



The Concept of Developmental-Tasks and its Significance for Education and Social Work

Uwe Uhlendorff, University of Kassel

Summary

The term “developmental-task” was introduced by Robert Havighurst in the 1950’s. According to R. Harvighurst, the term refers to tasks which arise in a social context during an individual lifetime. Since the 1950’s the concept of developmental-tasks has become an important theoretical approach in educational science and in theories of growth and development - but not in social work and social pedagogy. In the following article I aim to show that this approach is very important to theory and practice of social pedagogy and social work.

Keywords

developmental tasks, case diagnosis; case management, narrative interview; social work with children and adolescents in critical life events.

Introduction

Before introducing the developmental-tasks conception I will demonstrate a daily situation: Imagine we are on an overcrowded high speed train from Frankfurt to Berlin. There is a mother sitting at a table with two children. One of the children, a boy, is about 5 years old and the girl is at an age where she goes to primary school. It seems that they have been travelling for some time now since there are fully scribbled-over colouring books and the remains of a meal on the table. Apparently, the boy seems to be bored. After a while he starts getting impatient and asks his mother, who seems to be exhausted from the travelling, “When will we get there?” and then “I want an ice-cream”. The mother explains that it will still take some time to arrive, that he will have to be patient and that once they have arrived he will get his ice cream. After about five minutes, the boy starts fidgeting in his seat, sits up straight and says, “When are we going to be there? I want an ice-cream”. “We will be there soon - then you will get your ice-cream”, says his mom. The boy stays quiet for several minutes but then starts again. The mother is worked up but keeps calm and sticks to her soothing gestures. The voice of the boy starts getting louder. Finally, the older sister, who was busy all the time with the colouring books, intervenes and says energetically, “You have to wait until we arrive” and the mother supports the girl by adding, “Christine wants to have an ice-cream too. We all have to wait. And you are big boy as well. You just have to wait like Christine does.” At last the boy calms down and all the fellow passengers are relieved.

The situation described here could be interpreted in different ways: for instance as a specific behaviour of families in public. Furthermore, one could also interpret the mother-child-interaction in terms of typical interaction patterns. The scene could also be analysed with reference to reactions of stress or managing the oral wishes of children. But how might one

interpret the scene in a pedagogical way, in a pedagogical context in which the aim is to transmit and learn? What does the mother transmit to her child, what does the child learn?

Generally speaking the scene is all about coping with a developmental-task, namely postponing a desire until a later point in time. In this case the oral desire for an ice-cream (it could also have been a Fanta). We call this task “acquiring deferred gratification patterns. In this context, the interaction between mother and child makes sense. The adaptation and transmitting of patterns is in first instance a pedagogical problem mainly in family education. It is part of the basic tasks of family education that children learn to embed their physical desires such as eating, sleeping, drinking, playing within a time structure.

The outcome of the scene just described gives good reason for an optimistic prognosis that the boy will cope with this developmental-task. However, we could also assume a situation in which the family and the boy could not cope with this task in a case where he has no older sister who is a role model to him and that the mother, due to her daily worries and stress, does not have the necessary tolerance of frustration to manage the boy’s demands. She might, in order to avoid stress, provide the boy with sweets in advance. It may also be that this family has a chaotic time structure in which the demands of each person are, if possible, satisfied on an ad hoc basis. We would then - or at the latest when the boy starts with school - have a social-pedagogical problem. The mother would then perhaps ask for some help at an Education Advisory Centre or Welfare Centre.

My thesis is as follows: It is a principal task of social pedagogy and social work to support children, young people and parents in order for them to cope with developmental-tasks which are too much for them to cope with and which have created social problems. The practical work of the pedagogue aims at helping such parents and children by giving educational advice or offering specialist support programs such as daily groups, social team work, providing specially-trained staff for the care of children or education in a children’s home. Having said this, I am now in the middle of the subject. As a first step, I would like to clarify the term ”developmental-tasks”. Having provided this background, I would like then to explain in a second step what I understand by the term “a social-pedagogical problem”. In a third step, I would like to discuss some educational-scientific and social-pedagogical research perspectives and introduce you to a diagnostical approach which I have developed myself.

