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The Concept of Social Pedagogy Based on the Praxis of Social Work in Brazil

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Abstract

This text aims at identifying a concept of Social Pedagogy and Social Education based on the recent evolution and systematization of this science in Brazil. It takes into account a large and diversified experience and practice in social education and the effort to build up a Brazilian Social Pedagogy whose critical fundamentals are Freirean-influenced. First, the article contextualizes the recent evolution of Social Pedagogy in Brazil and brings about a new concept that makes it possible to anticipate new perspectives within the field. Here, Social Pedagogy is defined as science, social and applied science, normative science, descriptive science, science that produces educational technology, individual and group-oriented science structured in a relationship of care and help that promotes people's capacity to manage risk and emancipate those historically oppressed through socio-educational programs and institutions.

Concepts Far Apart

If we wish to delineate a profile of Social Education as it is being constructed in Brazil, we must first define which concepts of Social Pedagogy and Social Education we are closest to and which we are farthest from. Historically such concepts have succeeded one another, some accompanying the drift of political ideologies (like the doctrine of the political education of individuals), or as reactions to individualizing philosophical tendencies ("pedagogical sociologism"); or addressing the need to foster an educating society; and others in response to socio-educational demands stemming from conflicts inherent to social reality (critical social pedagogy). In which of them are we situated? What

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should be the starting point for constructing new parameters of reflection?

The theory of "pedagogical sociologism" emerges from the reaction to 19th century pedagogical individualism and counters it by placing a heightened value on the group, on collectivity-society. Its main reference figure is Paul Natorp and it seeks to mould individuals to the communal will. "A man is only a man insofar as he belongs to a society", and the sole function of education is the socialization of individuals (Cabanas 1997, S. 68).

A second tendency or doctrine of nationalist and political education of the individual situates the purpose of education in the ambit of the State, and the individual prepares himself to serve the state well, as a political being and a good subject. That concept of social pedagogy is hardly distinguishable from civic indoctrination and is used to assist dictatorial regimes to condition their citizens. It can be seen as a theory of human conditioning for life in society. Among its proponents are Fichte and Kerschensteiner.

A third concept could be considered a theory of the social qualification of a human being by means of the educational relationship; a science capable of providing the social dimension of an integral qualification whereby the social sphere is but one of among so many other formative agents present in the family, in school and in socio-educational practice. The "educational relationship" is central to this concept and it should be different from the one established in schools. As Nohl puts it:

Social pedagogy is not a scientific doctrine but an ambience of intervention like the family or the school. Where the pedagogical actions of those institutions fail to reach, social pedagogy appears to exercise a supportive action that depends as much on the State as on non-governmental organizations [...]. The core of social pedagogy's concrete work lies in the educational relationship established between educators and those being educated. It is in fact a personal relationship that should not be hampered by the bureaucratic-ness of the pedagogical institutions involved (apud Cabanas 1997, S. 79).

A fourth concept of social pedagogy construes it as a theory of the educational action of (an educating) society; a concept that acknowledges the educating potential of society's institutions. Those institutions may focus on social education, especially by making use of their Social Communication mechanisms. Agazzi and Mencarelli are among the adepts of this concept.

If we consider the distinction between intentional education and functional education then we can see that the latter is present in all those educational influences that take place without any explicit objective and stem from the socio-cultural, political and economic forces of the context. In turn, intentional education corresponds to a series of planned, educational actions/interventions, predisposed in a methodical order and designed to organize the educational strategies and actions in such a way as to foster and promote the education process (vgl. Nanni 1984, S. 31).

The perspective of an educating society takes into account the education resulting from the educational processes carried out by the society's various institutions. It can almost be confused with socialization processes and is even closer to being a "functional" education that takes place almost by the force of gravity but without any explicit educational intention. Thus the task of Social Pedagogy would be to ensure that the educational processes latent in an educating society were "intentionally" orientated wherever they occurred: be it in the school, the family, the shelter, or in the media.

There is a final concept that seems to be closer to the systematization of Social Pedagogy that is currently in course in Brazil, even though it has yet to acquire the specific elements of criticality and emancipation. An item will now be dedicated to those aspects: a social pedagogy at once critical and emancipator of individuals.

