Jesper Juul
Helle Jensen

RELATIONAL COMPETENCE

Towards a new
Culture of Education

About this Book:

Conflicts, grueling power struggles with difficult children, and destructive behavior daily challenge both teachers and parents. The main cause for disobedience and lack of discipline is a deeper-seated relational conflict between adults and children. Children want to learn; and they want to cooperate - provided their personal integrity and individuality are acknowledged and maintained in a respectful manner. This requires truly true dialogues with children.

Juul and Jensen emphasize the significance of relational competence as the core concept, changing the very nature of how we see education.

They offer relevant alternatives to conventional education and solutions for difficult situations. They seek valid alternatives and give teachers the support that is so urgently needed.

About the Authors:

Jesper Juul, born in Denmark in 1948, family therapist, supervisor and author, was the founder of the renowned Kempler Institute of Scandinavia, now Danish family therapy institute (dfti.dk) and represented by the DDIF. de and IGfB.org in the German speaking world. Besides training family therapists, this institute provided over 3 decades hundreds of Scandinavian teachers with training on how to treat children and adolescents. Juul is one of the most influential family therapists and authors on family topics in Europe. His books have been sold in record-breaking numbers. His international project *family-lab* is committed to enabling parents and professionals to transform emotional love and commitment into loving behavior and is active on several continents (www.family-lab.com).

Helle Jensen, clinical psychologist, family therapist and supervisor was responsible for conflict counseling at the Kempler Institute in Denmark and Norway for many years. Alongside her work at her own institute, she currently teaches courses all over Europe. She is a well-known author of numerous articles and co-author of the book *Empathy: It's What Holds the World Together* written together with Jesper Juul, Peter Høeg and others. Her current main focus is the project *training empathy* (trainingempathy.com), which is an international training course for teachers and other professionals.

The only alternative to
paternalism is dialogue.

VILLY SØRENSEN

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION 2017

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

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

The subtitle of the original book – *from obedience to responsibility* – describes a new paradigm for understanding child rearing and pedagogy. And it seeks a new culture for the way adults relate to children. The common paradigm believes that children must first learn to be obedient and cooperative, before a constructive and dynamic relationship between adults and children can be established. Over the past decades we have witnessed serious attempts to break away from this in several countries around the globe. One

common way was by forming *democratic schools*. Some of these were successful and some not. One reason might be that they were built on an ideology more than on what we now know about children's real capacities. That is, their way of learning and interpersonal needs.

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

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

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

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

and need to be encountered in a dignified way. Children's messages show relevant aspects of the current relationship and thus are helpful in order to adjust the quality of interactions.

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

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

Personal authority
All formal roles and authorities are experiencing, what they call a *lack of respect* for their roles. But this is also true in many partnerships and between parents and children. In all

cases, one or both parties find it increasingly difficult to ensure that their boundaries are respected with help of traditional means.

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

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

For the English edition, we especially want to express our thanks to our esteemed colleague, psychologist and family counselor Robin Menges who very committedly helped translate the book from German and edited the text with

meticulous accuracy as well as Jessica Joelle Alexander – the author of *The Danish Way of Parenting* for her support in editing and finding the best English sayings and Trent Murray for his support and questioning the translation.

Jesper Juul and Helle Jensen
Denmark 2017

Introduction

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

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

All institutions working with children share the same kind of responsibility. The responsibility of caring for the personal, intellectual, and social development of children. In practice, however, this responsibility is often split between daycare facilities and schools. While daycare facilities tend to focus on the personal and creative development of

children, schools are expected to provide intellectual and social stimulation. Although circumstances, goals, and contents change as children move from daycare to school, the relationship between children and adults as well as the underlying processes stay the same. To understand relational competence in professional relationships, we do not see a need to divide different types of educational institutions.

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

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

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

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

Another concern of this book is to show a way out of the culture of obedience. This culture of obedience has shaped society and education over a long period and is still often thought of as the most effective means to combat antisocial and individualistic attitudes. But obedience in itself does not give sufficient inner strength and stability to face the cultural changes, unpredictable challenges, and historically unique polarization of values in postmodern society. People need strong self-esteem and personal integrity.