1. What does developmental-task mean?

According to R. Harvighurst a developmental-task is a task which an individual has to and wants to solve in a particular life-period. Havighurst writes, “A developmental-task is the midway between an individual need and a social demand. It assumes an active learner interacting with an active social environment”. From an educational-scientific perspective the developmental-tasks concept is fruitful in many ways. The idea of the concept is that children and young people want to solve problems themselves (the active learner). The German Pedagogical tradition speaks in this context of the “*Bildsamkeit*” of the individual. In the concept physical and psychical maturation processes as well as socially influenced development and education are being taken into consideration.

The developmental-tasks concept assumes that social and educational arrangements impede or support the corresponding tasks. There are different types of tasks: One distinguishes individual or group specific developmental-tasks from general, cross-cultural developmental-tasks. Learning how to use these patterns to postpone basic needs (deferred gratification patterns) could be an example of a general developmental-task . Besides this, there are

developmental-tasks which can only be solved under certain social circumstances. Here we might be thinking about specific standards of everyday behaviour. A successful socialisation depends on whether one can successfully cope with the general developmental-tasks. Summarising, we can talk of general developmental-tasks when three factors come together:

1. The effort of the older generation to pass on certain social requirements, certain cultural abilities to the younger generation. Using the earlier example: The mother wants the child to learn to postpone his wishes to a later point of time. She knows that this is a difficult process which requires a lot of patience and she tries to face all the consequences of the process.
2. The effort of the child to adopt the expectations of the older generation, to consider them as subjectively important and to acquire the competencies related to this. For the young boy on the train the task becomes subjectively meaningful because he also wants to be grown-up and mature like his older sister. He knows that the grown-ups are patient and he knows how to wait and he makes every effort to wait until the train arrives although time is abstract to him.
3. A third factor which plays an important role is the existence of a "sensitive phase (or period)" during which, due to the physical and psychological level of development, the requirements are provided by the adult in order to fulfil the developmental expectations. One cannot expect of a two-year old child to be able to postpone physical demands – for example one would rather give him a dummy.

The developmental-tasks concept has gradually been accepted in pedagogy since Havighurst's empirical studies. Again, I would like to emphasise that this is a pedagogical concept. The concept refers to embedding educational cultures, in German the word is "Lernmilieu" ("pedagogical environments"). Developmental-tasks are always connected to pedagogical surroundings or, expressed differently, coping with the tasks always takes place in a pedagogical surrounding. In this context Donald Winnicott uses the term "facilitating environment", Robert Kegan writes of "culture of embeddedness", Uri Bronfenbrenner of "ecological system". In pedagogy we talk about the pedagogical environments and by this we mean the everyday gestures of a way of life in which the growing individual is being integrated. By using the term pedagogical environment we mean, for instance, the family, the school, the youth centre, the kindergarten, etc. Pedagogical environments fulfil two functions: They support and acknowledge the already existing abilities of children. At the same time children are confronted with gaining new abilities, new learning tasks. Good pedagogical environments offer a variety of possibilities to young people to demonstrate their already gained abilities and to gain social recognition; simultaneously young people are faced with new tasks.

Staying with what I have just described: Learning how to adapt and use patterns of desire is integrated in the pedagogical milieu of the family. The young boy who has to learn to postpone his wish for an ice-cream until a later point of time will do this with the help of his mother and his older sister, via verbal and physical gestures.

The theoretical approaches which go hand in hand with the developmental-tasks concept can be seen clearly. This is the "interaction theory" introduced to educational studies by Klaus Mollenhauer and Hans Thiersch at the beginning of the 1970's in Germany, but also the

development theory of Robert Selman and Robert Kegan. There is additionally the theory of the “life-world” described by Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann which plays an important role in the developmental-tasks concept.