Emancipatory critical social pedagogy

One concept that currently seems to enjoy wide acceptance in Brazil is a tendency known as critical social pedagogy associated to theories that are the basis of practices directed at groups of vulnerable and

excluded people in high risk situations. Social Pedagogy conceived in that light would be seen as emphasizing compensatory and redistributing actions and support for reinforcing citizenship making use of the resources offered by social solidarity. The current trend, however, is that in tune with the democratic movements determined by the 1988 Constitution, such Social Pedagogy based on social solidarity comes to integrate with the construction of citizenship based on universal human rights achieved by means of public and social policies. It draws close to the line of Critical Social Pedagogy that seeks to promote changes in individuals and in society by means of socio-educational actions directed at individuals and groups that are in social risk situations. They can be viewed, in their origins, as stemming from the contributions of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

Critical Social Pedagogy, as developed by Mollenhauer, insofar as it makes the connection between education and social structure (vgl. Serrano 2004, S. 49), is centered on a perspective of transforming social reality and making people aware of their roles in the world. It is based on the principle that antisocial behavior and social structures are inter-dependent. In a critical perspective, Mollenhauer's Social Pedagogy takes into account the subject, the subject's relations with social structures and the subject's intention and need to change them.

It is not just a question of achieving the individual's socialization but, instead, of inculcating in him a critical attitude capable of bringing about change and transformations in society. It is also not a question of fostering adaptation and accommodation to society, but of promoting change in society itself. In that author's view it is not enough merely to cultivate the relationship between educator and those being educated; the greater need is to modify the social conditions that generate conflict. Nor is it a question of playing out the role of exercising social control over youth, but of seeing to it that youngsters are active participants in their own education.

Mollenhauer saw the family as operating the transmission of culture and values. In his view the school concerned itself with the cognitive dimension, while Social Pedagogy and Education fostered integration in

environments of social conflict and risk. The author feels that Pedagogical institutions have many features in common, but Social Pedagogy institutions, however much they may tend towards a common denominator, do, in fact, bring together very different methodologies (vgl. Mollenhauer 1994, S. 112). For example, there are substantial differences between the methodologies used in a shelter for street children and those employed in a rehabilitation center for drug users.

Mollenhauer also warns against social control action that tends to be disguised in the form of socio-educational services when he states how:

up till now it has proved impossible to solve the conflict that overshadows most of the Social Pedagogy institutions, namely: can they really adhere to the fundamental pedagogical principle of only serving to foster and support those existential situations subject to development difficulties, or in other words, do they not always, or mostly, end up being forms of aggression, control or domestication in regard to the project of normality that the society unfolds? (Mollenhauer 1994, S. 117).

The author establishes a typology for socio-educational institutions, dividing them into five groups: (a) Institutions for children: crèches, care mothers, kindergartens; (b) Youth institutions like youth groups, youth work associations, sports clubs, churches, parties, assistance groups and associations, spare time activity centers, youth training centers; (c) Educational institutions associated to shelters, family shelters, shelters for the needy and abandoned; (d) Institutions offering Guidance and Counseling in: education, periods of crisis, matrimonial problems, family sociability, drug use situations, and questions of rights; (e) Socio-educational measures like conditional assisted liberty, semi-liberty and deprivation of liberty.

The author also delineates the problem of the issue of normalization or the questioning of parameters of normality given that Social Pedagogy generally has to do with groups or people that find themselves in situations of risk, conflict, or cultural or behavioral diversity;

Social Pedagogy institutions should not only concern themselves with the day-to-day problems of education, instruction and treatment but also those kinds of fundamental questions that involve the validity of the norms of our cultural form of life and our collective concepts of what is understood by normality. (vgl. Mollenhauer 1994, S. 134). This critical version of Social Pedagogy sees social education not exactly as a response to emergent needs based on compensatory actions but rather as stemming from pro-positive and preventive actions set in course before the problems have even arisen, by means of the citizenry's solidarity and social responsibility. The methodologies most used are mainly directed at Socio-cultural animation, education for citizenship and prevention through Education for all.

