
Conceptual Critique

Reinterpreting Bildung in Social Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article strives to reinterpret educational values in social pedagogy to provide a basis for a critique of evidence-based practices. The article focuses on traditions and developments in social pedagogy from a Danish perspective. However, the author often refers to 'Denmark and the other Nordic countries' due to the fact that many of the traditions and developments mentioned have taken place throughout Scandinavia. The author argues that 'the social' or 'sociality' in social pedagogy is not an evidence-based concept and must therefore be continually open for interpretation by professionals and clients alike. Furthermore, it is argued that this continual interpretive 'quest' (MacIntyre, 2003; Taylor, 1989) is a foundational practice in social pedagogy. As a response to the prevalence of 'evidence-based practice' and so-called scientific 'hard facts' within the social professions, the author argues for the necessity of interpretive spaces. The article explicates how the social pedagogical tradition in Denmark has built on the German educational tradition of Bildung, i.e. a broad, holistic, humanistic concept of education. The objective of Bildung is to educate not just toward knowledge but toward sociality. To work with Bildung within a social pedagogical framework, it is argued, practitioners need to be sensitive to historical, cultural and biographical narratives. However, such narrative sensitivity is only one side of the coin in working with Bildung in social pedagogy. It is equally important is to develop a culture that produces human presence (Gumbrecht, 2004). Practitioners must therefore navigate between interpretation and presence. The author argues that the knowledge base that this type of practice builds on is phenomenological hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1976; van Manen, 2016). From this perspective the author discusses how the values of this tradition can be re-interpreted in a late modern society.

Keywords: Social pedagogy; Bildung; interpretive practice; moral frameworks; sociality

Introduction

The question is often asked as to what the ‘social’ in social pedagogy actually represents. One plausible answer is that the ‘social’ represents the socio-political context that informs a given social pedagogical practice; to work to realise the ‘social’ in this case is to realise a given set of values in practice (Erlandsen, 2013). In the past 30 years the main values that have dominated social pedagogical and social political discourses in Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries are ‘prevention’, i.e. of emotional, social and cognitive neglect, and ‘inclusion’ of vulnerable citizens into cultural communities (Kristensen, 2013). In any case, working to realise a specific set of values so that they become embedded in the very fabric of day-to-day practices requires that social pedagogical practitioners themselves have a finely tuned understanding of local cultures and of how such cultures develop (Hatton, 2013). The ‘social’ of social pedagogy is no doubt a complex phenomenon and theorists often ask if it is possible to develop an overall theory for social pedagogy (Jensen, 2013). If such a meta-theory were possible – and I’m not sure it is – it would have to make room for what I will call interpretive spaces. Interpretive spaces are spaces where the practitioner and client can voice their own understandings of the ‘social’. In this article I will argue that social pedagogy is essentially a hermeneutical practice that calls for reflective and deliberative contexts, not just for the practitioner but also for the client. I will argue that the main knowledge base in social pedagogy is hermeneutical in that practitioners and clients strive to develop meaningful interpretations and understandings of the ‘social’ in order to develop relationships and communities of practice (Hämäläinen, 2003). Such interpretive practices are based on cultural narratives and lived experiences of everyday life. This requires a phenomenological openness to the significance of lived experiences and a sensitivity to cultural narratives. Precisely because phenomenological openness to everyday experience is essential in social pedagogy, I will argue for phenomenological hermeneutics (van Manen, 2016; Ricoeur, 1976; Heidegger, 2004; Gadamer, 2004) as a suitable methodology for this field of practice.

Social pedagogy’s quest for ‘the social’ in the age of evidence

The past 30 years have seen a growing tendency within the social professions to move toward evidence-based practice, with a view to greater accountability and value for money. By ‘social professions’ I am referring to professions that work to better the health, welfare or education of the general public. What the social professions have in common is that they involve direct face-to-face contact with the general public, which gives their professional practitioners a certain amount of reflective autonomy in their dealings with their clients. Lipsky (2010) refers to members of this group of professions as ‘street level bureaucrats’ and points to the fact that such autonomy often presents a dilemma for the individual professional. How should the professional use such autonomy? To the benefit of the client? To the benefit of the profession? In Denmark, as well as in other Scandinavian countries, the social professions are presently referred to as ‘welfare professions’ (*velfærdsprofessioner*), and as such are subject to strict controls and regulations to a degree that affects the practitioner’s ability to reflect over concrete practice. However, the coupling of social policy and evidence-based paradigms with the view to creating better social professions often overlooks one important aspect of the practitioner’s task: the power aspect (Pedersen, 2011). Professional autonomy is essential in order to reflect on the power the practitioner has over the client. I do not wish to criticise evidence-based practice, which I believe develops many important aspects of professionalisation in the social professions. However, evidence-based practice and ‘hard facts’ do not and cannot remove the practitioner’s need for interpretive spaces. Such interpretive spaces provide the means to reflect on everyday experience, cultural narratives and professional ethics. Furthermore, the application of ‘hard facts’ is in itself context-sensitive, which in itself requires interpretation. Concepts such as ‘evidence’ and ‘evidence-based practice’ signify political will that researchers and practitioners may forget to question.