So far I have written about the developmental-tasks as a pedagogical problem, but when does the developmental-task become a social-pedagogical problem?

2. The Social-Pedagogical Problem

We talk about a social-pedagogical problem when children and young people, but also parents in the role of mediators, cannot cope with general developmental-tasks and thus get into social difficulties. There could be various reasons for this:

First of all, it might be the child or the young person themselves who has a problem. The growing child, for instance, may not cope with the tasks set due to his physical or psychical constitution and needs support by a pedagogical setting. This is certainly the case with mental or physical handicapped.

The fact that young people are not able to deal with certain developmental-tasks is not necessarily something originating in themselves. It can also originate in the pedagogical environments in which they have been growing up. Social difficulties occur when a pedagogical surrounding, for instance the family, does not sufficiently support the abilities of the individual, it may transmit activities which are socially unacceptable or exceed the capacities of the child. It is then that we face a social-structural problem and youth welfare services have to act. There are three possible social situations when pedagogical environment cannot cope with developmental-tasks and when we talk about a social-pedagogical problem which seems to occur on a large scale:

1. Families which cannot adapt to processes of social change and modernisation. Due to their way of life, or due to adaptation difficulties, they may become, as it were, social outsiders. In this context we talk about problems of fringe groups and social marginalisation.
2. Also long-term poverty can burden a family to such an extent that certain education tasks cannot be fulfilled.
3. It is not only the difficulties in adaptation to social changes that can cause a social-pedagogical problem but also migration: very often generation conflicts appear within families who have migrated. The older generation maintains traditional values and rules, while the younger generation adapts to a way of life which then is often in contradiction to the parental generation's expectations.

The establishment of social-pedagogical institutions was born out of the increasing awareness of such problems. In 1799 they were referred to for the first time by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in his “Stanser letter”. Against the background of the radical social changes of the French Revolution which have taken place throughout Europe together with the growth of the rural poverty, Pestalozzi developed his educational ideas and the idea of setting up an institution. The introduction of the educational welfare system in the 19th century was a response to the introduction of the compulsory school attendance and the difficulty of teaching the rural population how to read and write. These examples demonstrate the processes of social modernisation which require more of educational systems and which led to the foundation of special social-pedagogical organisations. Also, by the end of the nineteenth century, mass poverty in cities and child neglect contributed to the establishment

of social-pedagogical facilities such as the kindergarten, crèche and youth associations. Records of contemporary debates show this clearly.

It is my thesis that social-pedagogical organisations have been supporting families to solve developmental-tasks - not only since the introduction of the children's and youth welfare acts at the beginning of the 19th century. They have, in fact, been supporting them much longer. This suggests the importance of social workers knowing the developmental-tasks with which children and young people struggle.

3. Social-pedagogical research and diagnosis

How do we carry out developmental-tasks and how do we diagnose them? Assuming that the educational development of a child is set in motion by an inherent process in itself (in the sense of "active learner"), then children and young people must have some inherent comprehension of these developmental facts. As a consequence, developmental-tasks, and also the difficulties associated with them, would have to be expressed by the growing child through self-interpretation. In other words, it is the child or young person themselves who are the ones who can best provide information and not the experts.

A significant way of approaching the developmental-tasks with which children and young people have to negotiate is the "narrative interview". At a certain age, this is when they start talking about themselves, one can ask them about their daily experiences learn something directly about the developmental and educational processes with which they themselves are preoccupied. The methodical research is called "hermeneutics". The hermetneutic paradigm is relatively old: it was conceived two hundred years ago by Friedrich Schleiermacher. With regard to verbal self-representation – taking about yourself - there are two types of analysis, two research directions:

1. I can analyse the interviews with a view to typical developmental-tasks. In this case, the attention of the investigator is not drawn to the specific characteristics of the single case but to the general features which are expressed. The question would be, "Which are the typical tasks children and young people of a certain age cope with?" In this case we are thinking about research aimed at establishing certain typical educational and developmental facts. In my view, the work of social-pedagogical research, amongst other things, consists of describing the developmental-tasks with which children and young people cannot cope with and then find the appropriate pedagogical environment.
2. Using the interview structure as a starting point, I could also analyse the specific characteristics of each individual. This second analysis approach would be to bring out more clearly the educational development and life themes of a child or a young person, but also to discover the obstacles which occur for the individual child. The question would be: Which are the developmental-tasks he or she cannot cope with and what are the solutions? This approach is called "case diagnosis". In my opinion, a second task of social work would be to develop methods which allow us to recognise developmental-tasks with which the individual cannot cope with and offer guidelines for help. This is therefore the task of the case diagnosis.

