



What does it Mean to Educate?

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the most abstract and most boring question of pedagogy or, as I prefer to call my field of interest, the theory of pedagogy. My aim is to try to rehash and re-pose this question – maybe even answer it? In this regard, Ottó Mihály advises us to be careful; in the preface to his notes on the philosophy of pedagogy he asserts that we do not know what educating is but we know that there exist “various valid and eligible answers” to this question.*

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The notional model that I am attempting to outline here may only lay claim to be one of the many “*valid and eligible*” answers (Mihály, 1998:15). At this point I cannot help but recall my good old times at university as a pedagogy major, when, in a great theoretical and practical rage, some of us (more precisely: two of us) decided to write a criticism of pedagogy. Several paragraphs of this opus dealt with definitions, not only because we had problems with the content of these definitions, but especially because we had a problem with the addiction to define – as we put it, the problem lay in the fact that pedagogy is way too engaged with itself. Back then I thought it was impossible that one day I too would find pleasure in dissecting this ancient question concerning the definition of education.

Despite the diverseness of the term, theoretical literature in Hungary generally defines educating as (a) an activity that is (b) teleological and (c) generative in its nature, and (d) as a category that is more general than and thus incorporates instruction. In my view, this conception of education is the product of modernity, and it is closely linked to the image of the child which claimed that the most vital duty concerning the child is to solidify its character and establish firm and consistent values. In this perception, then, educating points to the sphere of will and motivation which, as a result, is bound to be imbued with a moral content. Basically, this is also the aim of public education, which has become systemic and increasingly extensive since the 16th century. The curriculum aims at transmitting not

only the basic skills of writing, reading and counting, but also a tradition, and although the content of literacy at school has significantly changed and expanded over the centuries, the position of tradition in the school curriculum is markedly firm. This can hardly be explained by the practical use of tradition but has much more to do with the role that tradition played (in a concealed way) in character development. Even science and technical-vocational subjects, brought to life by practical needs in the 19th and 20th centuries, served to cultivate civic consciousness (by transmitting the notion that man can get to know, change and rule the world) instead of providing one with practical skills for directly finding one's way around world. In light of this mission of education it is plain to see that the pedagogical thinkers of modernism made education superordinate to instruction and viewed the latter as necessarily a mere tool of the former.

Furthermore, it was also evident that the course of educating could be foreseen. Whatever development may mean in an individual's life, traditionally no one doubted that the essence of education is produced by the tension between the student's lower moral-social status and the ideal status posited as the goal of education. Therefore, education is an activity, something that educators do; it has methods, both right ones, which can be prescribed for educators as the norm, and wrong ones, to be avoided.

Then came the 20th century and upset this whole construction. As it is known, it was reform pedagogy that first shook the faith in external pedagogical goals (or, more precisely, it drew the conclusions coming from the battered faith of society) by exchanging the metaphor of the animal trainer-educator (turning the wild creature of nature into a moral-social being keeping to the norms) for that of the gardener-educator, whose mission is to aid the child in developing its innate possibilities. What I find even more exciting is that since the second half of the 20th century, the hierarchical unity of educating and instruction has decomposed both in theory and in developmental practice. Bloom's taxonomy denotes this process excellently. As opposed to the former hierarchy, the three domains of educational objectives place cognitive, psychomotor and affective objectives side by side, in a way that they are not applied to one another. In the capability-oriented description of educational objectives their usefulness is clearly visible. Consequently, in the school students get to possess a knowledge that may as well become a tool with which they can deal with various situations in life, and which is independent from the moral and volitional sphere, that is, it can be used for various purposes.

A parallel inner split might be witnessed in the practical usage of the term educating – without an adequate theoretical reflection. On one hand, we use the term markedly as opposed to instruction, according to Bloom's cognitive-affective opposites (or, more precisely, to those of general psychology). On the other hand, continuing the exhausted tradition of modernity, we perceive it as an umbrella term, which encompasses every conscious developmental effect aimed at personality, from upbringing to training, community development or keeping order.

Nonetheless, with regards to education in its narrow sense, we must face the postmodern problem that our goals are less and less well-defined and clear, thus they cannot show the right directions for national public education systems. Of course we can find and set forth values and virtues in today's world as well, and it is easy to form a social consensus on the

importance of some of them. The problem, however, is that the list of virtues is unlimited, and we may never know when conflict may occur between them and which one may come out on top in a given situation. In this respect, then, education must in fact face the challenges of radical pluralism.

