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Affectivity and Relational Awareness in Pedagogy and Education - moments of hesitation in intersubjective encounters

Anne Maj Nielsen, PhD, Associate Professor

Department of Educational Psychology, University of Aarhus

Copenhagen, Denmark

Freja Filine Petersen, PhD fellow

Department of Educational Psychology, University of Aarhus and Center for Mental Health Promotion

Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

In this article, we put forward the concept 'relational awareness' to describe a conscious awareness of the experience of relational responsiveness and dynamics of change in stressful intersubjective encounters in pedagogy and education. This concept is inspired by phenomenology and cultural-historical theory. We introduce the theories of extended affectivity, embodied resonance and intersubjectivity and relate these to cultural-historical psychology in order to explore how people appraise and understand situations related to societal goals, motives, practices and mediating means. Relational awareness, which involves being consciously aware of embodied, pre-reflective relational responsiveness, is specific to the cultural context, to the mediating means, and the lived experiences of the person. Relational awareness and responsiveness can be objects of reflection and education when educational practices include deliberate work on embodied experience and mediational means to reflect on and change experienced intercorporeity. Relational awareness differs from interpersonal perception in that it involves embodied activity mediated by embodied knowledge and social means of language and discourse.

Our conceptualisation of relational awareness is empirically driven by two qualitative studies of preschool teachers' and teachers' embodied practices to become presently aware during

intersubjective encounters with children in stressful everyday conditions. The embodied practices in the study were inspired by exercises in mindfulness and compassion, which were adjusted according to how the participants experienced their significance. The flexibly adjusted exercises and discourses appeared to provide participants with the mediational embodied and discursive means to become relationally aware in difficult encounters. Biesta's conceptualisation of 'moments of hesitation' contributes to the discussion of 'relational awareness' in education and care.

Keywords: Relational awareness, intersubjective encounter, affectivity and hesitation, compassion and self-compassion, mindfulness.

Affectivity and intersubjectivity

In the work here presented, we have been studying how preschool teachers, student teachers and newly qualified teachers experience education with embodied practices to calm down and become aware of difficult embodied sensations and affectivity in intersubjective encounters with children. Our research took place in the participants' professional settings. In these settings, the professionals' intersubjective encounters with children articulated difficulties that could not be 'solved' by the professionals' interpersonal perception as mediated awareness of and flexible shifts between conflicting perspectives. It appeared helpful to use embodied practices in order to change these situations with agency. We found relational awareness to be a useful concept when attempting to understand how people can become consciously aware (however fleetingly), can observe and mediate their embodied experiences, and can respond to these experiences in accordance with their situated aims. Relational awareness specifies a transient and dynamic conscious awareness of relational responsiveness and extended affectivity; that is, affectivity as embodied arousal, impulses, affects, emotions and immediate sensations of meaning and intentions during intersubjective encounters. We assume that people can learn and develop relational awareness through social practices with mediational means and embodied practice. In this article, we outline what we mean by relational awareness, illustrate relational awareness with examples from our recent research, and reflect on the implications of relational awareness for understandings of professionals dealing with affectivity in preschool and school.

Extended affectivity

We consider affectivity an extended unity of dynamic appraisal and embodied relational knowledge of the present situation developed in primary intersubjective encounters (Candiotto, 2016). This conceptualisation is based on ideas in phenomenology and existentialism that understand experience as always shared and mutual as well as in ideas in social ontology and epistemology that understand agency as 'we-intentionality' and 'we' as the main indicator of social action. Extended affectivity is constituted in intersubjective encounters from infancy:

The love and care of the mother for the infant bounces back to the infant producing not only attachment but also a feeling of affection for her/his source of survival and, thus, a protocognition of intersubjectivity as relational knowing. Claiming that what is extended is affectivity means that this extension is not occasional and momentary (as would be if what is extended was just

emotion as an occurrent state of mind) and not necessary moved by representations (as cognitions). This kind of extension is existential and constitutes the subject as ‘being with’.(Candiotta, 2016 p. 240).

Candiotta (2016) assumes extended affectivity as the cognition of primary intersubjectivity to be prevalent in young children, while individual emotions and secondary or tertiary intersubjectivity are more prevalent in adults and concludes that adults still depend on the collective stance of extended affectivity. Similarly, Gallagher, quoting Merleau-Ponty (1962/2014) and referring to his concept of ‘intercorporeity’, argues:

between this phenomenal body of mine, and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system” (1962, p. 352; see 1968: 141, 143). Intercorporeity involves a mutual influence of body schemas, a reciprocal, dynamic and enactive response to the other’s action, taking that action as an affordance for further action and interaction. (Gallagher, 2011, p. 192).

