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How Do Relationships Influence Student Achievement?

Understanding Student Performance from a General, Social Psychological Standpoint

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Abstract

This article explores the influence of relationships on student achievement by examining empirical evidence and by adopting a social psychological theory. Initially, the issue is addressed from a national, Swedish context. Thereafter, two general questions are raised: 1) What is the influence of relationships on student achievement, according to empirical research? 2) How can the influence of relationships on student achievement be conceptualized? Question one is discussed from a body of international and Scandinavian research on general characteristics of teaching that promote student achievement. The argument leads to a model in which the teacher-student relationship is a key factor. In order to discuss the second question, Kenneth Gergen's social psychological theory is applied. According to the analysis, relationships play an essential role in understanding student achievement. The relational process is regarded as an inherent aspect of educational life and the foundation for encouraging performance. By combining these perspectives, the significance of relationships for comprehending student achievement is revealed. In the final section of this text, practical-pedagogical implications are discussed with reference to a narrative about a young student's knowledge development.

Keywords: student achievement, teacher-student relationship, social psychology, relational pedagogy, Kenneth Gergen, co-action

1. Introduction

A distinctive feature of international school development in recent decades is the strong focus on students' academic performance. Perhaps the clearest indication of this feature is the growing prevalence of nations participating in international knowledge assessments. The educational discourse at the national level has become increasingly dominated by the idea that the educational system must adapt to growing global competition. As instruments for gaining greater control over the relative level of knowledge, nations use tests, evaluations, assessments and inspections. On a local level, schools tend to orient towards measurements and evaluations to help students cope with tests and achieve prescribed learning outcomes (Aspelin & Persson, 2011).

Sweden, for example, participates in a number of international knowledge assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Further, The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) conducts its own measurements, such as national assessments (NU92 and NU03). A general trend that has been inferred from these surveys is that the performance of Swedish students has been deteriorating over the past fifteen years. Consequently, this assumption has created a growing interest in the education system to understand what factors greatly affect student achievement.

In a systematic review, The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) (2009) questions how Swedish schools have changed over the past two decades and how these changes are related to research on various factors of importance for understanding student performance. The review takes a broad approach and suggests that reasons for the change are complex and stem from a number of factors at different interrelated levels (*ibid*, p. 8). The most important trends and explanations are categorized into four themes: segregation, decentralization, differentiation, and individualization. Individualization, for instance, is described as a tendency that was intensified by the reform of the Swedish school system in the early 1990's and through the curricula adopted at the time. The review (*ibid.*, p. 40-41) discusses a number of

aspects of individualization. One aspect concerns individual work, which has increased while teaching the whole class has decreased. Another aspect involves the idea of learning: increasingly, students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning. A third aspect concerns the democratic undertaking of schools, which has changed from a joint and political mission to an individual mission for the student.

From this background comes the incentive to discuss general factors of special importance for promoting student achievement. In this article one such factor is highlighted: the teacher-student relationship.

2. Aim of the article

The aim of the article is to discuss how relationships influence student achievement. Two questions are raised. The first, from an empirical perspective using a selection of significant—influential and authoritative—international and Scandinavian research on what characterizes teaching that promotes student achievement, is as follows: *What is the influence of relationships on student achievement?* The second question, discussed on the basis of Kenneth Gergen's social psychological theory, is as follows: *How can the influence of relationships on student achievement be conceptualized?*

Two concepts are central in the argument: relationship and student achievement. In this context the concept of relationship is defined from a social psychological standpoint. Roughly speaking, the psychological version of social psychology tends to stress the individual's internal processes. In contrast, social psychology of the sociological kind could be defined as a systematic way of thinking of "a problematic distinction between individual and society" (Asplund, 1983, p. 53). The problem area is neither the individual nor society, but the relationship between these poles. Johan Asplund describes the core of the subject in the following way:

Consider the formula "individual/society". What I am trying to say is that social psychology is – or should be – a science about the slash between the individual and society. As such, it

would be a science, not about the wall or the cracks, but about the cracks *in* the wall. (Asplund, 1983, p. 62, my translation).

