Do we tactfully meet the children halfway

Working with the child’s autonomy as a goal in upbringing and education presupposes qualities of interaction.

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Do we tactfully meet the children halfway?

*Working with the child's autonomy as a goal in upbringing and education presupposes qualities of interaction.*

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In this paper I will introduce core concepts in pedagogy. Concepts are guiding what we can see, so the use of new concepts can help us to see a different reality. Wittgenstein already drew attention to the close connection between “language games” and “forms of life”. What are the concepts and stories we live by? Are they satisfying? Do they need new interpretations? What new concepts can help us to understand in new ways, to develop new stories we can live by?

In this paper I will introduce some of concepts that are key concepts in my understanding of education: autonomy, relationships, subjectification, beings and becomings, the child’s perspective, integrity, participation, democratic moments, recognition, self-education, collaborative action, improvisation, practitioner-research.

I will refer to text that elaborate those concepts and understandings. The goal of this paper is to stimulate discussion about daily practice and about the educational life that deserves your support.

Most of the articles I refer to in this paper will be distributed to the participants in the course.

**Introduction.**

The modern history of education as an academic subject begins in the Renaissance and the time of the Enlightenment, when people in cities around the Mediterranean, and later on also in northern European cities, got the idea that change and development was possible. Philosophers became interested in education, as they saw the child as a promise for possible change, and not only as a being that should learn to think and act as previous generations. Here we find the starting point for the conception of upbringing and education as a project that relates to an unknown future instead of a tradition that relates to the past.

Three philosophers from three different areas in Europe wrote about education in the 17. and 18. Century, and they can be seen as the founding fathers of three different paradigms.

*John Locke* in Essex (England) asked how to furnish the child’s mind, when this mind could be supposed to be “white paper, void of all characters without any ideas”. He founded the pedagogical tradition that believes that the central power in education is influence: writing on the child’s open mind. In Locke’s opinion, it was necessary to influence, and then at some mystical moment the child would be able to become autonomous. No doubt for Locke that the relationship between the writer (educator) and the white paper (the child) is an authoritarian one.

*Jean Jacques Rousseau* in Geneve and Paris opposed this view: Locke is only preparing children to adapt to the bourgeois society that is developing; it is just socialization and adaptation. Rousseau distrusted society:
“Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man”, and his solution was to ban the influence of society in upbringing and education: back to nature. Let’s give place for the natural development: “On leaving my hands he will not, I admit, be a magistrate, a soldier, or a priest; first of all he will be a man”. Raised as a (hu)man, the child will be able to find its own way, also, and specially, when the conditions in society are changing and unstable.

Rousseau and his radical ideas about freedom and autonomy impressed Immanuel Kant, in Königsbergen (Prussia), but he was not convinced that nature was the key to freedom. In his opinion, what was needed, was the child’s moral development, that means: the development of the child’s own ability to make good choices, a task the child only could lift himself, but not without help. So for Kant the task of the educator and teacher becomes paradoxical: on one hand influence (or in Kant’s words: coercion) was necessary but at the same time the goal should be freedom and the child’s autonomy.

With these three philosophies, three paradigms of education were founded: an authoritarian style (Locke), a child-centered and quite anti-authoritarian style (Rousseau) and a style that focuses on the quality of the pedagogical relationship and on the growth of the child’s own powers of judgment.

It is not difficult to find tracks of those paradigms and styles in actual debates and practices, and it would be an illusion to suppose that each of them could be found in a pure form. Locke stresses the dimension of education that concerns qualification, as qualifications give the child new possibilities. Rousseau stresses the dimension of education that concerns subjectification, as the child has the right to become an autonomous subject. Kant stresses that two dimensions of education are intertwined, even though they seemingly point in different direction: socialization, becoming a part of the world that already exists, is an unavoidable point of departure, but the goal is not adaptation but autonomy; becoming a subject that takes responsibility for own choices. In the Kantian tradition upbringing and education is a question of meeting the child tactfully halfway. It will be mainly this tradition (paradigm, style) we will follow in this paper.

