



The Pedagogical Atmosphere

Otto F. Bollnow

University of Tübingen

Preliminary Exploration of the Notion of a Pedagogical Atmosphere

The Fundamental Prerequisites for Bringing up Children

I take the term *pedagogical atmosphere* to mean 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. The term is perhaps a little unfortunate, and I use it hesitatingly for want of a better phrase. The term *atmosphere* usually makes one think of fleeting and delicate air hovering over the solid ground, somewhat like a shifting breath of wind or a guileful surface glare which covers and distorts the true relationships underneath. When one talks about a pedagogical atmosphere, an emotional and sentimental undertone often arises which threatens to cloak all educational events in a fuzzy sentimentality. That is not what I want to do in the following explorations. I want to be careful and stay clear of these kinds of references in order to come to grips with the foundational significance and importance of our subject.

What we are most concerned with here is examining and describing those affective conditions and qualities which are necessary for the raising or educating of children to be possible or successful. And we mean this to be taken in a most fundamental sense, for we do not merely want to describe those prerequisites which foster and enhance childrearing, or alternatively those conditions which create difficulties and which we can do without; rather, we mean to describe the conditions which must be supposed to exist before there can even be something like childrearing for education to be possible. I could also have decided to speak simply about the human or basic assumptions of childrearing by using these commonly understood terms as my title, were it not that these terms are all too unclear and therefore next to meaningless for the uninitiated.

I could have spoken about the virtues of the educator and presented an objective, an ideal for us to emulate. But by this objectification, our quest could be misled in unintended ways.

As well, it would present us with too broad a topic, for we do not wish to deal with the entire range of virtues of the parent or educator. There is a whole array of such virtues which should not enter our discussion because they point in a different direction. Such virtues are honesty, impartiality, the ability to separate one's own life from the child's, the demands of self-discipline, and a dedicated diligence, as well as many others. These are virtues which the pedagogue must utilize if he or she is to fulfill his or her duties, but which must previously have been actualized in the pedagogue and which therefore first show themselves in a childrearing situation. Here we are concerned only with those virtues which are pivotal for that specifically human relationship between the pedagogue and the child, that is, those which arise in the orientation of one person to another. One could possibly speak of a certain educative deportment or attitude and thus suggest that there is a certain systematic approach which lies at the base of all practical activity. It is out of a specifically oriented fundamental quality of the emotions that the gift or talent of caring for another springs, and in which it must remain firmly rooted. To this belong such things as trust, good will, patience, responsible availability, and so forth.

We are concerned not only with the virtues of the pedagogue in his or her relationship with the child, but also with the counterpart, the virtues of the child in his or her relationship with the caring adult: the emotional, human qualities to which the child must be able to respond if he or she is to accomplish the various tasks associated with growing up. In this respect, too, there are specific necessary prerequisites for education and childrearing. These are trust in the teacher, obligation and obedience, love and honor, and many others which make possible not only the ability to care for children, but also the readiness of the child to be cared for.

A certain affective attitude of the caring adult therefore corresponds to a certain emotional state of the child, and both are required in equal measure in the bringing up of children for education to be successful or even possible. But it would be a mistake to regard both of these as distinct and separate, as if we could exchange one for the other. Both are different aspects of the same affective medium which encapsulates both the caring adult and the child, and within which the two sides are distinct only in a relative sense. This is what is signified by the concept of the pedagogical atmosphere. Here we are concerned with the total pedagogical situation and especially with the child's and the pedagogue's common overarching harmony and disharmony in their relationship to each other. Using a deplorable

word from modern psychology, one could possibly speak about a pedagogical *operational climate*, or, if one really wanted to cloud the matter by using burdened significations, one could speak about the *means* of pedagogical *tools* or about *effecting* more harmony between people. It is the intent of this present undertaking to comprehend those essential preconditions of all child-adult relations which form the basis that makes any pedagogical relationship possible, and to highlight those moments of togetherness.

One is likely reminded of the thoughts of Nohl (1967) who spoke of the pedagogical relation and of Hertz (1932) who pursued the notion in his work. In his work, too, the focus was on the overarching adult-child pedagogical relation. But this concept was surprisingly neither pursued nor developed thereafter, and so the idea of the pedagogical relation remained notably pale because the significant elements contained therein were not examined further. It seems to me that within the concept of the pedagogical atmosphere there is hidden a foundational, still undifferentiated, but therefore all-encompassing view within which the concretely and actively grounded pedagogical relation can develop itself.

