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Reflective Practice Research in International Collaboration

Developing Teacher Education in Togetherness

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LIT

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Chapter 10: On compassionate teacher-student relationships

Guro Hansen Helskog[1], Dipali Mehakarkar[2] and Chaitali Ghosh Sinha[3]

Abstract

The question explored in this essay is "What does it imply to see a child?" Through a reflective practice research approach and the methods of Dialogos comparative dialogue and written reflections from participants, the authors share concrete experiences of seeing a child or being seen when they were a child themselves. The phenomenon of teachers seeing behind the immediate behavior and actions of the children and then taking proper and ethically sound action is drawn out as essential. In the theoretical reflection, the concepts of "empathic communication", "the tolerance window", "regulation," and "phronesis" are drawn into the exploration of the healing dimensions of love and compassion in teacher-student relationships. The purpose of the philosophical dialogue, as well as of the reflective practice research, is to develop orientational knowledge.

Key words

Compassion – healing – philosophising the Dialogos Way – philosophical dialogue – teacher-student relationships

Introduction[4]

In his book "The Ethical Demand"[5], the Danish philosopher Knut Løgstup (2020 [1956]) argues that a person never has something to do with another human being without holding some of the person's life in his hand. It can be very little, he states. A transient mood, an obviousness that one makes wither, or which one deepens or raises. But it can also be an awful lot, so it simply depends on the individual whether the other person's life succeeds or not. This passage has become something like a cliché in Nordic pedagog-

ical literature, but in the context of international collaboration, it is worth revisiting. A teacher is a person who, whether s/he is aware of it or not, is holding some of their students' lives in their hands, sometimes to the degree that their lives are profoundly changed for the better (or worse) by the teacher.

During my (Guro's the first authors's) visit to the Scholars Foundation High School in Panchgani, India, founder and rector Celine proved to be a person who had not only understood this but also taken action in ways beyond the capacity of most people. In a few sentences during our conversation, she had synthesised the essence of her educational philosophy: As a child, she had been in deep need of being *seen* in ways that could make her feel loved by the adults around her. However, they were simply not able to. Therefore, love is now at the core of her educational practice, she said, having more than 100 of the 600 children aged 5–17 living in two hostels belonging to the school, some of them orphans, some of them from homeless conditions in India. Whenever she sees that a child is in need of a hug or a comforting lap, she is there for this child. Whenever they face a problem, she helps solve it. The love includes demanding discipline and hard work, and that the students take responsibility for the school community. Through her works of love, she and the other teachers and staff at the school have transformed countless lives.

Inspired by Celine's vision, I decided to let the participants of the Dialogos philosophical dialogue programme with teacher educators[6] from 12 colleges in Pune, India, explore the question "What does it imply to *see* a child?" during our fifth day together. The programme was part of the JOIN and TeachIN projects involving the University of South-Eastern Norway and Savitribai Phule Pune University. The workshops had included several philosophical and dialogical exercises drawn from *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education* (Helskog, 2019), facilitated with the intent to make the teacher educators capable of trying out similar exercises with their own students in between and after the workshops. The particular comparative Dialogos dialogue that is reflected upon in this essay was facilitated on the second day of the second three day workshop. The dialogue constitutes the first part of the reflective practice research structure used to investigate the question of seeing a child in this essay. This means that all the philosophical dialogue participants are co-researchers in this essay. However, only Dipali Mehakarkar and Chaitali G. Sinha are direct co-authors with their narrated experiences and their contribution to the

critical and theoretical reflection upon their own examples. Hereafter, we are all referred to by our first names.

Stage one: The comparative Dialogos dialogue

The comparative dialogue format is maybe the format that has become the most important key to "philosophising the Dialogos way". The comparative process implies a clear movement from concrete, individual, personal, experiential, particular, and unique *examples* towards more general, conceptual, universal, and abstract levels of understanding. The main purpose of the essay is to explore the question "What does it imply to *see* a child?" based on both the *methodos* of moving from concrete to critical reflection in the comparative Dialogos dialogue and in a more general theoretical reflection in this essay. This is in line with the reflective practice research approach, which takes its point of departure in the philosophy of science stance claiming that we are always embedded in cultural and cosmic webs of relationships and that neither objectivity nor subjectivity is possible in their pure forms (see Lindseth, 2015). Therefore, it is justifiable for the researcher to take his or her point of departure in practical experience, which is narrated and explored through critical as well as theoretical reflection.