Hence, a key subject for social psychology in this sense is the relationship between the individual and his/her social environment. This article discusses the relationship between teacher and student on a level where internal factors, such as the inner life of the individual teacher, and external factors, such as student's social background, play secondary roles. Of course, this is a limitation of perspective. However, in addition to the theoretical motivation, it can be motivated by research which suggests that the relationship between teacher and student is the fundamental context for understanding student achievement (see below).

In the review from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2009), the concept of student achievement is defined in terms of students' knowledge and values seen in relation to the school's overall task. It includes not only learning outcomes, but also democratic and social objectives. In contrast, most research uses a fairly distinct and limited definition, and refers to tangible manifestations, such as scores and results of national tests. This article includes an ambition to problematize the conventional conception of student achievement.

3. International studies on factors affecting student achievement

It is reasonable to start the discussion on student achievement with John Hattie's book *Visible Learning* (2009), since it is probably the most comprehensive study conducted in this field. It has had a considerable impact on the international debate on educational policy during the last few years. According to a somewhat lyrical review in the *Times Educational Supplement*, Hattie's work "reveals teaching's Holy Grail" (cited in Arnold, 2011).

Hattie's study is a meta-meta-analysis—it analyzes a variety of meta-analyses. More specifically, it is an analysis of 800 meta-analyses, including 56, 637 studies.

Hattie notes that almost all innovations in school have a positive effect on student achievement. Therefore, he states, the bar cannot be set to zero if we want to understand which success factors are significant and which are not. Hattie develops a barometer for understanding whether the effect of one innovation is better than the effects of others. A large amount of factors (138) and their impacts on students' performance are considered.

The main purpose of Hattie's study is not to rank success factors, but to construct a plausible theory about the most beneficial circumstances for student achievement. In other words, he weaves a story from the enormous quantity of empirical data. Hattie claims that many of the most debated educational issues, such as school finances, class size and school choice, have little or no effect on student achievement. On the whole, the most powerful effects on students' achievements are not about general structures and working conditions, but about features within the school—in particular, Hattie focuses on the teaching process. A conclusion of his argument is presented in the following six signposts:

- Teachers are among the most powerful influences in learning;
- Teachers need to be directive, influential, caring, and actively engaged in the passion of teaching and learning;
- Teachers need to be aware of what each and every student is thinking and knowing (...) to provide meaningful and appropriate feedback;
- Teachers need to know the learning intentions and success criteria of their lessons, know *how well they are attaining these criteria for all students* (...);
- Teachers need to move from the single idea to the multiple ideas, and to relate and then extend these ideas such that learners construct and reconstruct knowledge and ideas; School leaders and teachers need to create (...) environments where error is welcomed (...) and where participants can feel safe to learn, re-learn, and explore knowledge and understanding. (Ibid, pp. 238-239).

As we can see, Hattie chooses the word “teachers” as the main theme in his conclusion. This is not a coincidence. In *Visible Learning*, the teacher and educational practice play key roles in explaining student performance. Successful teaching, Hattie

states, requires that teachers attain an active, engaging, and structuring role in relation to their students. Furthermore, such teaching involves teachers and students that act intentionally, guided by explicit and challenging learning goals and success criteria. Continuously, and through feedback from one another, these teachers and students seek information about success or failure. In short, Hattie's story is about "teachers seeing learning through the eyes of students, and students seeing teaching as the key to their ongoing learning" (ibid, p. 22). Thus, the emphasis is on teaching that is visible for students and on learning that is visible for the teacher.

Furthermore, Hattie describes the influence of the teacher as the following: "the most critical aspects contributed by the teacher are the quality of the teacher, and the nature of the teacher-student relationships" (ibid. p. 126). Although the teacher's role is assumed to be of great importance, it is the quality of *teaching* that is the focus of Hattie's book (ibid, p. 126). His model combines rather than contrasts teacher-centered and learner-centered pedagogy. What is stressed is the education being communicated between teacher and students.

Even if Hattie describes the teacher-student relationship as a factor among others—and certainly one of the most important factors—an overall message in his book is that the relationship between teacher and student is crucial in promoting learning. In a concluding comment Hattie notes "throughout the chapters of this book, the importance of relationships, trust, caring, and safety have been emphasized..." (p. s. 247).