The Reasons for its Neglect

It is amazing that the problem of the important affective preconditions of childrearing has so rarely been considered in pedagogical thought. The reason for this is probably the difficulty in providing a sufficiently comprehensive account of one's pedagogical actions in bringing up children. And so the easiest way to provide such an account is by trying to understand the process of childrearing analogously to methodologies and techniques of production. However, as long as childrearing was seen as a type of making or producing, certain kinds of questions never arose. The existence of affective conditions can appear either as advantages or disadvantages, but fundamentally the planned completion of the productive results of education is not dependent on such emotional preconditions. Even when I am in a bad mood I can accomplish my goal. I only need to pull myself together. On this level, the pedagogical atmosphere would only be a peripheral and most doubtful concern. Whoever wants to arrive successfully at his goal does not allow himself or herself to be bothered by this matter. The existence of a certain atmosphere seems only to soften the seriousness, to surrender to the merely coincidental mood.

Yet it is difficult to overestimate the historical importance of the theory of childrearing as advocated by Rousseau. He argued

that one should not try to shape children willy nilly; rather, one should let them develop naturally. The traditions of Classicism and Romanticism in German pedagogy further advanced this theory. Childrearing or education, so one suggested, is not a kind of making in the sense of a technique; it is not a kind of forming as if the child were malleable material to be shaped after a predetermined goal; rather, childrearing consists of a "letting grow" that which unfolds after an inner, organic law meets an inner necessity.

Both of these views have more or less directly influenced the development of subsequent theories of education. There did not appear to be a third possibility apart from combinations which tried to acknowledge the relative strengths of each. The situation was usually such that in theory one favored the organic view, while in practice one fell back on the technological approach because the former resulted in difficulties.

Even Rousseau had developed from the beginning the notion of a negative pedagogy, a pedagogy which does not want to bring about anything by itself, but which consciously limits itself to carefully warding off any disturbances. Fröbel adopted this view with the idea of a negative pedagogy. But still, it is significant that the Romanticists themselves did not want to accept fully a negative pedagogy, even though their entire thinking style conformed to it. Arndt (1912) and Jean Paul (n.d.) even denied the view, and Fröbel (1951) himself first had to develop a complicated explanation so that the concept of a subsequent and yet prescriptive form of childrearing could be understood. Something always bristles at this concept. Somehow the natural view of childrearing seems in error when one limits the role of the educator or parent to one of a careful, calculating observer. This means that if the view of making shows itself as unsuitable, so too the view of letting grow shows itself as inadequate in encompassing the essentials of childrearing. Both views let us down badly when we want to use them as complete systems or models to make sense of the various aspects of living with children.

So it is understandable that even the organic theory is not able to grasp the problem of the essence of the pedagogical atmosphere. That is why no significant contribution in this direction came from this theory. It was an outsider, Jean Paul, who emphasized the significance of a merry mood for child development. But maybe for him too it was the narrow theoretical base describing an isolated, inner-directed, plant-like development which brought him to adopt the analogy of the warm sunshine causing all the flowers to blossom but which allowed him to miss

the specifically human aspects of this atmosphere. Humans do not develop like plants and therefore an orientation which follows this organic model too closely misses the essence of education and childrearing.

There is, of course, one great pedagogue who, with his progressive genius, acknowledged early on the full range of this relationship. This was Pestalozzi (1927) in the last two letters of his main didactic works, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*. Herein, after he has concluded the actual didactic theme of his book, he turns to the customary and religious form of childrearing and explores how the foundations for all later development are rooted in a relationship between mother and child based on love and trust, thankfulness and obedience. Pestalozzi speaks here about a spiritual mood or a natural bond that exists between mother and child. But these terms remain somewhat vague. They seem to be only an expression of the shortcomings of a suitable comprehension for the things we mean. In any case, even Pestalozzi has found no clear and convincing name for the fruitful pedagogical atmosphere, and his challenges in this direction remain without any real consequence.