A contemporary philosopher of education, Gert Biesta (Biesta, 2010), summarizes the educational challenges in this way: education operates in three domains: socialization, qualification and subjectification. Educators will have goals for each domain, and they are at stake all the time.
The art of education is to handle this multi-dimensionality and the ability to prioritize in the right way in every unique situation. In order to develop this art, the teacher needs to know her pupils and a core task for the educator is to develop educational relationships.

The text we have chosen represent a way of thinking on education that is well known in our own country (Denmark) and Scandinavia, but it is not typically Danish (or Scandinavian), as it has roots in the pedagogical project that took shape in the renaissance. Therefor we have also chosen two texts that do not have any relation with the Nordic countries. We have added an appendix, where we sort out different figurations of the child and the following educational focus and approaches

**Tradition and rupture**

The texts we have gathered combine

- A call for education as a project that aims at the child’s autonomy, the child as an actor in the world.
- A call for education to recognize the child both as a *being*, right here and now, with unalienable rights and qualities and as a *becoming*; on its way to become an adult
- Attentiveness for how those ideas about children and education may represent ruptures with older and other traditional ways of treating children

**The text “The child’s right to be himself” by Janusz Korczak** (Korczak, 2009) is nearly 100 years old, but it still talks to us. Korczak was director of an orphanage in Warsaw¹, and he is one of the many educators who at that time, in the first part of the 20th. century, after the first world war, were disappointed by the mess grown-up people had created, and who projected the future and the hope for a better world in children. Just as other educational practitioners and theoreticians from that time, e.g. Ellen Key, Celestine Freinet, Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Rudolf Steiner, he was very well aware that children only could be a symbol for hope and new beginnings if they were accepted in their own right, as beings; not only as becomings but also as beings.

In the text “The Child’s right to be himself” Korczak asks *“do we tactfully meet the children halfway, do we avoid unnecessary grievances, facilitate mutual relations. Are we not rather stubborn, capricious, offensive and annoying”*. As long as we think we as adults are the ones who always know best and therefore have to direct the child’s activities and mind, life may be easy for us, but we do not give the children conditions for better development. Being an educator implied for Korczak being suspicious about what grown-ups, including himself take for granted and being curious to discover the child’s perspective, not as a final truth, but as a starting point for a more dialogical relationship.

¹ see: [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janusz_Korczak](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janusz_Korczak) for more information about him
Korczak’s work and writings have been an important inspiration for the formulation of the UN Declaration of Children’s Rights (1959) and the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) (Korczak, 2009, see also http://www.unicef.org/crc/)

While Korczak was a doctor, who (literally) devoted his life to disadvantaged children for 70 years ago, Jesper Juul is a family therapist who is still active, but their messages are remarkably similar. Both of them do away with the adult centered way of bringing up and education.

Jesper Juul’s text “methods of upbringing” (Juul, 2011) is an extract from the introduction in the book “Your competent child”2. A book written for about twenty years ago and translated in more than 20 languages. The book is about the rupture with the authoritarian education, and it shows an alternative. “When children are born, they are fully human –that is, they are social, responsive and empathic.” “It’s time (...) to change how we relate to children – to move from a subject-object relationship to a subject-subject relationship.” This line of thought resembles Korczak’s, and seems to be a relevant answer on contemporary questions about upbringing and education.

Jesper Juul is a psychotherapist and he relates the question of contemporary upbringing not to abstract principles, but to human well being in family and schools. His argument is compatible with modern psychological insights (e.g. Daniel Stern), but also with older psychodynamic models (e.g. Donald Winnicott, Margareth Mahler). Juul stresses the child’s natural willingness to cooperate and adapt. If this willingness is to be saved, the child’s natural ability to express when the quest for cooperation leads to a loss of sense of the self (integrity), should be notices and cared for as well.