On the Brazilian side, in a similar perspective to Mollenhauer's, Freire also seems to work with the concept of Social Pedagogy orientated towards social change, but not so much concerning structural changes as changes in the people's mentalities; an 'emancipation of the oppressed enabling them to get rid of visions of the world that reproduce situations of oppression' (vgl. Freire 1970).

He does not actually theorize a Social Pedagogy but, through his practice, he managed to influence the way in which social education is carried out in Brazil. In my view, one of the most significant aspects of Freire's pedagogy concerns what we can call building the capacity of individuals to manage the risks they encounter in their lives themselves. His literacy training method focuses on creating awareness in the learners of the risks facing them so that they will know how to administer the conflicts they will be subjected to. Social risks cannot be simply extirpated from people's daily lives. Thus it is important to understand them, not as being the inevitable fruits of destiny (whereby the person becomes passive in the face of social forces), but rather as the fruits of history, full of meanings many of which stem from crystallized ideologies. The process of acquiring awareness leads to a wider

understanding of the world and in turn to an indignation that provokes the need for change. It is along those lines that we can identify Freire's pedagogy of hope in the "unprecedented but feasible" as the myth that leads to the achievement of the goal of transforming a reality that generates risks and conflicts. The central motivation for Freire is hope. Hope must not be lost; loss of a hope means immobility, quietude, stagnation (vgl. Scocuglia 2009).

Freire's perspective transfers the center of gravity of education to the socio-cultural reality. It is not just a question of educating individuals in environments /situations of conflict but more of promoting an education of groups, grass roots education capable of generating actions with the power to transform society; its key word is hope, hope for social transformation; its method is dialogical. Its (social) pedagogy situates itself in the light of change as a form of Pedagogy at once critical and emancipatory.

The various perceptions of education set out above are capable of generating different concepts of Social Pedagogy and Social Education. In that sense, the concept of Social Pedagogy that is currently developing in Brazil based on the concept, also set out above, of a form of social pedagogy both critical and emancipatory seems to us to be endowed with considerable potential for contributing to socio-educational action. It unites a Freirean pedagogy with that social change perspective considered necessary to contribute effectively to solving socio-educational problems.

Elements to enable an understanding of Social Pedagogy and Social Education

It would not be easy to try to define social pedagogy in a single phrase. What we will set out here is merely an attempt. Social Pedagogy is a normative descriptive science that guides socio-pedagogical practices directed at individuals or groups that need support to meet their needs and help them to manage risks and it is afforded by means of the production of socio-educational methodologies and technologies, and support from institutional structures attuned to the struggle for social and constitutional rights. (vgl. Caliman 2009, S. 889).

This attempt at a definition draws on elements contributed by Italian authors (Beccegato, Izzo), Spanish authors (Fermoso, Cabanas), and a German author (Mollenhauer) but it also aggregates historic contributions made by Brazilian educators like Paulo Freire and, even more so, on Brazil's rich experience in social education over recent decades. Nevertheless, although those concepts are all fundamental contributions, much of the formulation of the definition is due to the almost ten years of direct personal experience I acquired in administering socio-educational institutions in Brazil.

Given the definition's complexity, the concepts addressed need to be explained in detail, step by step.

Social Pedagogy as a Science

It is a science insofar as it sets out to explain a sector or dimension that presents itself as problematic and needful of a solution in order to improve the quality of people's life, particularly that of groups living in risk situations.

It is a science because it tends to establish an order and systematize the knowledge obtained in day-to-day socio-educational daily practice. It transforms facts and occurrences into organized knowledge and furthermore, to do so in a correct and appropriate manner, it makes use of appropriate consolidated research methods used by other areas of human sciences such as Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology. Such methods are standard procedures which, when they are used appropriately, can help to explain, understand and interpret a reality that at first sight is overly complex and fraught with problems.

