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Beyond individualised teaching

A Relational Construction of Pedagogical Attitude

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Abstract

Teaching is today often described as a matter of adjusting to the individual lives of students. Building on the premises of three educational theories, mainly Martin Buber's concept of 'inclusion', the article aims to confront this idea and show how pedagogical attitude can be perceived from a relational perspective. A model is constructed in which pedagogical attitude is understood as three different types of teacher-student relationships: a) an asymmetric inter-subjective relationship; b) an asymmetric subject-object relationship; and c) an asymmetric object-subject relationship. The article argues that a genuine pedagogical attitude is included in the first type. It is interpreted as a matter of experiencing from the student's side of the relationship and, at the same time, taking a stand as a pedagogical subject. This interpretation differs from the widespread notion of pedagogical attitude according to which the teacher's position tends to be diluted.

Keywords: relational pedagogy, teacher-student relationship, pedagogical attitude, asymmetry, mutuality

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The individualisation of teaching: the case of sweden

Individualisation is a term frequently used to describe the overall changes of teaching in countries such as Sweden and Norway (cf. Carlgren et al. [2006](#)). In an analysis of research and an evaluation of the impact different factors in Swedish compulsory schools have on students' performance, the Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) ([2009](#)) described individualisation as one of the most significant tendencies of the past two decades. The report states that the process was intensified by the reform of the Swedish school system in the early 1990s and through the curricula adopted at the time (Lpo 94; Lpf 94). Moreover, the report discusses a number of aspects of the process. One aspect concerns changing the ways of doing school work: individual work has increased while teaching to the whole class has been given less and less time (ibid. 39). Another aspect involves the idea of learning: increasingly, students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning (ibid. 41). The third aspect concerns the democratic task of schools, which has changed from a joint and political mission, as described in earlier curricula, to an individual mission for the student (ibid. 40).

The National Agency for Education (ibid.) argues that individualisation in education has brought some unwanted consequences; for example, students are increasingly left to fend for themselves. Further, teachers have adopted a more withdrawn role so learning "has become an individual project" (ibid. 39, my translation). Based on current research in the field, the report states that the process tends to lead to

poorer student performance in terms of both knowledge and democratic goals. With regard to individualisation, this conclusion is in line with international research (e.g. Hattie [2009](#)).

The Swedish curriculum (for the non-compulsory school system, Lpf 94) describes the school's main task as "to encourage all pupils to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby actively participate in social life by giving of their best in responsible freedom" (Lpf 94, 3). Another quote essential for understanding the expectations of Swedish teachers states, "[the teacher should] take as the starting point each individual pupil's needs, circumstances, experience and thinking" (Lpf 94, 11).

Teachers' work includes a knowledge dimension and a social dimension. The social dimension is often divided into two main parts: moral education/discipline and care (Landahl, [2006](#)). In a historical study of the changing character of the social dimension during the twentieth century, Joakim Landahl ([2006](#), 8, 11) states that moral education is related to the problem of norm-breaking, while care is related to the problem of suffering students. Landahl's study supports the idea of individualisation in Swedish schools and discusses different aspects of this process. For example, he claims that teacher authority has changed from being more or less institutionally given to being dependent on individual factors, such as the teacher's personality and situational factors, for instance, the quality of collegial cooperation. Further, Landahl asserts that school has changed from being a public place where students are mere students with irrelevant private lives to an arena where teachers are expected to see and show an interest in the students as individuals. He considers that this change has led to new forms of moral responsibility for the teacher (ibid. 171, cf. Frykman [1998](#)). Landahl's study shows that moral education has been individualised; for example, demands for collective discipline and obedience to the teacher have been replaced by demands for student rights and student participation.

Landahl (ibid.) speaks of a change in the educational relationship from *vertical respect*, where students are expected to show respect for adults and other authority figures, to *horizontal respect*, where students are expected to show respect for their peers (ibid. 60–61, 91). In terms of pedagogical attitude, this change implies that the teacher has moved from educating students to knowing how to act respectfully towards authority figures, such as the teacher, to educating students to know how to act respectfully towards each other. Teacher authority in modern Swedish schools (from about 1900–1950) was a question of being 'strict but fair'; however, teacher authority in late modern schools (1950 onwards) has become a question of being 'kind and empathetic, but fair'. Consequently, today's Swedish teachers are generally expected to be kind to students and maintain equity between them.