The meaning and intentionality of the participating subjects’ actions are *in the interaction*, and intentionality and sensed meaning depend in dynamic ways on the other participants’ elicitations and responses. To understand intersubjective encounters, we apply Fuchs’s (2017) concepts of ongoing inter-bodily and intra-bodily processes of *bodily resonance* as the basic dynamic “which conveys an intuitive understanding of others’ emotions in our embodied engagement with them” (Fuchs, 2017, p. 195). This intuitive understanding is based on pre-reflective processes of mutual modification of bodily and emotional states and conditions and is conceptualised as *intercorporeality* and *interaffectivity*. Embodied affectivity and bodymemory are affected by the affordances in the situation experienced as affection and impression and trigger a specific intra-bodily resonance. This intra-bodily resonance includes and influences the subject’s emotional perception of the situation, which is articulated in immediate inter-bodily expressions and readiness for specific action. Pre-reflective processes of inter-bodily and intra-bodily resonance are vital for empathy, understanding and communication, and they offer a potential ground for reflecting on intersubjective encounters:

On the basis of primary bodily empathy, we are also able to explicitly represent, to imagine or to question the other’s situation. This happens in particular when their behaviour seems ambiguous, or when an irritation or misunderstanding occurs. (Fuchs, 2017, p. 206)

In social interaction, the extended affectivity and various forms of bodily resonance (in which the subject’s body is affected by the other) leads to what Fuchs (2015) calls ‘mutual incorporation’. This constitutes a primary intercorporeality of complementary embodied communication. These unconscious processes constitute the basis for secondary and tertiary intersubjectivity (Fuchs, 2015). Secondary intersubjectivity appears as infants (around age 1) increasingly transcend the mutual resonance of intercorporeality and explicitly refer to the shared context through joint attention and gaze-following, thus noticing how others interact with the environment, how others have intentions and goals, and how objects are meaningful and useful to others. These interactions begin to include objects in the environment, leading to a triadic structure and a secondary intersubjectivity through which

others are perceived as intentional agents who act and interact with purpose and meaning in the context (Fuchs, 2015). In cooperation with others, children join participatory sensemaking in actions with objects and symbolic interaction, reaching a crucial stage in language (Gallagher, 2011). As children engage in storytelling, they learn to understand others in meaningful ways and to imagine their intentions, and they begin with pretend play and role play. Through secondary intersubjectivity the basis for tertiary intersubjectivity develops (around age 4-5). The child now understands others as ‘mental agents’ who may have intentions and thoughts that differ from the child’s and from reality. In tertiary intersubjectivity, it is possible to understand conflicting perspectives of self and other and to shift between and be simultaneously aware of conflicting perspectives, which Fuchs calls interpersonal perception: “It means to become aware of others as being aware of oneself as being aware of them” (2015 p. 195).

Adults such as preschool teachers and teachers may experience primary intersubjective encounters as meaningful based on their personal experiences of ‘being with’ and extended affectivity as something unquestionable, as part of the ‘natural attitude’ (Giorgi, 2009). We are interested in the teachers’ interpersonal perception in encounters with children in daycare and school, and how they experience potential conflicting perspectives of self and other in the contexts of their work and their participation in sensemaking practices inspired by self-compassion and mindfulness.

Thus, in the context of the professional domains such as pedagogy and education, expectations and experiences of the participants grow from their lived and habituated experiences as well as the societal and institutionalised motives, ideals, tasks and procedures that constitute education and care.

Affectivity in a cultural-historical perspective

In the cultural-historical tradition, human relations and individual actions are tied to a cultural and historical context through their relation to common societal goals, which give meaning to objects, activity systems and mediating means (Leontjev, 1983). Affectivity is the person’s appraisal and understanding of a situation related to societal goals, cultural ideas, motives and practices. The cultural-historical tradition has developed in two different yet related strands: sociocultural psychology and activity theory (Chaiklin, 2001).