Finally I would like to refer briefly to the two subjects of research.

First of all, what does research and typification of developmental-tasks mean? Some approaches can already be found in the studies of Havighurst, but developmental-tasks were not described specifically. Havighurst referred to job and relational abilities. One has to specify developmental expectations. That is what we tried to do by interviewing 100 young people (Mollenhauer and Uhlendorff 1995). We were working with young people between the age of 11 and 20, who had significant psychosocial difficulties. Using the interviews as a starting point, we tried to discover the typical developmental-tasks which these young people had particular problems. Altogether we diagnosed 90 developmental-tasks. In the following section I show an extract of the diagnostical process:

Firstly the developmental-tasks were divided into “development categories” or “development dimensions”. Studying the interviews and comparing research literature, five categories could be found which refer to social-pedagogical interactions and to which young people themselves refer in their interviews.

- Developmental-tasks which aim to express the “contours of the ego” of a person within a social relationship. We named this category “*self-portraying*”.
- A second category includes the development of conceptions of the body. We named this “*body expressions*”.
- In a third category we summarised developmental-tasks which deal with acquiring “*time schedules*”.
- A fourth category refers to morale “*normative orientation*”.
- A fifth category deals with developmental-tasks which are necessary in order to cope with social conflicts. We called this category “*interaction strategies*”.

Self-portraying, body concepts, normative orientation, time schedules and interaction strategies seem to be important categories with which pedagogical work (and the self-interpretation of the young people) is engaged. Within these five categories we could locate more than 90 developmental-tasks across 100 case studies. Since developmental-tasks are related to age, and are related to each other during the course of a lifetime, we have tried to subdivide the developmental-tasks with the help of different development models into different development stages. For this we referred to evolution-conceptions of Robert Selman and Robert Kegan. The 90 developmental-tasks were divided into four development periods which children and young people between 10 and 19 years go through. In the table you can see developmental-tasks which refer to the first development period. This is a period 7 to 11 year old children normally go through! We have to be careful with the indication of age since these are average values. Within our research group there is a group which had difficulties with developmental-tasks which are listed as follows: In the first instance it is about children and young people who have difficulties with adapting to school and the educational system. Young people of this age are expected to be highly motivated in their learning. Furthermore, they are expected to have mastery over their impulses and the ability to co-operate, as well as to avoid physical violence as a means of gaining their objectives. This is often too much to ask for, as many children cannot cope with all these expectations.

Which are the particular developmental-tasks with which these young people cannot cope? What do they have to learn in order to develop themselves? I will now state some, but not all, of these tasks. Firstly, we noticed that the “self-descriptions” of these young people were very vague (see Table 1). They had difficulties in distinguishing between themselves and others. With reference to the *self-portraying*, they have to learn to distinguish between their own, and

another's, point of view. They have to learn to differentiate their own interests from those of others. The so-called *body-expression* shown by the young people at the interview was superficial and characterised by egocentric impulses such as gaining acceptance and showing strength. The main tasks they need help with is the development of a realistic self-estimation of their body and the development of a better body sensitivity for themselves and others. They have to learn to give more contours to their inner and outer body concept - this means to better recognise their limits of physical stress, strength and weakness. To do this, young people need help to express their need for strength and gaining acceptance in a socially acceptable manner. For instance, through the integration of their impulsive bodily expression in competition and play.