A Scandinavian study conducted by The Danish Clearinghouse for educational research (2008) starts by noting that the majority of studies in the field have shown that the teacher is the single most important factor in student learning. The researchers aim to ascertain which dimensions of teacher competence contribute to learning in children and young people (ibid. p. 18). The study examines and evaluates 70 international and national impact studies between 1998 and 2007, and, from this, a series of narrative syntheses are constructed. The conclusion is that successful teachers are characterized by three competencies:

- *Relation competence*: the teacher can enter into social relationships with individual students;
- *Management competence*: the teacher can manage and regulate classroom work and gradually transfer responsibility to the students;
- *Didactic competence*: the teacher is skilled in “the art of teaching”—selecting and adjusting relevant content, identifying clear learning outcomes and in using a wide repertoire of teaching methods. (Ibid, pp. 71-72, my translation).

The Director of Clearinghouse, Professor Sven-Erik Nordenbo, emphasizes the first competency—relation competence—and its impact on the well-being of students as well as on measurable knowledge: “we now have evidence that teachers who are able to enter into friendly, respectful and positive relations with the pupils generate far better pupil achievements” (www.dpu.dk 2008/06/19).

4. National studies on factors affecting student achievement

The studies mentioned above represent a global perspective on student achievement. In the following section, Swedish research on the issue will be highlighted.

In Swedish research on school effectiveness, Lennart Grosin has long played a prominent role. His work focuses on describing the pedagogical and social climate (called PESOK) in effective schools. Based on his own findings and the findings of other researchers, Grosin (2004) claims that the individual school’s internal educational and social characteristics play important roles in student performance. This is apparent, he says, also if the effects of such factors as the social and academic background of the students are accounted for. Grosin highlights factors that characterize the climate of effective schools. For example, he speaks about flexibility in terms of teaching methods, shared social rules at school and teachers having a positive interest in the learning and well-being of their students. Furthermore, Grosin examines international research on successful schools in order to see if their results and theories are relevant for describing the differences in student achievement and

social adjustment in Swedish schools. One important conclusion is that all successful schools are characterized by a learner-centered approach:

In other words, the results could point to a necessary condition in our time for achieving efficiency in terms of good student performance. It concerns students' perception of themselves as individuals in the school environment and the quality of the social relationships they experience. (Ibid. p. 37; my translation).

According to Grosin (ibid. p. 37), effective schools create a synthesis of the traditional "knowledge-school" and the "caring-school" developed in the 1970's. In successful schools, learning goals are prioritized. At the same time, these schools recognize the importance of respectful and positive relationships between adults and children.

In the Swedish review (Skolverket, 2009) mentioned earlier, different major trends that could explain the decline in the results of Swedish students are identified. The analysis focuses on how the educational process is organized. In this context, a distinction between "individual work" and "personalization" is introduced. The review suggests that the increasing prevalence of individual work in school is problematic since it does not benefit the students' progress. Conversely, "personalization" is regarded as an important factor for achieving good student performance. In the former case, the teacher plays a background role, while he or she in the latter actively relates to the students. In line with the research of Hattie, Nordenbo et. al. and Grosin, this report stresses the importance of teacher competence, especially the kind of competences that Nordenbo et. al. found. More specifically, the review emphasizes teacher factors such as the skill to create social bonds in relation to students and colleagues:

To highlight some results particularly prominent in the review, the teacher factor in relation to education- and learning processes is significant. It is partly about teachers having competency in meeting students from an understanding of the social, cultural and individual circumstances, and partly about them being able to create a classroom climate and an educational environment that promotes good social relations and support to the students. (Ibid, p. s. 249, my translation).

According to the mentioned review, student-centered schools have better conditions for good results. Such schools are directed towards both knowledge-production and caring. They are characterized by high expectations regarding students' academic performance as well as trusting relationships between teachers and students.

Another report from The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2005) examines differences between schools and their impact on students' academic performance. From this report, the most obvious similarities between schools having high effectiveness in terms of attaining learning goals—referred to as “P-schools”—could be summarized in the following way:

- *Teachers' attitudes:* education is focused on both learning goals and social care. Teachers are highly engaged in helping students. They are caring and proactive in relation to their students. They feel confident in having social control and in being able to “take care of things” and help students.
- *Teachers' relationships with students:* The schools are characterized by comparatively few and close relationships. This implies that teachers have knowledge of the students' social situations. Accordingly, teachers can build trusting relationships, maintain dialogues, and give relevant assistance to students.
- *An organization and/or a size of school that supports trust in relationships:* Schools are organized in such ways that comparatively few and close relationships between teachers and students can be built. They are small in size—either by having relatively few students or by organizing teachers and students in smaller units.