In the activity theory strand, ‘affectivity’ (affects, moods and emotions) appears jointly with activity and signals the meaning and value of a person’s activity in relation to the motive for the activity (Leontjev, 1983). In adult life, people engage in various social activities and relationships, and, as the activity systems and hierarchies grow, motives in different activity contexts may contrast and affect the person’s mood and emotional condition, whether these motives are consciously reflected on or are an unconscious societal source of meaning with the activity in question (Leontjev, 1983). Affectivity may cause the person to reflect on the experience and to become more consciously aware of personal motives, and, accordingly, to become more consciously aware of conditions and opportunities and to change activities or attitudes. It is through processes of ‘ingrowing’ of the external means and signs involved in activity they turn into internal means. “This is how the external forms of human behaviour – instrumented, significative behaviour – develop” (Leont’ev, 1994 p. 306) and biological development is replaced with historical development. In this way, the person influenced by social and cultural experience masters a number of methods of behavior, which transform the psychological acts into new and more complex acts and structures (Leont’ev, 1994). Through this process, attention “becomes voluntary, turning from signal to significative”

(p. 308). Through participation a person acquires experience with an operation or activity guided by external means and signs, these signs are transformed into internal signs by which the person can direct her own attention and behavior (Leont'ev, 1994). In the activity theory approach, experienced affectivity and potential reflections and voluntary attention offer opportunities to study participants' valuation of meanings, conditions and motives in their societal activity (Leontjev, 1983).

The sociocultural psychology strand, based in Vygotsky's work, focuses on the functional aspects of consciousness and gave rise to new ways of understanding the interconnections of the material and the mental in Vygotsky's emphasis on mediational means (Edwards, 2005; Vygotsky, 1986). Vygotsky defined the term conscious awareness to denote "an act of consciousness whose object is the activity of consciousness itself" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 190). To become consciously aware of the activity of consciousness in this approach involves using mediational means, particularly language acquired in communication (external speech), which become 'inner speech', changes the mental processes and allows reconfigurations of the internal psychologic structures, which in turn is externalised in actions on the world (Edwards, 2005).

Vygotsky reflected on affectivity through the idea "that *the environment's role in children's development of higher, specifically human characteristics and forms of activity is as source of development*," (Vygotsky, 1994 p. 351). The environment at home or in the nursery is the source of children's development of forms of activity, i.e. their use and understanding of artefacts, symbols, speech, interpersonal behavior, affects, moods and emotions. Hence,

[paedology] ought to be able to find the relationship which exists between the child and its environment, the child's emotional experience [*perezhivanie*], in other words how a child becomes aware of, interprets, (and) emotionally relates to a certain event." (Vygotsky, 1994 p. 341).

The theory of the environment as the source of children's development of forms of activity and behaviour makes it relevant to study preschool teachers' and teachers' activity and behaviour of affectivity (Mella, Lavoire, Rapimán & Milán, 2017). Vygotsky considered it possible to study consciousness as a feature of activity by examining how people used the mediational means available to them (Edwards, 2005; Vygotsky, 1986). The term 'relational awareness' is inspired by both strands in the cultural-historical approach:

- Activity theory offers a focus on how preschool teachers and teachers experience affectivity in inter-subjective encounters with children in societally motivated activity and meaning mediated through methods of behaviour (embodied practices).
- Sociocultural psychology offers a focus on how mediating means and inner speech in embodied practices and discourses inspired by mindfulness and self-compassion may transform internal processes and externalised actions.

It is necessary to be cautious when relating the phenomenological concepts of intercorporeality, extended affectivity and intersubjectivity to the cultural-historical theories of motivated activity and mediational means. Cultural-historical views criticise 'abstract' definitions of intersubjectivity, since, from a cultural-historical perspective, human interaction is culturally specific and thus definitions of intersubjectivity should relate to praxis and how a central activity creates the foundation from which intersubjectivity

develops in nonlinear, dynamic ways (Garte, 2016, p. 259). We find this critique answered by the phenomenological account of sociocultural saturation of all the forms of intersubjectivity. The phenomenological contributions to theorising the embodied, pre-reflective and pre-verbal ‘being-with’ of existence is a dimension that some researchers consider a ‘blind spot’ in the cultural-historical tradition (Køster & Winther-Lindqvist, 2018). They suggest using the pre-reflective to further theorise in the cultural-historical tradition because sociocultural influences deeply saturate the level of embodied and pre-reflective experience.