Background for the choice of philosophical question

When conducting a Dialogos dialogue process, I am always open to what comes up as important during a workshop. Now, being inspired by Celine and her educational philosophy, I suggested that we now take some time to contemplate and explore the question, "What does it imply to *see* a child?" Truly seeing another person, whether a child or an adult, is probably a sign of love in education, I suggested, and the participants agreed. But what did it really mean, and what does it really look like?

Finding, formulating, and sharing personal examples – a philosophical exercise in itself

I thus asked participants to find and formulate a personal example of one time in their lives where they experienced *being seen as a child themselves* or where they were the adult who *saw a child.* Finding personal experiences and formulating personal examples might seem easy, but repeatedly, I have experienced that this is not the case. First, it is a rather advanced skill, and

something most people, whether in India or in the Nordic countries, are not used to doing. Using a question formulated based on an abstract and general concept, in this case "seeing a child", then "scanning" one's own pool of experiences for concrete incidents that can be used as examples, then choosing the one best suited, is in itself a philosophical exercise, connecting the abstract and the concrete, the general and the personal, and the universal and the particular. In this case, some of the teacher educators claimed that they were unable to find examples. To help them with their thinking and exemplification task, I decided to narrate one of my own concrete examples.

Guro's exemplification – an experience of "seeing a child"

The incident happened some 15–20 years ago, when I worked as a teacher in a secondary school in Norway. One of the students in this class was rather grumpy, not wanting to participate in teaching-learning activities, rather being silently aggressive and angry. One day the class was to take a group photo, and we all went outside. Then this student caught me and said that s/he did not want to be part of the photo. I encouraged her/him, and s/he finally took place amongst the others. However, shortly after, the student came by me again, exclaiming that s/he did not want to do this, and then went inside.

Since we were quite a few teachers on this day, I could run after the student. The door to the classroom was closed, and I opened it slowly, seeing the teenager sitting by the desk, arms folded, with a closed, angry look. From the doorway, I silently mentioned the student's name, asking carefully, "I wonder if you might be sad about something?" Then s/he started crying. Slowly, I sat down next to the student. S/he talked about her/his life situation and about what was bothering her/him about being part of the class picture.

After this incident, our relationship transformed completely. The student showed trust in me, and whatever task was given to the class, this student was among the most eager to do her/his best. From this day on, our eyes met on a regular basis, confirming our mutual bond. The students knew I *saw* him/her.

Now all the participants were able to find examples of seeing or being seen. Hence, it was not that they did not have such experiences. It was rather that they were seldom asked to find and narrate such experiences. The reason for this is probably to be found in the cultural-historical webs we find ourselves situated in. The cultural webs of Indian and Nordic teacher ed-

ucators are likely to have both differences and similarities. One similarity might be that the educational systems are grounded in Enlightenment ideas of science and philosophy. From Descartes on, there has been a separation between subject and object, concrete and abstract, and between experience and philosophy. For instance, Hegel ([1807]1979) argues that storytelling is not philosophy, even when encountered in Plato. To him, *the concept* constitutes the scientific in our thinking. Ideals of objectivity and neutrality have thus been central in education modelled after the Enlightenment ideas. Teacher educators are not necessarily used to the practice of exemplifying general concepts by drawing on their own experience. Thinking abstractly and on an opinionated level seems to be much easier for people than thinking concretely and from personal experience. However, used in a Dialogos philosophical group dialogue, the role of personal experience is that of *concretization, exemplification,* and *self-investigation* on the side of the person finding and formulating the example, and that of *phenomenological, hermeneutical,* and *empathic perspective-taking* on the side of the dialogue participants listening to and engaging with the examples of each other. This might not be "philosophy", but it is indeed an important element in "philosophizing", i.e. in the activity of searching wisdom (*philo* = love/friend, *sophia* = wisdom/word).