One general conclusion that can be drawn from the body of research referred to above is that the relationship between teacher and student is a key factor for explaining student achievement.

5. A relational perspective on education

As indicated above, research on student achievement is often oriented towards explanations. It uses databases and statistical analyses in order to identify different

factors that affect student performance (cf. Skolverket, 2009 p. 251).¹ Rarely does such research include theoretical analysis of the relational foundation for achievement.

Noted above is that the relationship between teacher and student is regarded as a key factor in research on student achievement. Now, a critical question is what we mean when we talk about relationships. As indicated above, empirical research tends to treat the concept of relationship as a variable and as one among many influences. From Gergen's (2009) perspective, which we will soon turn to, this approach could be questioned. According to his theory, the concept of relationship signifies the essential condition for education and for human life in general.

International theoretical research which focuses on relationships in education has grown substantially over the past two decades. For example, in a series of works (e.g. 2006) Gert Biesta develops a theory of education as communication. Nel Nodding (e.g. 2005) conceptualizes caring relationships as the basic ethical aspect of education. Max van Manen (e.g. 1991) questions the notion of education as technology and emphasizes teacher knowledge that grows in relation to students. Sharon Todd (e.g. 2003) conceptualizes teaching and learning as relational phenomena, with demands for ethical conduct. In the anthology *No Education without Relation* (Ed. Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004), a group of researchers from different countries and disciplines contribute to the concept of "relational education".

Educational theories which focus on relationships have expanded in Scandinavia as well. For instance, Moira von Wright (2000) uses George H. Mead's theory on inter-subjectivity to develop a relational perspective on genuine meetings between teacher and student. Per Fibaek Laursen (2004) explores changing expectations of teachers in terms of "the authentic teacher". Geir Karlsen (2003) and Göran Björk (2000) study the educational meeting and the educational relationship from ontological/existential perspectives. Jonas Aspelin (2005) studies teaching processes and the significance of the teacher-student relationship from Martin Buber's relational framework. Aslaug

¹ In addition to these extensive studies of what affects student performance, there are (of course) a variety of intensive, qualitative case studies. For reasons of space, such studies will not be addressed in this article. For examples of qualitative studies on the subject, see for instance Aspelin & Persson, 2011.

Kristiansen (2005) elaborates a conceptual framework for understanding trust as a fundamental aspect of teaching. Carl Anders Säfström (2005) develops a “pedagogy of difference” in which ethical meetings between teacher and student are central.

One recent contribution to the field is Kenneth Gergen’s acclaimed and celebrated book *Relational Being*, from 2009. Although Gergen does not explicitly deal with the question of student achievement, we get a theoretical basis for discussing how the influence of relationships on student achievement can be conceptualized from a social psychological, relational perspective.

Gergen (ibid. p. 5) describes the main challenge in his book as sketching an alternative to the tradition of “the bounded being”. The alternative is constituted by a conception of man as relational being. Gergen’s book “seeks to recognize a world that is not within persons but within their relationships, and that ultimately erases the traditional boundaries of separation” (ibid. p. 5).

The notion of the bounded being, as criticized by Gergen, is deeply rooted in Western society and has long since been supported by various disciplines of social science—including sociology, which has often described the individual as an autonomous entity engulfed in groups and threatened by “the crowd” (cf. Wrongs, 1961, classic critique of what he calls “the over-socialized conception of man in modern sociology”). According to “the traditions of the Enlightenment” (ibid. p. xv) and its vision of independent selves, human beings are fundamentally separated from each other. The self is understood as the basic unit of existence. What is essential for me exists within me, and constitutes a private space. The Ego is the primary and natural entity of existence. Relationships are phenomena that can be created when two or more individuals come together. Relationships are “things” that individuals can build, handle, work with, shape, and so on. In other words—and still according to the notion of the bounded being—relationships are secondary aspects of humanity and some kind of object that individuals aspire to instrumentally. Relationships always include risks and jeopardize the autonomy of the individual (ibid. pp. 6-19).

