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The Pedagogy of Relation and Educational Communities

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Abstract

The paper challenges the efficacy of traditional educational reforms focused on accountability, choice, and technology, proposing that the essence of education lies in the relational dynamics between teachers and students. The author explores the concept of the relational self, arguing that education involves the development of diverse relational selves through various life stages. The author critiques dominant educational theories for neglecting the fundamental caregiver-child relationship, emphasizing the need for educational relationships that balance support and challenge. The text advocates for a new dimension of educational accountability that measures relational well-being, calling for a paradigm shift to recognize the importance of relational dynamics in educational outcomes and student experiences. The work presents a case for redefining educational success beyond conventional metrics, underscoring the transformative power of relational pedagogy.

Keywords: relational pedagogy, educational communities, reform, dialogue, attachment, relational self, accountability

The dark matter of education

I am a philosopher of education by training, but I have been dabbling in other social sciences fields for a while. Now, I represent a network we are trying to create, focused on Relational Pedagogy, or what we also call Relation-Centered Education. I believe the notion of relation is probably valuable for you, considering the theme of your conference. The community, at least in its *Gemeinschaft* dimension, is a relational phenomenon. I want to mention that I am an educator, so all my examples and thinking stem from the world of education, mostly

K-12. As any self-respecting keynote address speaker, I will start with a field that I know almost nothing about.

You are likely familiar with the concept of dark matter. Physicists believe in its existence, though it has neither been seen nor measured; we know almost nothing about it. Its composition, the basic stuff, remains unknown. However, we know dark matter exists because the rest of the universe suggests its presence through unaccounted-for gravity; the only explanation is that something else is there. Similarly, in the field of education, there exists a comparable phenomenon. We recognize its existence because it does not behave as our current understanding predicts. I will provide some examples to illustrate why a group of us began studying relations in education.

Unexplained anomalies in education

The anomalies in education are as follows. Educational systems worldwide, not just in the U.S., often resist improvement and change once they become established. Numerous educational reforms have focused on accountability, essentially suggesting that if learning outcomes are measured and feedback is provided to teachers, they will learn to improve their methods, resulting in better learning outcomes. However, evidence for the effectiveness of this approach is limited. Some studies, like Deming et al. (2016), show only marginal improvements, not nearly to the extent expected by the reformers.

Another prominent approach is introducing choice in education, an economic concept. You are probably aware of educational vouchers and charter schools in the U.S., known by different names in Europe. The underlying idea is that introducing choice in education will spur competition among schools, thereby improving productivity. This model has proven effective in industries like telecommunications, transportation, and manufacturing, but it has not been successful in education. Despite many years of experimentation in various forms, the evidence, including that from Hattie et al. (2015), indicates that charter schools in the U.S. do not effectively work. A well-known national experiment in Chile during Pinochet's regime yielded similar results, as documented by Hsieh & Urquiola (2006). While some groups benefit, others lose, leading to no overall improvement.

The third example of anomalous behavior in education is the introduction of information technology. For many years, there was a widespread expectation that since education is largely an informational industry, the incorporation of technology would enhance outcomes. Consequently, countries around the world invested billions of dollars in computers, infrastructure, hardware, and software for schools. Yet, no significant positive impact was found on achievement levels from this technological influx in the international results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Despite varying start times across countries, which should have resulted in delayed but noticeable improvements in PISA outcomes, such improvements have not materialized, as noted by Schleicher (2015).

I am not suggesting that this investment was a complete waste of time and money. The pandemic has shown us that a well-developed infrastructure for online learning was crucial in navigating the year and a half of global health crisis. However, the reasons for the lack of impact on educational outcomes remain unclear. One hypothesis is that education is more about relationships than information. Relations, like the dark matter, are invisible in educational research, and therefore they are ignored by educational reformers, which explains the anomalies.

Education differs significantly from other industries, a concept encapsulated in "Baumol's Cost Disease," a theory proposed by economist William Baumol (2012). Baumol distinguished between 'progressive' and 'non-progressive' industries. Education, according to this classification, is non-progressive, alongside a few other sectors. The primary challenge in non-progressive industries like education is the inability to significantly increase productivity. This would typically require reducing the number of teachers while increasing the number of students, a strategy that is unfeasible in education due to the non-automatable nature of teaching. Thus, traditional methods of boosting productivity are not applicable in the educational sector.