Besides this concern, our prime motivation to promote a paradigm shift in the field of education, and to suggest substituting obedience with responsibility is grounded in psychological, existential and pedagogical knowledge. In fact, we are convinced that this shift is not only the next logical and necessary step for teachers but for every individual and society at large. We believe relational competence is fundamental for personal development and the social progress of humanity. In addition, it establishes an ethical foundation for qualitative improvement of social communities. These ethics are an important basis for building successful professional relationships between the four parties involved – teachers, children, parents, and society.

The majority of this book builds on our experience; our desire to share the experience we gathered each on our own and together in over 30 years of practice in education, psychology, and psychotherapy, studying interpersonal

relationships in families, schools, therapy and many other settings was the motor for this book.

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

This book builds on values, and concepts we consider essential for pedagogical work. Values and concepts relevant for students, freshly graduated teachers, directors, and experienced pedagogues wanting to reevaluate the quality of their work. Readability and practical application have influenced the writing and use of specific language in this book. We have consciously spared scientifically concise terms due to their rare use in daily interactions and discussions.

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

Pedagogical literature usually classifies children in different age groups – ranging from infants, toddlers, preschoolers, school children, middle-schoolers, etc. In this book, however, we let this classification go. This decision is due to the fact that the constructive qualities of professional relationships are largely consistent over all ages, from birth until death. We use the term *'early childcare'* and *'day care'* to describe institutions caring for children up to school age[1]. The term *'school'* includes all types of schools including private schools and special schools. *'Educational institutions'* is used as a collective term.

For the same reason, we do not differentiate different types of educational institutions, nor do we expand on

schools based on specific pedagogical or philosophical ideologies. The fundamental values and concepts promoted in this book build on underlying human interactions, true for all and also apply to universities, hospitals, or even nursing homes. The necessary qualities in professional relational processes are the same regardless of the goals, content, framework, or structures of an institution. The same holds true for the ethnical, religious, and cultural background of children and their teachers. Our international work has shown us that the values and interpersonal principles described in this book are, to a large extent, valid across differing cultures. They are equally acknowledged and appreciated everywhere in the world, despite differing norms and cultural patterns which often impede their implementation.

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

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

The book is divided into four main parts. The first part is devoted to conditions influencing educational work. The main focus is on the changing adult-child relationship and the significance of family. The second section deals with personal aspects which are common to both children and adults and play an important role in developing professional

relational competence. The third section describes how interpersonal relationships influence professional development. In addition, it offers a definition and description of our key concept: relational competence. The fourth and last part of the book provides a detailed view on specific relational situations. The final chapter touches issues dealing with difficult children and emphasizes the need for a new educational approach.

While working on this book, we exchanged experiences, examples, and thoughts. Jesper Juul was the driving force of the project. We would like to thank our friends and colleagues at the *Kempler Institute of Scandinavia* for their substantial contribution of a wealth of experience, which the institute collected from 1979 on and thereby provided a strong foundation for our ongoing work. We would equally like to express our thanks to the educational institutions whose openness and trust we appreciated in particular. In addition, we would like to thank our editors Elsebeth Jensen PhD, vice dean, director of Studies Teacher Education, VIA University College and Ole Varming, PhD for their interest in this project and for giving us invaluable input and feedback.

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[1] In most countries, this is between 5 and 7 years of age

Part One
GENERAL ASPECTS

Chapter 1:
The Educational Landscape

A Colorful Picture

Looking back at schools we have worked with over the years, we see an educational landscape which is anything but consistent. Of course, national, political and cultural differences have influenced the framework in different countries. But the differences within individual countries are often more salient than the differences between countries. Looking at the educational climate within institutions, we have encountered everything from deserts, minimalist kitchen gardens, to fertile greenhouses. We have worked with dynamic private schools and excellent public institutions, but also with complacent and static institutions – both private and public. We have worked with schools with an ongoing drive for development regardless of political and economic circumstances while neighboring institutions remain static, basing their lack of drive on the exact same circumstances. There are preschools and schools that feel honored and are committed to being cultural providers for their country, while others oppose the prevalent values of their society. Similarly, there are principals and teachers, whose careers and identity are characterized by seeking professionalism. Others see themselves as mere public officials and then there is everything in between.

On the relational level, we have encountered institutions where the adults formed a closed but lively circle, showing activity and commitment within their sphere of influence. Yet, we have also met institutions where cold passivity or

stubbornness led to self-righteous power plays between teachers and students. The prevalent thinking in these cases often is, that everything will be fine in the end, but if things do not work out someone is to blame. The awareness how this behavior influences the relationship between children and adults varies. Early childcare institutions are often more aware of this interplay, due to the more direct way younger children react to adult interventions.

