The Pedagogical Relation Past and Present: Experience, Subjectivity and Failure

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Abstract

The pedagogical relation, the idea of a special relationship between teacher and child, has long been a central theme or ‘problem’ in interpretive studies of education, with the term having been established in English some 25 years ago by Max van Manen. Speaking more broadly, themes of ‘student-teacher relations’ and ‘pedagogies of relation’ are common in both empirical and theoretical literature. The German educationist Herman Nohl (1879-1960) was the first to give the phrase ‘pedagogical relation’ explicit description and definition, and as I show, a steady stream of educationists have followed in his wake. Nohl began his influential account by inverting the traditional order of teacher and student experience and subjectivity: Instead of the teacher’s experience, expectations and concerns being dominant, it is those of the young person or child that are of exclusive concern. Nohl’s notion has subsequently been revised and criticized by prominent continental scholars. Regardless, much from these continental conceptions—particularly the exclusive focus on the child’s experience—has been retained or strengthened in English by van Manen and others. However, in the light of ongoing adult and teacher fallibility this paper argues that the weakness, hesitation and subjectivity of the educator must also be accounted for in any understanding of the pedagogical relation. In tracing the 90-year trajectory of this notion, the paper consequently concludes—along with Andrea English and Gert Biesta—that moments of ‘interruption’ and ‘hesitation’ must be seen as integral, not accidental, to pedagogy and its relations.

Introduction: The Pedagogical Relation and Pedagogies of Relation

In the introduction to their edited collection, No Education without Relation, Bingham and Sidorkin point out that ‘there is a long philosophical tradition of emphasizing [educational] relations’ in philosophy, going back as far as Plato or Aristotle (2004, p. 1). Speaking of these relations generically, Bingham and Sidorkin highlight Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger as providing important, recent contributions to this tradition. Each of these three figures, it turns out, was deeply influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey, who inaugurated the human sciences and its disciplines, and who famously declared in 1888 that ‘the study of pedagogy …can only begin with the description of the educator in his relationship to the educand’ (p. 8). Buber encountered Dilthey’s ideas during his studies in Vienna; Heidegger’s teacher, Edmund Husserl, had Dilthey as his supervisor, and Gadamer, in turn, was supervised by Heidegger. Since Dilthey’s time, the pedagogical relation, the idea of a special, affectively-charged relationship between teacher and child, has been a central theme or more critically, a challenging ‘problem’ in the

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1 I would like to thank Dr. Max van Manen for his understanding, feedback and assistance with an earlier version of this paper. I would also like to acknowledge the influence of the vocabulary of teacher and student ‘subjectivity’ introduced by Dr. Gert Biesta in his own English-language interpretations of the German and continental pedagogical traditions.
pedagogical branch of the human sciences (Giesteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik; Klafki 1970, p. 58). In this context, it is hardly incidental that Herman Nohl, the first to theorize the pedagogical relation, was himself a student of Dilthey, and that he saw himself as consolidating a ‘movement’ in which pedagogy is investigated in terms of the relation between educator and educand.

However, in saying that the ‘study of pedagogy’ begins ‘with the description of the educator in his relationship to the educand,’ Dilthey not only underscores the importance of student-teacher relations, he also identifies techniques of description as most appropriate for their study. In so doing, he can be said to have anticipated one of the fundamental tasks that reconceptualist curriculum theorizing as well as phenomenological research in education have set for themselves. This theorizing and research extends from William Pinar’s ‘method of currere’ (1975) to phenomenological studies of the student’s or teacher’s experiences as situated in their respective, everyday lived realities or lifeworlds (e.g., van Manen 2015). Speaking more broadly, Dilthey’s imperative also resonates with continued attention by psychometricians to ways of quantifying and standardizing measures of teacher-student ‘closeness,’ ‘conflict’ and ‘dependency’ (e.g., see: Pianta 2001). Given the attention converging from various quarters on this topic, it is valuable to revisit its conceptual origins in the work of Herman Nohl, and to see how his original understanding has been subsequently affirmed, adjusted and critiqued.