Aim of the article

The introduction suggests that teaching today, at least in the Swedish context, is largely described as a matter of adjusting to the individual lives of students. Built on the premises of three theories in the field of relational pedagogy, mainly Martin Buber's concept of 'inclusion', this article aims to challenge the individualised conception of the teacher-student relationship. More specifically, it seeks to show how pedagogical attitude, i.e. the teacher's way of relating to the student, the essential 'how aspect' of the pedagogical relationship, can be perceived from a relational perspective.

The relational perspective

Relational pedagogy is a third communicative path between the two main roads built in education during the twentieth century: teacher/teaching-centred and student/learner-centred. It can be defined as a theoretical perspective on humans as relational beings (Aspelin and Persson [2011](#)). It is based on the idea of subjectivity as founded in inter-subjectivity (see e.g. Biesta [1996](#)). In other words, relational analysis does not focus on individuals or on the collective but on the space between the poles. The three theorists discussed below (also see e.g. Biesta [2004](#); Noddings [2005](#); Gergen [2009](#)) put the relationship between teacher and student in the focal point of education. Of course, such a focus does not mean that the wider educational context is neglected. For instance, Gergen ([2009](#)) speaks of "circles of participation" to clarify connections between different relational levels, and describes the teacher-student relationship as the first circle, a kind of centre of the relational process. In a similar way, Aspelin ([2013](#)) defines the interhuman relationship between teacher and student as the primary level in relational analysis, and discusses how it is connected to other levels, from the individual, via the social and organisational up to the societal level. In this article, however, the analysis of pedagogical attitude is limited to the teacher-student relationship.

The relational perspective is rooted in an anthropological notion of the relational self: humans exist in relationships and the individual is an abstraction, an aspect or by-product of relationships. The dominant idea of the self as a separate existence or as a "bounded being" is not credible (see Gergen [2009](#)). The self

cannot exist separately, as 'I' exists in relation to someone or something; therefore, 'I' am an aspect of a relational process. (For an introduction to relational pedagogy, see Aspelin and Persson [2011](#).)

A variety of empirical research shows that the teacher-student relationship is a key factor in successful learning and speaks of relational competence as an important feature of education (e.g. Hattie [2009](#); Nordenbo et al. [2008](#); Skolverket [2009](#); Aspelin [2012](#)). Further, a growing body of theoretical research speaks in favour of a genuine, trusting relationship between teacher and student as an essential element of education (e.g. Bingham and Sidorkin [2004](#); Noddings [2005](#)). Three theoretical approaches, which are based on the idea of relationships as the fundamental aspect of education, will now be considered a little more closely.

Moira von Wright's study *What or Who?* (2000) (*Vad eller vem?*, in Swedish) explores the question of how teachers can create genuine educational relations. With reference to Lars Lövlie, she introduces a distinction between a 'relational' and a 'punctual' perspective on the human being. These perspectives stand for two different ways of educational thinking, with specific internal logics. The punctual perspective is assumed to be dominant within educational research. It is based on a subject-philosophical conception of the human being as a product of various internal and external factors. Humans are defined by their separateness from the outside world; they are closed creatures: a *Homo Clausus*. Conversely, the relational perspective is founded in an inter-subjective philosophical tradition, where the human being is presumed to be realised in relationships. Humans are born in an inter-subjective process, in meetings with others; they are open creatures, a *Homines Aperti* (ibid. 147). Thus, the first perspective draws attention to internal aspects of the individual, while the second one draws attention to interpersonal phenomena.

In another context, von Wright describes the two perspectives as follows:

There is a risk that the dominant punctual perspective unilaterally emphasises particularities and anomalies, and that it ignores relationships and contexts. ... To perceive something from a relational perspective means to look at it as a phenomenon with (at least) two different descriptions; this, in contrast to punctual traits, which just have one description. ... The point of speaking of a relational perspective in educational contexts is that it could be helpful when discussing how a teacher's beliefs and attitudes tend to influence the educational situation (2009, 37) (my translation).