As a science, it seeks to present the reasons for its existence, what it is, what it does and how it does it. As a science, it investigates. The investigated knowledge is organized in the form of a study discipline, in this case as one of the sciences of education. As an example, one investigative method that is well known in the practice of some socio-educational institutions is that of research-action whereby the same group of educators meets on a weekly basis to evaluate and reflect on the daily practices of its members. They register the course of their educational experiences and modify their practices in the light of their

reflection on the actions. Another research method is the focal group where a group of people guided by a researcher share information that will be used to make a determined pedagogical action clearer. There are other quantitative and qualitative methods that also lend themselves to investigations in the area of Social Pedagogy. The choice of methods depends on the specific context in which they are to be applied and the objectives that the person conducting the research wishes to achieve.

It is a science insofar as it seeks for solutions to the problems of daily life. Those solutions are actually techniques and methodologies that facilitate facing up to problems, solving conflict situations, and improving people's quality of life individually or in groups.

A practical science

Social Pedagogy has the qualities of an applied, practical science. It would not make any sense in the form of a pure or merely theoretical science. Its sources are pedagogical practices that under investigation become transformed into theories and feed back to the reality in the form of practices capable of transforming that very reality.

It is in the daily round that an educator who comes across a young drug user for example asks himself how he should act to help the youngster to free himself from drugs and feel better in the company of others. What does Social Pedagogy have to say in such a situation?

Well, we can remember straightaway that Social Pedagogy is capable of scientifically constructing and validating human relations techniques and dynamic mechanisms that favor the restoration of the health of youngsters with addiction problems. It would have to be admitted that simple chemical detoxification, which could be achieved in a question of months, would not of itself solve the root of the problem. Because the drug use may have begun as a reaction to a state of malaise the person was living through, the symptom of a lack of meaning to life, or an inability to handle certain problems or people in the course of the individual's daily life; it might have been a means of getting away from reality that led to the initial purchase in a quest for compensatory sensations. Furthermore, in such cases Social Pedagogy will say that for

there to be a true rehabilitation, in addition to chemical detoxification, there needs to be a period for the reconstruction of the person's very identity and self esteem and of the style of his or her personal relationships; it can offer solutions and methodologies to that end.

Such solutions in the form of techniques, dynamic mechanisms, planning, or educational projects are all ways of responding, in a scientific light, to the problems experienced in the daily educational round.

A normative science

When we call an adolescent's attention to the fact of his using violence with his colleagues, we are tacitly admitting that there is a consensus as to the norms of sociability. We act consequentially to educate adolescents in such a way that they will act in accordance with that consensus, which, in the specific case, expresses itself as peace, citizenship, respect, affection, etc. Those norms, values and attitudes that we consider to be "adequate" serve as references for the education of youngsters in daily life. In that light we can affirm that Social Pedagogy is indeed a normative science, that is to say, it is orientated by norms, attitudes, values, all of which are ends that inspire the educational actions.

While we cannot deny that the educational processes are endowed with them a certain dosage of control, what actually makes the socio-educational intervention meaningful is the need to reconstruct the individual's sense of well-being in his environment, the need to act and deal with the causes of the social malaise and to provoke social change.

Intervention, in the form of educational practices, aims as much to transform the quality of life of individuals, as that of the groups, communities and society in which they live. This transformational aspect is essential because it is not interesting to us to have people or society continuing to generate and nurture risk situations or for people to continue to be involved in conflicts and problems but, instead, to have them change for the better.

A descriptive science

Under the previous headings we gave as an example and object of analysis young people's involvement with drugs. Common sense offers a variety of opinions in attempts to explain why youngsters turn to drugs: under the influence of other youngsters, because they cannot come to any understanding in the home or with their parents; because they live in degrading social situations; because young people are "irresponsible"... in short, the man in the street puts forward a variety of 'whys' and 'wherefores'. The opinion of a social educator, however, becomes more qualified insofar as he not only has the advantage of contact with the childhood-adolescence context of daily life and his own involvement with socio-pedagogical practices, but he can also call upon the theoretical presuppositions of social pedagogy itself.

However, if we wish to gain more precise knowledge of the reasons behind drug use and the whys and wherefores of how it comes about, we must have recourse to scientific knowledge. That does not mean disdaining common sense or failing to take into consideration qualified observations made by the social educator, quite the contrary; the researcher investigates reality, listens to the various social actors involved and then uses validated methods to systematize the information gathered.