I argue that social pedagogy in the Scandinavian countries has traditionally implied deliberative and dialogical practices, engaging professional and client alike. The proliferation of reflective practice from the 1980s on rendered reflection as exclusively ‘professional reflection’. This shift was signified historically by Schön’s classic 1983 book *The Reflective Practitioner – How Professionals Think in Action*

(Schön, 1991). However, I would argue that to speak solely of *'How Professionals Think in Action'* misses an important point when it comes to social pedagogy, in that it misses the simple fact that the deliberative and dialogical basis for such reflection is rooted in micro-dialogues with clients and the families of clients. These very dialogues are the democratic basis for social pedagogy. On a macro level, the development of social pedagogy as an independent field of practice should be seen in the context of the overall democratic development in the Nordic countries from the turn of the twentieth century onwards. However, the validity of this point depends on how we understand what a profession actually is. If we understand professions in the Weberian sense of the word, i.e. as power struggles between actors to dominate a specific field of practice with a view to generating status and capital, then we fail to see that deliberation with clients and their families may have a fundamental role in the practice and identity of a profession (Weicher, 2003). Max Weber (1864–1920), the German sociologist, was one of the first to conduct research into the concept of profession. Weber's functionalist understanding of profession would render professional reflection as a tool or resource for professionals to establish and integrate their dominance in a given field of practice (Weber, 1978). On the other hand, if we understand a profession as a human organisation that builds on a set of altruistic values with the view to achieving a set of goods for humankind, then Parsonianism is relevant. This approach was developed in Talcott Parsons's (1902–1979) research into the sociology of professions. Parsons studied the role professions played in the development of democracy in the USA in the 1930s to 1970s, arguing that due to their complexity, modern societies could not exist without the professions (Parsons, 2016). To be professional is to be committed to 'social action', to be true to a set of altruistic values, above all to have solidarity with the client, patient or pupil in question (Parsons, 2016). The professional is driven by the desire to contribute to the wellbeing of humankind. The motivation for such 'social action' is philanthropic. Where Weber developed a descriptive framework in his understanding of bureaucracy and the professions, Parsons understood professionalism and 'social action' as normative phenomena. Parsons is also highly descriptive in his approach to this normativity. However there is a tension between the descriptive and the normative in Parsons's theoretical framework. This tension is also discernible today when we speak of 'social professions' or 'welfare professions' whose objectives are to promote 'the social'. For is it possible to be completely descriptive in our interpretation of the social world and social action? Is it possible to understand 'the social' without being to some degree normative? I don't think so. When I make the claim that social pedagogy is integrally linked to the overall democratic development in the Nordic countries from the 1900s onwards, I am drawing on a Parsonian understanding of profession. Democracy in this context is not a bureaucratic state form. I am referring to democracy as a way of life, as a form of praxis that grows from the bottom up (Koch, 1995). From this perspective, social pedagogy has essentially always been located at grass roots and community level (Hatton, 2013).

To arrive at an understanding of what 'the social' in social pedagogy connotes we must look at the word 'pedagogy'. Many researchers agree that the social pedagogical relationship between professional and client is essentially an educational relationship with the view to supporting the client in his/her endeavours to lead a dignified life (Erlandsen, 2013; Hatton, 2013; Hämäläinen, 2003; Kristensen, 2013; Madsen, 1993). Dignity is a central concept (which I will return to later). Social pedagogy refers to professional work with people who have 'problems' that undermine their ability to exist, interact and live with self-dignity, i.e. homeless people, substance abusers, children in care, children in need of care, senior citizens in need of care, people with disabilities etc. As opposed to merely giving technical or financial assistance as means of compensation, the social pedagogical ideal is to educate the client to live with the problem and to live with the social distress caused by the problem (Hämäläinen, 2003). It is precisely the educational aspect of the relationship that marks the border between social pedagogy and social work (Hämäläinen, 2003). Within the contemporary field of social work practice social problems are researched and a variety of methods are made available to assist clients with challenges and disabilities. However, it could be argued that this approach is purely compensatory and that the client's existential needs go unseen. By existential needs I am referring to the client's need to find meaning with life. The struggle for meaning is often seen as an individual project in late modern society (Giddens, 1991). However, such a struggle is not possible without interaction between the individual and a community of others. Furthermore, I would

