becoming increasingly apparent today; after all, it cannot but incorporate in its theory and actions the reality and nature of this society. Social pedagogy brings new clarity to education’s status as a function of society, but the manner in which it does so still requires discussion. While the family and school could still insist on their status as the locus for reproduction of developed society and harmoniously defined tradition to which the younger generation was to be initiated through practice, social pedagogy has seen itself – and continues to see itself – as faced with this society’s *developmental* process: in concrete terms, the harm which this society inflicts – or appears to be on the point of inflicting – on the person.

Thus in the social pedagogue society produces one of its most violent critics. Through the recurrent harm which society inflicts it provides regular sustenance for criticism. To be sure, this is not to maintain that this criticism actually wounds its opponent. In fact it must be assumed that – on account of its ideological nature and the lack of enlightenment which remains characteristic of it – this criticism leaves intact the object of its grievances, while the will to effect change dwindles into a resignation which, though impotent, finds compensation – through personal connection – in the recurrent felicity of pedagogic encounter. And yet this

all but confirms the immutability of social facts. The possibility of fertile pedagogic criticism of society is realised through mere sociocritical carping, at least until further elements are incorporated in the concept of education and thus in the social pedagogue's self-understanding.

Accordingly, for the sake of its own effectiveness social pedagogy is compelled to incorporate in its basic concept what all personal assistance consistently meets with: the objective conditions engendering the need for help as well as help itself. The "pedagogisation" of society has enormously widened the scope of educationally significant facts – or, more precisely, the scope of material subject to educational reflection and requiring integration in educational activity. To limit oneself to personal development within the educational process would nowadays represent an arbitrary abstraction and contraction, since the factors influencing a person greatly exceed the potential contribution of an individual educator. But this is not the key issue. For in every society it is the institutions which are most effective in shaping the individual, and the educational relationship has – in the form of a personal connection – probably being accorded more significance in our society than in any other. The key difference is that these impersonal influences have today become – or at least may yet become – the object of rational planning. If education has always been the plannable domain of processes of socialisation, then measured against this yardstick education has nowadays evolved into something different. A society which is *unable* to consider the possibility of itself changing (because it posits itself as absolute) and *refuses* to discuss this possibility (because, despite its enlightened nature and for whatever reasons, it has an interest in stabilising the given situation) or resigns in the face of this opportunity must make do with a limited concept of education and isolation of the reality of education to pedagogic provinces such as the family, the school, the home, the group and so on. In this case, educational planning will be isolated and function as a support system for this society, validating both its facticity and the conditions compelling one particular area of social pedagogy to deal with the same unchanging predicaments. An appropriate concept of educational reality nowadays includes the possibility of bringing enlightenment to these conditions and their planned integration in the educational process.

Educational reality includes anything which may effect change in a person and which is accessible to planning. But while the school may still be able to impose limits on this concept and to isolate it from society (though it too is no longer permitted to do so), in the long run this would make of social pedagogy farce and quixotism. Personal influence over a young person remains one of many options, but it becomes significant only where all the elements of this educational reality interact. The fact that social pedagogy already makes practical use of this concept in many places – albeit consciously so only to a greater or lesser degree – is apparent

in the protection afforded to children and young people, in architectural planning, in the establishment of children's playgrounds in the new youth leisure centres. [...]