What exactly is the labor involved in education? For decades, many believed it was about the transference of information or knowledge. However, it is now evident that this is not the case. Education is fundamentally about building relationships with students and fostering a community in the classroom. Learning is secondary. Gert Biesta, a renowned philosopher based in the UK, even argues that education is not about learning at all (Biesta, 2015). This might be an exaggeration, but it does suggest that for learning to occur, a relational foundation is essential. This significant revelation is something many people overlook, and understandably so, as the nature of relationships is complex.

While it is intuitively clear and widely accepted that relationships are crucial in education, the challenge lies in the next steps: understanding and measuring these relationships. What constitutes good relationships in an educational context, and what characterizes the bad ones? These are questions that need addressing to fully grasp the role of relationships in education.

Relationality in education

In the philosophy of education, the concept of relationality has been a topic of interest for quite some time. Nel Noddings, in 1984, was among the first to discuss Martin Buber's theory of dialogue, which gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. Buber, a German philosopher, is best known for his book "I and Thou" (1970), where he presents an ontological perspective on human existence. He proposes that humans can exist in a world of "I-it," focusing on instrumental relationships with objects and others, or in a world he terms "I Thou," where relationality takes precedence.

Around the same time, Mikhail Bakhtin, a literary critic who infused his philosophical ideas into his literary critiques, also emphasized the importance of dialogue. In his analysis of Dostoyevsky's works (1984), he presented the idea of the polyphonic novel as a metaphor for the social universe, with characters representing different aspects of the self. Bakhtin, following Buber, asserted the paramount importance of dialogue and relational aspects in human interactions.

This approach resonated with many, including myself. My doctoral thesis explored the ideas of Buber and Bakhtin, among others. In philosophy, we often take compelling concepts and attempt to apply them to real-world situations. The idea here is that the relational aspect of our existence is as crucial as any other, shaping our interactions and understanding of the world.

There's a critical issue in applying Buber and Bakhtin's concepts to education: the inherent inequality in the student-teacher relationship. This relationship doesn't operate on a plane of complete equality, as teachers often have a secondary objective in mind—guiding student

growth. According to Buber and Bakhtin, such a dynamic doesn't constitute true dialogue. I realized they perhaps overstated their case by prioritizing the wrong type of relationship. Buber, especially, labeled it 'primary' in both being the first and the most important, but this was in the early 20th century, a time when feminist thinking and developmental psychology were not as evolved as they are now.

The significance of attachment theory, which heavily involves the mother-infant bond, was unknown to them. They showed little interest in women, mothers, or infants. Their ideal of profound relationality was more about two bearded white men engaging deeply with each other's thoughts, which doesn't quite reflect the complexities of real-world relationships. Modern understanding, influenced by the works of Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1979), places emphasis on the primary caregiver-infant bond, a relationship that shapes the entire fabric of human relationality. Recognizing this and moving beyond Buber and Bakhtin's narrow focus is crucial for advancing our understanding of relationships in education.

In developing a pedagogy of relation, one crucial aspect often overlooked is the specificity of educational relationships compared to others. The central question is: What distinguishes educational relationships from all others? If they are the same as any relationship requiring good rapport with people, then education loses its unique role. This broad-brush approach fails to capture the essence of education. This is the crux of the argument, necessitating a slight detour in our discussion.

Teacher-student relationships have been a subject of study in school and educational psychology for about 20 years, resulting in hundreds of publications and even specific terminology, like TSR (Teacher Student Relationship). While these studies are valuable, I believe they lack sufficient theoretical sophistication to be applied to education, an area where your Society could contribute.

These relationships are often measured like any other, using questionnaires and observation tools that assume the necessity of trust, inclusiveness, and engagement (as discussed by Pianta et al., 2008). However, this is not sufficient. In education, there is a dual quality of relationships. There are at least two dimensions: if a teacher's engagement with students focuses only on their comfort, safety, or inclusion, it falls short. There must be another dimension where these aspects serve as means towards furthering student growth. This dual aspect—one of support, safety, or belonging, and the other of challenge and development—should be integral to observational tools and measurement instruments.

Vygotsky defines the developmental aspect of education as a process where education not only fosters development but also gives it direction and momentum. He challenges the Piagetian interpretation of development as a mere 'unfolding' of a pre-existing program. Instead, he emphasizes the role of education in actively shaping development, or as he liked to put it “education pulls development up.” Vygotsky introduces the concept of the "social situation of development." A prime example of this is the significant transition a child undergoes when moving from preschool to school. Such transitions are not just events; they profoundly impact a child's development, presenting challenges that require adaptation.