Concrete reflection: Participants' experiences of "seeing a child"

In order to save some time, I divided the full group of 17 teacher educators into four smaller groups of four to five members. The members of the smaller groups then shared their experiences with the other group members, one by one, while the others were instructed to listen carefully without commenting or asking questions at this stage. When everyone had shared their experiences, I asked if someone had a good example that they would share with everyone in the group. With the encouragement from her group members, Dipali, for this reason one of the co-authors of this essay, told her story. Dipali has written the story out in detail for this essay:

Dipali's example (anonymised)

After completing my Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree, I joined a school as a teacher. In school, I used to teach subjects like English, geography, and ICT for secondary classes. Sometimes we needed to engage the free period

of any class, as the concerned teacher was not present on that particular day. Therefore, one day, I went to a 5th-grade class to engage their free period. I had to maintain discipline in the class by conducting some activities, so I decided to conduct a general knowledge-based quiz. I instructed the students about quiz rules, divided the class into groups, and started to conduct the quiz. While conducting, I noticed a boy who was tall and seemed like he was not a student of the 5th grade; he looked older than his other classmates. Also, I noticed that in one moment, he became aggressive and started shouting at other students, and the next moment, he was silently listening to us. I felt that something was wrong with that boy, so I inquired with the other students of the same class about him. They said that his behavior was like that only.

The next day, I inquired about him in the staff room. Teachers said that 'only the boy was like that', 'he doesn't understand things like others', 'his notebooks were not completed', 'he used to spend more than 2 years in one class', etc. Afterwards, I visited him and checked his notebooks. I observed that his handwriting in the notebooks was not good in some places and surprisingly good at some places. This made me more curious about the boy's situation, so I decided to communicate about this with his parents with my supervisor's permission. Then I finally met his mother on the weekend and discussed this whole thing with her.

She shared that due to an incident, he had built up trauma inside him, which was the main reason for his behavior that they see in school. I insisted that she please share it with me. She then told me that two years back, when their family had gone for a vacation to their hometown, there was a sudden robbery in the house, and as their father was trying to resist the robbers from looting, the robbers suddenly attacked his father, which caused his father to pass away. I was obviously shocked by hearing all this and felt sorry for her and her family, especially the boy, but her next words were even more shocking; she said that this scene was witnessed by him, and that caused him greater trauma, which ultimately led him to fall into trust issues. The only way he could learn or concentrate was when he was with his mom or if she was teaching him. She said that he only listens to her and can get hyper if any other person imposes upon him to do something; this was also why he was not getting good grades and had to repeat the same class. I assured her that I would find a way to help her as well as him.

I discussed this situation with my supervisor and every teacher in the classroom, and after our meeting, we came up with the solution that we will write down the homework or whatever has happened in the class, basically

whatever has been taught, in his diary and give it to him. After going home, he would give that diary to his mother, and she would teach him according to the points and instructions given in the diary. Also, his mother visited us every alternate day to know about how to teach certain things to him; we guided her accordingly. We waited for some time for the changes to be seen, and we were right; we started noticing them within a month. It started small but was fine, as his notebooks, which used to be empty or shabby, were neatly completed with consistent good handwriting. If asked questions in the class, he used to give answers, not immediately, but eventually, and he also learned to slowly control his emotions.

After two months, after their exams, we could also see a drastic change in his grades that went high according to his ability, and finally, he passed that year with good grades and confidence. He had slowly started to learn to trust others, thus also overcoming his trust issues.

Now that I look back, I feel that it was a great success for us as well as that boy who gained his confidence, and I was able to detect what was inside a child's heart and solve it. I personally think that there is no greater success for a teacher than to see students succeed by analysing what's going on in their mind and heart.

***

Everyone was listening carefully while Mehakarkar was telling her story of *seeing* a child. They were then instructed to ask her phenomenological questions to elaborate on her story so that they could better understand it and take her perspective. Ideally, they would, metaphorically speaking, put themselves in her shoes. I then asked if someone had an example that was very different from Dipali's example. Chaitali then came forward and shared her experience. Here she has written it out in detail:

Chaitali's example (anonymised)

I recall the days when I was in 2nd standard. I was a girl whose both parents were working and an elder brother who was visually impaired. I was a soft and timid girl who shouldered the responsibility of helping my mother and being a companion for my brother. My sense of responsibility made me even more mature than I was supposed to be at that age.