Underpinning Nohl’s influential conception is an affirmation of the primacy of the experience of the student and teacher, and in particular, an inversion of their ‘traditional’ order or structure: Instead of the teacher’s experience, expectations and concerns dominating the pedagogical situation, it is only those of the young person or child that are significant. After describing this and other key points from Nohl’s texts, this paper provides an overview of post-war continental critique and revision of the pedagogical relation, and then traces its reception and interpretation in English. I argue that these interpretations run up against a difficulty inherent in the pedagogical relation since its inception: The ultimately unfulfillable obligation that the exclusive focus on the child’s experience and subjectivity places upon teachers and adults. Finally, by highlighting work by O. F. Bollnow, and more recently, by Andrea English, Gert Biesta and others, I argue that in the light of adult weakness and fallibility, a second fundamental ‘inversion’ is required in the pedagogical relation. This is one in which we, as pedagogically engaged adults, experience ‘interruption’ and ‘hesitation,’ and are thus thrown back onto our own subjectivities, experiences and weaknesses—as well as onto the broader institutional and political context in which they are manifest.

**Introducing the Pedagogical Relation: Nohl 1926**

Nohl defines the pedagogical relation in two different ways in two separate articles: The first is a clearly ‘progressive’ or ‘reform-minded’ articulation from 1926, focusing on educational engagement with poor and at-risk youth (Verwahrlosenpädagogik) entitled ‘Thoughts on the individual’s educational activity (Erziehungstätigkeit) with special reference to the findings of Freud and Adler.’ Nohl defines the pedagogical relation here as ‘the unique (eigene) creative or
generative relationship that binds educator and educand...’ (1926, p. 153). He then goes on to outline a number of ways in which this relation is different from other student-teacher relationships that we today would regard as more overtly ‘teacher-centered.’

The second article originated an entry in the 1933 volume *Handbook of Pedagogy* titled ‘The Pedagogical Relation and the Community of *Bildung*.’ This later piece is less progressive or reform-minded than the 1926 article. It offers definitions and descriptions of the pedagogical relation that are by far the most cited and referenced in both English and German. Here, Nohl defines the pedagogical relation specifically as a ‘passionate’ or ‘loving relation between a mature person and one who is becoming, specifically for the sake of the latter, so that he comes to his life and form’ (1933, p. 22). The tensions evident in a relation that would be at once ‘passionate’ or ‘loving’ and only for the ‘sake of’ another are considered below.

Nohl’s understanding of the pedagogical relation is inseparable from the German inflection of a number of key terms: Pedagogy (*Pädagogik*), education (*Erziehung*) and, of course, *Bildung*. Translated variously, *Bildung* can be understood as one’s ‘formation’ or ‘subjectification’ through engagement with others, as well as through engagement with oneself. *Bildung*, like the German *Erziehung*, focuses on what happens in school as well as outside of educational institutions. Both include practical matters of upbringing and maturation as well as the acquisition of strictly academic qualifications. While *Bildung* gives emphasis to internal self-cultivation, *Erziehung* underscores active and intentional adult activity, meaning literally to ‘pull’ (*ziehen*) something ‘up,’ ‘out’ or ‘along.’ *Pädagogik*, finally, refers to the theory and practice of teaching, and is also associated with an interpretive and philosophical tradition focusing on lifeworld experience and practice.

In this context, Nohl’s thinking is further grounded in a central question formulated for educational thinking by Friedrich Schleiermacher: ‘What does the older generation actually want with the younger?’ (1826/forthcoming, p. 38). This question is profoundly ethical rather than simply abstract or theoretical in nature. It asks us what we as adults ‘want’ with children and young people in our lives and in our world. What do we owe them (e.g., in terms of their education or the environment they will inherit), and what do we expect from them? (Today the latter is often understood in terms of their personal success or values.) Education in this sense is also seen as an intergenerational enterprise in which the older generation takes care of and also prepares the younger for the future. The older generation does this by passing on what it and previous generations have learned in interchange with the young. Experientially, this means that education

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2 Zögling is translated here consistently as ‘educand.’ Zögling is a combination of a declension of the verb ‘ziehen’ (meaning to draw up or out), which is central to the verb *Erziehen* (to educate), together with the diminutive suffix ‘-ling.’ Zögling is thus the one educated, the one whose character and potential is drawn up or out by another, by an educator (*Erzieher*). The term can refer children or youth who are being educated, to pupils as well as students—but can carry broader connotations as well. For example, Robert Musil’s novel of adolescent boarding school students, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*, is simply translated for example as ‘The Confusions of Young Törless.’