argue that the individual's struggle for meaning in a material community of others is the essential structure of 'the social', i.e. without this aspect 'the social' fails to exist. To live a dignified life, all humans need to undertake this struggle for existential meaning. However, humans with special needs and disabilities often require professional pedagogical support for this undertaking. The difficulty of this task for professional and client alike boils down to the fact that there are no universal guidelines for what makes for meaningful. Alasdair MacIntyre (2003) likens the struggle for meaning in human practices to the 'medieval quest'; i.e. the quest is more often than not a journey without a destination and without a goal. The idea of the quest is that the destination and goals are discovered along the way. However for MacIntyre (2003), who writes from an Aristotelian perspective, such a quest for meaning can take place only within a specific practice and with a specific set of virtues. Virtues in this sense are skills or qualities that the practitioner/client develops in the pursuit of meaning, i.e. curiosity, reflection, stamina, focus, empathy etc. Virtues are not goals in themselves, but are 'goods internal' to practice (MacIntyre, 2003). If allowed to evolve sufficiently, practices develop their own interiority. As 'goods internal' to a specific practice, the virtues cannot be transferred to other practices (MacIntyre, 2003). However, contemporary 'evidence-based practice' and its reliance on transferrable skills (competency) seems to have little grasp of the interiority of practices. I am not arguing that social pedagogy does not require evidence for best practice. However, I am trying to highlight the importance of interpretive spaces concerning the development of the interiority of practices. The knowledge base for this argument is phenomenological hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1976; Gadamer, 2004).

Schmidt (1999) writes that pedagogical relationships are characterised by the ironic fact that they are relationships that are formed with the view to being terminated at some stage or another. Once the child or client reaches a certain level of autonomy then the relationship has served its purpose and becomes terminated. Social pedagogical relationships may however be different in their structure, as clients may be dependent on professional support networks throughout their entire lifespan. Social pedagogical support networks incorporate individual and collective axes of client participation. By focusing on practical activities in communal settings, the goal has been to create a protective/preventive shell against the fragmentation of the client's social and cultural lifeworld (Erlandsen, 2013; Madsen, 1993). Within this protective shell, the social pedagogical ideal has often been to develop a holistic practice with the client, i.e. a practice that places value on the client as a cultural, social, deliberative, biological, spiritual and intellectual being (Jensen, 2013). To work and be part of a working community (*arbejdsfællesskab*) and at the same time to enjoy the benefits of the protective shell has traditionally been the focus of holistic practices in the Nordic countries. To work with others has been seen not just as a work process but as an educational process. *Homo faber* and *homo educandus* are closely intertwined in social pedagogy. In both German and Danish traditions, work is seen as a foundation for democratic cultures (Jensen, 2013). The Marxist-inspired Frankfurt School, with intellectuals such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Negt, conceptualised 'work' as a necessary activity for human thriving, the argument being that work generates identity and culture. In 1947 Horkheimer and Adorno (1996) criticised what they saw as modernity's belief in progress for being based on a narrow and reductive concept of rationality, i.e. the rational as measurability. Their argument was that this reductive rationality overlooks important phenomenological aspects of human life. From a social pedagogical perspective, it might be added to the argument that precisely such phenomenological aspects of human life are fundamental to creating meaning for clients and contribute to the very possibility of living a dignified life. In 1981 the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1985) reformulated this critique, arguing that the narrow concept of rationality used by state, economists and public institutions was erosive of the civil logic in human relationships. More directly, Habermas (1985) wrote that the System colonised the Lifeworld. In Denmark and the other Nordic countries after the Second World War, Marxist-inspired theory (such as that of the Frankfurt School) fueled much of the intellectual discourse surrounding social pedagogy. The common denominator for these discourses was the call to avoid alienation. To achieve this, social pedagogical movements and institutions needed political, social and economic resources to create the types of support structures needed by clients. Marxist influences and Marxist values in many ways constituted the centre of this burgeoning professional identity. The Marxist value set became an integral part of the Danish social

pedagogical tradition, where the client's daily life was insulated against what was seen as the detrimental effects of the capitalistic society (Jensen, 2013).

Retrieving moral frameworks: sentimentality or necessity?

As stated at the beginning of this article, the knowledge base for social pedagogy is best described as phenomenological hermeneutics, i.e. knowledge based on openness to everyday experience and phenomena together with knowledge based on an understanding of cultural narratives. In order to understand how values are interpreted over time it is important to retrieve older cultural narratives. This is essential when reinterpreting professional values in social pedagogy. We live in an 'age of measurement' (Biesta, 2010) wherein so-called 'hard facts' dominate political and professional discourses. Attempting to retrieve insights from the past may quickly be seen as an act of sentimentality. However, I agree with Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1931–), who argues that humans act on 'moral intuition' and that to understand such intuition it is necessary to look to the narratives of the past (Taylor, 1989). Articulating 'moral intuition' becomes necessary when values conflict, i.e. in contexts where professional practitioners are engaged in decision-making. Taylor (1989) writes that our moral intuitions are linked to social ontologies, which differ from culture to culture, from community to community and also from period to period. A social or moral ontology is the most fundamental description of what it is to be human. Taylor (1989, p. 5) argues that such fundamental descriptions can never be objective as they are rooted in a basic set of values. This basic set of values are not chosen by the individual but evolve in communities and traditions. Although such values form the 'background picture' to the individual's thoughts and actions, the individual is often oblivious to this (Taylor, 1989, p. 8). The 'background picture' becomes clearer to the individual when he or she is forced to articulate a moral intuition in a concrete situation, i.e. a conflict or dilemma. This can, as Taylor (1989, p. 9) writes, often prove to be a controversial and confusing experience for the individual. Discovering that one is not author of one's 'own' values may be an unsettling experience in the age of radical individualism. As Taylor (1989) writes, 'The agent himself or herself is not necessarily the best authority, at least not at the outset' (p. 9).