Gergen constructs his alternative against this individualistic conception. The concept of the relational being assumes the existence of a relational process that precedes the very notion of the self. According to Gergen's view, there are no isolated egos and no completely private experiences. The human being exists in a world of relationships. I am embedded in relationships; when I act, I "break out" of a relationship, and later return to a (new) relationship.

A central concept in Gergen's theory is *co-action*. Everything we perceive as real, good, true and valuable originates from actions related to other actions (ibid. p. 31). A single word in a book has no meaning in itself, but related to other words it becomes meaningful. In communication, an utterance from one participant is just a candidate for meaning; meaning appears in relation to a response (ibid. pp. 31). Gergen discusses a variety of concepts, such as rational thought, intention, experience and creativity, and concludes that the phenomena are born and continue to exist within a relational flow (ibid. p. 95).

In a particular situation, participants have access to and make use of various relational resources. These resources could originate from other situations than the previous one. By being able to move between different relational contexts, and in this carrying a multitude of relational potential, participants are not bound by the existing rules for relationships. Consequently, every conversation is potentially an open field, and human identity is always in motion (ibid. pp. 40).

The tradition of the bounded being includes a concept of man and world as being separate and independent entities. It also includes a concept of a causal relationship between the poles. It is a tradition that tends to use a causal model in explaining human action. For instance, it speaks of society as "influencing" or "having an effect on" the individual (ibid. p. xxi). Either the external influence on individuals or the individual's influence on his or her surroundings is stressed. Against these two conceptions, Gergen constructs his idea of *confluence*. It refers to "a form of life (...) that is constituted by an array of mutually defining 'entities'" (ibid. p. 55). From this perspective, meaning is not a solid substance that exists, for example, in an individual, isolated consciousness. The concept of confluence implies that all meaning occurs in a

relational process where several persons are involved. We cannot observe these persons separately without losing the concrete meaning of their actions. Of course, it could be analytically fruitful to break out parts of a confluence to show which of these are central and which are peripheral (ibid. p. 56-57). However, if we look for a more substantial understanding of human actions—such as student performance—we should not primarily look for factors *behind* the phenomena. More important, we should try to understand the phenomena as immanent aspects of relational life (ibid. p. 58).

What Gergen proposes is a radical change of perspective: from the ideas of environment causing individual actions and individual actions having effects on the environment, to the idea of actions as expressions of relational existences. According to Asplund's definition, cited earlier, this is a genuine social psychological way of thinking.

6. Relationships and student achievement

Gergen's argument implies that the dominant idea of achievement in Western culture is built on a conception of man as a bounded being. The notion of the bounded being presupposes the existence of autonomous individuals carrying out acts independently of each other and achieving certain results. The influence or involvement of other human beings is neglected or put into parentheses. Such an individualistic perspective is often complemented by a structural ditto, in which the focus is put on various external factors—societal, cultural and social—and on their presumable impact on individuals. Thus, where the emphasis is put may vary, but common to the dominant models is an idea of a causal relationship between the individual and society.

Gergen's conception of relational being bridges the gap. According to this conception, a dualism between inner life and external influence reduces man. Achievements should not be described as isolated entities, like points on a scale. Essentially,

achievements are not tied to individual actions.² We cannot speak of individual accomplishments without presuming and considering the existence of relationships. Achievements are elements within—not outside of—relationships. Metaphorically speaking, when a student performs, he or she begins in relationships, uses relational resources to break out of relationships, directs his or her actions towards someone or something, and returns to relationships. In fact, when we say that a student has performed, what we are considering is the result of co-action. Gergen illustrates this idea by speaking of the teacher-student relationship:

The student does not possess meaning until granted by the teacher; the teacher speaks nonsense until the student affirms that sense has been made. Without co-action, there is no communication and no education. With mutual engagement, the student and teacher actively participate in a mutual process of teaching/learning. (Ibid. p. 245).

Furthermore, Gergen (ibid.) states that the individual student is an imminent part of relational contexts on a variety of levels: from relationships with teachers, classmates, student groups, other local communities, and further on to larger cultural and societal communities. According to him, students' achievements and more general behavior are dependent on such communities, referred to as "circles of participation" (ibid. pp. 245). From this point of view, the conventional notion of achievements as tied to single, separated subjects reduces the relational process.