3 This same text, ‘The Pedagogical Relation and the Community of *Bildung*’ reappears as a section in Nohl’s later book *The Pedagogical Movement in Germany and its Theory* (1935; a book which in later editions includes a postscript by Nohl integrating ‘the pedagogical movement’ into National Socialist ideology).
is marked by a division, a split between the lifeworld and experience of the older generation, the teacher or educator, and the lifeworld and experience of the younger, the educand. For Schleiermacher, as well as for Dilthey and Nohl, this division and interdependency between younger and older represents the precondition for all educational thinking, engagement and experience. Schleiermacher and Dilthey affirm this division as a collective, phylogenetic phenomenon; Nohl and other scholars of the pedagogical relation explore its ontogeny, conceiving of it as ‘dyadic structure’ (Mollenhauer 1972, p. 21) that links educator and educand.

Given that the two respective ‘lifeworlds’ of the child and the teacher are constitutive of all educational situations, Nohl starts off by saying that educational prescriptions have traditionally been concerned with the lifeworld and the experiences of the adult or educator—with his or her adult accomplishments, concerns and difficulties. In the face of this, Nohl proposes an ‘inversion’ (*Umdrehung*), a replacement of the worlds and concerns of adults exclusively with those of the student or child. The consequences of this, Nohl says, are ‘far-reaching, and shape each and every moment of education’ (p. 152). In a crucial passage from 1926, Nohl describes this in terms of ‘the basic stance’ of what he calls the ‘new education:’

> This basic stance …is decisively characterized by the fact that its perspective is unconditionally that of the educand. This means that its task is *not* to draw the child towards… specific, predetermined, objective goals that it might see…[in] the state, the church, the law, the economy, and also not of a [political] party or worldview. Instead, it sees its goal in the subject and his/her physical and personal realization or unfolding (*körperlich-geistige Entfaltung*). That this child here comes to his life’s purpose (*Lebensziel*), that is [its] …autonomous and inalienable task. (p. 152)

A whole-hearted adoption of the perspective of the educand, the young, the child, is what defines the stance of the educator. Notably, Nohl applies the word ‘stance’ or ‘attitude’ (*Grundeinstellung*) to this pedagogy rather than, say, ‘priority’ or ‘responsibility.’ This suggests that this stance is to be a personal orientation attuned to or explicitly ‘in synch’ with the child’s or student’s experience. This responsibility and attunement is also deeply ethical in nature, as manifested in concrete, personal practice: ‘The pedagogical result does not arise from a system of prevalent values,’ Nohl explains, ‘but instead from a real person with a clear intention, which is directed toward another real person’ (Nohl 1933, p. 132). It appears as a kind of identification or emotional resonance with this child’s response to his or her lived experience.

The intention and intentionality of the adult, in other words, is structured by and organized around the child’s experience—his or her joys or suffering, his or her fantasies and lived realities. This further deepens the affinity of the pedagogical relation with phenomenological approaches. Both direct their attention not only to the experience of the educand, but also on its concrete nature or quality. Using phrasing that could well serve as a definition of *Bildung* itself, Nohl underscores that this concern is with the educand’s ‘unfolding’ or ‘realization’—in its bodily (*körperlich*), personal, mental and spiritual (*Geistige*) senses. Finally and significantly, in the quote above, Nohl
underscores the autonomy of the ‘new education’ from the influence and purposes of ‘the state, the church, the law, the economy’ and any other particular ideologies and world views.

The singular way that ‘this child here’ simply is and the unique way her subjectivity is realized in her life and world—with all of its joys and difficulties—constitutes what Nohl refers to as ‘the pedagogical situation.’ It is in reference to this pedagogical situation that Nohl provides an illustration of how his sometimes elevated talk of the unfolding of the singular subjectivity of the educand might be translated into everyday practice. Still writing in his essay on troubled youth in which he introduces the pedagogical relation, Nohl explains that there are difficulties which are the central concern (Ansatz) of both normal and special (delinquent) education: [These difficulties] determine what we call the pedagogical situation of the child. And here we see very clearly the inversion that I spoke of earlier. The old education starts with the difficulties that the child creates, the new starts with the difficulties that the child has. (1926, p. 157, emphases in original)

The child or educand is part of an experienced situation, with difficulties that pose their own challenges for him or her. These are the realities that the adult or educator must also inhabit.