The concept of Relational Awareness

We believe that by integrating the phenomenological concepts of body-memory, intercorporeality and extended affectivity it is possible to further explain the terminology of affectivity as appraisal and valuation of conditions and meanings related to motives in cultural-historical theory. The cultural-historical influences at the level of embodied and pre-reflective experiences are not separated from, but instead inter-woven with, sociocultural mediating means, such as activity traditions, material settings and conditions, artefacts, symbols, language and other communicative means. The extended affectivity in primary intersubjectivity and intercorporeality is formed into basic unconscious patterns of bodily resonance, and it appears as embodied intentionality, arousal, affect or emotion. From infancy on, the encounters, extended affectivity, intercorporeality and relational development are nested in a specific sociocultural environment with historical and specific ways of relating and understanding embodied actions and articulations. Extended affectivity is part of responsive processes of experiencing lifeworld and ‘self’ and the body is therefore the basis of pre-reflective selfhood – a sense of ‘self’ responsive to pathic dimensions of the lived world. This notion of self is not contained in the body as opposed to the environment; it is an embodied self that is responsive to extended affectivity and that encounters the intersubjective, sociocultural and material lifeworld. Køster and Winther-Lindqvist (2018) suggest the term “personal history” to specify the ontogenetic and existential process: as an embodied participant in culture ‘somebody’ continuously becomes a specific person; they further suggest the term “historical selfhood” to specify a person’s embodied, present style of being as a result of their personal history. Taken together, the embodied resonance, historical selfhood and personal history form the basis of what we suggest calling the subject’s *relational responsivity*.

The embodied pre-reflective experience of life-world and self is the basis for relational responsivity and for conscious *relational awareness* of the experienced as ‘objects of experience’. Van Manen and Li suggest an epistemology of practice and a language to create the sensed and felt pathic dimensions in the lived existence as an object of reflection:

the terms empathy and sympathy bring out that this understanding is not primarily gnostic, cognitive, intellectual, technical – but rather that it is, indeed, pathic, that means, relational, situational, corporeal, temporal, actional. (van Manen & Li, 2002, p. 219)

A language to create this sensed pathic dimensions of extended affectivity as an object of awareness and reflection can function as a mediational means to become consciously aware of responsive processes, perceptions and experiences in the intersubjective encounter. It can

further potentially serve to reflect on what to achieve and how to do so, according to the goals of the institutionalised activity.

Moments of hesitation

There is a long phenomenological tradition of viewing relationships in education and care as affective and of focusing on the professional's ability to listen to and 'interpret' the child in order to organise teaching and learning based on the child's needs and potentials (Friesen, 2017). However, Biesta (2012) argues that education should rather begin with the assumption that the child is communicating and that the teacher should prioritise moments of hesitation to the experience of being addressed by another human being. A moment of hesitation often appears as a sense of doubt in which the professional can reflect on the experience of being addressed by a child and on what responsibility he/she can take for the experienced (Friesen, 2017). Biesta considers the moment of hesitation a basic moral demand that opens up the possibility for education because the orientation towards the experience of "being addressed" reaches "out" to the self (Biesta, 2012, pp. 10-11). The professional's authority is nested in the aims and motives of education, a domain where the professional is an authority in knowledge – there is an 'unrelational' distance between the professional and the child. Biesta considers reflections on meaning, aims and motives in education important and he finds it helpful to acknowledge and explore 'unrelational' dimensions of education "not in order to refute the idea of educational relations but to add a moment of hesitation to our thinking about education and about educational relations in particular" (Biesta, 2012, p. 10). We consider the term 'moments of hesitation' as describing the experience of being addressed and acting in relations by acknowledging a difference in motive, knowledge and responsibility between the professional and the child, and we believe this term can prove helpful in the research of relational awareness and in childcare and teaching practice.

The term of relational awareness specifies a conscious awareness of the experience of the embodied, pre-reflective relational responsivity. Relational awareness differs from interpersonal perception in that it involves embodied activity mediated by methods of behaviour, motives and social means of language and discourse specific to the history, culture, mediating means and lived experiences of the person. We consider that relational awareness and responsivity can be objects of reflection and education when educational practices include deliberate work on embodied experience, on moments of hesitation and include mediational means to reflect on and change experienced intercorporeity.

The concept of relational awareness in research

In our studies (Nielsen & Laursen, 2017; Petersen, 2020), we investigated how preschool teachers and teachers perceived and articulated experiences of difficult inter-subjective encounters with children. These professionals had participated in training courses on mindfulness and compassion practices, which were adjusted to them. They appeared to become aware of their relational responsivity in situations in which their intuitive understanding or expectation did not fit the situation, or in situations characterised by contradictions. They seemed able to engage in bodily practices (such as breathing exercises or tiny body scans), and by doing so they became aware of some of the dynamics in their specific relational responsivity, and -- using the notion '*relational awareness*' -- they could act with intention.

Mindfulness and compassion practices in education and care

There has been a growing interest among preschool teachers and teachers in practices labelled ‘Mindfulness’ and ‘Compassion’ (Ergas, 2014; Napoli, 2004; Neff, 2003). Research has shown that these types of practice are associated with increased well-being, stress reduction, the ability to self-regulate, and concentration (Weare, 2013; Macbeth & Gumley, 2012; Kirby, Tellegen & Steindl, 2017). An often cited working definition of mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). There has been much discussion of mindfulness in education and the tendency to focus on outcomes of mindfulness is often criticised as this seems to oppose the ontology of mindfulness traditions and overshadow the potentials for personal wellbeing and agency in this so-called ‘contemplative turn’ (Ergas, 2014).

