

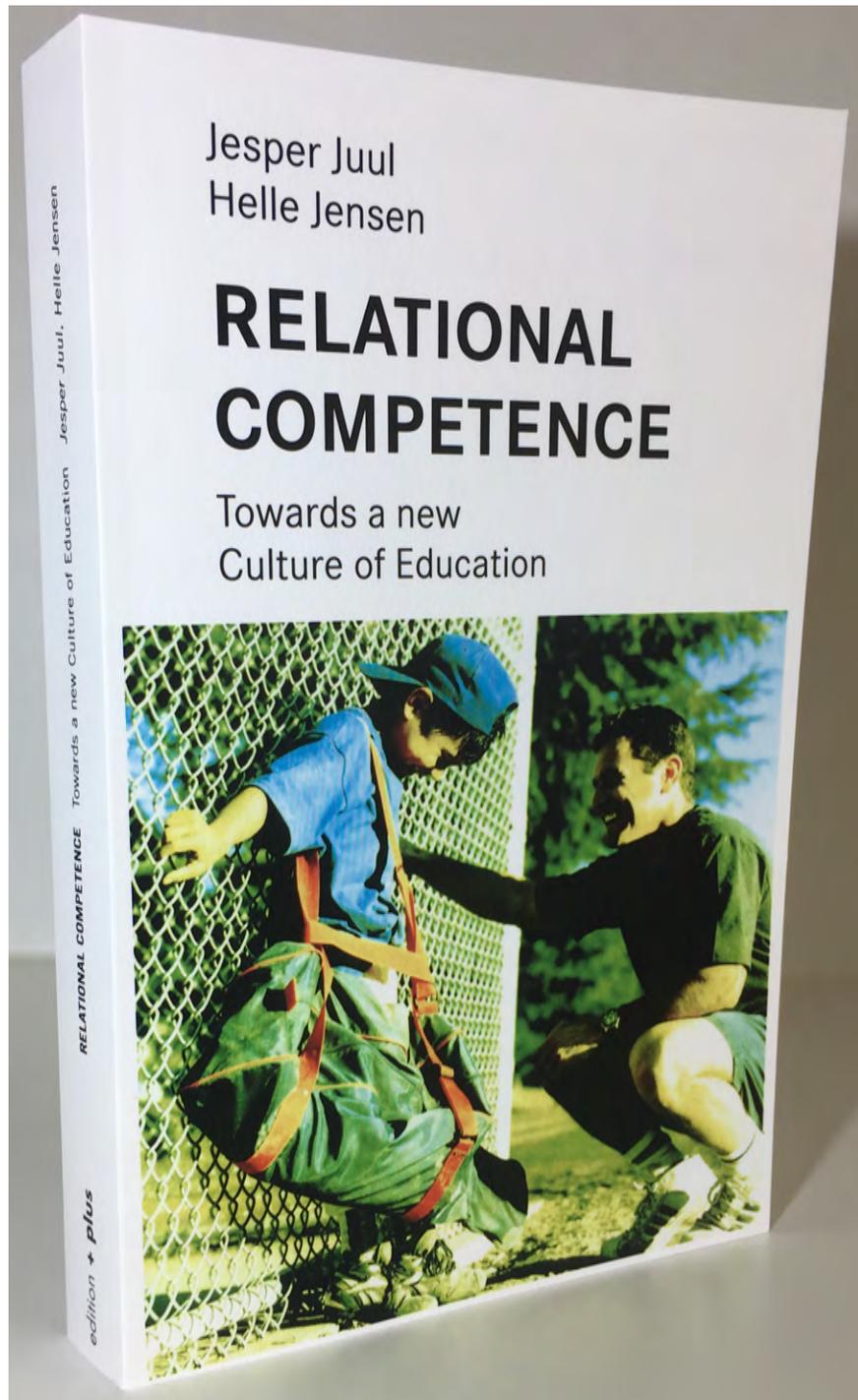
Jesper Juul Helle Jensen

Relational Competence

Towards a new Culture of Education

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION 2017

Since this book was first published in 2002 understanding of what makes for good schools has developed considerably. Many elements have been researched on and new insight in many areas has been taken serious. The the concept of multiple intelligences (Howard Gardner), for example, has proven valuable for everybody involved in public education. But what has not been established is an overall concept of what we call “*relational competence*”. A competence of the individual, which not only improves the academic learning and the well-being of children and adolescents, but simultaneously supports the well-being of teachers.