In essence, education serves a vital developmental purpose. It is defined not solely by curriculum and pedagogy but also through the creation of different social environments. These environments ideally should be conducive to development, underlining the broader role of education in shaping and directing a child's growth and adaptation to new social contexts. This necessitates the specificity of the educational relation, which I describe as its dual dimensionality. The dual dimensionality of educational relations is a pivotal concept.

The two dimensions of the educational relation are that of well-being and that of growth. While an educational setting must secure child's well-being to make any learning possible, it also has to take care of challenging the child to grow, to develop.

Related approaches

Before moving on to the concept of the relational self, it is important to discuss concepts of education that partially overlap with the notion of the relational pedagogy. A significant body of scholarship, deeply rooted in philosophical traditions focuses on child well-being (Pollard & Lee, 2003). Although this focus is praiseworthy, the notion of well-being does not sufficiently encompass the instrumental role of relationships. Well-being is a description of a result; it does not necessarily indicate how to achieve it.

Relationships are crucial; they serve as a key mechanism through which well-being is largely achieved. Undoubtedly, basic factors like nutrition and health are essential. However, the impact of the social world is critical. Well-being largely depends on how connected individuals feel to others, their sense of community, and the presence of reliable social support. These aspects highlight the significance of relational phenomena in educational and personal well-being. Therefore, relational pedagogy is a more instrumental approach than the well-being one.

The second related concept is that of social and emotional learning. While it is very popular, it faces challenges in measurement. Numerous attempts to develop an instrument for measuring social emotional learning, such as those by Cox et al. (2019), have not been very successful. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) spent years and considerable resources trying to create an international instrument, but the cultural specificity of social and emotional learning complicates this effort. While these elements are culturally specific, I believe in the possibility of creating a universal instrument to measure relationships. This belief stems from the universality present in human relations, which, I argue, could be applicable across various cultures. While well being is too abstract, socio-emotional learning suffers from vagueness and the lack of practical measurability. In my opinion, theoretical constructs like relation-centered education can help overcome those limitations of the related concepts.

Expanding relational selves

Drawing from Andersen and Chen's work (2002), I delve into the concept of the relational self. They propose an intriguing idea: the self is such a large cognitive construct, so expansive that it cannot be fully activated in a human mind at any one time. This leads to the formation of different relational sub-selves, each emerging within specific relational contexts with significant others. For example, the way one interacts with parents is likely distinct from interactions with colleagues. This is not merely a perception; it is evidenced by changes in vocabulary, body language, and emotional states corresponding to different relational contexts.

Andersen and Chen (2002) suggest that environmental cues trigger the activation of these distinct relational selves. In other words, we activate different version of our self in different relational situations. This aligns with the psychoanalytic theory of transference—for instance, how one might unconsciously perceive one's father in a therapist. It happens, because the situational factors activated the previously existing relational sub-self in the

therapy session. This demonstrates that our interactions naturally evoke different facets of our selves.

Contrary to the traditional view of a singular, unified self, this approach posits a self, composed of various subsets, each activated by different interactions. This view of the self, as a collection of various 'selves' that emerge in response to our relational environment, is a key takeaway from Andersen and Chen's insights, and forms the foundation for further speculation and exploration in this area, which are mine, not theirs.

We should consider transference and related studies as means to help individuals expand their range of relational selves. A more mature and developed individual typically possesses a wider array of these sub-relational selves, enabling them to engage productively with a wider variety of people. This ability to navigate diverse cultural and social environments is a hallmark of personal maturity.

The process might look something like this: a child has a primary relationship with their mother. When this child attends preschool, they encounter a teacher, initiating transference. The child treats the teachers as a mother or another significant family adult. However, the child soon realizes that this relationship with the teacher is different from the one with their mother. The relation is not unconditional. In the preschool environment, the child is one among many, needing to consider the needs of other children, engage in collaborative activities, and follow the preschool's rules and routines.

This realization and adaptation in a child mark the development of their ability to differentiate and navigate various types of relationships, a key part of growing up and learning to interact in a complex social world. In this process, cognitive dissonance arises within the child's mind, leading to either accommodation or assimilation. The child might attempt to apply their existing mental framework to the new person or situation, or they might adjust their framework, developing a new subset of their relational self.

This evolution continues throughout a person's life. For instance, as children transition from elementary school to adolescence, peer relationships gain importance. Initially, they might approach these relationships through transference, applying relational sub-selves formed with siblings or friends. However, they soon realize that the dynamics in a larger, urban middle or junior high school environment require different relational approaches. Successfully adapting to these varying social situations reflects a form of relational maturation, illustrating the ongoing development of the child's ability to manage and evolve within different relational contexts.