In general pedagogy and philosophy of education the young person's coming-of-age and self-development are characterized as this normative consensus. These prescriptions are general in nature and provide hardly any indications as to the concrete pedagogic task at the present time, though both formulations bear clear traces of their origins in specific historical contexts: the Enlightenment in one instance and German idealism in the other. But the nature of the task becomes clear if one inquires into the ordering tendency of the new social pedagogic establishments and methods and thereby calls to mind the image of a democratic citizen which has provided the foundations for the conception of a democratic community and if finally – in industrial society in the aftermath of its second revolution – one considers the skills which a person must have in order to succeed as such amidst this society's blessings and hazards. The direction in which social pedagogy is finding increasingly clear expression is thereby directly and reciprocally linked with the image of the democratic citizen and the demands of industrial society to whose challenge the social pedagogue seeks to respond through his activities. In these responses the shift in pedagogy's centre of gravity from a movement of counteraction to one of support emerges with great clarity. Individual case work, group work, youth leisure centres and probation work here speak the same language, while kindergartens and some areas of social work and institutional upbringing have acted as their predecessors. The consistent aim is to provide support for independence, to promote and facilitate spontaneity, to engender systems of order in terms of interaction between group forces, to acquire roles, to assume tasks – and responsibility for these tasks – and to realize self-enlightenment. It is of secondary importance here to adapt to a given order, to recognize authority, to be granted protection and isolation, to learn to obey and to imitate role models. This shift in accent in educational intentions is not only a problem of method – though it is this, too, and particularly acutely so – for it also signifies a change in the image of the responsible adult person whom education is to help produce.

This is particularly apparent in the change which has been evident over the past decade and a half in the attitude of the educating generation in relation to young people. Almost all participants in education share a rational, analytical interest in young people and their system of behaviour and values which does away with absolute models, and does so not only for the sake of better and more effective assimilation of these young people into the given order but also to appreciate them and to take them seriously as partners in the business of education. This atti-

tude has become constitutive of social pedagogy.

A factor which we have so far been compelled to neglect – in order to clarify the change which has occurred – thus becomes more acutely the object of pedagogic interest: the personal connection. While this has acquired a new status in the newly structured field of social pedagogy, it is proving to be an essential requirement for pedagogic success. For wherever the direct influence of an individual educator initially appears subject to constraints – methodisation, group planning, institutional arrangements, provision of opportunities and maintenance of the openness of systems of order – and pupils' initiative is granted as much free rein as possible, it becomes clear that the pedagogic task is fulfillable only where intensive supervision is included in educational planning as a necessary correlate. Ultimately, therefore, the personal educational relationship remains at the origins and at the heart of any pedagogic process. But through the shift in accent and the activities associated with this relationship it has not only acquired a new status in the conglomerate of pedagogic factors, it has also changed in terms of its nature, as the so-called “Helping Relationship” (*Helpende Beziehung*) of case work illustrates with exemplary effect.

We have said that social pedagogy is a function of society. This is true for social pedagogy to the same degree as for the school and for education within the family. This principle is therefore a principle of general pedagogy. All education is tied to the sociocultural context in which it takes place, particularly where this education is subject to the control – or at least the supervision – of an institutionalized public interest which undertakes planning. In this sense, the educator is the executive organ of his culture, playing a socially defined role. The basic features of a person's cultural character are determined within the family, while school imparts the cultural canon of knowledge as well as the techniques and attitudes necessary for its acquisition; social pedagogy assists with integration in relation to the many points of transition and conflict characterizing the process of growing up in modern society, while repairing the harm which is continually inflicted on the individual. All areas of pedagogy are thus oriented in accordance with the image of a functioning society and a person whose existence within this society is to be subject to a minimum of harm; these are images which education has not created on its own account but which are socioculturally prescribed for it.

However, this holds true only at a lower level, as it were. “Stationary” societies which undergo no change at all or do so only very slowly will always make do with – or even expressly adhere to – this situation. But the dynamic of a modern democratic society lies above all in factors such as this society's establishment – or desire for establishment – of a functional context enabling each individual cultural sector to contribute spontaneously to society's progress.

This makes of this functional context a dialectical structure. If therefore, in relation to a structure of this nature, reference is made to education's status as a function of society, this means something different than would be the case in a stationary society.

At the abovementioned lower level all societies appear congruous in formal terms. Even if different norms apply in each case, in the education of young people it is always a culture's unquestioned self-evident truths which are reproduced. The speed at which these evolve is extraordinarily slow, enabling contemporaries to hold them to be ahistorical constants. A child should be granted his or her right to individual development, be treated in a friendly and not an aggressive manner, gradually gain access to rational argument, learn to interact with friends, a specific form of cleanliness, civilized behaviour and a sense of orderliness roughly corresponding to that of a middle-class household – these appear to be some of the cultural self-evident truths whose validity passes without question in our culture, particularly as they derive from a tradition far older than industrial society. At the level of these norms, education still today signifies enforcement, handing-down and fulfilment of prescription. The educator is left with no choice but to act out a predefined role. His contribution to society is reproductive in nature.

In contrast to stationary societies, in the dynamic society of industrial democracy it is only at a second level that the characteristic nature of the educational task becomes apparent. If this society is to maintain its democratic and dynamic character, then the pedagogic task is not only conservatively to preserve this stock of cultural self-evident truths but also to hand down and to produce the means for social change or social progress.

In an open society the educator too looks to an open future. Social pedagogy has a special position in this situation. It is, as it were, society's most prominent field of pedagogic experimentation because, in accordance with its mission, it is concerned not with handing down cultural knowledge but instead solely with coping with current problems in young people's development and integration. In place of "educational knowledge" it imparts attitudes and skills which make it possible to cope with concrete issues in the present, and normally right away. Accordingly, of all the task areas of pedagogy it alone has a direct involvement in social progress. If it nonetheless fails to respond to current social problems then it faces an accusation which is doubly grave. But it is thus that the principle of education as a function of society has acquired its current meaningful significance. As a relatively independent sector within our culture and society, it is able to participate productively in their evolution. If education always anticipates future possibilities within the recipient of education, then inherent in the concept of education is the view that it possesses the outline of the future – at least in any society

which has not decreed that tomorrow is to be the same as today and yesterday. Where education is confronted most unrelentingly with “today” – in the field of social pedagogy – it is compelled to reflect most emphatically on the possibilities of “tomorrow” and to incorporate in its pedagogic train of thought reflection on social progress. This other dialectic of present and future corresponds to the dialectic of individual subjectivity and objective society.

This dialectical structure of the reality of education is not simply a given, it is not necessarily already provided through the fact of this society. Instead, it becomes reality only on a case-by-case basis, through the will of agents possessing a dialectical understanding of their actions who are willed to help this structure become social reality. In concrete terms, this means the manifestation – or lack of manifestation – of this will in the formulation of a concept of neglect and jeopardy, in the organization of an educational programme, in the use of specific methods, in a manner of relating to children and young people, in readiness for continual experimentation and in consideration of the proposition that what has been learned and is familiar may be unusable or inappropriate. A care home which is organized in accordance with the family principle or another principle may treat this issue purely technically and find orientation in models or follow social doctrine or dogma; but it may also enter the tangled web of the problems of contemporary family life and group existence and venture forth a productive outline for the future. A social worker may act in accordance with the maxim that he is to spare his protégés decisions which they are unable to make; but he may also adopt the maxim that in all his actions and advice he must not only engender decision-making skills but must also and always take these skills for granted – even if this is a pedagogic utopia and even if he is aware that without him and, in many cases, even despite his assistance the outcome will be failure. A youth welfare worker may view his task to be to introduce a young person to specific cultural goods, forms of behaviour and modes of socialisation (*Gesellung*) which he deems essential and to bind him to these; but he may also seek to deal with this youth in a spirit of impartiality and help him to discover spontaneity and productivity through paths of his own.

The dialectic of the pedagogic problem becomes most clear in terms of the younger generation itself. It is here that it distinguishes itself from all of its predecessors since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. On a practical and daily level, this generation faces the same problems as the educator confronts in reflecting on his pedagogic task. This generation directly encounters the contradictory nature of contemporary culture: the contradictions of profession and leisure, consumption and productivity, conformity and individuality, adaptation and resistance, commitment and distance, authority and servitude, freedom and socialisation (*Vergesellschaftung*).

As young people experiment with their behaviour in these areas of tension happily or unhappily, with profit or harm, and while realising or failing to realise solutions, the educator is burdened with the weight of pedagogic responsibility, with the tradition of his theory, his ideology. His situation is more difficult than that of young people, because in terms of coping with this dialectic he finds himself in a position of uncertainty similar to that of his protégé, and yet he must both help his protégé and bear pedagogic responsibility for his path.