Some languages do not have a term for this competence. One reason might be that it has been a basic assumption of pedagogy that teachers just know how to establish fruitful relationships to their pupils. In a similar way, earlier generations believed that emotional love was sufficient to ensure healthy relationships within families. And the basic presumption was: this is a personal trait and cannot be learned.

The subtitle of the original book – *from obedience to responsibility* – describes a new paradigm for understanding child rearing and pedagogy. And it seeks a new culture for the way adults relate to children. The common paradigm believes that children must first learn to be obedient and cooperative, before a constructive and dynamic relationship between adults and children can be established. Over the past decades we have witnessed serious attempts to break away from this in several countries around the globe. One common way was by forming *democratic schools*. Some of these were successful and some not. One reason might be that they were built on an ideology more than on what we now know about children’s real capacities. That is, their way of learning and interpersonal needs.

To develop a new paradigm, we have also established a new terminology. In the following, we give a brief overview of the terms we use and which are described at length throughout the book.

Relational competence

The term *relational competence* refers to the teachers’ ability to see each child on their own terms and to adapt one’s own personal behavior accordingly without giving up the leadership. It also describes the ability to remain in contact with the child (or parent) authentically as well as the ability and willingness to take on full responsibility for the quality of the interaction.

Relational competence is both a matter of pedagogical trade/craft as well as a matter of ethics. Therefore, in our understanding professional competence is determined by the sum of a teacher's *teaching competence* and *relational competence*.

Equal dignity

Equal dignity is not an existing term in many languages, which is why we constructed it by combining *equal* (often used in a political or hierarchical way) with *dignity*. In our understanding, equal dignity is not a political term. We do not claim that children are or should be equal with adults in terms of power. The term *equal dignity* calls attention to the fact that the cognitive, verbal, non-verbal and emotional reactions of children are meaningful messages and need to be taken equally serious. The term also points out the fact that the human needs of both adults and children are equal and need to be encountered in a dignified way. Children's messages show relevant aspects of the current relationship and thus are helpful in order to adjust the quality of interactions.

Professional-personal development

A common assumption is that difficult relationships to children, can only be adjusted if the child can be motivated to change its behavior. In the last decades, we have seen thousands of clinical examples of how powerful even small adjustments of teachers' behavior can be and how quickly this can enable children to learn on all levels (personally, academically and emotionally). The term professional-personal development relates to the fact that the person (in the role of a teacher) is the most influential factor when it comes to relational challenges.

Self-esteem and self-confidence

For a long time, pedagogy and psychology have been trying to strengthen children's *self-confidence* in order to support their learning. This makes sense because self-confidence is all about what a human being can do and how this can be improved. We have however seen, that enhancing a child's *self-esteem* is much more productive for many children. Self-esteem describes what a child knows about themselves (emotions, thoughts and behavior) and how it feels about that (most children simply mirror the attitudes of their parents and teachers). A child needs to feel *seen*, recognized as the person it really is, so the gates to enhanced learning as well as increased self-confidence can open.

Personal authority

All formal roles and authorities are experiencing, what they call a *lack of respect* for their roles. But this is also true in many partnerships and

between parents and children. In all cases, one or both parties find it increasingly difficult to ensure that their boundaries are respected with help of traditional means.

The way to *mutually* respectful relationships – both personal as well as professional – goes via personal authority. Personal authority that builds on understanding our personal boundaries and our ability to express them firmly and kindly and – very importantly: on inviting the other person to do the same. This always leads to both stronger mutual respect as well as self-respect. This does not alter the professional relationship into a private one, it simply adds a personal dimension.

In 2017 expecting obedience seems to be fading and slipping into the background for both teachers and parents. But in a way, it looks like functioning has replaced obedience, without changing much of the underlying dynamics or ways of thinking about each other. Children, as well as their families are expected to in a thoroughly structured world. Consequently, we see both increasingly dysfunctional relationships and children that are being marginalized. Many parents and teachers experience that time for dialogue and contemplation is not readily available to them. This is mainly due to a complex host of political and cultural phenomena and the situation varies from country to country. The key concepts described in this book do not go into depth on these phenomena, but rather offer relevant support for the personal time we have with children and the time we choose to spend with them. Every day when teachers, children and parents meet, they share the same desire: to feel of value for each other and be successful in their roles and jobs.