**The Pedagogical Relation according to Nohl 1933**

In going further, however, it is now necessary to shift away from Nohl’s 1926 discussion of youth to his 1933 handbook entry that takes the education and upbringing of young children as its primary instance. Here, Nohl significantly expands on his characterization of the ‘leidenschaftlich’ or passionate nature of the pedagogical relation noted above. In addition, he makes it clear that the passion in question here is ‘love.’ In this text, Nohl’s comments suggest that this pedagogical ‘love’ represents an affective, intersubjective bond, and that it is nothing less than constitutive of the pedagogical relation. He explains further that this ‘love’ is manifest in two different ways:

The relationship of the educator to the child always doubly determined: by the love to the child in her reality, and by love for her goal, for the ideal of this child; the two are not separated, however. They are a unity. (1933, p. 23)

Love in the pedagogical relation is love for the child in his or her own present reality. It is simultaneously love for his or her ‘ideal’ or for what he or she can be or become. Recalling the ‘intentional’ character of the pedagogical relation, one could say that the teacher intends what is best for the child in two ways: at the present moment and for his or her future. This can be said to mark a particular temporality of the pedagogical relation: It is split between the needs of a concrete present and the possibilities (even demands) of an uncertain future.
The exercise of this love, particularly for an imagined or anticipated future of the child, Nohl emphasizes, must always be carefully ‘restrained.’ Any desire to see or form the child only in one particular way or another must be resisted. Nohl speaks of the need for ‘a conscious reserve in the face of the spontaneity and originality of the educand.’ Adult intentions must be active yet at the same time held back. This peculiar opposition and alignment of two tendencies constitutes the pedagogical demeanor (Haltung) of the educator, and gives him a peculiar distance to his object and to the educand. This is expressed in its most refined form as pedagogical tact, which does not ‘come too close’ to the educand, when it would want to either wish to see him either accelerated or [overtly] protected, and which also senses when an important matter is not to be minimized simply for instructional expediency. (p. 24)

Tact, the pedagogical demeanour of the educator, is a topic which was not new in Nohl’s time. It goes back as least as far as Johann Friedrich Herbart’s lectures of 1802 (translated in 1896), in which Herbart assigns tact an indispensable role, one that it appears to retain in Nohl. For Herbart, tact serves as a kind of link which ‘inserts itself quite involuntarily intermediate between theory and practice.’ It refers to ‘a quick judgment and decision, not proceeding like routine, eternally uniform’ (p. 19), one that allows the educator to know ‘at the right time… how to make sure of his pupil, and then calmly leave him to his own development in the mist of play and contest with his mates’ (1896, p. 23).

Nohl speaks of the broader context of the pedagogical relation as being ‘sustained by two forces’ which are seen slightly differently by adult and child. For the adult, these are ‘love and authority,’ and ‘as perceived by the child,’ they are ‘love and obedience (Gehorsam)’ (p. 138). Like love, the ‘authority’ and ‘obedience’ implied in a pedagogical relation are contextualized by the idea that the pedagogical relation cannot be forced, but that it is entered into freely by both educator and educand. It proceeds for Nohl as much from the authority of the adult as from the freedom of the young person or child:

Authority does not mean force, even if this authority, under certain circumstances, must forearm itself (wappnen); and obedience does not mean following blindly or acting out of fear, but instead the free assimilation by the child of the adult’s will to her own. (1933, p. 26)

As a result, if the legitimacy or authority of the adult or the free obedience of the child is absent, the pedagogical relation can and will fail: The teacher, Nohl says, should ‘not be offended or hold it against the educand (gekränkt sein) if the relationship does not succeed… One would instead

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4 This term is also consistent with the key word-choice in Hopmann 2006.
5 Nohl sees the pedagogical relation, despite its singularity, as manifest in a group of children, a Bildungs-gemeinschaft; in other words in a ‘pedagogical’ and formative community of cultivation and education.
attempt to bring the child into relationship with another’ teacher or adult (1949, p. 154). The pedagogical relation, in short, is characterized by its practical instability, or simply, its fragility. Nohl openly acknowledges the possibility of the failure of the pedagogical relation but says little else about the disruptions and uncertainties of adult action and the adult world in this connection.

**Post-War Responses to Nohl**

Nohl’s unqualified insistence on adult love, authority and responsibility—as well as the child’s reciprocal love, obedience and trust—appears rather old-fashioned, if not overtly problematic. Most obviously, such accounts do not acknowledge adult fallibility or failure, particularly as it is ramified and amplified through the (actual or expected) reciprocal obedience, love and trust of the child. However, critiques of the pedagogical relation that have appeared in the German context tend to focus on a different issue. This is the question of the connection or lack of connection of the pedagogical relation to what Nohl described as the ‘predetermined, objective goals of the state, the church, the law, the economy’ or of a political ‘party or worldview.’ This goes as far back as Theodore Litt’s very early critique of Nohl’s 1926 account of the pedagogical relation as ignoring the influence of overarching ‘objective powers’ in pedagogy (1927, p. 116). However, the same point is made much more forcefully after World War II. For example, in his 1968 book *Education and Emancipation: Polemical Sketches* Klaus Mollenhauer writes:

> Educational processes, including those envisioned by Nohl in his conception of the ‘pedagogical relation’ as the most basic relation, have not been subject to reflective engagement. …The realization of such pedagogical propositions in combination is at the same time the realization of an image of society [Gesellschaftsbild]. The criteria for pedagogical valuation are at the same time those that belong to a particular understanding of society. (pp. 24-25)

To envision a pedagogical relation is to imply a whole range of social roles on which the student and teacher, in both their personal and social aspects, depend. To understand what is appropriate in this relation, moreover, is also to understand more generally what is appropriate in one’s culture and society. As a result to claim as Nohl does, that the pedagogical relation is autonomous from these factors, or to argue that it should be explicitly aligned with them (as Martinus J. Langeveld does below) is problematic. To argue for their alignment would almost certainly result in the lock-step reproduction of given social realities and problems, while to argue for their mutual autonomy would constantly risk aberration into arbitrary, even dangerous idiosyncracy.

Thus, despite Mollenhauer’s later intensive engagement with human science pedagogy (e.g., Mollenhauer 2014), like most German scholars in education, he never turned to the pedagogical relation as an explicit theme in his writing. There are a few prominent exceptions,

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6 Of course, these include the questions raised by Nohl’s later alignment of his work with National Socialist ideology. The details of this alignment are beyond the scope of this paper, and are covered at length in Ortmeyer 2008.
however. For example, critical educationist Wolfgang Klafki (quoted above) provided a careful explication of the pedagogical relation in a 1970 introduction to educational studies—relying extensively on Nohl’s original characterizations. However, Klafki concludes his explication with a detailed, cautionary comparison of an ‘authoritarian’ pedagogical style with ones he sees as being more ‘social-integrative’ and ‘democratic’ (pp. 84-91).

Otto Friedrich Bollnow, a student of both Nohl and Martin Heidegger, represents another important exception. Bollnow discusses the pedagogical relation in a way that is openly affirmative. His account does not overtly reject elements of love and obedience, but it is qualified by an emphasis on trust, hope and dialogical reciprocity. Bollnow references Martin Buber’s ‘dialogical existentialism’ in emphasizing that for the pedagogical relation (like any dialogical encounter), the absolute and unconditional affirmation of one’s dialogical partner forms an indispensable precondition:

The speaker takes [the one addressed] …not just as perceived or observed, but as his partner, and this means: He confirms, as far as… he can confirm, this other being. The true turning of his being to the other substantiates this confirmation, this recognition. (Buber, as quoted in Bollnow 1981, p. 34)

Bollnow also points out the striking similarity of Buber’s characterizations of ‘dialogical education’7 to Nohl’s definition of the pedagogical relation.

Bollnow defines his key notion of hope in similarly existential terms, namely as a basic human emotion responsible for a wide range of feelings. For Bollnow, it serves as an explicit counterbalance to existentialist emphases on Angst, fear and despair: ‘Hope in this sense is trust in a future and an openness to its possibilities’—a trust that for Bollnow ‘provides the decisive basis of education’ (1989, pp. 51, 52). Finally, in recognition of fragility and uncertainty of the pedagogical relation, Bollnow brings to the fore yet another existentialist concern, explaining that this relation can be marked by radical discontinuities and even crises. While these ‘interruptions’ are not to be deliberately sought out by the teacher, Bollnow emphasizes that ‘human life does not…unfold in a merely ‘organic’ process of growth; rather only by passing through crises does [it] assume its genuine being’ (1987, p. 3). These crises, whatever form they may take, can thus present the teacher with the opportunity to ‘help young students to overcome their difficulty with as much honesty and resolve as possible’ (1975b, 49).