Reflecting on this, it seems feasible to construct a model of lifespan development for the relational self which involved transference, cognitive dissonance, accommodation, and emergence of new relational sub-selves. I have not done it but am inviting all to contribute to this theoretical work.

Teaching relationality

Educational relationships play a crucial role in guiding individuals through these yet-to-be-defined stages of development. A pertinent question then arises: how do we teach educators to facilitate this process? This leads to a unique challenge. Many relational skills operate at a subconscious level, and there's an evolutionary reason for this. As social beings, a significant portion of our brain's capacity is dedicated to relational calculus – understanding

who our friends and enemies are, recognizing debts and alliances, and navigating social hierarchies.

These complex social dynamics have become subconscious processes, as consciously handling them alongside survival tasks would be overwhelming. Our ancestors concentrated on immediate, concrete tasks like hunting or finding routes, activities that required conscious thought and were easily taught and transferred. In contrast, the subtleties of social interactions, ingrained in our subconscious, pose a greater challenge when we think about teaching these skills.

Ann-Louise Ljungblad (2021), a Swedish researcher, presented her micro-ethnography of the teaching practices of highly successful teachers. She describes an instance where a teacher interacts with a group of four students, addressing each individually with a unique tone of voice, facial expression, and phrasing, tailored to each student. When Ljungblad later informed the teacher of these varied approaches, the teacher was unaware of their own practices due to their complexity. This exemplifies how conscious reflection on these intuitive skills can make them more artificial and less fluid. This is part of the larger challenge in teaching the nuanced skills of social interaction. How do we teach relational skills to future teachers, if these skills are largely operating below the conscious level, below awareness?

One significant problem we face in teacher education is the difficulty in teaching certain skills, especially those akin to art, which are complex and intuitive. It is feasible to teach how to build relations to counselors and school psychologists, who actually engage in practical learning about client-therapist relationships in their programs. However, the scale becomes a challenge when considering the vast number of teachers and the fact that they operate in one-to-many relational settings. In the United States alone, there are around four million teachers. How do we impart these nuanced and sophisticated, often subconscious skills to such a large group?

Despite the large differences in professional practices, we can learn one trick from the mental health professions. Counselors and school psychologists often employ techniques like mindfulness or other practices to enhance their own relational abilities. These techniques, developed to fine-tune their own responses and interactions, might not directly apply to teachers. However, it is conceivable that we could adapt these methods for teachers, helping them to attune more closely to relational dynamics. Such training could enable teachers to better handle relational stresses and avoid negative patterns like relational aggression, thereby fostering a more positive and effective educational environment.

Another approach, discovered through trial and error, is the concept of the "educational community," which has roots in the history of education and its many experiments. While I am not a historian, I suspect that the Jesuits were among the first to utilize this concept (see Casalini, 2019). Jesuit schools, established centuries ago, recognized the potential of using peer groups as educational tools. These educational communities are somewhat unique; they are not purely peer groups, nor are they entirely independent. Adults are involved, but they do not exert full control. These intermediate interventions establish a social structure with a developmental function, yet they retain a semi-natural aspect. This balance allows for a form of educational interaction that is neither wholly peer-led nor completely adult-directed, offering a distinctive and effective learning environment.

Peer groups are a naturally occurring phenomenon, and the Jesuits were not the only ones to recognize their potential use in education. The educational collective theory and tradition

in Russia (Sidorkin, 1998), and the Kibbutzim education system in Israel (Spiro, 1975) both share similar roots. These approaches rely on semi-structured peer groups. The significance lies in the fact that teachers do not have to build individual relationships with every student. Instead, they focus on influential members within these groups, facilitating the spread of positive influences. This method is effective, but often practitioners struggle to articulate it. Scholars should help educators to develop student communities that are inclusive, safe, yet also challenging and demanding, propelling students towards growth and development.

Assessing relationality

The next step in advancing our understanding of classroom dynamics involves developing an instrument to assess the classroom as a collective entity, rather than focusing solely on individual student-teacher relationships. The dynamics within a classroom group can vary significantly. Some classrooms exhibit inclusivity, openness, and tolerance, while others may be marred by hostility and bullying. This differentiation underscores the importance of our next phase. We welcome and indeed need assistance in this endeavor. Our objective is to measure and subsequently enhance or regulate these relational dynamics within schools.

This initiative also has significant implications for accountability in education. The notion that education will be left unscrutinized by policymakers and the public is unrealistic. Education, representing a substantial portion of GDP—about half of what is spent on medical expenditures in the U.S.—will always be subject to questions regarding its funding and effectiveness. Rather than eliminating accountability, we propose adding a new dimension to it. By establishing a credible, thoroughly researched system for assessing the quality of educational relations, we can introduce a parallel system of accountability. This approach is likely to garner public trust and credibility.