Self-compassion has been defined as an attitude of: 1) treating oneself with kindness in an affectionate, forgiving and empathetic self-attitude; 2) recognising one’s shared humanity in understanding mutual aspects of human life as interconnected, including suffering as an existential condition; and 3) being mindful when considering negative aspects of oneself as a conscious, non-judging awareness in the present moment (Neff, 2003; Neff & Dahm, 2015). In the field of preschool education, research on self-compassion is still in its infancy and a current key question is whether self-compassion can be developed as an individual capacity through specific interventions (Jennings, 2011) or whether structural changes are necessary to develop *cultures of compassion* (Lipponen, Rajala & Hilppö, 2018).

Embodied practices in study

Despite differences in theories, practices labelled mindfulness and compassion both guide participants to reach an open, curious awareness of embodied experiences such as tension, relaxation and transient emotions. Engaging in such practices in their professional lives therefore offers preschool teachers and teachers a window to their perceived embodied experiences of encounters in daycare and school. Our primary interest is in how preschool teachers and teachers experience, and possibly overcome, difficult intersubjective encounters as a whole of relational responsiveness and relational awareness in the specific situation. We are specifically interested in tracing the paths from their extended affectivity to the specific direction taken by their thoughts, and the reverse path from their thoughts to their embodied experience and activity. We therefore sought rich descriptions of the professionals’ first-person perspective on affectivity in everyday experiences with embodied practices. Further, using a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach (Giorgi, 2009; Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009), we asked for detailed descriptions of specific situations as they sensed them.

Studies and Method

We studied two development projects one in preschool (author 2) and one in school (author 1) in which the preschool teachers (study A) and student teachers (Study B) learned embodied practices inspired by self-compassion and mindfulness – as well as some associated vocabularies – to calm and comfort themselves in difficult or challenging situations. We explored how the participants experienced these situations and were able to change them.

Study A: Preschool Teachers' Experience of Professional Self-care

In a poor municipality in Denmark, 8 out of 16 preschool institutions were randomly assigned (1:1) to the intervention involving self-care and compassion. Three to four preschool teachers (n= 24) from each institution participated in course intervention and research activities ten times over a 1.5-year period in 2017-2018, for six hours each time. On each occasion, the topic of self-care was discussed for between 20 minutes and 1 hour. The phenomena 'professional self-care' as experienced by preschool teachers and self-care in pedagogical relational work were explored. Researcher 2 prepared and studied the 'explorative intervention' in which she entered into collaboration with participants about the definition of self-care. This approach was chosen to strengthen the transformation of practice through a close and meaningful collaboration between research and practice (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2000; Peleman et al. 2018). A broad understanding of self-care, self-compassion and compassion was introduced, and participants were invited to explore what they experienced as professional self-care and how they might experience it as meaningful in their everyday professional lives. In addition to reflections, participants were invited to join exercises, including body scans, neuromuscular relaxation, meditation and awareness exercises, and physical energetic exercises inspired by contemplative interventions (see e.g., Neff, 2015; Gilbert, 2010). The intervention content continuously developed as an interaction between the exercises presented and the participants' feedback.

Study B: Student Teachers' Experience of Mindful Awareness and Relationship Building

At a university college in Denmark, researcher 1 studied practices and experiences in two classes of trainee teachers who received teaching in contemplative education and mindful awareness of relationship building throughout their four-year teacher-training programme (Jensen, Skibsted & Christensen, 2015; Nielsen & Laursen, 2017). The teacher-training programme in Denmark lasts four years; it comprises a theoretical curriculum and one to two teaching placements every year. In the theoretical part, preservice teachers learn school subjects, didactics, and learning psychology; in the teaching placements, preservice teachers observe and learn from experienced teachers. The further they proceed through the programme, the more they are expected to teach on their own and 'learn by doing'.

For the first three years, the project included 51 trainee teachers and, in the fourth year, 26 of these trainee teachers chose the project course as an elective. The participants in the project taking place 2012-2016 joined a full-day seminar every month that included theoretical lectures in psychology, discussions on pedagogy and contemplative training. The seminar typically began with a short welcome and a physical activity, such as guided dance, followed by work on psychological theory.