The Pedagogical Relation in the English-Speaking World
In working to establish the pedagogical relation in English-language discourse, Max van Manen cites the influence of Nohl, and in particular, the importance of his own engagement with the Dutch

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7 Bollnow here is citing a collection of Buber’s lectures on education, parts of which have translated into English: Buber, M. (1953). Reden über Erziehung. Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer. (See: Buber, 2002). Here Buber describes the relation between educator and educand as one of ‘existential communication between a being who is with one who is capable of becoming’ (1954, p. 273; emphases added).
educationist Martinus J. Langeveld. From Nohl, van Manen explains he takes three key characteristics: The personal, ‘intensely experienced’ quality of the pedagogical relation, its intentional focus on both the present and future of the educand, and what van Manen calls its ‘oriented quality:’ its orientation to the pedagogical significance of the child’s present situation (2015, p. 119). When it comes to Langeveld, van Manen recognizes a much more significant and far-reaching influence. In fact, van Manen attributes to Langeveld nothing less than the insight ‘that the pedagogical [relation] …in everyday life is from the very beginning ethical’ (2014, p. 608)—although this recognition can be traced through Nohl back to Schleiermacher in 1826. Regardless, in its basic constituents, Langeveld’s conception of the pedagogical relation is strikingly similar to Nohl’s. It emphasizes love, obedience and authority, but as indicated, sees the pedagogical relation as closely aligned with—rather than autonomous from—the influence of the church, state and other ‘objective powers.’ This specific point, like others from Langeveld’s account of the pedagogical relation, are not explicitly addressed in van Manen, who is principally if not exclusively concerned with its deeply-felt ethical and practical nature.9 However, it is clear that Nohl, Langeveld and van Manen all agree on a further point. This is one that is more about the preconditions for understanding the pedagogical relation than the relation itself. This is the primacy or ‘primordiality of consciousness and lived experience’ (van Manen 2016, p. 53) over theory and rationality: ‘We do not at all take a general concept or an axiom as our starting point,’ as Langeveld says. Instead, we must begin with ‘the phenomenon itself, or how one finds it in that experience that we can all share if only we are ready and able to grant it validity’ (Langeveld 1965, p. 26; see: Nohl 1991, p. 109).

At the same time, however, there is a rather different philosophical influence that can be traced in the work of van Manen on the pedagogical relation (e.g., 1991, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2016), as well as in that of Stephen Smith (1998) and Saevi and Husevaag (2009). This is the influence of Emmanuel Levinas, particularly his notion of ‘the Other’ which is used to frame the pedagogical relation in terms of an encounter between ‘self,’ teacher or adult, and ‘other,’ student or child. Unlike critical German interpretations of the pedagogical relation,
the key question that is thus brought to the fore is not about any connection to external forces, but about the ethics of the pedagogical relation itself and this specific issue of the otherness of the child or young person in his or her vulnerability.

Van Manen, for example, has perceptively noted that ‘within the terms of relational ethics’ in the broadest sense, ‘the vulnerability of the other has become the weak spot in the armour of the self-centered world’ (2015, p. 202). Pedagogically speaking, this weak spot or vulnerability has been understood in terms of the adult’s ‘interpretation’ of and intentions toward the subjective situation of the child—a situation which children and youth are often not able or inclined to communicate. For example, the title of a 2009 article by Saevi and Husevaag asks whether, in the pedagogical relation, the ‘child’ is actually ‘seen as the Same or [as] the Other?’ The authors’ response is to say that ‘our challenge as adults and pedagogues is to become more attentive to the experience of the child and to acknowledge the child’s utter otherness as the basic precondition for pedagogical relational practice’ (2009, p. 37). Similarly, in a short piece titled ‘Phenomenological Pedagogy,’ van Manen and Catherine Adams ask after the self-understanding of the adult in such a relation or encounter: ‘How can one “identify” and “form” oneself in the everyday experience of the pedagogical encounter… in the life of the child?’ (2014, p. 609). Their answer presents an equally difficult challenge: Such identification and formation, they say, ‘is only possible if one does not lose oneself in this identification but, in spite of and even thanks to this identification, remains oneself and at the same time empathically lives in the situation of the other—the child’ (p. 609).

As van Manen himself says, it is indisputable that ‘we are apt to do damage’ as adults in pedagogical relation to children (2015, p. 9)—and as hard experience has taught us, the damage done ranges from minor errors in judgement to outright abuse. It is not necessary to cite instances of overt criminality, however, to recognize the importance of adult fallibility and weakness in the pedagogical relation. Even for the most selfless and devoted adult or teacher, small or simply suspected slip ups in decision and action are normal and ongoing.