Another relevant factor are the significant changes that have occurred in society as a whole within just one generation and strongly influence the quality of interpersonal relationships. The most important changes, which have prompted institutions to seek new educational perspectives are:

1. The questioning of authorities in the 1960s.
2. The women's fight for political and social equality, changed gender roles, and equal treatment.
3. The general emphasis on human rights and specifically, the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a political response to the growing awareness for human integrity.
4. Modern infant and relational research, as well as clinical work on interpersonal relationships in families, institutions, and professional occupations.

1. Questioning authorities

The politically motivated questioning of almost every form of official authority marked the beginning of the end of the *role play* which influenced the adult-child relationship strongly. I.e. the interaction between the teacher's *role* and the student's *role* rested primarily on the student's fear/ respect for – or fearful respect for – the teacher's *role-based* authority. In educational institutions, this was not discussed openly and consciously. Almost overnight children claimed a *full-fledged* self and refused being reduced to the predefined

role, which they had been taught to fulfill previously. Approximately at the same time, corporal punishment was forbidden as an educational measure. Subsequently, children as well as teenagers began to draw attention to the social and existential discomfort and pain which characterized their relationship with adults. They also started to show their creativity, their spontaneity, and their directness. Character traits which have always been part of being a child. Teachers who had been denied the privilege of showing their true selves as a child, continued to cling to their professional roles. Today, it is becoming very clear that this role-based authority is outdated and must be replaced by *personal* authority, if teachers want to create meaningful teaching conditions for both parties involved.

2. Women's fight for equal rights

In this context, women's fight for recognition is particularly relevant. It triggered public discussions about the so-called *soft* values in families, institutions, and society as a whole. Parallel to the political fight for equality and more power, women clearly also struggled for personal recognition. This fight on the interpersonal level was soon also adopted by men and children. Besides a general recognition, personal acknowledgement also includes closeness, contact, care and empathy - values which rarely dominate the male world, but are not specifically female. These values are better described as human values and needs. The increased significance of these values has enhanced knowledge on relationships in general and expanded psychological and pedagogical concepts of the individual.

In addition, the new focus on a *psychology of oppression and violence* was an enrichment to society. The oppressed and the violated finally had the opportunity to express themselves freely. Surprising and shocking statements confronted those who stood for an opposite ideology.

3. Human rights

End of the 1950s, Scandinavian countries witnessed an almost unnoticed but revolutionary shift in the general view on children. A group of researchers, including Åse Gruda Skard, Aase Hauch, Jens Sigsgaard, Thomas Sigsgaard and Nic Waal specialized in infant psychology. They initiated a major change, which helped schools shift their attention from seeking *conformity* to enabling *development.* The objective no longer was to raise obedient, well-assimilated humans impelled to *other-directedness* (David Riesman[1]) but to stimulate each child's motoric, linguistic, intellectual, and creative development consistent with the individual's potential. The reason for this shift was, without a doubt, of a practical nature. The focus on individual development should simply create a broader foundation, for educational work and the child's *role* as students. But in the light of the political, social and psychological movements of the subsequent decades and because of the growing economic wealth, children not only demanded individuality which made them profitable members of society, but they also demanded the right to simply be themselves.

The fight for political and social children's rights peaked in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child2. This instigated a progression in the Western world, where the wellbeing of children was not just the concern of parents any longer but also of the society at large. The political significance of children's living conditions directly correlated to psychologists' growing interest in children's inner experiences. In course of the last century, adult employees experienced a similar development. In addition to working conditions such as work hours, safety, the right to have a voice, or fair payment, the *psychological work environment* was given more and more attention.

Comparing these changes in work environment with changes in children's learning environment reveals a rather

bleak picture. For example, at the turn of the millennium, Denmark was faced with the decision to either pursue improvements of the learning environment for children (investing in new furniture, regulating the number of children allowed per square meter, and providing proper ventilation) or to combat a provoking social phenomenon through a nationwide campaign against bullying. The decision was made for the campaign against bullying and, thus, became another example of how adults abuse their power over children while maintaining their image as responsible, caring, and child-focused human beings. Later in the book, we will revisit this example in order to demonstrate that such choices are commonplace in education.