Table 1: The developmental-tasks during the first evolution period

Dimensions:	Developmental-Tasks
Self-Portraying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinction between own opinion and the opinion of others, between own interest and the interest of others • Distinction between physical and psychological components of an individual • Differentiation of motive and physical action
Body Expressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a realistic body-self-estimation • Developing a body sensitivity for oneself and other individuals • Recognising physical limits, weaknesses and strength • Expressing physical strength and implementation in socially acceptable activities • Embedding impulsive body components in competition and play • Body-self-control, control of actions committed in the heat of the moment
Time Schedules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term planning and not just for the moment • Recognising time perspectives of other individuals • Patterns of how to postpone desires • Chronological development regarding one's own past and possible future. Chronological structuring of curriculum vitae
Normative Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation of social rules • Avoiding physical violence as medium for achieving one's goal • Applying rules of mutual fairness in case of rivalry • Mutual help and exchange of material goods • Showing consideration for other individuals, helping and caring for the weak • Achieving one's own interests on a socially acceptable way • Co-operation with others
Interaction Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepting language as medium for negotiations • Coping with physical negotiation strategies • Passing on desires and wishes in a socially acceptable way; mutual exchange of interests • Accepting competent mediators and objective points of view from outside

Another developmental-task they have difficulties in coping with is the evolution of simple time-planning competence. This is the ability to plan ahead and, in particular, to be aware of the time perspective of other people. With regard to the development of normative orientation, the recognition of generally binding social rules in groups, as well as the renunciation of physical violence in order to gain acceptance, play a key role. Referring to the category *interaction strategies* young people have to learn to use language as a medium for negotiations.

Earlier on I mentioned that social-pedagogical research can not only make developmental-tasks more transparent, but should also create useful pedagogical environments. What might a pedagogical environment look like, in which the young people are being supported in order to cope with the tasks discussed? These young people need a pedagogical environment which offers them a wide space to act, where they can prove their abilities, strengths and impulsive bodily expression in a socially acceptable manner. Also important is the social acknowledgement of their competence and strengths. Furthermore, it is pedagogically important to adopt easy forms of co-operation in order to motivate effectively. Young people need pedagogical environments and institutions which support them in expressing their experience and to be reflective about them. They should also be included in daily planning processes.

Besides this type of basic research which concentrates on the classification of developmental-tasks, and which serves as a conceptualisation tool for social-pedagogical settings, in the last few years we have tried to develop and test a social-pedagogically approach to case diagnosis in close co-operation with social workers. What does such an approach to case diagnosis look like? The obvious thing to do is to use the list of developmental-tasks as a manual of diagnosis. This means I might do interviews with young people, taking this list of developmental-tasks with its 90 tasks, and check which developmental-task presents a particular problem to a child or young person. This is the deductive way to proceed. Here the individual characteristics of each case would not be considered to such an extent. The social-pedagogical case diagnosis has to analyse the following: a) developmental-tasks which represent a complex problem to the young persons and his/her social environment; b) the individual life theme – that is to say the conflicting themes in coping with daily life - and lastly c) a social-pedagogical plan which relates to the individual case.

In co-operation with Klaus Mollenhauer, I have developed a social-pedagogical diagnostic model which is being used by many German and Austrian youth welfare organizations. It is based on an interview which two social workers within the organisation make with young people. The evaluation of the interview is carried out according to the five categories mentioned earlier. The interpretation of the interview data is made by the team with responsibility for the adolescent. The first step of the interpretation involves drawing out the adolescent's life themes: there are normally four or five. In a second step, the aim is to find out the developmental-tasks which present particular difficulty. Normally three to five developmental-tasks can be found by using the information from the interview. Without practical task-setting, a diagnosis would be incomplete. In contrast to the medical or psychiatric diagnostic approach, our approach differs in that the diagnosis is not followed by a specific treatment. Moreover, the social-pedagogical diagnosis aims at task-setting which supports the adolescent in daily life to advance with his educational development. This task is not being imposed on the adolescent and his family, but is a proposal by the social-pedagogical team for a "helpful-plan" to be elaborated together.