It is in this context that an aspect of the pedagogical relation highlighted earlier by Bollnow emerges as significant: discontinuity (Unstetigkeit). While Bollnow, as explained above, does not see such discontinuity as something that should be actively sought out in pedagogical contexts, he does emphasize its potential pedagogical value, perhaps especially in forming and testing a young person’s character and conviction. In keeping with his existential emphases, Bollnow tends to view discontinuity in terms of crises and other major life-changing experiences that in pedagogical contexts can at best only be imprecisely anticipated and retrospectively addressed. However, others working within the human science tradition in pedagogy—and writing in English—have focused on discontinuity not only in terms of life crises but also by considering less extreme moments of disruption, interruption and disconnection (e.g., Koskela 2012; Koskela & Siljander, 2014). For example, in an in-depth 2013 study of Discontinuity in Education, Andrea English notes that such meso- or micro-level discontinuities exist not only for children and students, but also in the experience of adults and educators: ‘Teachers also experience interruptions—discontinuity and
negativity within the experience of teaching—and come into uncertain situations in the practice of teaching; this uncertainty provides a basis for reflection’ (p. 82).

Others have developed this theme of breakage and discontinuity further, with Wilfried Lippitz focusing not on the difficulties of children in relation to adults, but on the diametric inverse: adults, specifically parents, in relation to their children. Lippitz has noted that ‘parents, those who are ostensibly closest to their children, are rendered foreign to themselves through their children. And children are rendered foreign in the eyes of their parents’ (2007, p. 91). Children may not only appear foreign to us, but in our engagement with them, we experience ourselves as foreign, and are confronted with gaps and inconsistencies, even moments of ‘non-identity’ with ourselves: We look upon ourselves as unexpectedly changing or as surprisingly capable or impotent—for example, as turning into our own parents. Alternatively, we may be momentarily overwhelmed by palpable frustration or fear or may be confronted by memories of one of our own powerful experiences as a student or child. We might become aware of ourselves as still haunted by childhood fantasies and deprivations—ones that we would wish to see fulfilled or avoided in the life of the child before us.

When we ourselves are thus rendered foreign, we are confronted not as much by the child before us as we are by ourselves. We are confronted by our own memories and moods, perhaps by our own, often inconsistent or all-too-convenient images of ourselves and our own upbringing. In this sense, our self-knowledge is shown to be inadequate if not deeply distorted. In these moments we neither remain ourselves nor does our attention to the experience of the child become more focused and direct. When we surprise ourselves by what we may say, feel or do, it is clear that we are not transparent to ourselves—neither mentally, physically nor emotionally. After all, we go to the doctor to diagnose our physical conditions, and we engage in interpretive work—informally, or sometimes with professional help—to better understand our own deepest thoughts, impulses and emotions.

Of course, these limitations in adult self-transparency and self-knowledge were given early and potent definition by Sigmund Freud, particularly in his work on the ‘unconscious mind.’ By definition, the ‘unconscious’ is not available to our conscious awareness of ourselves in relation to others, and it finds expression only indirectly in ways that affect our thoughts, emotions and identities over time. According to Freud, these indirect expressions occur through processes such as ‘projection,’ ‘displacement’ and ‘transference.’ Significantly, it is the last of these that is discussed explicitly by Nohl in his 1926 paper on the pedagogical relation that references Freud and his Viennese colleague, Alfred Adler. In keeping with his focus on the subjectivity of the child or educand, Nohl discusses transference and related Freudian concerns as if they were an issue only for the child, and for his or her experience. Nohl advises pedagogues that the more personal dimensions of the pedagogical relation may be realized through the transference of the parent-child bond to one between teacher and child. Recognition of the vulnerability of adults to such powerful, emotionally-charged but hidden processes and patterns, however, receives no mention.
The Relevance of the Pedagogical Relation in the 21st Century

One discussion where the question of the vulnerability or liability of the educator (and also the theorist) comes up is in a discussion of Nohl’s pedagogical relation in a keynote to the Society for the Philosophy of Education by Gert Biesta in 2012. Framed a kind of response to Bingham and Sidorkin’s *No Education without Relation*, this presentation (and paper) is titled ‘No Education without Hesitation.’ It begins with a recognition of Nohl’s canonical 1933 articulation of the pedagogical relation. Continuing, Biesta explains he is working to explore aspects of educational processes and practices that reveal gaps, interruptions, distances, and disconnections—not in order to refute the idea of educational relations but to add a moment of hesitation to our thinking about education and about educational relations in particular. (p. 10)

Biesta’s concern, one could say, is the inconsistency, alienation, and also the non-self-transparency that arise for the adult in his or her relation with the educand. Biesta does not deny the importance of the pedagogical relation itself. But at the same time, he would likely not find the solution to its challenges in greater educator attention to the experience of the child or greater efforts to ‘not lose oneself’ in empathic identification with the educand. Instead of repeating the gesture of inversion that Nohl sees as the precondition for the pedagogical relation, Biesta can be said to enact a significant inversion of his own. One can say that according to Biesta—and as also suggested by Lippitz and English—the experience and lifeworld of the educator is not to be simply ignored or suppressed for the sake of the child. The subjectivity of the adult becomes important not in spite of the pedagogical relation, but precisely because of its role in an intentional, and passionate or loving relation with the educand.