However, this doesn't imply that the agent is powerless. The agent must take up the task of articulation. Moral intuitions are merely 'strong evaluations' that agents experience in specific situations and they require language in order to be interpreted and understood (Taylor, 1989, p. 4). Such strong evaluations manifest in the most necessary of human practices, such as upbringing, care-giving, education, family life, work and political activity etc. It is not possible to interpret or understand an individual's strong evaluations without taking the overall moral frameworks or 'background picture' into account. Taylor (1989) alternates between the expressions 'moral frameworks' and 'frameworks', describing the effect a framework has on the individual thus: 'To think, feel, judge within such a framework is to function with the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others...' (p. 20).

Taylor's (1989) view of articulating 'the good' as a non-individual process brings to the fore the importance of deliberation in professional practice. Social pedagogy has traditionally been characterised by deliberative processes concerning 'the social'. However, the deliberative space for practitioners to take up the task of articulation seems to be disappearing rapidly from the social professions. Deliberation understood as a verbalised form of reflection that is shared between practitioners is becoming a rarer feature in professional practice due to the political demand for scientific knowledge and evidence-based practice. The ideal of political and professional accountability requires the type of irrefutable knowledge that objectifies practice. This ideal leads slowly to practitioners standing outside of practice having lost contact with the interiority or the 'goods internal' to the practice (MacIntyre, 2003). The practitioner becomes a type of naturalist who studies phenomena from the outside. However as Taylor (1989, p. 70) writes the 'naturalist stance' cannot exist without implicit ideas of 'the good'. In other words, the 'naturalist stance' removes the very values and moral horizons that it needs to evolve. Professional deliberation requires that practitioners do not shy away from concepts of 'the good'. In the case of social pedagogy, practitioners need to begin speaking about what 'good education' is in an age of measurement (Biesta, 2010). Taylor (1989, p. 15) points to 3 axes of moral thinking that he argues are necessary to take

into account when articulating ‘the good’: (1) obligation to others; (2) to live a full life; and (3) dignity. To lead such a life, to strive after ‘the good’ in this way, requires education in the broadest sense of the word; in the sense of social, ethical and cultural formation. I will discuss this in the following paragraph.

Bildung and social pedagogy

In the following section I will argue that social pedagogy as we have known it in Denmark and the other Nordic countries builds fundamentally on the educational concept of Bildung. So much so that without Bildung as a value and as a tradition, social pedagogy becomes something else. Bildung refers to a liberal, humanistic educational tradition in Europe that has roots in Greek antiquity. Bildung is a German word and refers to education in the broadest sense, i.e. bringing together various disciplines into a whole such as upbringing, socialisation, education and moral self-formation (Gustavsson, 1996; von Oettingen, 2003). Bildung is an integrative concept in that it designates a bringing together of various aspects of the individual into a whole; the whole being not so much a complete personality or identity but an integrated character. In some historical periods the focus and objective of Bildung has been the collective whilst in other periods it has been the individual. However, as Gustavsson (1996) argues Bildung is best understood if we see it from both collective and individual perspectives simultaneously.

As a fundamental concept for educational thinking and practice, Bildung is a concept that causes as much disagreement as agreement. This is due to the fact that it is a highly normative concept that requires continual deliberation and interpretation. We see this in the Danish discourse over the past 20 years. Schmidt (1999) and Hammershøj (2003) argue that Bildung in contemporary society must be understood as ‘self-formation’ and that the objective is to develop individualism. Kemp (2013) conversely argues that the objective of Bildung is cosmopolitanism, i.e. that the highest goal of education is to prepare the youth to be citizens of the world. Korsgaard (2004) meanwhile sees Bildung as democratisation and argues that Bildung is essentially about preparing the youth for active citizenship. However these various positions differ, they seem to agree on one important point: that the overall objective of Bildung is to educate individuals toward sociality; that acquisition of experience, skills and knowledge should prepare individuals to live together and find meaning in coexistence. As mentioned earlier in this article, the role of social pedagogy is to provide support networks for individuals who because of special needs or challenges are inhibited in living meaningful lives in communities of others.