Children are competent, but this competence is put to the test when they are raised in a power-structure that misjudges them, and there is a lack of recognition of the child’s perspective. As a parent or teacher, says Juul, you should not only be interested in your own perspective, but also in the child’s. The healthy alternative to the power play, he says, is open, personal dialogue that takes into account the desires, dreams and needs of children as well as those of adults.

The rupture in upbringing and education, from a power-structure towards dialogue and recognition, is also connected with the changing expectations to individuals in society. For not so many years beings disciplined and able to submit to power structures was a more or less necessary and appreciated characteristic, while we today request strong individuals who can lead themselves. Jesper Juul points out that being integrated in traditions and being a competent person is not a contradiction. Upbringing and education deal with initiation and individualization at once. A key word in this process is participation.

Participation and democratic moments

Participation is also a key word in the text written by Berit Bae: Children’s right to participate –challenges in everyday interactions (Bae, 2009) The right to participation, as expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, challenges dominating discourses regarding relationships and adult roles. The

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2 The book is published in Italy under the title: Il bambino è competente. Valori e cognoscenze in famiglia. The book “Asta sunt eu! Cine esti tu?” is published in Romanian
Norwegian Kindergarten Act states that children should have the right to express their views on the day-to-day activities.

Professor Berit Bae has been working extensively with the concept of definition power. In her empirical findings she found that adults exercise “definition power”: they define the child, and they communicate their definitions in many ways to the child. Adults do not always realize that their “definitions” not necessarily are right, or at least in accordance with the child’s own views. Neither are they aware of the power they exert, as the dominant position of the adult will lead to the child’s submission under this definition, also in those cases when the definition is not in accordance with the child’s own original feeling. The adult always is in a powerful position and should be careful in how to exercise this power. Participation that implies being attentive and listening to the child is a good cure against unjustified and harmful exercise of definition-power. For Berit Bae, and maybe for a strong tradition in Scandinavian Kindergarten-pedagogy, participation is closely related to education for democracy.

In her article, Berit Bae stresses and elaborates what it means to view children both as “beings” and as “becomings”. If children only where “becomings” we should only be concerned with their future, for “real life”. Behind this idea of children as just becomings we can glimpse John Locks view on education. But children are also “beings”, whose life here end now matters, who should be met just where they are, in their childhood.

The democratic form of life is not something that first will count in the future, it is also relevant here and now, and this “here and now” also is an education for the future. What then means “democracy” and “participation” in childhood-settings? For Bae it makes sense to talk about “democratic moments”, not about a formalized democratic procedures. In relation to the occurrence of those democratic moments the empirical study this article refers to distinguishes between narrow and spacious interactional patterns. In the spacious interactional patterns both the teacher and the child can come forth as subjects. The empirical study also point out what kind of contributions from the teacher seem especially important:

- Following up on the child’s initiative
- Emotional responsiveness and expressivity
- An attitude of playfulness
- The ability to shift perspective and take the child’s perspective.

In other studies Berit Bae also elaborates the concept of recognition and the four ways of being that can guide the work with recognition in practice:

- Understanding (the child from its own perspective)
- Confirmation (affirming the child’s experience in a given situation; not praise or positive feed-back))
- Openness (giving up attempts to use, dominate, manipulate or control others)
- Self reflection (upon our contribution to and role in communication, a separation of aspects of oneself from aspects of others)
Working with recognition in schools contributes to learning beyond cognition. Further reading: (Ritchie, 2008; Schibbye, 1993)