The social educator and the researcher come face to face with both practice and theory and develop the ability to describe contexts and practices and to construct knowledge. In most cases, methodologically correct research brings in results that are sufficiently reliable to enable an adequate organization of the pedagogical practices and, consequently, to address the problems involved in an appropriate manner.

Research in which the investigation is methodologically correct accurately describes the reality in which the individual being educated is inserted. It organizes, systematizes and interprets the data. Finally it puts forward possible solutions based on the scientifically gathered information. It is the task of the coordinator and the team of a given social project to make the solutions operational and insert them in the daily round of the socio-educational activity.

The educator and his collaborators are guided by their own experience but they are also guided by science, represented in this case by the Social Pedagogy researcher. The investigation of adequate solutions is enriched by the confrontation and complementation of the two poles, experience and theory, and becomes a solid basis for the construction of actions, projects, practices and socio-educational methodologies.

A science that produces educational technology

Social Pedagogy is capable of producing educational solutions for socio-educational institutions. Such solutions are primarily preventative but can also be remedial for problematic conflict-ridden situations in which individuals or groups find themselves living.

The moment a pedagogue (educator, education specialist or social scientist) addresses the problems of a given reality and articulates programs or projects to foster the socio-educational development of individuals and groups in risk situations, he or she is actually performing the more specific function of articulating solutions aimed at achieving the social and educational well-being of the target groups or individuals. There are many different kinds of solution: processes, dynamic mechanisms, coordinated actions or procedures within the sphere of projects; and they, in turn, are situated within programs that ensure that they have a pedagogical and political basis. Isolated, sporadic projects tend to produce palliative solutions and are often counter-productive.

One example of a technical solution for socio-educational institutions is the construction of projects designed to counteract violence in certain neighborhoods or communities in areas surrounding schools. Research into the local reality and a diagnosis of the situation are both indispensable to any project of that nature. It must involve the various participants including educators, parents, representatives of the community, administrators, etc., not only to provide information on the local reality (investigative phase) but also to transform that reality (operational phase). It must drive towards achieving an improvement in the quality of life of individuals and groups, the integral educational devel-

opment of the people involved and the social transformation of the environment where it will be applied.

A science directed at individuals, groups and society at large

Social Education, intermediated by the services of social educators, works with individuals, groups and society at large.

- Individuals: the aim of socio-educational programs is to improve people's quality of life especially that of people in situations of personal and social malaise. Some social programs or projects focus on addressing individuals rather than groups. To exemplify, we can mention programs directed at professional and vocational orientation, behavior, defense of civil and human rights, prevention and recuperation in cases of (sexual, physical, psychological) violence, therapy for the rehabilitation of drug users, and inclusion for prisoners.

- Groups: under this heading we can consider groups based on geographic, age group or social criteria. Using geographic criteria we have socio-educational programs directed at neighborhoods, districts, blocks, communities or cities; based on age group criteria they can be directed at children, adolescents, young people and adults or even elderly people that share the same specific needs; and when social criteria are used, social education is directed at groups that face the same difficulties and risks or have the same specific common needs (drug use, extreme poverty, urban violence, involvement with anti-social gangs etc.).

- Society: although all socio-educational activities, whether they are operated at the level of individuals or groups, seek to foster the wellbeing of groups in risk situations, the overriding purpose seems to be to recuperate citizenship and wellbeing in society as a whole. That underscores the importance of the critical and transformational dimension of each and every socio-educational project or program.

A relationship of care and assistance

While it is true that Social Education, in its role as the practical facet of Social Pedagogy, represents educational processes directed at society as a whole, in reality, it mainly tends to intervene in emergency situa-

tions in response to demands and requests for help, solidarity and guidance.

Such interventions tend to occur in wider spheres intermediated by educational processes that unfold in the school, the family, or as an expression of social and public policies that democratically make those processes available to the population as a whole. However, given the urgency of the demands that spring up from reality and risk situations that constitute emergencies, preventative action must necessarily extrapolate the bounds of the classroom, concentrate on the groups at risk and be unfolded by means of cultural actions, and actions designed to occupy spare time (sports, leisure activities, music, theater, rhythm, expression and art etc.).