In *What or Who?*, von Wright interprets the quote from the Swedish curriculum mentioned earlier, namely, "[The teacher should] take as the starting point each individual pupil's needs, circumstances, experience and thinking". Von Wright shows that needs, circumstances, experience and thinking have completely different meanings depending on the perspective adopted. From a punctual point of view, the teacher focuses on acquiring knowledge of where the student is located on an imagined developmental ladder, where the student ought to be, and what the teacher can do to make the student reach the prescribed goal. Consequently, the teacher relates to the student as a 'what', that is, as a carrier of certain types of traits. From a relational stance, the teacher focuses on the student as constantly becoming a subject, namely, as someone involved in an ongoing process with the teacher. Here, the teacher relates to the student as a 'who', that is, as a unique individual in a relationship with the teacher. In this context, the teacher finds him/herself as a participant in an inter-subjective process where he/she is pedagogically responsible. Put another way: a teacher who adopts a punctual attitude becomes too distanced from the student, by acting based on a picture of what the student is, and implementing the prescribed pedagogical goals. A teacher who adopts a relational attitude achieves an essential bond with the student, approaches the student as a unique subject and responds as a pedagogical subject.

How does von Wright's analysis contribute to the question of the teacher's pedagogical attitude? First, the analysis supports the idea that the teacher's attitude, relationally speaking, is based on an idea of teacher-student relationships. Relationships are considered to be fundamental in relation to individuals and their actions. An 'attitude' is not primarily an individual phenomenon but a relational ditto; to adopt a pedagogical attitude essentially means to relate to someone or something. Second, von Wright's study reveals problematic aspects of the punctual approach and the productive implications of the relational approach. In a punctual context, the student is objectified and the teacher is distanced in such a way that he/she loses an immediate connection to the student. However, in a relational context, both the teacher and the student obtain opportunities to emerge (or begin) as unique, responsible subjects.

That one party is pedagogically responsible for another party suggests the idea of asymmetry in the teacher-student relationship. Asymmetry is seen by von Wright as a basic characteristic of the educational situation; for instance, she describes it in terms of the teacher having the power and authority to manage, maintain and end communication with the students (2009, 29 f.). In order to gain a deeper understanding of

the essential meanings of asymmetry regarding pedagogical attitude, Lotta Jons' monograph *Calling and Respons(e)ibility* (Till-tal och an-svar, in Swedish) (2008) will now be considered.

Pedagogical guiding light

Jons (2008) constructs pedagogical attitude from a relational (existential and normative) perspective founded on Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. The starting point for her thesis is a relational ontology similar to von Wright's, namely, where the focus is on reality's "spaces between" and not its points (ibid. 122). Based on this ontology, Jons discusses the question of how the teacher should relate to his/her student. In her search for answers, Jons constructs a concept in which existence is understood as a matter of 'calling' and 'response' (Sw. 'till-tal' and 'an-svar'). The teacher is supposed to be constantly facing an existential call which, in turn, requires a personal and pedagogical response.

Jons speaks of three different normative beliefs that can influence the teacher's attitude. First, 'pedagogical recipes' (*pedagogiska recept*), which consist of instructions (e.g. from models, curricula and methods) that explain *how* teachers should act in various situations. Second, 'pedagogical doctrines' (*pedagogiska läror*), which are ethical systems that clarify *why* teachers should act in one way or another. Most modern educational theories, Jons argues, can be categorised as pedagogical doctrines. They differ in terms of how the teacher is perceived, from a sovereign to an abdicated leader, but they share the idea that the teacher should seek to make rational and autonomous individuals out of the students. Third, Jons describes a 'pedagogical guiding light' (Sw. '*pedagogisk ledstjärna*'). Unlike the other two normative beliefs, this one gives no fixed starting point for the teacher's actions; instead, it gives the teacher the task of constantly updating and consolidating his or her personal values. Led by a pedagogical guiding light, the teacher answers the request from the particular student, and also gives the student an idea of who he/she could be. The pedagogical guiding light gives direction to the teacher's action, but it does not prescribe or determine it.

Jons (ibid.) sees Buber's philosophy of dialogue as one of many 'guiding lights' that can impregnate the teacher's attitude to become what she calls a 'stance' (Sw. '*hållning*'). She introduces a distinction between the terms "attitude" and "stance": the former represents human existential appearance in general, while the latter refers to a specific type of existential appearance, namely one that is normatively defined by a pedagogical guiding light. Jons argues that a pedagogical stance demands a great deal from teachers because they must know who they want to be and where they want to stand morally. Further, the teacher needs to know how to apply these insights to various kinds of concrete encounters (ibid. 44).

According to Jons, recipes or doctrines do not in themselves provide adequate educational guidance. For instance, the question of how the teacher should relate to the student cannot be fully answered by reference to things such as policy documents or educational theories as the question is existential and tied to the concrete life of the teacher. Moreover, the question is conditioned since existence is synonymous with co-existence. Jons argues that it is only when the teacher interprets his/her primary role as a matter of personal responsibility to the student that his/her attitude becomes a personal stance.

Consequently, how does Jons' study contribute to the question of what characterises pedagogical attitude from a relational perspective? First, she defines three alternative, normative beliefs that the teacher's attitude could be influenced by. The teacher's attitude to the student is not an ideological or theoretical question but an existential one; it is in an inter-human context, when the teacher relates to the student, that he/she answers the question. Second, Jons demonstrates that the question of pedagogical attitude is tied to the specific relational form of the educational relationship. In the conceptualisation of moral education that emerges in Jons' work, the teacher's response (to the request from the student) is guided by a personally integrated frame of values. While the teacher's existential relationship with the student involves showing the student direction, the student's existential relationship with the teacher lacks this quality. This, we may argue, is the meaning of asymmetry in the teacher-student relationship.

Jons' (ibid.) conception of pedagogical attitude is a combination of an authoritarian (top-down) and a servile (excessively service-minded and subservient) manner of relating. In this respect, Jons refers, among others, to Nigel Tubbs' (2005) idea that the teacher does not have to choose between being authoritarian and servile, but can be both at the same time. Jons is also and mainly inspired by Martin Buber's notion of the specific nature of the pedagogical relationship. In order to clarify how pedagogical attitude can be understood relationally, Buber's educational philosophy will now be highlighted.

Inclusion and confirmation

Martin Buber presupposes that every human being is constantly addressed by the world in which he/she lives: "The kindling of the response in that 'spark' of the soul, the blazing up of the response, which occurs time and again, to the unexpectedly approaching speech, we term responsibility" (Buber [2002/1947](#), 109). From this perspective, responsibility is not primarily a matter of taking responsibility *for something*, for example, following principles or certain standards, but responding *to someone* in an ongoing dialogue. The teacher cannot know exactly what will happen in this event, nor can he/she know exactly what his/her contribution will be; inevitably, the relational process involves elements of surprise. In this unpredictable situation, the teacher responds with the aim of helping the student find a personal path and, ultimately, to become responsible for his/herself. Such a teacher "denies no answer to life and the world, but accepts responsibility for everything essential that he meets" (Buber *ibid.*, 137).

For Buber, education is essentially education of character. The genuine teacher does not simply perceive the student as a carrier of different functions, such as skills and abilities. Instead, the teacher is interested in the student as a whole person: "both in the actuality in which he lives before you now and in his possibilities, what he can become" (Buber *ibid.*, 123). In other words, pedagogical attitude is a matter of relating to the student's actual *and* potential existence. To clarify what this two-dimensional approach means, Buber uses the concept *inclusion*.

'To include' means that one person experiences a (relational) process from both sides of the relationship. Buber sees inclusion as "the elemental experience with which the real process of education begins and on which it is based" (Buber *ibid.*, 114). The teacher's attitude is mainly structured by inclusion, and it receives its power from this experience. In inclusion, the student becomes immediately present to his/her teacher, and the gap between the two parties is bridged. A common misconception, Buber asserts, is seeing inclusion as being synonymous with empathy. While empathy means to feel something to the extent that essential aspects of one's own self are denied, to include means to share someone else's reality without losing one's own self (Buber *ibid.*, 114).

However, relationships in which one party has the task of influencing another by purposeful action can never consist of a total inclusion (Buber [1947/2002](#), 118–119; [1923/2000](#), 122). According to Buber, the teacher-student relationship has a structure with specific limits. The teacher's attitude involves both his/her own position as well as the student's; yet, the student is unable to include the teacher's position, that is, to fully experience what it is to educate. The teacher's ability to show the student a navigable path depends on a concrete, bipolar but still *one-sided* inclusion. If the student and the teacher relate to each other in the same way, the particular pedagogical dynamic will fade out; hence, the relationship will turn into something more like friendship. Thus, the teacher-student relationship is, in an essential and not just a formal way, asymmetric. Asymmetry is regarded as constitutive of the educational relationship and crucial for the educational process to be initiated and realised.

Another two of Buber's concepts that conceptualise the asymmetrical character of the pedagogical relationship are acceptance and confirmation (Buber in Anderson and Cissna [1997](#)). Acceptance is a relational process in which the student experiences that the teacher affirms him/her as he/she is at that very moment. Buber contends that this is just one part of the pedagogical process. A teacher who does not accept his/her student will not make existential contact; however, simple acceptance supports the student's regressive tendencies. By confirmation, the teacher both accepts the student and shows him/her where (according to the teacher) to go. In other words, confirmation is a process in which the student experiences the teacher's affirmation of him/her as he/she is and as he/she is about to become. Therefore, the teacher realises the potential the student possesses by including the student. However, the process does not affirm the status quo. Instead, the teacher encourages the student to move forward, towards what he/she is meant to be. Buber (*ibid.*) believes that it is when the teacher distinguishes between acceptance and confirmation, and maintains an attitude characterised by the latter, that the teacher can support progress.

Thus, Buber's main contribution to the question of this article may be summarised in the concept's one-sided inclusion and confirmation. By using these concepts, Buber shows that the relationship between teacher and student is genuinely pedagogical when the teacher acts as a guide and relates to the student as a person who has to find his/her way. This is not a top-down relationship. To understand the student's potential, the teacher needs experience from the student's side of the relationship. The initiation of a pedagogical process presupposes that the student trusts his/her teacher and experiences that the teacher accepts him/her as he/she is. Thus, the relationship is characterised by reciprocity: the two parties take each other's roles and influence each other's actions. Still, there is a fundamental difference between the attitudes of the two parties in the relationship. If the teacher's actions are to improve the student and if the student is to let the teacher influence him/her in a substantial way, there must be some kind of gap in the

relationship. The gap in the relationship is created by the student's potential existence playing a palpable role.

Conclusion

I have discussed how pedagogical attitude, i.e. the teacher's way of relating to the student, can be characterised by referencing a series of relational works. The article started with the idea that the individualistic or, as von Wright (2000) terms it, "the punctual" perspective is dominant in contemporary educational discourse. In contrast, a relational perspective, where the relationship between the teacher and the student is the focal point, was explored. From this background, it seems reasonable to say that it is *in* the relationship that education exists: "In this respect, we can say not only that education happens in the gap between the teacher and the student. We might even say that it is this gap itself that educates" (Biesta 2004, 18).

It has been suggested that the relationship between teacher and student is constituted by mutuality. Essential learning, Buber argues, "does not take place in each of the participants or in a neutral world which includes the two and all other things; but it takes place between them in the most precise sense, as it were in a dimension which is accessible only to them both" (1947/2002, 241–242). From the relational point of view, pedagogical attitude is an aspect *of* a living relationship rather than an aspect *on* a living relationship. From a punctual point of view, the teacher attends to the student as a 'what', that is, an object of the teacher's influence. Here, the teacher is not immediately part of the relationship but manages it 'from the outside'. From a relational point of view, the teacher meets the student as a 'who', an active subject in an ongoing relational process. Here, the teacher immediately relates to the student, and his/her actions are immanent parts of the relationship (von Wright 2000).