What follows is that with regards to the traditional goals of education it is extremely difficult – if not impossible – to determine what counts as a more developed and what as a less developed condition. (Let us think about the debates surrounding Kohlberg – is it possible to psychologically interpret moral development? I am more inclined to think that it is not, and therefore perceive Kohlberg’s experiment as a failure, despite its results.) Can we still speak of personality development at all? From this aspect it is worth considering a highly edifying story from the recent past. According to this anecdote (as I came to know it), one of the renowned representatives of psychology in Hungary expressed a remonstrance against the opinion that personality development is the duty of pedagogues: *“As far as I know, the duties of a pedagogue are instruction and education.”* This obviously enraged Hungarian pedagogues, although despite the intolerance the claim displays, it does point out a real problem. Personality development has become a territory of psychology: the term indicates trainings where the participants “meet themselves”, gain intrapersonal experiences, get to know their own selves much better and thus can come to terms with or “right” themselves, that is, their personality indeed becomes more developed.

In my opinion, if this is what personality development means, then we are entitled to question the notion of education as personality development. But what is education then? What I claim here is that education is not personality development, not because it has nothing to do with personality – it does have a lot to do with it – but because it is not development. Let me explain what I mean by this. As I mentioned above, we still use the concept of pedagogy as inherited from modernity, both as an umbrella term for processes that aim at shaping the sphere of motivation and will, attitudes and habits of personality, and as a more general umbrella term which incorporates each and every effect on personality indiscriminately. Educating, however, is also used in a third, much more significant sense, and this is what I would like to talk about now. In this sense education is not an activity but a relationship between people. We can talk about a pedagogical relationship (or, to put it in a more philosophical way, about “pedagogical positing”) when we perceive another person as a personality, that is, not merely as the carrier of one or more given roles but as a whole and unique individual. In such case the instrumental relationship that links one person to another in everyday life becomes secondary and the question of what the other person needs for development, for achieving integrity, gets in focus. Education itself is not development but an attitude to the other person, and it is the realisation of this relationship that helps him or her to make progress through various activities, both with or without a certain aim.

Although getting to know another person is a crucial part of “pedagogical positing”, one has to be aware of the fact that cognition always has its limits. Pedagogy does not make one transparent, and exactly for the reason that it is not a technology, it is not based on the idea that the

educator knows all about the other person, and thus knows where to interfere. Rather the key concept here is responsibility. Educators are responsible for the students, that is, they obligate themselves to never view the student as a component of an establishment, but will place his or her developmental needs as a priority in their relationship. The fox put this stance the following way in *The Little Prince*:

“To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world...” (Saint-Exupéry, 1968)

Here uniqueness does not mean the only important person but a unique, unmistakably different person, one that is not like the others. Saint-Exupéry also clearly defines what it means to get to know a person – it is not cognition that is a prerequisite of taming but quite contrarily:

“One only understands the things that one tames,” said the fox.

(Saint-Exupéry, 1968). And eventually it is the fox that articulates the role of responsibility in the story:

“People have forgotten this truth,” the fox said. *“But you mustn’t forget it. You become responsible forever for what you’ve tamed.*

You’re responsible for your rose...” (Saint-Exupéry, 1968)

“I am responsible for my rose,” the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember (Saint-Exupéry, 1968).

If anyone reading this consequently believes that the notion of educating outlined here is dangerously close to the concept of love, then that person is right. Love is one of the concepts that pedagogical theory should have started to deal with expertly a long time ago.

Although the picture I have painted of education so far may suggest that I believe it to be the relationship of two people, this is definitely not the case. Pedagogical attitude may imbue a whole community; what is more, it might as well be what turns a group into a community. The pedagogical theory tends to interpret community education as an indirect effect of the pedagogue; this viewpoint, however, fails at expressing the core substance, since in this case pedagogues would use the members of their group as tools for achieving their own goals. What happens here, rather, is that responsibility for the other as a person applies to each and every member of the community; thereby everyone is simultaneously a pedagogue and a student, which is the way pedagogy normally works, even if the older members of the community, the adults necessarily bear a greater responsibility in this relationship.