Consequently, the critical question is not *if* relationships are important with regard to student achievements, nor *how* important they are or *how much impact* they have. In an important sense, such questions are superfluous, since an individual's action cannot

² Certainly, the toning down of the subject, that seems to be implied in this argument, could be discussed. Surely, it seems reasonable to talk about individuals and their accomplishments. Even if human beings are always parts of a relational context, use relational resources and so on, we must acknowledge the existence of a phenomenon usually referred to as "I". We might describe it as a temporary event neither identical to the previous-, nor to the subsequent relational constructions. In fact, we may say that it is this tense relationship between I and its surroundings, which is the focal point of education. For reasons of space, no further comment on this issue will be made here. The article tries to remain consistent with Gergen's line of reasoning.

be fully understood without considering relationships. Rather, the critical question concerns the meaning of student achievements within a relational context. With regard to the kind of performance found desirable, which relational conditions are productive and which are not? Such a question implies that relationships are the foundation for encouraging and discouraging student performance. This is not to say that relationships cause specific performances, rather that performances are always ingredients in an ongoing relational process.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to discuss the influence of relationships on student achievement. Two questions have been outlined. First: What is the influence of relationships on student achievement, as seen from an empirical perspective? To answer this question, the article first dealt with the wider question of how teaching that promotes student achievement is characterized. On the basis of significant empirical research in the field, we can now summarize teaching that promotes student achievements in the following five statements:

- Teaching—and the school as a whole—is focused on learning goals, yet it combines a quest for knowledge production with a quest for caring;
- Teaching is student-focused;
- Teaching is built on communication and on continuous feedback between teacher and students;
- The teacher is active, engaged and caring, in relation to the students;
- The relationships between teacher and students are trusting and personal.

In general, Hattie's (2009) meta-meta analysis shows the importance of education being communicated between teacher and student. Nordenbo et. al. (2008) define teachers' relational competence as a key factor behind student performance. Grosin (2004) argues that successful schools and pedagogy are characterized by a learner-

centered approach and by respectful and trusting teacher-student relationships. In a series of reports (e.g. 2005, 2009), the Swedish National Agency for Education has demonstrated the importance of the social competence of teachers and of close, personal relationships between teacher and student to school performance. Thus, according to the body of empirical research referred to in this article, the teacher-student relationship is a key factor for understanding student achievement.

The article's second question was formulated from a social psychological standpoint and reads: *How can the influence of relationships on student achievement be conceptualized?* In empirical studies relationships are often treated as variables among many others, and as a force behind student achievement. One part of social life—e.g. the teacher-student relationship—is omitted, and its effects are compared to the effects of other possible factors. From Gergen's social psychological perspective, the idea of relationships as variables, parts or causes of actions, is built on a notion of the bounded being, that is, of man as an independent unit. Seeing teachers and students as possessors of certain skills and as actors behind specific, measurable consequences could be misleading. By applying Gergen's theory, we may question the idea of accomplishments as results of separate egos and as objects on a prescribed scale. In this view, credible answers to questions concerning student achievement need to consider the current relational contexts. In order to understand what encourages student achievement, we should not only—and not in the first instance—look for factors behind the actions, but for the complex characteristics of relational life in which the actions occur. In other words, in order to create a nuanced picture of student achievement—whether we speak of a very limited or a more sophisticated performance—the action in question should be observed as an expression of “confluence” rather than as a direct effect of individual or structural influence.

What is proposed here is that the concept of relationships stands for the basic educational condition. Thus, the influence of relationships on student achievement is suggested to be an ontological question. Relationship is conceived as the primary unit of existence. In ongoing relational processes, different kinds of performances are born and flourish.

Of course, the adoption of a perspective as Gergen's does not mean that we should reject studies designed around the idea of the bounded being. It can be seen that educational studies carried out from a causal model—which seek to understand student achievement in terms of cause and effect—have rendered important knowledge to the field. From an analytic point of view, it might be productive to select different parts of the phenomenon Gergen calls confluence, to try to understand which part is of special importance. The contribution from relational theory in this context is not to falsify other theories, but to make us aware of their limitations.³

8. Practical-pedagogical implications

The dominating global discourse on education implies a notion of the main goal for education. In short, it assumes that schools have to strive for an improvement in the individuals' measurable achievements. It also presupposes that student achievement is an interior phenomenon: a result of intentions and actions of single selves. In this article the individualist conception has been problematized. According to Gergen (ibid. p. 245), the educational system is generally designed to bring about lasting changes in the individual mind. Usually, the students' states of knowledge are seen as effects of the system. Instead, we can view relationships as basic units in education and achievements as relational performance. Then, "*the primary aim of education is to enhance the potentials for participating in relational processes—from the local to the global*" (ibid., p. 243). School work is not primarily about producing independent thinkers that can achieve better results on standardized tests, but about "facilitating relational processes that can ultimately contribute to the continuing and expanding flow of relationships within the world more broadly" (ibid, p. 243).