**Education and self-education**

In educational theory the concept of self-education is not unknown. We find the concept in the continental tradition, specially in the traditions inspired by Rousseau and by Kant. The concept of self-education originates in the difficulty of answering the question how to raise children towards autonomy: Autonomy is not something one person can learn or give another person, but at the other hand, the child does not attain autonomy unless grownups take responsibility and initiate the child in the world. Self-education is the child’s own affair, it is how (s)he develops him og herself. Grown up people can help, initiate, challenge, remove stones from the road, encourage, comfort, but in the end the child makes her or his own moves. This also means that educators never precisely can know what will happen, and how things will end. Education requires attentiveness, recognition and the ability to adapt plans to what seems to be most appropriate in the specific situation, at this moment, with those kids (see also Manen, 2008). That requires an ability to improvise, to make judgements about what is appropriate, and the willingness to take risks. Maybe a teacher in a subject is doing a good job in teaching the subject in order to give the children a possibility for getting better qualifications in this subject. But when the children are not motivated, when education is out of touch with self-education, it is time to stop, and to ask: how can we re-establish a cooperative atmosphere. That may require some other pedagogical actions then just continuing the usual teaching or putting oneself on top of a power structure and keep the children down.

**With children, not to them**

The International Step by Step Association (ISSA) ([www.issa.nl](http://www.issa.nl), [http://l4wb.org](http://l4wb.org)) had its 2009 conference in Bucharest, under the title “Seeds of change: effective investments in early childhood for enduring social progress.” ISSA is a membership association, which serves as learning community and a champion for quality and equity for all children and their families. The ISSA network embodies over 60 members from across Europe and Central Asia and is a dynamic mix of NGO’s, schools and kindergartens, higher education and academic institutions. All ISSA members work to ensure the best quality care and education for young children, especially the most vulnerable.

ISSA has elaborated a booklet about Competent Educators of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy ([http://www.issa.nl/content/issa-quality-principles](http://www.issa.nl/content/issa-quality-principles)), a policy document that defines quality teaching practices when working with children from 3 to 10 years old, and their families, to better support the child’s development and well-being. Referring to the importance of well-being, of children’s rights and of democracy the main point is “with children, not to them”. This is very much in line with what we have dealt with in this paper. ISSA recommends and promotes collaborative processes that can encourage practitioner’s critical reflection on their practice, with reference to basic educational values. “Quality”, ISSA says, “is a process that requires the building of shared values and meanings.” (Tankersley & Ionescu, 2016).

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3 Further reading: (Ritchie, 2008; Schibbye, 1993)
That means, that (pre)school development is a *collaborative action*, that both requires and stimulates engagement of the teachers. For the development of the culture of teaching and learning support from and active participation of the authorities is required. The concepts and thoughts presented in this paper and in the underlying literature can serve as keystones for discussions and enquiries, leading towards the building of shared values and meanings.

The principles of quality concerning the learning-environment elaborated by ISSA are attached to this material as appendix 2.

**How to develop teaching-skills and educational setting?**

If it is true that education is more than initiation, discipline and the teaching of subjects, if it is true that education requires attentiveness, recognition, changing planned activities and improvisation, how then can a teacher develop his or her skills and competences?

The great American educational philosopher John Dewey saw research as a normal human activity: every time you get stuck you have to find out, you do research in order to be able to act more appropriate. Learning and doing research are intimately connected for him, as both serve the higher goal of acting appropriate in the world.

Today the talk is about class-room research, participative action-research, and practitioner research; terms that point to the activity of researching own experiences. This kind of research is in line with Deweys idea that research is a natural activity, that sometime you have to get more knowledge about what is at stake in order to be able to act adequate.

I have chosen to finish this paper with a reference to Korczak, who also was the first one mentioned in the paragraph about tradition and rupture. Korczak was a reflective person who looked deeply and honestly into himself and his actions; he was a practitioner-researcher. He encouraged teachers to become autonomous knowledge producers by questioning an interrogating their work. For him and for us that is the road towards the teachers own self-education. “*Korczak teaches us*,” writes Efron (2005), “*that it is the educator’s professional obligation to continuously improve and grow professionally, in order to become a force of change and a leader in the struggle to improve children’s lives and futures.*”.

It is important to understand that general knowledge, that means knowledge about the subject for one’s teaching and knowledge about curriculum, didactics, developmental psychology etcetera, is a good resource, but that it is not enough for becoming a good teacher. In order to become a good teacher, a virtuous teacher, the teacher needs knowledge of his or her own specific circumstances: the good teacher always asks questions, wonders and searches.