My brother was bullied due to his impairment. It was often physical. Other kids used to push and hit him from behind and verbally say hurtful things. I used to be very sad whenever I saw him suffer or when he shared his suffering with me. When I was with my brother, other students used to

say things that, as a 7-year-old, made me cry. Being younger than his classmates, I feared them and never tried to fight back. Also, we seldom used to share with our mother, considering she would be worried. Due to this, the situation got even worse. His classmates started bullying him even more. One day, while I was in my English class, one of his friends came and informed me that a boy had hit my brother with his belt; the metal part of that belt hit his head. He was bleeding profusely. I did not know what had happened to me, and I just ran out of my class without the teacher's permission. I hit that boy very hard and slapped and kicked him several times. In the meantime, other students called the principal. He saw me hitting the boy. My brother was taken to the first aid centre near the school, and I to the Principal's office. Principal sir and the other teachers were very angry with me. They decided to severely punish me for my action. They also decided to call our parents to the school. By then, I started to feel so ashamed and frightened that I could not even say anything.

My English teacher was called after her class was over. The principal also wanted her to blame and scold me. Instead of doing so, my teacher looked at me and said she did this because she loves and protects her brother. If that boy had not hit her brother, she would not have done this. It's not her fault we are accusing the wrong one. We should question that boy about why he hit her brother with a belt. Everyone then started to understand the background of my action. I was not punished; my mother did not get a call from the school.

Later, my English teacher called me alone and told me I could talk to her freely and share our problems. I shared with her how my brother and I were being bullied by his classmates. I also told her why we could not tell our parents about all these instances. Listening to my story, she advised that I must be strong and open if I wanted to protect my brother and myself from bullying. From then onwards, she was the one with whom I shared the most. Because of the courage she gave me when it was needed most, I transformed into an upright person. She shaped my life and made me mentally and emotionally strong to face life's challenges. I cannot forget her ever.

***

Everyone was listening carefully, also while Chaitali G. Sinha was telling her story of being *seen* as a child, followed by the phenomenological indwelling by asking her questions to elaborate so that they could better understand her experience and take her perspective.

Critical reflection – comment and collective comparison

Needless to say, the group of 18 teacher educators, including Guro, who facilitated it, were deeply moved and touched by the two experiences that had made such an impact on the lives of the respective children that were seen: the boy in Dipali's example and Chaitali G Sinha herself in Chaitali's example. This part of the Dialogos comparative dialogue thus activates the *existential-emotional* and *relational-communicative* wisdom dimensions (see Helskog, 2019). The existential-emotional wisdom dimension is explained as developing understanding of and the ability to cope with our emotional and existential life as part of developing our fully fledged humanity. Truly making efforts to understand the experience of another person, so to speak, from inside the body of the other person is essential in the development of this wisdom dimension. In the process, self-knowledge in a broad sense, combined with insight into the universal existential human condition, is likely to develop. Important here is also the relational-communicative wisdom dimension. By inviting the teacher educators to engage in profound, attentive, and meaningful dialogue and communication with others, with the aim of reaching mutual understanding, this wisdom dimension is enhanced. It implies engaging in the lives of other people in ways that make others and oneself grow, again to use a metaphor. However, being able to judge when such connecting is inappropriate, or when one should stay within limits that prevent unwanted intrusion into the life world of the other, is important.

I now asked participants to compare the two examples, asking them to focus on differences first, before we moved to similarities and shared aspects. With this, I wanted them to step back from the rather intimate phase of storytelling, listening and questioning, and lift themselves up to view the examples from a more distant and critical perspective. The act of comparison, especially looking for differences, is a good way to make this move, now more explicitly engaging the *critical-analytical wisdom* dimension. This wisdom dimension is oriented at developing the ability to critique, analyze, conceptualize, synthesize and create abstraction, i.e. the capacities that, for instance, Oscar Brenifier (2009) holds as the only true philosophical capacities.