From close up, a pedagogical relationship means two things. On one hand, it is an active attention to, and interest in, the other person, an opportunity for the other person to express him- or herself and to get constructive responses, that is, responses which understand his or her viewpoints. On the other hand, the counterpoint of all this is when pedagogues also open themselves up, showing their personality. This does not necessarily and principally mean setting an example – sincerity and

transparency is much more important here. In a pedagogical relationship one shows how one handles problems and gets closer to understanding the self, which then may be a way to either be followed or rejected by the students. As a matter of fact, rejecting certain models can push the students on, and models are needed to be seen so that the students can reject them (The dual face of pedagogy I refer to here is in fact the generalisation of Thomas Gordon's method of resolving conflicts). As for methods, though, I do not believe educating has any. It is not by chance that, as opposed to educational programs, the most effective pedagogical methods could never be described in a way that based on this description they could be reproduced as a program. The bottom line of these methods – from Makarenko to Gyula Pataki's *Fiúkfalva* (Pataki, 2008) – is a unique human relationship; therefore, they can only be described in a narrative form. In a recent interview Pataki himself claimed that he did not have any pedagogical methods:

“I understand the term teaching method; it has a theme, everything. That, I can apply with Kate and Steve, in this and that classroom. But a pedagogical method...? I keep thinking hard about it, but pedagogy does not have an evolved method.” (Pataki, 2008)

Understanding educating as a relationship opens the way in a new direction, so that the organic relationship between education and instruction could be realisable again in a new form. In order to achieve this, it has to be seen clearly that education and instruction have parted. Instruction without educating is not only possible but it has become the rule. Under the given circumstances of public education today, when pedagogues spend one to three hours a week with one class and work with as many as two hundred students a year, it is difficult to refer to their work as educating. On the other hand, in the light of this situation it would not be fair to expect them to do pedagogical work, since there are simply no opportunities to create the loving human relationship that I outlined above. But is there a need for such a relationship at all? Can the school be expected to respond to the students' personality? To my mind, the answer is yes. What is more, without educating, I believe that the system of the institution known as the school will collapse in the near future. Let me briefly highlight two things here.

I have already written and talked about one of these extensively, so I shall only refer to it briefly here. The transmittance of literacy as the primary ethos of the school is rapidly falling into discredit, exactly because – as I claimed in this lecture – its basic function of character development has faded out. Neither the parents nor the students can see why they have to spend so much time with formaldehydes, the Thirty Years' War or the epigrams of Janus Pannonius. The consequence of this is a significant motivational deficit; therefore, instruction should not be restricted to transmitting information and skills but shall take an intensive turn towards winning over young people. And this cannot happen without human relationships.

The second factor also correlates with the motivational crisis. The school does not only transmit literacy but is also a channel for upward mobility. It is worth being a good student because this way one can get on better in life than one's parents. What we witness is, however, that a huge

number of students do not see this correlation or realise that it may apply to their life. This is especially true for those who live in poverty, whom we refer to (with an established alienating term) as multiply disadvantaged students. In their case arrears and being culturally alien to the lifeworld of the school have reached such an extent that neither them nor their parents will ever come to realise by themselves that it is exactly schooling that may solve their problems. The solution – if there is one – can be none other than direct human relationship, which might open the way towards the influence of the sphere of will and motivation.

And now the million-pound question: is this possible? My attempt at a short answer is the following: maybe it is, but in order to make it possible, everything in the lifeworld of the school has to be turned upside down. The question is obviously not if pedagogues are able to love their students, but what institutional conditions can foster this love? In a nutshell: deregulation, a human scale school, and wide-ranging activities. What I mean by deregulation is that the higher the number of formal-bureaucratic regulations controlling the everyday life of a school is, the more people become reduced to mere roles (characters in an institution), and the less likely it is for personality to get in focus. Being human-scale means that the circle of students that a teacher works with is of a clear-cut size, and the time spent with the students is sufficient enough to enable the formation of real human relationships. Finally, school activities need to be wide-ranging so that both teachers and students are able to show themselves and thereby at least have an opportunity to get to know one another. School activities refer partly to extra-curricular activities, and partly to the process of instruction itself, which, for the time being, offers hardly any opportunities for choice, self-expression, and cooperation – the moulding and re-shaping of the situation. What a pity that we are going in the exact opposite direction, towards the school with an extreme lack of education and the institutional self-liquidation of the school.

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