Von Oettingen (2003) describes Bildung as a pedagogical paradox: how can educationalists remove the freedom from younger generations in order to teach them how to live as free and autonomous individuals? The paradox lies in the fact that the individual’s freedom as a rational being is possible only when he or she is socialised into a specific culture of others. To actualise this socialisation is to enforce a certain amount of symbolic power on the individual with the view to his/her acquisition of freedom as a rational being at some later stage. Working in social pedagogy can possibly require even greater uses of power in order to support the client’s sociality. Because the pedagogical paradox becomes more acute in such practices, practitioners must continually reflect and deliberate on the values that form the basis for their actions.

As an integrative humanistic concept, Bildung however must never become sheer force or indoctrination. The balance between individual freedom and the symbolic power of the community has been the focus of most discourses concerning Bildung from the Enlightenment period to today. The challenge of securing individual freedom and simultaneously maintaining the cohesion of the community led to the establishment of pedagogy as a university discipline in Europe around 1750–1800. Before this period, pedagogy was regarded as a minor discipline within the field of philosophy, often being referred to as philosophy of education. As Korsgaard (2004) points out, the early stages of the Enlightenment period in Germany and Denmark saw an increased political focus on pedagogy. There was a need for insights into how pedagogy could contribute to the ethical, social and cultural formation of individuals. The political context that formed the background for these developments in Denmark and Germany from the 1750s to 1800s was one of growing nationalism. In Denmark and Germany politicians, intellectuals and educationalists were asking how to develop moral autonomy in individuals and at the same time how to develop a strong sense of national identity (Korsgaard, 2004). In 1779, E.C. Trapp

became Germany's first professor of pedagogy; in 1800 C. Sander became the Nordic countries' first pedagogy professor (Korsgaard, 2004). Both were philosophers who strived to re-interpret Bildung in this new political context.

Although nationalism can be said to be the dominant ideology in most European countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, other ideologies such as philanthropy and cosmopolitanism were strong contenders in the battle to articulate the relationship between the individual and the collective (Korsgaard, 2004). In fact, Korsgaard (2004) argues that the most progressive forces that brought about change in education were philanthropists. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) gave a series of lectures on pedagogy in 1776–1777, published with the title *On Pedagogy* (Kant, 2000) shortly before Kant's death in 1803. Not only does *On Pedagogy* provide important insights into Kant's pedagogical thinking, it also provides insights into how Kant – often regarded as a conservative thinker – became inspired by philanthropists such as John Bernhard Basedow (1724–1790) (Lyhne, 2000a). It was precisely Basedow's practical and integrative approach to Bildung that inspired Kant. However both Kant and Basedow owed much of their progressive thinking to another philanthropist, the French philosopher and pedagogue J.J. Rousseau (1712–1778).

Like Rousseau, Basedow and Kant strived to formulate an integrative pedagogy that brought the pupil's body, senses and intellect together. Basedow founded a school – 'The Philanthropinum' – at Dessau in Germany. Both Rousseau and Basedow believed strongly in the innate goodness of humanity. Rousseau's argument was that exposure to urban culture destroyed the moral integrity of individuals (Rousseau, 1997), and that life especially in larger cities made humans more concerned with outer appearances than with the inner human condition. In such a conception, the ideal pedagogical setting would be one removed from the vanities of urban life; it should be close to nature, forming a province in its own right – a 'pedagogical province' (Rousseau, 1997).

Although Basedow's school was situated in a town and not in the countryside, he strived to create a holistic pedagogy that put the pupil's senses and embodied experiences at its centre. The type of pedagogical holism that Basedow practiced rested on two focal points. Firstly, it saw the pupil as an embodiment of five senses: an embodiment that needed to be awakened in order to achieve intellectual skills (Lyhne, 2000a). Secondly, it saw the pupil not exclusively as a citizen of Germany but as a citizen of the world (Lyhne, 2000a). By using their own senses and their own capacities to make judgements – as opposed to depending on the judgements of others – when confronted with challenges or when conducting experiments, the pupils would grow into independent and autonomous citizens (Lyhne, 2000b). The school at Dessau emphasised the formative importance of practical disciplines, i.e. handwork, crafts, art and woodwork. However, its curriculum was by no means anti-theoretical. Its field of disciplines was very large compared to other schools at the time. Beyond the practical disciplines, the curriculum ranged from languages, physics, zoology, botany and geography to bookkeeping (Lyhne, 2000a). The school also differed from others in a number of other ways. Corporal punishment and disrespectful attitudes toward pupils were forbidden. Lessons were conducted in German and not in Latin, making it possible for pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds to participate. It was the norm in Germany and other European countries in the 1700s to conduct teaching and instruction in Latin, catering exclusively for the children of a small but growing elite (Korsgaard, 2004). By legitimising the use of the mother tongue, Basedow's influence had a significant and permanent democratising effect on education. N.F.S. Grundtvig followed this example in Denmark by making the Danish language the official language of the Danish Folk High school (Korsgaard, 2004). Furthermore, the Philanthropinum at Dessau also differed from other German schools at the time in its emphasis on the experiential dimension of learning (Lyhne, 2000a). Factual knowledge from books was not seen as enough to develop autonomous intellects. Such an autonomous intellect could be developed only if pupils used their own experiences in experiments and practical application. Learning mathematical formulas and historical dates by heart was forbidden (Lyhne, 2000a). It must be noted that this was roughly 200 years before the first learning theories were developed and appeared in educational discourses.