The Double-Sidedness of Relationships

In this general atmosphere in which the bringing up of children occurs, two important interdependent and reciprocal directions are discernible. One is the affective or emotional disposition of the child toward the adult, the other, the corresponding orientation which the adult brings toward the child. This suggests a double-sided perspective from which to observe the relationship, namely that of the child and that of the adult. And even if the two sides in the uniform surrounding atmosphere unite and blend together so that it becomes difficult to separate the two completely, it is unavoidable for the purpose of this discussion to separate the two. Sometimes we must even use a little force, and occasional inconsistencies are unavoidable to handle first the one and then the other perspective.

We begin with the perspective of the child. Pestalozzi (1927) seems to place this perspective above all others. We could not describe it better than with Pestalozzi's concepts of love and trust, thankfulness and obedience. Nevertheless we must broaden the range of our observations somewhat, for the child does not just bring an affective attitude to the adult who is initially often the mother. The child is oriented with an attitude of acceptance, not just toward another person, but toward the whole world. To this belongs the feeling of safety and security in

an orderly and trusted world, a certain joyfulness and carelessness toward the burdens of life, a mood of morning-freshness in the full day-to-day expectancy and willingness to meet the future.

It would be blindness if one tried to suggest that the child's life could or should consist only of these pleasant emotions and attitudes. Also included, of course, are the opposing experiences of fear and doubt and the never-ending experiences of sadness. This can adversely affect a child more than an adult because the child is unable to defend himself or herself against the effects of these experiences. And as existential philosophy has commonly taught us, these disturbing experiences of life fulfill an important function in that they tear us out of our everyday taken-for-grantedness and lead us to a more authentic existence. This is true not only for the adult, but it also works itself out in the life of the child. Here arise important, and until now unexamined, questions, for one cannot assume that the forms of development of existential experiences of the adult may without qualification apply also to the child. The parent or educator must also know about this dark side of the child's world. The task of the adult lies in comforting and being available in the face of such threats. But I would not consider these experiences to be an actual part of the process of childrearing or education, that is, in the positive sense of contributing to the child's growth. Therefore, we will not examine them further.

From the solid basis of a generally supportive mood in which the child finds himself or herself will emerge the unique sentient feelings to those people with whom the child stands in a pedagogic relation—a relation which Pestalozzi (1927) has characterized with the notions of love and trust, thankfulness and obedience. Both the child and the adult are supported by this general mood, and they both are affected by its fundamental character. In turn, they both actively recreate the encompassing atmosphere, as the unique sentient feelings help to bring the atmosphere about. We must try to isolate these feelings in order to show their unique and significant character.

The special sentient feelings that the child needs to muster for the sake of a positive or healthy growth need to be met by a corresponding set of sentient feelings on the part of the adult. These affective feelings include the adult's love and trust in dealing with children. And they lead to a fusing of the relationship which will make it difficult to keep the perspectives of the child and adult separate. Yet, in the perspective of the adult, these feelings take on quite a different meaning which we must try to articulate and which therefore requires special handling.

To the quality of the pedagogic relation belongs a reflective sense of the Good, a sense of the meaning of being human, a sense of hope for the personal becoming of the child, and finally, an untiring sense of patience to hold the expectations and other requirements of the adult in check.

Note

Translated and edited by Max van Manen and Peter Mueller from O.F. Bollnow (1962/1970), *Die Pädagogische Atmosphäre* (5th ed.), Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer Verlag (permission from publisher).

References

- Arndt, E.M. (1912). *Werke*. (L. Band, hrsg. von A. Leffson und W. Steffens). Berlin: Deutsches Verlagshaus Bong.
- Fröbel, F. (1951). *Menschenziehung. Ausgewählte Schriften*. (2 Band, Hrsg. von E. Hoffman). Bad Godesberg: Verlag Helmut Kupper.
- Hertz, H. (1932). *Die Theorie des pädagogischen Bezugs*. (Göttinger Studien, Heft 22). Göttingen: Verlag Vandenhoeck und Reprecht.
- Jean Paul (n.d.). *Levana oder Erziehlehre. Werke*. (hrsg. von E. Berend. 5 Band). Berlin: Propylen-Verlag.
- Nohl, H. (1967). *Ausgewählte pädagogische Abhandlungen*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh.
- Pestalozzi, J.H. (1927). *Sämtliche Werke*. (hrsg. von A. Buchenau, E. Spranger, H. Stettbacher, 13 Band). Berlin: Verlag Walter de Gruyter.