³ It should be noted that most of the studies referred to in the first sections of the article include some reflections on the limitations of the chosen theoretical frameworks (see e.g. Nordenbo et.al. 2008, p. 46-47).

The main argument of this article will now be related to the level of pedagogical practice. Barbara Stengel's (2004) story about her daughter Emily's knowledge development will be used as illustration. As a young girl, Emily was curious and eager to learn about the world. Her caretaker, Anna; her family members; preschool teachers; and other significant others were "the vessels that conveyed understanding marked by openness" (ibid. p. 140). In school, Emily's open attitude to life gradually narrowed. Stengel notes that in the sixth grade her daughter went to "a typical school environment where relations with teachers were subordinated to the subject matter to be learned and where she was encouraged to evaluate herself with reference to a particular brand of academic performance" (ibid. p. 140). Knowledge was no longer an immanent aspect of learning relationships, but comprised of objects in a hierarchical, disciplinary system. This did not mean that the teachers were ineffective. On the contrary, Stengel says, they were very effective in making Emily focus on acquiring a certain kind of knowledge. However, at the same time as Emily became increasingly skilled in giving right answers to her teachers' questions, her deeper understanding of the issues decreased. In other words, her growing intellectual capacity was followed by a reduced richness of learning (ibid. pp. 139).

Stengel (ibid. pp. 141) asserts that knowing not only arises as result of individual consciousness, but mainly as a by-product of relationships in particular relational contexts. The point is not that Emily originally had knowledge-creating relationships and then lost them. Nor does Stengel claim that Emily's earlier relationships were generally better than the ones she became part of in school. The point is more basic: all kinds of relationships yield learning and knowledge of a certain kind and quality. Emily's caretaker seemed to take the concrete relationship with Emily as a starting point for a search for understanding of the world; she imagined knowledge that could emerge "from within" the relationship. In contrast, Emily's school teachers' saw knowledge as static objects and tried to shape relationships and students fitted for the conception. The school teachers were, Stengel implies, ineffective in the only respect that was significant: they did not build a relationship that generated the child's interaction with the content.

The empirical results discussed earlier speak for a school in which knowledge and care are integrated tasks and relationships are seen as fundamental in successful teaching. From Hattie's work (2009) we concluded that the teacher and the teaching practice play key roles in promoting student achievement, and that this practice involves visible learning and a trusting relationship between teacher and student. Stengel's story and analysis is in line with this conclusion. Yet, it also problematizes the idea of student achievement as synonymous with measurable scores on a prescribed scale. It suggests that students can perform well in a narrow, academic sense, while the obtained knowledge is in fact superficial and even counterproductive.

Stengel's (*ibid.*) analysis implies that focus should be directed from individual and separate functions to the relational context of learning. Originally Emily was included in relationships that stimulated her curiosity and her concrete understanding of the world. In school she became part of relationships where knowledge was handled as abstract, impersonal, and instrumental objects. Using Gergen's (2009) concept, we may say that the education system was based on an idea of the bounded being—of autonomous individuals carrying out acts and achieving specific results. It was not until Emily became part of a context in which knowledge was a function of relationships with significant others that her interest in learning was revitalized. According to Gergen, students and teachers are parts of different circles of participation. Emily's case demonstrates the idea that the concrete, inter-personal circle is essential for promoting learning in schools.

When we speak of student achievement, we ought to acknowledge the existence and meaning of relationships: that achievements are products or by-products of relationships. This is the compressed message that this article sends to the pedagogical practitioner. It speaks for a discourse in which relationships are not factors that affect us "from the outside" or handled "from the inside", but ongoing processes in which both students and teachers are involved and perform.

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