The concept of Bildung has been reinterpreted many times since Rousseau, Kant and Basedow. However, I would argue that it is no less relevant a pedagogical concept today than it was in the early

Enlightenment period. Above all in social pedagogy, where clients are deeply dependent on practitioners' care and support networks, the need for an integrative and humanistic *Bildung* is acute. The question is, how should we interpret *Bildung* in social pedagogy today?

Reinterpreting *Bildung* in contemporary social pedagogy

There is a fundamental difference between Enlightenment interpretations of *Bildung* and modern or late modern interpretations. Philosophers such as Kant and Rousseau organised their educational concepts according to the belief that 'the good' or 'goodness' existed on a universal level and that the right type of pedagogical intervention and tact would guide the pupil toward greater moral insights. This belief is evident in Kant's pedagogy, where he characterises *Bildung* as being organised in four successive phases: discipline, cultivation, civilisation and moral understanding (Kant, 2000). The final phase, moral understanding, is not based on religious practices but encompasses the exercise of moral judgements and rational thinking. It is at this level of abstraction that the pupil can reflect on what Kant called the categorical imperative: (roughly translated) to act as if your actions were to become the rule for all men's actions (Kant, 1999). However, throughout modernity and especially in late modernity, such belief in a universal 'good' for all mankind began to evaporate. The 'good' became an individual question often linked to the search for 'meaningfulness' or the exercise of 'taste' (Hammershøj, 2003; Schmidt, 1999). At the end of the modern period (around the 1950s) the pedagogical focus moved from developing sociality and morality to encouraging individual 'self-activity' (Grue-Sørensen, 1950). The objective became a question of how to effect, teach, inspire, provoke and guide the individual in a way that would lead to 'self-activity' (Grue-Sørensen, 1950; von Oettingen, 2003). This development has taken on an unforeseen intensity in today's late modern period. As both Schmidt (1999) and Hammershøj (2003) argue, late modernity has radically changed conditions for *Bildung*, leaving us with no alternative but 'self-formation'. Both Schmidt (1999) and Hammershøj (2003) argue that 'self-formation' does not refer to the type of 'moral formation' discussed by Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Rousseau, but refers to the 'aesthetical formation' of individual taste. Drawing on contemporary sociology Hammershøj (2003, pp. 114–6) describes late modern conditions for *Bildung* in a way that backs up his argument that 'self-formation', understood as individualised *Bildung*, is the only way forward. Hammershøj (2003) describes the conditions of late modernity in the following way:

- Individual liberation due to the erosion of traditional bonds
- Loss of stability and certainty due to the loss of the idea of truth
- Undermining of the legitimacy of authority, and thereby privatisation of morals (114–6) (my translation)

However, I would argue that a relevant critique of 'self-formation' as it is explicated by Schmidt (1999) and Hammershøj (2003) is that radically individualised *Bildung* overlooks the importance of community in the formation of individual identity. Qua educational theory, 'self-formation', with its insistence on the self, ignores the fundamental role of others and otherness in the development of values. Although clients are also radically individualised products of late modernity, contemporary social pedagogical communities can continue to build what Taylor (1989) calls the three axes of morality: obligations to others, to live a full life and dignity. The challenge for the social pedagogue is to professionalise the three concepts into a unified practice. The German social pedagogical tradition of building relationships based on *Haltung* seems to be a good place to start (Hatton, 2013; Mührel, 2015). *Haltung* refers to an embodied attitude of profound respect for the other. As Mührel (2015) argues, the practitioner can never completely understand the client by means of language, theories and concepts, and although it is necessary to seek the best possible or most fitting interpretations in a given situation it is also necessary to accept the limits of language. Mührel (2015) is not suggesting professional or conceptual resignation here. However, drawing on the work of Levinas (1996), he argues that although we may have rich and comprehensive conceptualisations of the client, i.e. with the help of educational theory, psychology, sociology anthropology etc., such formalised knowledge is not sufficient to encounter the presence of the client. Being present with the other requires accepting the limitations of language in that

moment of togetherness. This is, needless to say, a difficult zone for the professional to be in. As [Mührel \(2015\)](#) argues, the other (the client) will always remain a mystery that I must not decipher but must regard with profound respect. To reduce the client's behavior to mere conceptualisations is to ignore his or her strangeness or otherness. Along the same lines of argumentation, Danish philosopher K.E. Løgstrup (1905–1981), refers to the individual's *urørlighedszone* or untouchable zone, hereby highlighting a private individual space beyond any form of conceptual understanding ([Løgstrup, 1978](#)). Although manifest in encounters between individuals, *Haltung* is not an individual attitude. As [Hatton \(2013\)](#) points out, *Haltung* is linked to a person's *lebensweltorientierung*, i.e. a person's social orientation in a lifeworld of others. In other words *Haltung* is an ethos that expresses a community of others, whether they are present or not.