Parents universally desire their children's happiness and growth at school. They intuitively sense the atmosphere of a school—whether it is open, welcoming, and inclusive, or hostile and restrictive. By creating a system that assesses and communicates the level of relational well-being in schools along with healthy challenge, we can shift the public discourse. Imagine relocating to a new neighborhood and having access to two sets of data about your local school: its performance in standardized tests and the expected level of your child's relational well-being. Such information would be invaluable and could significantly alter public conversations about education.

Currently, there is a notable lull in educational policy circles, characterized by a sense of uncertainty about the next steps to take. This situation arises from the realization that various strategies, such as the integration of technology, accountability reforms including standardized testing, and the introduction of school choice, have not been as effective as hoped. These are just a few examples of the many attempts made. The primary issue is that these strategies have not significantly improved learning outcomes, as measured by standardized tests, nor have they addressed the persistent problems of equity in education.

John Hattie, a prominent figure in educational research, has made significant contributions to this field. He has published several editions of a book (for example, Hattie, et al 2015) and runs a website, visiblelearning.org, where he shares his research findings. His work is essentially a meta-analysis of other meta-analyses, serving as an encyclopedia of educational interventions. Despite examining approximately 200 different interventions, only a few have shown a significant impact, exceeding a effect size of 0.4 SD. This is a somewhat embarrassing fact that the educational research community often hesitates to

discuss, but the reality is that very few strategies in education prove to be effective. There are occasional success stories of exceptional schools or classrooms, but efforts to replicate these successes typically result in reduced effectiveness.

In policymaking circles, there is a prevailing sense of uncertainty about the direction to take in education. The initial belief was that extending formal schooling to more people would yield positive results. This belief was grounded in the sound economic theory of human capital, which has demonstrated that in various societies, increased formal education correlates with higher lifetime income. Additionally, there are notable spillover effects: better parenting skills, reduced crime rates, improved health, and other positive outcomes.

However, we are now encountering a saturation point, especially in the developed world where primary and secondary education are universally provided. The challenge arises in expanding higher education systems, which are proving to be prohibitively expensive. No country has yet figured out how to provide quality higher education to the vast majority of its population affordably. While countries like Canada, Israel, and Russia have high levels of higher education participation, this does not directly translate into GDP growth, and there seems to be a ceiling to the benefits that can be reaped.

The concept of human capital has dominated the thoughts of policymakers for the last five decades, focusing on expanding access to education. While this expansion is undoubtedly beneficial, it appears to have its limitations. Additionally, various reforms and other methods aimed at improving education have not been as effective as hoped. This situation presents a complex challenge for policymakers in determining the next steps for enhancing the educational landscape.

Policymakers are actively seeking new directions, asking, "What should we do next?" A significant challenge they face is the opposition to standardized testing and accountability reforms, which often lacks a solid, well-founded alternative. Critics of these systems frequently rely on rhetoric rather than proposing viable alternatives for accountability. This indicates a weakness in the educational sector, highlighting the need for a more rigorous theoretical foundation supported by empirical evidence.

The focus should be on demonstrating the importance of educational relationships. While improving these relationships might not directly affect test scores, it can significantly enhance the student experience in schools, colleges, and universities. The stakes are high in this endeavor.

There is a growing sense that a relational pivot or turn in education is imminent. This shift would emphasize the importance of relationships in the educational process. While it may not be the current group of policymakers or educators who spearhead this change, the expectation is that someone will introduce a novel approach. This new perspective might differ significantly from current discussions but is necessary for the evolution of educational strategies. The future of education may hinge on recognizing and implementing this relational turn.

Conclusion

The understanding of education needs a paradigm shift, with a focus on identifying a new dimension for measurement. The overreliance on standardized tests as the sole metric of success is a fundamental issue. This approach negates other critical aspects of education, particularly the dimension of well-being, which is not independently measured. If well-

being were measured as a distinct entity, acknowledging that schools serve multiple purposes, the narrative around public funding, accountability, and discourse in education would dramatically change.

This perspective opens up new avenues for evaluating and understanding the impact of educational interventions. It suggests a more holistic approach to assessing the effectiveness schools, one that goes beyond test scores to include the overall well-being and development of students.

Thank you for your attention. If you have any questions or are interested in joining our network, please feel free to reach out via email. I appreciate the invitation and the opportunity to share these thoughts with you.

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