Comparison is one of the basic philosophical activities, as it demands that the dialogue participants rise above the stories told, engaging in *conceptualization*. According to Brenifier (2009), a concept is an intellectual representation that captures the theme or the prominent idea in an utter-

ance, or here – an experience narrated as a story. We could also call it the "keyword" or "key expression", which is drawn out through the dynamic process of conceptualization. This is, according to Brenifier (2009), the activity of recognizing, producing, defining and utilizing concepts, integrated in a global thinking process consisting of an action of reduction. Conceptualization is a movement from

> "the concrete to the abstract, from the multiple to the simple, from the actual to the virtual, from the perceptible to the thinkable, from entities inscribed in time, matter and space, to acosmic, immaterial and intemporal entities: we enter the realm of pure ideas, the realm of thinking the thinking".

Crystallizing differences and similarities can thus be seen as acts of conceptualization. Each difference suggested was problematised and supported by reasons before being conceptualized and written in a scheme on the board. The concepts extracted by the participants of the dialogue are transcribed and presented in Table 1. The differences were abstracted and crystallized as follows:

Table 1. Differences

Dipali's experience	**Chaitali's experience**
Dipali was the adult who saw the child in the situation	Chaitali was the child who was seen by the adult in the situation
Dipali who was the teacher, acted for the benefit of the wounded child	Chaitali was he wounded child, whom the teacher acted for the benefit of
The boy's PTSD struggles were recognized by Dipali	Chaitali's outburst of anger was recognized by the teacher
Dipali showed empathy with the boy	The teacher showed empathy with Chaitali
The student was indirectly helped by Dipali through the group of teachers	Chaitali was directly helped by the teacher who connected personally with her – BOND between teacher and Chaitali
Dipali's primary concern was to support the boy's academic development	The teacher's primary concern was to protect and support Chaitali emotionally
Dipali was taking ACTION in an ongoing situation	The teacher was REACTING to an incident where Chaitali was involved
Had a clear objective	Had no clear objective
Several teachers collaborated about the boy's development	The contact teacher took responsibility for Chaitali alone
The boy became increasingly independent and in less need of support	Longitudinal support ("1–12" grade)

Table 1. Differences

Dipali's role as a substitute teacher was crucial	Chaitali's role as a sister was crucial
Long process of trust building	The incident created immediate trust bond
The boy was weak due to trauma	Chaitali was strong as a child, protecting her brother

Dipali suggests that a possible answer to the question *"What does it imply to see a child?"* in her example implies a process of

1. observing the child's behavior and performance in school, sensing that something is wrong
2. feeling an inner drive and urge to help the boy
3. Communicating with the boy and his mother in order to know more about the reasons for the student's behavior and inability to perform well in school
4. understanding the boy's pain and problem
5. finding a way to help the boy and bring things balance

Similarly, Chaitali suggests that a possible answer to the question *"What does it imply to see a child?"* in her example implies the process of

1. Understanding the underlying factors behind the her behavior.
2. making her trust that she is loved and accepted.
3. making her understand that her opinions are respected
4. supporting the child in becoming emotionally stable over time,

bringing out the best of the personality so that the child becomes independent in every possible way.

In the comparative dialogue itself, when we had explored differences and conceptualized them, I asked the group of teacher educators to now focus on similarities. Like with the differences, each similarity suggested was problematised and supported by reasons before being conceptualized and written on the board. The participants came up with the following similarities, many of them overlapping with the synthesis made by Dipali and Chaitali above:

Similarities

Both experiences were examples of situations where . . .
– the dyad between school/teachers-student/family was involved
– biological relationships were involved (mother-son / brother-sister)

- The actions taken depended on the teachers using their instinct and intuition
- The actions taken depended on the fact that the background of the children's struggles was made explicit
- The actions taken were based on discovering that there was a logic behind the behavior of the children
- The actions taken were founded in the moral values of the teacher
- The empathy of the teacher were at the core of the actions taken
- The students were dependent on adult support for change to come about
- The actions taken implied nurturing the children's emotional and existential being
- the relationships that developed involved bonding love
- The relationships that developed involved trust between the child and the adults
- The longitudinal involvement and care of the teacher lead to the transformation of students' lives
- the students could gradually overcome their inabilities and trauma
- teachers were role models of *good* teachers
- it all ended as success stories, even though the sad backgrounds, respectively of having his father killed and having a brother who was bullied because of his visual impairment, did not change.