To develop this type of practice is a twofold task. Practitioners must strive to develop a 'culture of interpretation' and a 'culture of presence' ([Gumbrecht, 2004](#)). As [Gumbrecht \(2004\)](#) reminds us, presence embodies something fundamentally human that language 'cannot convey' – we have to be there to know. Drawing on [Gumbrecht \(2004\)](#) I would argue that this twofold practice in social pedagogy is educational because it incorporates *lebensweltorientierung* into concrete encounters, and because it also it generates new reflections in the oscillating space between 'interpretation' and 'presence'. Educational values such as 'dignity' or *Haltung* can never become completely defined in this space. The objective of educationalists and practitioners alike, I would argue, must therefore be to continually reinterpret such values as an integral part of theory and practice. The knowledge base that practitioners can draw on in order to take on the dual task of developing interpretation and attunement to presence is phenomenological hermeneutics ([Ricoeur, 1976](#); [van Manen, 2016](#)).

Developing 'interpretative cultures' and 'presence cultures' side by side is no easy task. As [Giddens \(1991\)](#) points out, late modern institutions hinder the open interpretation of concrete experiences if such experiences do not fit into the overall narrative of the institution. Presence becomes a disturbance to the smooth running of things. [Giddens \(1991\)](#) writes that the reflexive self, i.e. of the practitioner or the client, is sometimes forced to repress what is deeply human in order to maintain a coherent self-narrative and/or to be loyal to the narrative of the institution. This institutionalised act of repression is essentially non-voluntary. [Giddens \(1991\)](#) refers to it as the 'sequestration of experience'. This raises a deeply problematic point for social pedagogy, in that practitioners strive to create support networks and existential spaces for clients to lead potentially complete and meaningful lives. Sequestering what is deeply human from such lived spaces is detrimental to this endeavour. Also, as [Giddens \(1991, p. 244\)](#) further points out, it is often the types of experiences that raise difficult questions or 'potentially disturbing existential questions' that are repressed in late modern institutions. Because practitioners and clients alike are forced to keep the narrative going in order to avoid incoherence, certain aspects of being human are omitted from day-to-day life. As [Giddens \(1991\)](#) writes, daily life is separated from what is potentially disturbing – 'particularly experiences to do with sickness, madness, criminality, sexuality and death' (p. 244).

Although sequestration of our day-to-day experiences may be beyond our control, I would not necessarily say that we are completely powerless. In fact I would argue that this problem highlights the need for knowledge of narrative structures and how they affect identity building. Furthermore, I would argue that the more aware practitioners become of narrative structures in their day-to-day practices, the more reflective they can become in their interpretations, and also the more adept they can become in their attunement to presence. What is called for is a narrative approach to *Bildung* in social pedagogy.

American philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007) argued that *Bildung* in late modern society must be understood as narrative *Bildung* ([Rorty, 1989](#)). Rorty was interested in *Bildung* because of what he saw as the 'contingency' of human identity in both individuals and communities ([Rorty, 1979](#); [Rorty, 1989](#)). Contingency of human identity highlights the point that no human identity is more 'true' or more 'real' than others. [Rorty \(1979; 1989\)](#) takes up the argument that human identity is highly vulnerable to fragmentation, change and suffering, and to alleviate these detrimental traits humans cling to ideas of truth. The objective of education as *Bildung* in Rorty's optic is threefold: (1) to develop human identity by acquisition of knowledge and reading of books; (2) to cultivate an understanding of the contingency of identity; and (3) to cultivate an empathy in individuals towards the vulnerability of the identity of

others (Rorty, 1989). Although Rorty's interest in Bildung, together with his educational arguments, are contextualised in the mainstream educational system in the USA (i.e. high schools and universities), I would argue that his explication of Bildung has particular poignancy for contemporary social pedagogy because it tackles the question of identity head on. As Rorty (1979) points out, the difficulty with using the concept of Bildung in American/Anglo-Saxon educational discourses is to find an accurate translation into English. He suggests the word 'edification' (Rorty, 1979, p. 360), which I would argue is a problematical translation in that 'edification' may for some have religious connotations. In my view, continuing to use the word Bildung has a value in that it reminds us of the historical, cultural and philosophical context the concept evolved in. However I agree with Rorty's (1979) argument that Bildung is essentially about continuing 'the conversation of mankind' in the best possible way.