During the seminar, participants took part in guided meditations focusing on breath and/or the body and in activities with inter-corporelational contact, such as gentle shoulder massages. The instructors encouraged participants to reflect on their personal experiences and connect these to situations in which they had experienced difficult relationships— in school or another context. The preservice teachers shared these reflections in groups before using the previously presented theory to understand their own as well as others' experiences. The contemplative training comprised embodied and conceptual knowledge about relational psychology in teaching and training practices individually, in pairs, and in groups once a month for four years.

Method for the Two Studies

We collected descriptions from 36 participants who varied in age and sex in both projects (24 preschool teachers and 12 preservice teachers). Participants in study A had varied educational backgrounds: some were trained preschool teachers and others educational assistants. They also had varying amounts of professional experience. All the participants in study B were preservice teachers. The participants' prior experience with embodied practices of self-care and mindful awareness also varied, though most had no experience with meditation or a similar focus on themselves.

Information was collected in interviews (study A and B) and written descriptions (study A). In study A, three group interviews with eight participants in each group were conducted halfway through the project in 2018, and, to deepen our knowledge, six participants were interviewed individually. Interviews focused on participants' experiences and opinions on how or whether professional self-care influenced their relational work in preschool. Group interviews asked participants to describe experiences from their everyday work with professional self-care and exercises or everyday situations they associated with professional self-care. They joined a guided meditation and were then asked to recall a specific challenging work situation in which they experienced the use of professional self-care. Subsequently, participants were given time to write down their experiences in detail. In this article, we include an example from such a written description.

In study B, interviews were conducted with groups of 3-5 preservice teachers in 2014 and 2016, and almost a year after they graduated, individual interviews were conducted with nine participants in 2017. A guided body scan meditation preceded the group interviews in order to recall lived experiences. Following the meditation, participants were invited to recall an incident from internship in school involving positive or difficult contact with a student and an incident in which they felt they had been a good teacher. The preservice teachers then drew the incidents and presented them to – and discussed them with – the rest of the group and the interviewer. In this article, we include an example from such a group interview in 2014 (Nielsen & Laursen, 2017).

Relational awareness in practice: Examples and analysis

We will use the concept of relational awareness to explore how some of the participants felt their awareness was directed and moved in situations they found difficult or challenging. Although there are several differences between preschool and school practices, there appear to be characteristic structures in the embodied experiences of intersubjective encounters described by preschool teachers as well as schoolteachers. In this section, we present an example from each context and an analysis of the experienced relational responsiveness as it intersects with mediational means and gives rise to opportunities for relational awareness.

Relational awareness in preschool

The following transcription is from a written description by an experienced preschool teacher, here called Irene, during interview after she had participated for nine months in the project exercises and reflections exploring professional self-care and compassion.

Irene described her experience as she attempted to calm down a 4-year-old girl who was caught in a tantrum of frustration. Irene sensed how she was also about to get frustrated and upset herself, and she therefore tried to calm down both herself and the child in the process:

“A girl had a fierce reaction to another child where she would bite and kick, causing me to hold her physically. While I held her, I told myself (inside my head) that I was doing this to help and protect her. At the same time, I told the girl, so she knew why I was holding her. There was quiet around us. I talked quietly and spoke with a quiet voice to her and to myself. My pulse was high, but I thought a lot about how I was breathing. I was aware that I must have a small physical distance to her to feel myself and calm myself and that this reassurance was necessary for me to be calm with her. I was aware of my voice and tone and the way I looked at her. The event lasted approximately three minutes. I said with a quiet, quiet voice to the girl that I would let go of her when she was ready. Afterwards I thought a lot about whether I could have done it differently. But I told myself that I did as well as I could.” (Written description by Irene during interview, transl. from Danish by the authors)

Irene responded to the child having a tantrum by holding the child’s body physically while the child was crying, screaming and trying to free herself. Irene had to use her body and physical power to restrict the child’s movements, a type of activity in which the child may hurt her physically. Extended affectivity in a situation like this may call for complementary embodied actions and a sense of irritation or anger. In the theory and embodied exercises in the project, Irene had become acquainted with calming embodied practices, discursive terms and mediational means of friendly kindness, compassion and ideals of potential to calm herself and the children she works with. This motive intersects with the motive of her task as a professional in charge and with ability to manage the situation and the child by caring for herself. Irene describes inner speech as a functional mediational means to guide her awareness towards her own bodily sensations of arousal and potential calm by breathing and by not only holding the child but doing so at a distance to her own body (as a self-caring attitude). We suspect that Irene first encountered the embodied experience of breathing to calm herself in safer conditions, such as the embodied awareness practices of the self-compassion exercises in the project. She could therefore guide her method of behaviour towards a similar calming embodied activity with the mediational means of inner speech that signified the formerly experienced meaningful calming sensation. The interwoven embodied practice of behaviour and caring terminology in the project appear to function as both pre-reflective and reflective means for Irene to objectify her own relational responsivity and accordingly to act with relational awareness in the situation.