4. Modern research

Modern infant and relational research[3], represents a paradigm shift and is turning the majority of former discoveries and previously held opinions about development on their head. Research focusing on infants, bonding and interpersonal relationships has developed over the past decades and focuses mostly on the relationship between mothers and children up to the age of two. But despite this short time span and the early age of children studied, the findings coincide with our 30 years of clinical and therapeutic experience working with experiential family therapy. Up to the present day, none of the scientific observations in the field has contradicted our personal experience of adult-child relationships.

Furthermore, brain research supports our thinking[4]. Evidence has been found to show that children's awareness is not a blank slate, as developmental psychology believed for a long time. From these insights and others, we conclude that the currently prevalent concepts of learning and educational practices need revision.

The willingness and ability to integrate new knowledge is greatest in early childhood. Even if early child care can be reduced to mere supervision in some cases, it usually pursues social, developmental and psychological goals for good reasons. Schools, however, generally tend to focus on more specific and accomplishable tasks. Its deep-rooted tradition demands separating the children's intellectual abilities from their existential and psychological being.

Educational research on the other hand is continuously refining its areas of academic expertise. Former activities and subjects are being replaced; new branches have been introduced; language teaching has changed its form and methods just like teaching creative classes has. Kindergartens are faced with the decision to abandon interactional aspects and concentrate on preparing children for school. In all educational settings, quality is taken very serious, despite lacking a satisfying definition of what *quality* means in this context.

These processes as well as the perpetual desires and demands of educational experts represent a natural step in the development of society as a whole. Groups and individuals who invest their energy and enthusiasm in order to change and improve circumstances have always been at the heart of educational institutions. Even if this commitment, that sometimes borderlines fanaticism, isn't always given credit and immediate success, it is imperative in raising important questions and finding answers. The same applies to educational research and its wealth of topics and fundamental principles that are hard to keep track of for teachers out in everyday life.

In the process of these developments, unfortunately many children are defined or diagnosed as outside the norm and, consequently, marginalized. We say *unfortunately* because these diagnoses very often lack a sufficient basis. Similarly,

children in earlier times were denied help or support for no apparent reasons.

   And adding to the full picture, a strikingly high percentage of teachers would change their job if they could in Europe. Many teachers who quit soon after starting, do this in their own words *because of the children's inappropriate behavior or their poor bringing up.* These issues are not issues politicians like to focus on.

Adults on the Defensive

The most noticeable difference between today's children and those of 50 years ago, is that today's children walk the earth in the belief that they have a right to be here. They express their opinions and feelings naturally, ask questions, provide arguments, and expect to be taken seriously. They have gained a certain amount of confidence. Even more relevant, more and more children wake up every morning not fearing adults like children of previous generations did; and some of these have grown up to be parents and teachers themselves.

   A quarter of a century is a long time. Today we can hardly imagine how provocative it was to be inexorably confronted with this development. On the one hand, this struggle involved adults who had been taught to live in humility and restraint and sometimes even in self-denial. And on the other hand, children who, unaware of their role in this development, took the newly gained privileges for granted. Adults who had fought for the rights and the improvement of children's living conditions, and delighted in enabling children's freedom, were all of a sudden faced with ungrateful children who took this freedom and their rights as granted.

   To counteract the general sense of helplessness adults felt, new categorizing methods were established. The

emergence of a *new child's character* was one of the earliest attempts to explain this new difficult relationship. Ever since then, **pedagogical debates have focused more on the question why adults have difficulty working or getting along with children instead of focusing on how to create a basis for healthy cooperation between children and parents.**

This does not mean that the adults' difficulties with children have not been real. And vice versa it also is true for children. The largely reactive behavior and the inability of those in charge to handle the situation have caused a lot of insecurity and confusion. Since conflicts between children and adults were previously more or less hidden power struggles, adults often misinterpreted the situation and considered the children as the *winners*. Actually, we are dealing with a mutual relationship in which both sides are at a disadvantage if the relationship lacks specific qualities.

Interestingly, the widespread helplessness and defensive attitude of adults soon was an international phenomenon, despite differing approaches to education, value systems, democratic traditions, and economic developments in individual countries. Even politicians picked up this defensive attitude and only suggest restrictions, punishments or anti-campaigns. The head of a Danish boarding school gave an interview that illustrates the problematic nature in this situation. Rather upset, he told how his school had introduced a smoking ban in compliance with new the regulations passed by the ministry of education. A couple of students ignored the ban and smoked at school anyway. The principal described with righteous indignation that he went so far as to call the ministry and ask for permission to interfere, but he was denied this option.