For the English edition, we especially want to express our thanks to our esteemed colleague, psychologist and family counselor Robin Menges who very committedly helped translate the book from German and edited the text with meticulous accuracy as well as Jessica Joelle Alexander – the author of *The Danish Way of Parenting* for her support in editing and finding the best English sayings and Trent Murray for his support and questioning the translation.

Jesper Juul and Helle Jensen
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INTRODUCTION

This book seeks to identify and describe the processes that form relationships between teachers and students. This approach may appear unusual, because we differentiate interpersonal processes and pedagogical processes. Our personal experience is that most schools pursue a professional educational approach. Many institutions, however, are uncertain concerning underlying principles and values and their practical implementation, even though they know these are the foundation for successful education and cooperation.

The perspective that relational processes are the foundation for every pedagogical approach is up to debate continuously. Frequently we encounter the opinion that achievement and success have the highest priority and everything else comes after that. This attitude also shows the enormous responsibility teachers have, and the necessity to abide to regulations and standards provided by law. But it also reflects the remnants of schools conceived of as institutions.

All institutions working with children share the same kind of responsibility. The responsibility of caring for the personal, intellectual, and social development of children. In practice, however, this responsibility is often split between daycare facilities and schools. While daycare facilities tend to focus on the personal and creative development of children, schools are expected to provide intellectual and social stimulation. Although circumstances, goals, and contents change as children move from daycare to school, the relationship between children and adults as well as the underlying processes stay the same. To understand relational competence in professional relationships, we do not see a need to divide different types of educational institutions.

Our experience shows that academic goals can best be achieved if teachers are committed to good student relationships. This foundation for cooperation and involvement influences all further activity in the classroom. In many educational settings, *relational competence* – the key concept of this book – is the *missing link*, to enabling all parties to receive care, attention, and respect.

The term *social competence* is often used in this context as well. Despite strongly varying definitions, the word social primarily describes the children's ability to cooperate, be considerate, or build friendships – in other words, to be a constructive member of the community. Since this term was introduced, the focus on children's social competences has risen and gained importance. But as independent experts in conflict resolution, we have observed that in the end, it comes down to the adults' relational competence that provides the necessary basis that children can internalize these social competences. In everyday life, it is difficult to draw a clear-cut distinction between relational competence and social competence. *Adults*

develop relational competence by interacting with children, while children simultaneously acquire relational and social competence.

This mutual and equal learning process plays a central role in our understanding of relational competence. Neither young, nor experienced teachers have fully developed relational competence. It is a life-long learning process. And all children lack social competences and are in a learning process.

Of course, one may say that universities do not teach relational competence and parents should prepare their children for social life in school, but everyone involved has to cope with the competence level they have attained at the given moment. Both teachers and children have to make the best of their common reality, both in the classroom and in working with peers.

Another concern of this book is to show a way out of the culture of obedience. This culture of obedience has shaped society and education over a long period and is still often thought of as the most effective means to combat antisocial and individualistic attitudes. But obedience in itself does not give sufficient inner strength and stability to face the cultural changes, unpredictable challenges, and historically unique polarization of values in postmodern society. People need strong self-esteem and personal integrity. Besides this concern, our prime motivation to promote a paradigm shift in the field of education, and to suggest substituting obedience with responsibility is grounded in psychological, existential and pedagogical knowledge. In fact, we are convinced that this shift is not only the next logical and necessary step for teachers but for every individual and society at large. We believe relational competence is fundamental for personal development and the social progress of humanity. In addition, it establishes an ethical foundation for qualitative improvement of social communities. These ethics are an important basis for building successful professional relationships between the four parties involved – teachers, children, parents, and society.

The majority of this book builds on our experience; our desire to share the experience we gathered each on our own and together in over 30 years of practice in education, psychology, and psychotherapy, studying interpersonal relationships in families, schools, therapy and many other settings was the motor for this book.

The literature cited draws on relevant issues, we encountered while trying to keep up to date professionally. They are not the result of systematic study. We conceive of ourselves as practitioners and aim to substantiate and pass on our practical knowledge.

This book builds on values, and concepts we consider essential for pedagogical work. Values and concepts relevant for students, freshly graduated teachers, directors, and experienced pedagogues wanting to reevaluate the quality of their work. Readability and practical application have influenced

the writing and use of specific language in this book. We have consciously spared scientifically concise terms due to their rare use in daily interactions and discussions.