It is also true that in the educational reality we find in Brazil it is hard to think of education disassociated from social issues. If it is true that the school's most pragmatic objective is limited to promoting teaching and learning processes, it is also true that such processes cannot ignore the objective situation of the failure to meet basic needs and respect fundamental rights; a situation that tends to foster poverty and exclusion, affective deprivation and deviant anti-social behavior.

Those processes, essentially of a pedagogical nature, preferentially founded on reason (teaching and learning) need to establish a dialogue with processes of a socio-pedagogical nature that are particularly governed by affectivity and the relationship between educator and the one being educated.

When we refer to help or assistance, it is not merely material assistance. As Nohl (apud CABANAS, 1997) has underscored, it lies much more in the affective construction of the relationship within an educational community. In Nohl's view, the objective of a socio-pedagogical action is not primarily society itself, but the individual situated in it; the individual being educated should not be considered as a 'case' or a 'client' that needs to be adjusted to society, but as a person that needs to be respected and orientated. In that light the educator tends to help the person being educated to help himself (CARIDE, 2004).

Fostering people's ability to manage risks

When we come across a risk situation or vulnerability being experienced by an adolescent, the first step tends to be taking care to redress that situation of pain and suffering. That care or cure, however, should be just the first step of a sequence designed to create motivation, force, and self-esteem, or as some researchers put it, to promote resilience. It is a process whereby people no longer become motivated from without (care and cure processes) but rather, from within (empowerment process); whereby the person begins to dream of the future again and to act in the light of his or her own life projects. In such cases we believe that people learn to stand on their own legs, to catch their own fish instead of being given fish hand-outs, to be pro-active rather than being eternally reactive to their suffering and neediness.

We would note, however, that the first process of care and cure is indispensable; it is not possible to remain indifferent in the face of a person suffering in a risk situation. Nevertheless, for it to be effectively transformational, the first phase needs to lead into a second one that reinforces the person's internal resources and fosters mechanisms stemming from inside the person himself to overcome the risks. When Freire designed his literacy training method he certainly did not conceive it as being just a method to enable people to read words but rather as a method to enable them to read the reality they were living in and to interpret it. The first phase of the care (learning to read and write) is necessary for the person to pass to the second phase, which prepares them for a more in-depth reading, a reading of the world, a revision of their vision of the world, boosting motivation and initiating the administration of their own risks and their emancipation from oppressive contexts.

By means of socio-educational programs and institutions

The construction of institutions springs from the need to systematize and organize processes that repeat themselves in response to the original demands that created them. That avoids the continual re-invention of the same processes. Institutions already have a set of actions, behaviors, processes, and ways of responding to the said needs and can

count on the experience of their staff and the institution's organizational support.

The institutions do not appear to be permanent in their nature but tend to respond needs emerging at a given moment and historical context. When the needs and the context change, then the institutions tend to change their processes to avoid becoming obsolete, inefficient and outdated.

Socio-educational institutions show themselves to be indispensable the moment they make it possible to systematize the educational processes and procedures in a more effective manner adequately addressing certain needs people have; they can count on the collaboration of a group of people (staff, volunteers) that undertake relevant functions in society; and they possess an identity constructed on the basis of consensual values, principles and norms (cf. CALIMAN, 2007).

To conclude

The synthesis set out in this article has been an attempt to capture flashes of Social Pedagogy's trajectory in Brazil. My experience in Social Education acquired during several years of work in that field (1980 – 1987) has contributed to the endeavor and explains my sensitivity to the issue. On the other hand, 20 years of academic life dedicated to the study of Social Pedagogy, first in Italy (1988-2003) and later in Brazil (2004 -...), have also made their considerable contribution. In Brazil, Social Pedagogy has emerged as a science offering methodological and theoretical bases for Social Education. In turn, Social Education has constituted a practical sphere within which the application of the respective techniques, methodologies and dynamic mechanisms generated in its dialogue with Social Pedagogy takes place. If one is associated to theory, the other is associated to practice, but, like reflection and action, the two go hand in hand, each one nurturing and constructing the other. Without practice there can be no theory; without theory, practice is liable to become merely a senseless ritual.

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