Korczak says: “*the question is much more important than the answer. It is a guide for thoughts on the way towards goals.*” For Korczak the knowledge of the specific circumstances, the knowledge about what matters, is tied to self-knowledge. Research is not simply gathering “data”, but seeking understanding, and in order to achieve new understanding one has to go into different conversations: conversations with oneself, with literature and with colleagues. I fully agree with Korczaks request for teachers who recognize
how their insights, beliefs and values inform their actions, and who systematically research their own practice as an entry to deeper understanding of their students and their own theories of practice.

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Texts that will be distributed:


Korczak, J. (1967). The child’s right to be himself. From: *Selected works of Janusz Korczak*. Washington: The National Science Foundaction


Video:

### Appendix1: Figurations of child

<table>
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<th>Figurations of child</th>
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<th>What child lacks by nature</th>
<th>What culture needs to provide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Maturity</td>
<td>Maturation, Guidance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ignorant child</td>
<td>Plato, Aristotle, Locke</td>
<td>Rationality; Experience</td>
<td>Instruction, Training</td>
</tr>
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<td>Evil child</td>
<td>Christianity, esp. branches of Protestantism</td>
<td>Thrustworthiness, natural goodness</td>
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<td>Innocent child</td>
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<td>African Philosophy, Ubuntu</td>
<td>Social relationships, Norms and values</td>
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<td>Competent child</td>
<td>Daniel Stern, Jesper Juul, Korczak</td>
<td>The child is a being, not only a becoming, so let’s focus on what it is not on what it lacks!</td>
<td>Competent adults who van recognize the child as an active aprticpant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: The ISSA Quality principles concerning the learning environment

The learning environment greatly influences children’s cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. By creating a physically and psychologically safe and stimulating environment that offers a variety of developmentally appropriate materials, tasks, and situations, the educator encourages children’s learning through independent and group exploration, play, access to diverse resources, and interaction with other children and adults. By ensuring that every child feels welcomed, the educator gives children the message that every individual is respected, that each child and family is an important part of the classroom community, and that every child has opportunities to benefit from the shared community space and resources and to participate in maintaining them. By offering children a secure environment and accommodating specific learning needs, the educator encourages children to work cooperatively, to engage in different kinds of activities, and to take learning risks. Outdoor areas of the school and community resources are also valuable components of a rich learning environment.

### PRINCIPLES

6.1 The educator provides a learning environment that promotes each child’s well-being.

6.2 The educator provides an inviting, safe, healthy, stimulating, and inclusive physical environment that promotes children’s exploration, learning, and independence.

6.3 The educator provides an environment that promotes children’s sense of community and participation in creating the classroom’s culture.

### INDICATORS OF QUALITY

1. The educator creates an environment that ensures each child’s sense of belonging and comfort.
2. The educator shows respect for children by being interested in their feelings, ideas, and experiences.
3. The educator creates an atmosphere where children are encouraged to express themselves.
4. The educator creates an environment that stimulates children to take appropriate risks for development and learning.
5. The educator encourages each child to develop attachment and an individual relationship with her/him.

1. The educator ensures that the learning environment is physically safe and easily supervised.
2. The educator ensures that the space is inviting to the children and comfortable for them to engage in a variety of activities.
3. The educator organizes the space into logically defined interest areas that support learning and development.
4. The educator incorporates varied, plentiful, accessible, and developmentally appropriate materials that stimulate children to explore, play, and learn.
5. The educator encourages children to participate in planning, arranging, and maintaining their environment.
6. The educator modifies the physical environment to meet the needs of individual children and groups of children.

1. The educator communicates clear expectations for behavior and involves children in creating rules when appropriate.
2. The educator creates an environment that is built upon democratic values and promotes participation.
3. The educator uses consistent routines to promote children’s self-regulation and independence.
4. The educator guides children’s behaviors based upon knowledge of each child’s personality and developmental level.