This little anecdote exemplifies a central issue: in Scandinavia, today's children are said to lack *social competence*; in Germany, there is talk of a substantial *crisis*

of discipline; and so, every country has its own version of the same problematic situation. What all of the countries have in common, is their incessant search for possibilities to change the behavior of *children* without recognizing that this is the wrong track.

We do not deny that there are children with destructive behavior towards themselves and others that is socially unacceptable, or that there are teachers who are forced to cope daily with violations to an extent which no one should have to put up with. One's ability to tolerate or be broad-minded varies greatly from person to person and yet we do not doubt that there are numerous damaging adult-child relationships and that they require limits. The way out of this social plight, however, does not lie in restriction, campaigning, control, regulation, prohibition, or punishment. These all too familiar methods go back to an old saying '*Those who don't listen must feel*', meaning that if I can't reach you by reason, I have the right to implement consequences or punishments regardless of the infliction of personal borders This approach not only ignores the actual adult responsibility and the significance of relationships but also subjects children to adult manipulation and their exercise of power.

Furthermore, it is a defensive strategy – a reactive response to the child's behavior. Defensive strategies do not produce satisfying outcomes for the parties involved in interpersonal conflicts. Whenever adults are in defense, the following three scenarios can be observed:

- adults lose the initiative and perspective of the situation; their collaboration with the child is reduced to a tiring struggle of being right.
- children become insecure and lose their trust in the adult's leadership;
- both adults and children lose faith in themselves.

These observations are not only a snapshot of the situation schools are in. They also apply to families and show the widespread social helplessness we feel in the face of free individuals. Similar conflicts occur when a family with small children sits down for lunch, kindergarten groups go on excursions, school children do not want to do the assigned group work, high school students ignore the teacher and text each other, university students miss a class and then demand that relevant information be repeated when they are present, or local authorities plan to disavow a small group of second-generation immigrants within a community.

In the educational world, teachers are left to figure out how to react best to this defensive helplessness of any given situation. Individuals such as Birthe in our next example are expected to fend for themselves while figuring out how to integrate new teaching methods and cop with the institutions changing structure and demands for teamwork. These are sometimes overwhelming social expectations.
Making a collective problem the issue of an individual teacher is never adequate and leads to teachers being labelled as *incompetent, problematic, psychologically unstable* and the like. Often the social and political expectations as well as the institutional structures need to be revised and questioned. On the other hand, however, personal professional development for individuals like Birthe has gained importance in the educational field.

Example

Birthe recently assumed a new position as a first-grade teacher, even though she had not worked with first-graders in a long time. She was a competent Danish teacher with high career ambitions. And had high expectations for the new school year, but first-grade students require patience and cannot be expected to learn as quickly as older students do.

After the winter break, she realized that her pupils would not reach her goals set for the current year. Despite her commitment to differentiated teaching, she wasn't seeming to have success. Since she defined her worth as a teacher by her student's progress, she was gradually developing doubts about her ability. Her reaction was similar to how many of us react to the feeling of being unworthy: we either withdraw frustrated, become more and more self-critical, depressed and inactive or show our despair in the form of anger and aggression.

Birthe did both. She wondered if she was too old to teach first-graders or if she was suffering from burnout. She also considered the 'new children's character' and 'stressed-out parents too busy to properly raise their children' as possible causes for her professional failure. Either way, she didn't reach a satisfactory explanation.

Birthe lost the sense of being a valuable teacher along with her awareness of her personal boundaries and needs. She started to neglect her responsibilities, and let the children get by with things which affected her professional integrity. The children sensed Birthe's insecurity about who she is, what she wants, and what she does not want. Consequently, they also became insecure. And they were hurt by Birthe's critical and reproachful remarks and her complaints.

Birthe is a competent and experienced teacher with a positive and affectionate attitude towards the children she works with. For this reason, her story is a good example that psychological instability or personal issues are not the reason, when we fail to establish healthy relationships with today's children. For many years, her qualifications and role-based authority served her well but now she is challenged in an entirely new way.

A similar crisis could have emerged just as easily in her marriage, in raising her own children, in living with her