I would argue that the task of continuing the 'conversation of mankind' in social pedagogy is about supporting, facilitating and inspiring the development of client narratives, i.e. their personal biographies. For the social pedagogue the task boils down to creating concrete experiences that generate meaningful narratives. This may sound simpler than it is. Many clients who are dependent on support networks have limited ability to create meaningful and coherent life narratives – some clients have no ability whatsoever. The reasons for this fall into 3 categories: first, mental illness or disability; second, limited linguistic capital due to social disadvantages; third, substance abuse. The challenge for a contemporary social pedagogy is to develop environments that inspire and nurture personal and cultural narratives. For Rorty (1979), Bildung is precisely that: 'the "poetic" activity of thinking up... new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by... the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings' (p. 360).

For clients without verbal ability, a broader concept of narrative can be applied in practice, incorporating non-verbal forms of expression such as arts and crafts, sports, music, dance or togetherness. Social pedagogical practices work to care for some of the most vulnerable people in society. To understand this vulnerability it is important to see beyond the actual disability, illness or neglect suffered and see the social problems that arise in the aftermath, one of the main problems being social isolation. As Imogen Tyler (2013) points out, when citizens do not have the linguistic competency or cultural possibility to establish their own coherent narratives they often become the objects of other narratives. Tyler (2013), who writes in a UK context, warns that contemporary neo-liberal discourses, geared toward profit and efficiency of workforce, tend to discard as human waste those who don't fit into this equation.

Although Tyler (2013) mainly focuses on the plight of asylum seekers, travellers and socially excluded youth, her arguments are highly relevant for those citizens who need social pedagogical care. In all cases we are dealing with human beings who are unable to establish a coherent sense of self-identity and as such run the risk of being made 'abject' by society. As Tyler (2013) writes, human beings are made 'abject' when they for various reasons cannot define who they are, and so become subjugated under the tastes and definitions of others. This lack of self-definitional power characterised by the 'abject' individual or group is, according to Tyler (2013), linked to a range of disadvantages from lack of socio-cultural capital, to social exclusion, to restrictive and inhuman institutional frameworks. The 'abject' is constructed in societal and political discourse as the 'other' and is mostly framed as a problem that requires solving. Groups and individuals who are made 'abject' mostly find themselves on the receiving end of negative emotions of disgust, hatred and fear. It is therefore important when working with narratives in social pedagogy that practitioners draw on a strengths perspective, i.e. by locating personal and cultural resources, so that the client's biography is not exclusively built on disability and disadvantage. Schmidt (1999) points out that working with self-formational processes is fraught with conflict because identity formation is based on taste/distaste for different ways of life. Schmidt (1999) argues that conflict is not a symptom of self-formational processes, but is the very ground self-formational processes are built on.

Writing from a social worker perspective, Guo and Tsui (2010) call for a strengths perspective that values not resilience alone but also resistance. Guo and Tsui (2010) argue that practitioners should work with reflective practices that are based on a knowledge of clients' positions within social-cultural communities. Failure to work intelligently with conflict and resistance in practice would not only betray the democratic tradition of social pedagogy, but would also inevitably lead to what Belton (2018) calls 'cultural colonialism'. The challenge posed for a pedagogy of difference, I would argue, cannot be met

with evidence-based practice alone and calls for a renewed focus on reflective and interpretive practices. As [Arendt \(2005\)](#) writes, to reflect is to consider a diversity of human voices in the struggle to articulate one's own responsibility. Furthermore, [Arendt \(2005\)](#) describes this as a process that proceeds through three phases: (1) building complex narratives based on real experience; (2) deliberating with oneself; and (3) deliberating with others. Developing practitioner judgement is not about replacing evidence-based practice but about complementing it. As Brian Taylor ([2013](#)) points out, robust cultures of decision making require both evidence and practitioner insights; one cannot replace the other.

Conclusion

This article is a critique of the prevalent use of evidence-based practice in social pedagogy. I have argued for what I see as the necessity of an interpretive approach to social pedagogy in order to work with the normative aspects of practice. Firstly, I have highlighted the point that the 'social' in social pedagogy requires continual interpretation among practitioners and clients. Secondly, I have drawn on Charles Taylor's ([1989](#)) theory of moral frameworks in order to understand the fundamental role that values play in practice. Thirdly, I have discussed Bildung as the main European educational tradition within which social pedagogy has evolved. The question is how we can adapt an originally Enlightenment-era concept into contemporary social pedagogy. To answer this, I have drawn on Richard Rorty's ([1989; 1979](#)) narrative understanding of 'Bildung'. I have argued that the formational ideal must be to work with personal and cultural identity in a pedagogy of difference: a pedagogy that understands the importance of self-identity; furthermore, a pedagogy that understands the importance of a community of others in the formation of self-identity. To work in such a normative field is highly conflictual and gives rise to a renewed focus on reflective practice.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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