Biesta identifies as a key moment one that is neither characterized by recognition, listening, or acknowledgement of the child, nor by putting oneself in the place of the educand and his or her subjective experience. Instead, it is a moment which brings to the fore the reciprocity of address highlighted earlier by Bollnow and Buber. Biesta reminds us that as adults and educators, we inevitably experience being called or addressed by the student or child. To hear the child speak in these moments is not so much to be active in listening or acknowledging; it is rather to be passive and to receive something:

I wish to approach [the idea] that the child is speaking in terms of the ‘experience’ of being addressed, rather than in terms of listening or recognition. While listening and recognition can be configured as acts of benevolence, ‘being addressed’ works in the opposite direction. Here it is not for me to recognize the other, but rather to recognize that the other is addressing me — that I am being addressed by another human being; here it is for me to act upon this recognition. This suggests that if any recognition is involved, it is recognition that is directed toward the self, not toward the other. (p. 6)

In thus being addressed, in becoming the recipient of something brought forward by the child or educand, the teacher is not simply being asked to recognize this child and this address, but
to recognize him or herself as being *thus addressed*. In these moments that Biesta labels as ‘hesitation,’ the educator may see herself in a particular light, as being acted upon and called to act. Whatever the lifeworld experience or subjectivity of the child may be, the educator is confronted with his or her own experience and subjectivity as a teacher. In relational engagement with the child, in other words, the teacher is thrown back onto her own relationship with herself. At the same time, it is important not to understand this hesitation entirely literally or *in extremis*, as if it would involve ‘pressing pause,’ insistently interrupting an unfolding situation, or alternatively, as requiring an unlimited affirmation of teacher selfhood or identity. It would more likely be evident, for example, in particular feelings and intimations, in momentary or lingering doubts and uncertainties. It is such feelings, hesitations and disruptions that can be said to be as constitutive of the pedagogical relation as the responsibility of the adult and the lifeworld of the child.

Through reference to these hesitations and disruptions, one can perhaps also address the common German critique of the pedagogical relation: Its isolation from the larger objective forces of the society and politics in which it is located. In being confronted by disruptions and interruptions, one could also say that the educator is also confronted in terms of her membership in the flawed and contested adult world. Thus, in order to be able to be responsive to and responsible for the child, it is necessary to be similarly responsive to oneself. And to do so is also to return to one’s professional or parental role, to larger social and political forces and factors that inevitably impinge upon it.

Whether they are taken up explicitly or not, whether they are seen as inside or outside of the tradition of Dilthey and Nohl, the intricacies of the relation between teacher and student, educator and educand, appear to be strangely difficult to avoid in educational discourse. This is the case, of course, not only for phenomenology, but for the descriptive and auto-descriptive study of education in ethnographic and curricular research, and even for the standardized measures of teacher-student ‘closeness,’ ‘conflict’ and ‘dependency’ (e.g., see: Pianta 2001). In this sense, the pedagogical relation has not only been a central ‘problem’ in educational thinking in the human sciences. Perhaps out of existential necessity, it remains one for a wide range of approaches to educational research and practice. However, to understand the form in which it can be affirmed today is surely to see it as having discontinuity and recognition of adult failure at its core. At a time when heterogeneity and difference are proliferating in the classroom, it is no longer possible to appeal to a single kind of pedagogical experience that ‘we can all share if only we are ready and able to grant it validity’ as Langeveld did. In such contexts, adult subjectivity, whatever its particular interruptions and inconsistencies, can no longer be presumed to reliably or consistently mirror, echo or amplify the subjectivity of the child. Instead, fractures and discontinuities in our own adult subjectivity bring a heterogeneity and difference all their own. In its instabilities, passions and pains, unsettled adult subjectivity becomes relevant precisely *in* and *because of* an ‘intensely experienced’ relation with the educand or child.

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10 Bollnow and others were inclined to see the pedagogical relation as a kind of *existentiale*, an existential constant that, like ‘encounter’ or ‘crisis,’ is an unavoidable part of contemporary experience.
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