Paul Natorp is often considered one of the first social pedagogical key thinkers and has played a vital role in shaping social pedagogy in Germany. Born to a Protestant minister in Düsseldorf/Germany in 1854, Natorp lived in turbulent times: despite its failure to unify the Germany states, the Revolution in 1848/1849 had changed the political landscape and social order by ending the feudal system; and from around the 1830s the Industrial Revolution had been leading to increasing urbanisation as people moved from rural areas to the cities with the aim to find work in the factories. As urban areas grew, so did social problems such as exploitative working conditions, homelessness and starvation.

Having studied music, history, and philosophy, Natorp soon became an influential social philosopher during his time as professor for philosophy and pedagogy at the University of Marburg. Together with his colleagues, Natorp became known as part of the so-called Marburg School, which gradually established social pedagogy as an academic discipline in its own right. Natorp was not the first to coin the term ‘social pedagogy’, which had been previously used by Adolph Dieterweg and Karl Mager in 1844, and many social pedagogical ideas date further back to earlier social and educational philosophers, such as John Amos Comenius, Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi; yet, Natorp is often considered the ‘birth father’ of social pedagogy as he was the first to develop social pedagogy in any significant way (Niemeyer, 2005). In doing so, Natorp introduced the term social pedagogy to a broad audience stretching beyond the academic discourse and into the public domain (Wendt, 2008).

**Influences and Ideas**

Natorp’s social pedagogy can be conceptualised as a social philosophy of upbringing, which draws its key influences from Plato, Immanuel Kant and Pestalozzi. As Niemeyer (2005) notes, in order to understand Natorp’s work, it is essential to consider its relatedness to the social philosophical thinking prevalent at that time, which was dominated by the ideas of John Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Kant. All of them were concerned with the structure of society and its implications for inter-human relationships. Similarly, pedagogical thinking at Natorp’s time was no longer merely focussed on the individual child’s upbringing but reflected upon its contribution towards creating human togetherness and societal order.

In his philosophical perspective Natorp was influenced by Plato’s ideas about the relationship between the individual and the *polis*, the city-state. Plato imagined the polis as an organically constructed human-society, an organism that aims towards justice and follows reason. In Natorp’s understanding it ‘is geared toward the spiritual life and the complete educational development of each person in it. The person, after
means inspiration capital of morally community’, as Saltzman (1998) notes. This means that, for Natorp, all education is social education, or Sozialpädagogik.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant and his works on reason and morality were a further vital source of inspiration for Natorp. One of Kant’s central maxims, the categorical imperative, demands that we treat people as subjects in their own rights instead of treating them as means to an end. While religion had previously argued that human goodness is something that God commands, Kant argued that reason commands this too. We should not merely treat others with respect out of fear of a higher power, but because this is reasonable if we want to be treated with dignity ourselves, according to Kant’s moral imperative. Kant thus helped explain social interaction in a way that saw intrinsic value in good respectful human behaviour. Kant’s work on social ethics resonated with Natorp and impacted on his perspective on morality within society.

Natorp was also influenced by Pestalozzi’s concepts on community education, outlined in the Swiss pedagogue’s 1819 popular novel Lienhard & Gertrud. In this he described an oppressed village community, morally and economically impoverished as a consequence of the corruption and greed of the squire. The novel also outlines how, through re-structuring and a series of socio-economic and pedagogic interventions, the inhabitants are gradually enabled to live in justice, realise their intrinsic potential and live their lives as their own creation (Thiersch 1996). Pestalozzi’s views on educating for humanity and on improving societal conditions reinforced Natorp’s perception that ‘all pedagogy should be social, that is, that in the philosophy of education the interaction of educational processes and society must be taken into consideration’, according to Hämäläinen (2003, p.73).

Key works
Building on these philosophical perspectives, Natorp published a monograph in 1894 titled Religion within the Bounds of Humanity: A Chapter for the Establishment of Social Pedagogy. In what was the first major work on social pedagogy, he aimed to find an answer to the intensively discussed ‘social question’ in the late 1800s, when industrialisation, secularisation and urbanisation were causing massive social change, new inequalities and destitute living conditions for the increasing working class. In Natorp’s view, the central issue was how to overcome the legally established rule of power by capital over poor labour, with its destructive consequences for the morality of the entire people (Natorp 1894).

Natorp argued that these social issues were not about material poverty but about impoverishment of social existence, that a lack of social cohesion in Germany had caused many of the social problems. What was needed was therefore a clearly pedagogic answer to the social question, one that reconceptualised the relationship between the individual and society. This social pedagogy should aim to encourage a strong sense of community (Gemeinschaft), educate both children and adults to ensure positive relations between the individual and society, and ‘fight to close the gap between rich and poor’ (Smith 2009). Natorp realised that as social pedagogy is about the individual in relation to society, social pedagogy has to address both sides – rather than only working with the individual it must also attempt to influence the social system and to optimise it.

As Niemeyer (2005) explains, Natorp argued that at a theoretic level social pedagogy must research how education is related to the social conditions people live in and how social life in the community is affected by educational conditions, i.e. the lack of educational opportunities for the working class (Natorp 1894). But while a theoretic understanding of the problem is important, it has to be complemented by practical action. Natorp thought that a practical level social pedagogy must find means and ways to design these social and educational conditions. Through this he aimed to create educational opportunities for those who do not have them and to educate or renew the community so as to develop people’s morality. Thus Natorp combined the person-centred and community-centred aspects of education in his concept of social pedagogy.

Niemeyer (2005) concludes that, as a result, social pedagogy was seen by Natorp as contributing to shaping the social, the community and its circumstances. Where previously the influence of religion had meant that the concern was with salvation of man from a sinful world, Natorp argued for creating a world worth living in, because and as long as man does not become his own, and other people’s, opponent but finds human community.

This article is based on our chapter ‘Conceptual Foundations’ in C. Cameron & P. Moss (2011) Social Pedagogy and Working with Children and Young People (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers) and printed here with permission by JKP.

References: