

## **A comprehensive understanding of education and socialization.**

### **Jesper Juul**

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### Introduction

In 1993 I wrote a small book called “An apple for the teacher – the overlooked dimension in public schools” pointing out two factors that I felt needed attention. The first was the isolation of teachers – most of them working alone – and a culture within the public school system that pays little or no attention to their human and professional needs and the need to focus more on the *interpersonal pedagogical processes* as a source of energy, inspiration and improved learning. This was an attempt to inspire the school system to adapt a healthier balance between content and process at a time when many schools and individual teachers were complaining about the behaviour of children. A point in history where schools were beginning to realize that the implementation of “democratic values” however valuable was not sufficient to create a learning environment where both children and teachers were thriving.

A similar confusion was characteristic for many families looking for new ways of bringing up their children without violence. In the Nordic countries school legislation was changing and was now including paragraphs that would specify that schools were also responsible for the “personal and social development of children”.

Stipulating this responsibility ended two generations of debate within the school system about whether or not teachers should also contribute to the general upbringing of children and not limit themselves to teaching (“Bildung or Erziehung”). This has of course always been going on in every hour in every school, but now it was official and pointed out a professional task that the education of teachers did not concern itself with in any substantial way. Furthermore it created a whole new setting for the collaboration between teachers and parents and a need to find common ground in terms of values and objectives.

In 1995 I published a book for adults concerned with children called “Your competent Child”. This book became an international bestseller and very soon it began to appear as a textbook within different pedagogical educations although it by no means satisfied the academic requests and demands for such books. This led us to write “From obedience to responsibility” hoping that it might strengthen our dialogue with teachers and inspire the much needed change in perspective and attitude within the school system as well as many private and alternative schools.

## Background

Since 1980 we had been working as supervisors and consultants in a large number of very different schools and kindergartens. We would be called upon when schools had “difficult” or “impossible” classes. We would sit in when the dialogue between teachers and parents was unsuccessful and we would help teachers form inspirational and supportive teams. We would consult and train the staff when there were crisis in leadership and collaboration among the adults and we were encouraging and training school psychologists to work more directly with teachers and children and to adopt a family perspective instead of focusing on the individual child/pupil. Coming from the field of family therapy our interventions and perspective were based on systems theory although our methods were more experiential.

As the “disciplinary crisis” within especially public schools escalated during the nineties we also had the opportunity to work as counsellors and therapists for a large number of individual teachers who were experiencing “burn-out”, “break-down” and a growing number of young teachers who were inclined to give up after only one or two years in their profession. Most of these teachers recovered and went back to their classrooms with insights and skills that they had never known or considered important for their profession.

During these years we also learned that the quality of teaching almost never was the problem. Individual teachers and schools had very different pedagogical approaches and methods and there was a general openness and willingness to keep updated. We also realized that the “crisis” was far from being a “disciplinary crisis” brought about by ill-mannered children with lazy parents. If and when there was a crisis it was a “social crisis” within each school that could only be solved by helping the leadership and teachers to adopt new insights and perspectives and learning new interpersonal skills.

## A new paradigm.

The life and work in schools for both teachers and children was based on morals values and psychological knowledge that were not only old-fashioned but also limited and often outdated. Neither children nor teachers were regarded as anything but their roles as teachers and pupils and the role-based authority that had supported teachers for generations was more or less gone and needed to be replaced by a much more personal authority and in the same way children had to be seen and taken seriously for their whole existence and not only for their limited role as pupils.

In schools as well as in families adults were desperately searching for solutions but very often they found themselves caught in a limited and outdated intellectual polarization between “strict rules and consequences” in one extreme and “free education” in the other, and this is where our more than forty years of research and practical experience in working with interpersonal relations proved to be valuable in term of finding a “third way”. The challenge was to transform this experience from the field of psychotherapy to the pedagogical reality of teaching and socialization in pedagogical institutions. The objective had to be an updating and a strengthening of the professional, pedagogical identity of teachers and not an attempt to make amateur psychologists or psychotherapists out of them. Or in other words : we had to take good care of the teachers before we could expect them to take better care of the children – one of many valuable lessons from family therapy.