4. Results

According to Schleiermacher, education has two aspects: the universal and the individual. The universal, as defined by Schleiermacher, describes the role of the older generation in motivating the developing young person. The young person should gain abilities which enable him or her to enter society, as well as to change social conditions. That this has not yet changed shows, for example, the Children and Youth Welfare Act in Germany. This law guarantees the right to developmental support and education to assist each child or young person to attain a sense of self and social responsibility (§ 1). The fact that social responsibility or socialisation requires a certain range of social abilities can be proved by reliable empirical means. Social pedagogy or social work does not only mean helping people to cope with their life, but also the transmitting the expectations within our society.

Social pedagogues have always had problems with the term standard expectations, although this is understandable considering the history of the youth welfare. Standard concepts were put on young people without granting any free space. Even when talking about individualisation and plurality in life situations, one cannot avoid the standard expectations of our culture. The conveying of social development and standard expectations, that is the expectations coupled to sociability, are basic elements of educational and interactive processes. In spite of the individualisation of life situations and life styles, general developmental-tasks are shown on which a successful socialisation depends on.

It is the role of educational science to make these developmental-tasks more transparent. Additionally, it is the social-pedagogical research to find out the particular developmental-tasks which present particular difficulties for young people. Furthermore, it is the task of social pedagogy to develop diagnostic methods that can be implemented effectively in order to improve help for young people. To achieve this, the developmental-task concept, which I have outlined here, is an important starting point.

Yet there are limits to the application of the developmental-tasks concept. According to Schleiermacher, the purpose of the education is achieved when certain characteristics of individual personality have been developed. He calls this the *individual business of education*. In the end, the social-pedagogical work with children or young people in need is an act of balance seeking to mediate between the - partly risky – ideas about life of the young person (self-concepts) and the social expectations. Social pedagogy, or social work, tries to open up educational paths and ways of life which are acceptable, more or less, for the young person and his or her social setting. This requires a *pedagogical tact* which accepts and supports the independence of an individual, yet at the same time manages its morally ambivalent behaviour. The fact that sometimes unconventional paths are taken, lies in the nature of social-pedagogy.

References

- Kegan, R.** 1982: *The Evolving Self. Problems and Process in Human Development*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London.
- Luckmann, T.** 1983: *Life-world and social realities*. London.
- Mollenhauer, K.** 1972: *Theorien zum Erziehungsprozeß*. Weinheim.
- Mollenhauer, K. and Uhlendorff, U.** 1992: *Sozialpädagogische Diagnosen - Über Jugendliche in schwierigen Lebenslagen*. Weinheim, München.
- Mollenhauer, K. and Uhlendorff, U.** 1995: *Sozialpädagogische Diagnosen II - Selbstdeutungen verhaltensschwieriger Jugendlicher als empirische Grundlage für Erziehungspläne*. Weinheim, München.
- Schütz, A. and Luckmann, T.** 1975: *Strukturen der Lebenswelt*. Darmstadt.
- Schutz, A., Luckmann, T. et al.** 1974: *The structures of the life-world*. London.
- Selman, R. L.** 1980: *The Growth of Interpersonal Understanding*. New York.
- Thiersch, H.** 1977: *Kritik und Handeln. Interaktionistische Aspekte der Sozialpädagogik*. Neuwied/Darmstadt.
- Uhlendorff, U.** 1997: *Sozialpädagogische Diagnosen III - Ein sozialpädagogisch-hermeneutisches Diagnoseverfahren für die Hilfeplanung*. Weinheim/München.
- Winnicott, D. W.** 1965: *The child, the family, and the outside world*. Harmondsworth, England.
- Winnicott, D. W.** 1965: *The maturational process and the facilitating environment*. New York.

Author's address:
Universität Kassel, Fachbereich Sozialwesen
Arnold-Bode-Straße 10,
34109 Kassel
Germany
Tel: + 49 561 8042920
E-Mail: Uhl@hrz.uni-kassel.de