We are aware that we are sometimes seen as taking sides with children, but we do not see ourselves this way. Actually, we do not act in the interest of any parties involved. Our focus instead is on the relationship itself. In other words, we advocate for the relationship, for only intact relationships benefit both children and teachers.

Pedagogical literature usually classifies children in different age groups – ranging from infants, toddlers, preschoolers, school children, middleschoolers, etc. In this book, however, we let this classification go. This decision is due to the fact that the constructive qualities of professional relationships are largely consistent over all ages, from birth until death. We use the term ‘*early childcare*’ and ‘*day care*’ to describe institutions caring for children up to school age*. The term ‘*school*’ includes all types of schools including private schools and special schools. ‘*Educational institutions*’ is used as a collective term.

For the same reason, we do not differentiate different types of educational institutions, nor do we expand on schools based on specific pedagogical or philosophical ideologies. The fundamental values and concepts promoted in this book build on underlying human interactions, true for all and also apply to universities, hospitals, or even nursing homes. The necessary qualities in professional relational processes are the same regardless of the goals, content, framework, or structures of an institution. The same holds true for the ethnical, religious, and cultural background of children and their teachers. Our international work has shown us that the values and interpersonal principles described in this book are, to a large extent, valid across differing cultures. They are equally acknowledged and appreciated everywhere in the world, despite differing norms and cultural patterns which often impede their implementation.

Please be aware of the limitations of written words when reading a book of this kind - a book which talks about relational processes *between the lines*. This book builds on real examples and personal interactions and the described interactions cannot be applied in general. The choice of words is always unique to specific situations and the actors involved.

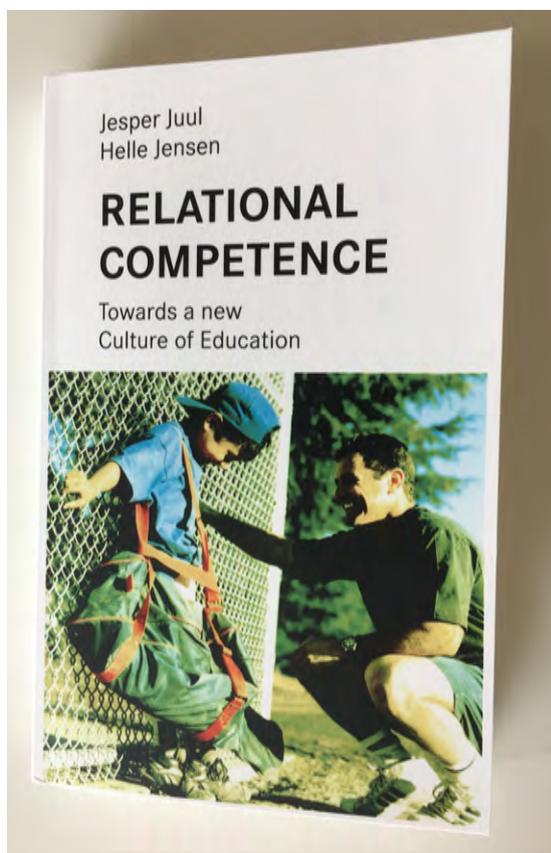
Some examples have been selected because they are exemplary, others for the opposite reason. If we describe inappropriate professional behavior, we do not claim that the persons involved acted deliberately. These examples show radically different value systems and illustrate that, values and actions often do not correspond.

The book is divided into four main parts. The first part is devoted to conditions influencing educational work. The main focus is on the changing adult-child relationship and the significance of family. The second section

deals with personal aspects which are common to both children and adults and play an important role in developing professional relational competence. The third section describes how interpersonal relationships influence professional development. In addition, it offers a definition and description of our key concept: relational competence. The fourth and last part of the book provides a detailed view on specific relational situations. The final chapter touches issues dealing with difficult children and emphasizes the need for a new educational approach.

While working on this book, we exchanged experiences, examples, and thoughts. Jesper Juul was the driving force of the project. We would like to thank our friends and colleagues at the *Kempler Institute of Scandinavia* for their substantial contribution of a wealth of experience, which the institute collected from 1979 on and thereby provided a strong foundation for our ongoing work.

We would equally like to express our thanks to the educational institutions whose openness and trust we appreciated in particular. In addition, we would like to thank our editors Elsebeth Jensen PhD, vice dean, director of Studies Teacher Education, VIA University College and Ole Varming, PhD for their interest in this project and for giving us invaluable input and feedback.



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