We are aware of the dyadic character in this example and the often multi-relational challenges in preschool settings. However, we selected this example to illustrate how the term relational awareness can contribute to our understanding and knowledge, not to claim that this kind of example is typical in preschool. In Irene’s description of her encounter with the upset child and her continuing tantrum, Irene actively sensed her way of breathing and she intentionally modulated her way of holding, tone of voice, and direction and mood of gaze. Her engagement in embodied and sociocultural mediating means of ‘self-care’ appears to comfort her in the difficult situation and, in turn, to comfort the child. The transient processes of relational responsivity appear to be objectified and, through the embodied and discursive mediational activity, transform her action and the extended affectivity in the intercorporeal encounter with the child.

Relational awareness at school

The example below is described in a group interview in 2014 by a trainee teacher halfway through his teacher training. Sam (as we call him) described a teaching situation from one of his internships in a school. He taught science in a Year 9 class in which the usual teacher had given up engaging two girls who seemed reluctant to learn. These girls were even allowed to stay seated when the rest of the class got up to conduct experiments. One day when the usual teacher was absent, Sam, who was in the class with two fellow trainee teachers, decided he would try to engage the two girls. He described his experience as follows:

“Then I went towards the two girls ... it was rather difficult, as I did not know how they would react. How would they receive me over there?

Well, in the end, I bent down beside them, so I was the same height as them, and then I talked to them about what they found to be a little difficult, what they might need help with, and said I would like to help them. Finally, they fully engaged in the experiment.

Deep inside, I was very nervous! How would they receive me? What would I do if I could not win them over and make them join in? Would I have to accept a ‘defeat’? What should I invest in this, and what can I gain? ... Well, I contained my insecurity because I thought that, if they could sense it, I had lost in advance.” (Oral description by Sam during interview, transl. from Danish by the authors)

Sam thought it was wrong that the usual teacher had given up engaging these two girls in class. This stance is in line with many contemporary theories of education and didactics (i.e. Klafki, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1997), including those involved in the development project. The understanding that practices of teaching and education should engage students and not give up on them is pivotal to the societal motive of education. Based on the cultural-historical approach, we speculate that Sam responded to the societal discourse and his own understanding of the motive of education by intending to engage the girls in the chemistry experiment when the usual teacher was absent. In this particular situation, Sam challenged the authority of his own teacher’s ideas and instruction. Sam described sensing an insecurity in the social situation as soon as he decided to try to engage the two girls – he even used the terminology of war: ‘win them over’ and ‘defeat’.

This vulnerable sensation of risk appears to be meaningful not only in relation to the two girls but also in relation to the entire situation that included the absent teacher. The relational responsiveness appears to include contextual, social and cultural meanings and Sam’s situated responses to them, experienced as extended affectivity. As Sam approached the girls and related to the motive of education, he challenged the contradicting instructions and practice of the ordinary teacher, and he sensed arousal and affectivity as ‘nervousness’ – an objectification mediated by his everyday language yet a type of experience legitimised in the practice and theory of the development project. In Sam’s other descriptions, we can see that he practised mindful breathing regularly. Interwoven with his methods of breathing behaviour, the mediating objectification of his intercorporeal relational responsiveness helped him to become relationally aware and ‘contain his insecurity’. When Sam arrived at the girls’ desk, he was presently aware and his intercorporeal memory provided him with an intuitive understanding of the girls’ perspective, and he bent down to look them in the eye and to offer them his friendly interest and support.

Conclusion: Relational awareness in theory and practice

Theoretically, the terminology of relational awareness offers a way to conceptualise how embodied pre-reflective experiences in practice can transform and become reflected through mediating means of embodied practices and socio-cultural language and discourses, as called for in Køster and Winther-Lindqvist (2018).

The structure of relational awareness encompasses a situated responsivity experienced as an intention to change or care for a situation, and relational responsivity with extended affectivity, which is objectified by mediating means in embodied practice and discursive understanding. Relational awareness is not just an awareness or attention towards ‘the other’ or a process of shifting awareness of ‘self’ and ‘the other’ as in interpersonal perception (Fuchs, 2015). Relational awareness conceptualises an embodied and mediated awareness of the extended intercorporeal affectivity and resonance. It can be experienced as an immediate response and as an embodied reflection perceived as an impulse, affectivity, a mood, an emotion or a conscious reflective line of thought. The descriptions of relational awareness are simultaneously descriptions of self-awareness: of their extended affectivity, embodied sensations, affectivity and emotions, understood as meaningful and changeable through mediating means and discourses.