I also argued, and in a more substantiated way, that the relationship between teacher and student is constituted by asymmetry. The word asymmetry means irregularity of form; it is an antonym of symmetry. If a symmetrical figure is divided into two, one part will become the mirror of the other, but an asymmetrical figure has different forms when we look at it from different sides. Applied to the educational relationship, this means that the attitude of the teacher is essentially different to the attitude of the student. Specifically, the relationship involves two parties, where the former is responsible for the latter's development; the former acts intentionally in order to influence the latter or arrange space for him/her to become a unique subject. Pedagogical attitude includes a response aiming for some kind of change in the student. In the absence of such a response, the teacher's responsibility is dissolved. This is not to say that the teacher's response is shaped by a pre-constructed picture of what the student is or should become. The relational process always involves a certain element of unpredictability and surprise. A part of the structure of responsibility is, as Biesta (2006, 32) states, not knowing what it is that you are responsible for. However, it is reasonable to say that the function of the pedagogical relationship and the legitimacy of the pedagogical attitude is that it is influential, dynamic and progressive.

As stated above, Landahl (2006) outlines the historical change in moral education from vertical respect, where the teacher's actions mainly concern the student's respect for authorities, to horizontal respect, where the teacher's actions are concerned with the student's internal relationships; both of these forms can be described as subject-object relations. To use von Wright's (2000) concepts, we could say that they are formulated from a punctual perspective, that is, they let the teacher perceive the student as material to be handled from a prescribed model. In the first case, the teacher models the student from the ideal of a hierarchical authority structure, while in the latter case the teacher models the students and their internal relations based on ideas of how students should behave towards each other. Principally, in both of these cases the teacher is largely distanced from the student/students and, so to speak, teaches 'from the outside'.

Landahl's (2006) model could be expanded by introducing two other concepts. On one hand, we may speak of a *horizontal and asymmetric* respect. Here, the relationship is characterised by mutuality, which is implicitly structured by asymmetry. This term is based on the idea that there cannot be total inclusion in the teacher-student relationship if the pedagogical dynamic is to be maintained (Buber 1947/2002). In a horizontal and asymmetric relationship, the teacher is immediately existentially connected to the student, but maintains the position as a pedagogical subject. It is an inter-subjective encounter where one party primarily acts as a pedagogical subject while the other party primarily acts as a learning subject.

On the other hand, we may speak of *reverse vertical* respect, where the position of the student is overemphasised. The teacher is content to accept the student in his/her current predicament and therefore, so to speak, sacrifices the pedagogical function of his/her own actions. When relational problems are raised, for example, in terms of "engulfment" (Scheff, 1990), they are usually associated with one party being

formally subordinated by another. However, the point here is that a formally superior party, such as the teacher, due to different processes from the ideological to the micro-social level, could be engulfed. For example, a teacher may misunderstand his/her task as mainly a matter of 'mirroring' the student and give him/her unconditional attention. The curricula state that a teacher should first consider each pupil's needs, circumstances and experiences. In some contexts, the teacher may interpret that part as if they should be guided by needs explicitly stated by the student. However, as presented in this article, a genuine pedagogical attitude is characterised by a teacher who 'includes' the student, while at the same time challenges the student's current position. To take a pedagogical stance, as Jons (2008) calls it, implies showing the student a path from the present situation. Rightly, it has often been claimed that the most problematic aspect of the teacher-student relationship is that it tends to over-emphasise distance between the teacher and the student (cf. Biesta 1996). Of course, this article does not question this well-proven idea. Yet it does imply that the opposite form of relationship – characterised by too much closeness and loyalty – is too often ignored or equated with mutuality.

The relational conceptualisation of pedagogical attitude is summed up in the following model in which pedagogical attitude is described as three different types of teacher-student relationships:

- *An asymmetric inter-subjective relationship*: the teacher and the student appear as active subjects on the basis of their respective positions. That is, the teacher's response to the action of the student is founded on co-existence with the student and, at the same time, it aims at the student's progress.
- *An asymmetric subject-object relationship*: the student is given a passive position vis-à-vis the teacher's activity. That is, the teacher's response to the student takes place without an experience of 'the other side' of the relationship.
- *An asymmetric object-subject relationship*: the teacher takes a passive position vis-à-vis the student's activity. That is, the teacher's response to the student's actions lacks pedagogical purpose and direction.

From the relational perspective discussed in this article, pedagogical attitude is optimally included in the first type of relationship, while the traditional pedagogical attitude is often associated with the second type. It is likely that the third type is uncommon. Still, we suspect it is becoming more common, at least from a national (Swedish) perspective, which the initial reasoning intended to show.

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