Common in the two experiences is that the children in the stories are in deep need of adult support, and luckily, they receive it because they had teachers who *saw* behind their external behaviors and sensed that the reason for their behavior lay hidden in the existential and emotional realm of their being. The boy had experienced the trauma of seeing his father being killed by intruders in his home, giving him severe trauma reactions that prevented him from trusting anyone but his mother. A one-time incident in a childhood that in all other respects seemed loving had left him emotionally and mentally scattered. He was not able to keep up with the work at school, and he was acting rather aggressively until Dipali started to question what might lie behind the behavior of the boy. From that day on, long-term work to help the boy started, involving collaboration between several teachers as well as the boy's mother.

Chaitali, on the other hand, was living in a situation where she and her bullied brother protected her parents from worries by not telling them what happened to them at school. Thus, even though her parents were loving, they did not know what was going on, and the children were secretive until the day Chaitali attacked the boy for hitting her brother with a belt. She was

about to be punished when her teacher came to her rescue, seeing behind the action she was about to be scolded for and placing the responsibility where it belonged. From this moment on, the teacher continued to support Chaitali.

Unlike the boy in Dipali's story, who experienced a one-time incident that traumatized him badly, Chaitali lived in a situation of constant bullying of her brother and herself. The boy and Chaitali were both *seen* by their teachers, who took action in accordance with the pain and struggles they saw behind the outer behavior of the kids. Through their longitudinal actions to support the children in ways that implied that the children *themselves* felt seen and thus understood, a healing process started for both children.

If we are to synthesize two key phenomena rising out of these two examples, it seems that the phenomenon of *understanding the existential and emotional reality of the child behind its observable actions* is primary in the act of seeing a child, while the phenomenon of *taking action in such a way that it supports the child's development and growth* follows as a next step.

Theoretical reflection: On seeing and taking action

It can certainly be discussed whether the phenomenon of *taking action* is going beyond the phenomenon of *seeing*, but since our examples here involve teachers seeing students, it follows that if teachers see and understand, it is part of his or her duty to take action. It might thus be argued that in the professional lives of teachers, the two phenomena cannot be separated. Seeing and understanding *rightly*, like both Dipali and the teacher in Chaitali G Sinha's example did, is a prerequisite for *right action*. If the teachers who wanted to punish Chaitali for defending her brother had continued to dominate the situation, who knows how the life of Chaitali would have developed from this incident on? Moreover, if Dipali had not started to investigate the life situation of the boy, involving her team of co-teachers as well as the mother, who knows how the life of the boy would have developed? Hence, we are here at a point where the words of Danish philosopher Knut Løgstup, which introduced this essay, become deeply meaningful: *"The individual never has anything to do with another human being without holding some of the person's life in his hand"*.

This actualizes the practical-ethical wisdom dimension in the Dialogos approach (Helskog, 2019), which, with reference to the notion of phronesis

(practical wisdom) in Aristotle, implies developing the ability to act with sensibility and good intentions in concrete situations, ideally doing the right thing in the right way at the right time toward the right people for the right purposes. This will be explored further in the following theoretical reflection section.

How, exactly, can teachers' practical-ethical wisdom of *seeing* the children and *acting* in ways that were of life-transforming support to the children be understood? To explore this question, we will mainly draw on the concepts of "empathic communication" (Brudal, 2014), of "the tolerance window" and "regulation" (Nordanger, 2017), and on the Aristotelian concept of "phronesis" as interpreted by Norwegian philosopher Olav Eikeland (2006). Because we do not read Greek, and Eikeland does, we chose to trust his reading rather than using a translated version of Aristotle. By doing so, we let experiences made in an Indian-cultural school context be reflected upon by using theory developed or interpreted within a Norwegian cultural context. This way, the essay itself might be seen as a piece of intercultural dialogue, while also making visible the general or even universal aspects involved in *seeing a child*.