We found that the potential agency of preschool teachers and teachers is strongly supported and developed by collegial dialogue (Edwards, 2005; Ribers, 2018). We therefore assume that, in moments of hesitation, shared mediating means in both embodied and discursive forms may allow preschool teachers and teachers to attend to their relational responsivity and motives for their work and to act with intended relational awareness and authority. Biesta’s (2012) conceptualisation ‘moments of hesitation’ (the professionals’ experience of being addressed by children) suggests an educational understanding of relational awareness. When educators and carers attend to the experience of being addressed by a child in moments of hesitation, it is not just a personal matter. In order to care, teach and educate, professionals should be able to consider the relevant qualification, socialisation and subjectification of the child (Biesta, 2012). We conclude that moments of hesitation should provide a potential distance in the encounter for the professional to consider which motives to attend in the next act of response.

We found embodied practices and other mediating means to attend with awareness to embodied interaffectivity supportive for practitioners to manage affective challenges in childcare and education. These mediating means were inspired by mindfulness and compassion and adjusted to the participants’ experiences of meaning in practice related to their motives. Offering fixed programmes of specific procedures would run contrary to the aim of education and care with awareness, as situated reflection on motives and meaning is central in moments of hesitation and relational awareness.

Practically, we see a need for shared embodied and theoretical knowledge about relational awareness, as preschool teachers and teachers continue to meet rising demands to be efficient as well as able to care for and educate children in increasingly challenging settings. The number of children perceived as disruptive in class has increased over recent years, and, in many countries, special needs children are now included in mainstream classes (Jennings, 2011). Such stressful conditions put the wellbeing and prosperous encounters of professionals and children at risk and the professionals in danger of losing awareness of the meaning and motives in their work (Taggart, 2011).

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About the authors

Anne Maj Nielsen is currently based at Department of Educational Psychology, University of Aarhus in Copenhagen. Her research centres on children's, and professionals', sensory and lived experiences of participation and inter-subjective encounters in pedagogy and education, comprising sensory, aesthetic and symbolic meanings articulating learning and development in daycare and school, and contemplative practices and relationship building in education. It draws on phenomenology, cultural psychology, and cybernetic systems theory of dynamic states of consciousness. The topics of her recent publications include contemplative cultures of awareness, identity and relationship-building strategies in school and education (2011, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2020), phenomenology methodologies including researchers' sensory experience in research with children and students (2013, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020), and stress in education and contemplative interventions in group, class, and school-communities (2013, 2017, 2018). She holds a position as associate professor in psychology and learning at School of Education, Aarhus University where she served as Head of Dept. of Educational Psychology 2014-2019. In addition to her Ma. in psychology from University of Copenhagen and her PhD from The Royal Danish School of Educational Studies she is a certified integrative cybernetic-psychology therapist. She is an editorial board member of the journal *Psyke & Logos*, and participant in the research program: Early childhood: Education and care in everyday life.

Contact: Department of Educational Psychology, University of Aarhus in Copenhagen, Denmark. Email: amn@edu.au.dk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4747-1750>

Freja Filine Petersen is currently based at Center for Mental Health Promotion and affiliated Department of Educational Psychology, University of Aarhus in Copenhagen, as PhD-fellow. Her research centres on lived experiences of participation and care in pedagogy and education and is affiliated the research program: Early childhood: Education and care in everyday life. Her recent research involves exploration of the importance of professionals' ability to self-care and awareness for the relational work with children and young people in vulnerable positions. Currently, she is associated with two major research projects collaborating across DPU, Aarhus University and Center for Mental Health promotion. The purpose of the projects is to ensure and develop the quality of day care for children in vulnerable positions and involves, among other things, teaching educators and developing initiatives that strengthen the professionals' self-care in close collaboration with practice. In her research she is inspired by contemplative cultures of awareness phenomenology and cultural psychology theory. In addition to her master's degree in Educational Psychology from DPU, Aarhus University, and her current PhD scholarship, she has a BA in psychomotor therapy from the University College of Northern Denmark. She has published the first article about her PhD-study, a book about stressmanagement for adolescents and multiple training videos for the Open and Calm-programmes for adults and adolescents.

Contact: Department of Educational Psychology, University of Aarhus in Copenhagen, Denmark, Email: frfp@edu.au.dk