The first key-word was “equal dignity” (German: Gleichwürdigkeit) a word that exists in many languages but had to be constructed in English in order to avoid confusion with the term “equality”.

“Equal dignity” as a new standard for interpersonal relationships and especially for the relationship between adults and children draws its meaning, power and potential from two sources. One is out clinical experience from working with disturbed relations between parents and children and the other from the last 15 years of scientific research into the early relations between parents and infants done by significant people such as Daniel N. Stern, Peter Fornagy and others. One of their conclusions is, that the healthiest relationships as well as the optimal thriving parents and children appear when the relationship is a “subject-subject-relationship” as opposed to a “subject-object-relationship” – with the child as the object. This research constituted in itself a new paradigm, that since has turned most of the “truths” from developmental psychology upside-down.

What I call “equal dignity” is the nature of the “subject-subject-relationship” – i.e. a relationship where the thoughts, reactions, feelings, self-image, dreams and inner reality of the child is taken as seriously as those of the adult and included by the adult into the relationship. In this way the child becomes a co-creator of his own world under the leadership of the adult. Not as a political right but in order to secure the personal integrity of the child as well as the adult.

We live in a time of transition and the challenge has been to inspire teachers to adopt this new insight and perspective even though they themselves have been brought up (personally as well as professionally) as objects in relationships with parents and teachers who were often exercising more power than care. Many schools and teachers – as well as many parents – have had to take a de-tour into behaviour control and other modernized ways of exercising adult power and disregarding the existential reality of both adults and children. In doing so they often realize that event though these methods “works” short term, the prize to be paid is very high.

The difficulty is both emotional and intellectual. It is simply difficult to stop thinking only in “adult versus child” terms and adopt a perspective that serves both parties equally and does not put the needs of one before the needs of the other. The focus must be on the quality of what goes on *between* them (the process). This of course it completely new ground for teachers, who have been trained to focus on the quality of the content they present to pupils and therefore we meet a lot of teachers who are very good in traditional teaching skills but lack interpersonal skills and the ability to encounter destructive behaviour in a constructive way.

## Responsibility

The second key-word is responsibility, specifically understood as *personal responsibility* – i.e. the responsibility we all have to possibility to assume for our own behaviour, feelings, reactions, values etc.. On top of this comes he fact, that in any relationship/meeting between an adult and a child the adult is responsible for the quality of their relationship. Children are simply not able to assume this responsibility, and whenever they are forced to do so, because the adult is not willing or able, the child (and the relationship) suffers. This is true whether we talk about a family or a classroom. It is imperative for adults to understand that this responsibility cannot be shared with or delegated to children. It rests solely on the adult parent or teacher.

This psychological fact contradicts generations of “double standard” in the adult understanding of reality. This says, “When my relationship with a child is successful it is my success (or the success of my method). When my relationship to a child (a class) is not successful, it is the fault of the child.

Of the many phenomenon that have a negative influence on the culture of schools, this is probably the most destructive. Less than a generation ago all adults agreed to this double standard and children who did not submit to it were either excluded or punished and consequently most children developed a natural fear of teachers. (In retrospect this fear is often confused with respect). Today's children have not learned to fear adults in the same way during their preschool years and they demand respect from teachers before they are able and willing to respect them back.

The demand for personal responsibility goes both ways. For children to grow up in a healthy way, they must experience constant care for their personal integrity (needs and boundaries), develop a healthy self esteem and a strong sense of personal responsibility. The adult behaviour that makes this possible is in almost every way different from the behaviour that emphasizes obedience.

It is not only different it is also completely new and without poignant historical representation. Just as parents are forced to find new ways of exercising their (much needed) adult leadership within families, teachers must develop a new form of professional leadership in the classroom and in the one-to-one contact with individual children. Many schools and teachers have already started this process and are enjoying the results.

Jesper Juul & Helle Jensen, *Pædagogisk relationskompetence. Fra Lydighed til ansvarlighed*. 3. edition by APOSTROF 2006.

Available also in Swedish, Norwegian and German.