On seeing a child

The tolerance window is a model that says that all human beings have an activation zone where they feel comfortable and where it is optimal for them to be. When the person is inside this tolerance window, s/he is safe and "in place", ready to explore, play, and learn. However, when the activation in the body is too high, and the person is stressed, upset, angry, or worried, the person is what in this theory is called *hyperactivated*. Here, the person is likely to go into the *fight- flight- or freeze* spectrum. That means that the person instinctively will want to attack/fight or flee the situation. Or, if neither is possible, the only solution is to freeze. At other times the activation in the body is too low, and the person becomes *hypoactivated*, meaning the person is likely to be indifferent, apathetic, and not present in the current situation due to it. Comparing the two examples, it seemed that the boy in Dipali's example was struggling with different modes of hyper- and hypoactivation, while the incident in Chaitali's situation activated her fight mode.

Nordanger argues that the tolerance window is a universal and general model that is relevant to all human beings, regardless of culture and background, because we all have a window for what we can tolerate and

endure before we become hyper- or hypoactivated. During a day, we are all inside and outside our tolerance window. Most adults, however, have established strategies that make it possible for us to regulate ourselves back into our tolerance window so that we come back to some kind of balance. Children, however, have limited capacity to do this by themselves. Being a small child is more or less the same as having a very narrow tolerance window, Nordanger (2017) argues. A newborn child who is hungry, scared, in pain, or in other ways suffering invites us to comfort and calm them in certain ways that are similar all over the world. A child cannot calm itself before it has repeated experiences of being calmed by an adult. As caring adults, we *see* the need of the child behind their expressions of discomfort and answer their invitation with certain types of rich, rhythmic, tactile, and musical sense experiences which touch all the child's senses. We cradle them, hum and sing to them; we give them eye contact and funny faces; we communicate and play with them. In such situations of adult comforting efforts, strong connections between sense experience and safety are made in the mind of the child. From this basis of experiencing being comforted and having their emotions regulated by an adult, children learn to regulate themselves and their own emotions and actions. Some children, however, grow up in situations where adults, for different reasons, are unable to see the children's needs and help regulate their emotions. They never had the sensitive regulatory support of adults to help calm them and comfort them and help them expand their tolerance window when they struggled as children. They were not seen. Instead of being comforted, maybe they were punished or overlooked. Maybe nobody noticed their inner discomfort, so they gave up trying to communicate it. Such children will have difficulties developing self-regulation strategies, i.e., strategies that make it possible for them to help themselves calm down when brought out of balance. Hence, their tolerance window might remain narrow and limited. These children are also likely to have difficulties regulating themselves later in life.

In our examples, it seemed that the boy had a good basis of trust and regulatory comfort in his mother from the time before witnessing intruders kill his father. However, his trust in people generally was severely distorted after this terrifying experience. Until his teacher Dipali Mehakarkar found out about the boy's situation and traumatic experience, the only safe space in his life after the attack seemed to be with his mother. Hence, in the boy's case, the tolerance window had suddenly been narrowed due to the unexpected traumatizing event that happened to him, causing him to struggle with suspicion, lack of concentration, etc., meaning he struggled with self-

regulation. If he had not met the supportive teachers who were able to help regulate his mental state in such a way that he gradually became more independent, his repertoire for self-regulation might have remained limited, despite the heroic efforts of his mother.

In Chaitali's case, the siblings were trying to protect, comfort, and regulate each other until this day, when Chaitali had become furious and attacked the children who bullied her brother. This was also the day when the teacher *saw* the struggles behind her behavior and took long-term action to offer her comfort, and through this helped develop her ability to regulate her emotions.

Both children experienced an expansion of their tolerance windows and thus increased independence through the longitudinal help of their teachers. They were children who experienced that the adults understood that their behavior expressed an underlying pain. The adults were also able to establish existential, empathic contact with them (Brudal, 2014). Such contact happens beyond language, as "moments of meeting" (Buber, 2004). Children are dependent on adults taking responsibility for their situation. It is obvious that in the case of the boy in Dipali's example, he could not have found his way out of the entrapment without the help of the teachers. His mother helped him as best as she could, but she too needed the support from the teachers. It is also obvious that in the case of Chaitali, she was dependent on the fact that the teacher understood what had happened in the incident and *saw* her struggles and inner pain. She had no chance of making her school days better by herself. The adults at the school needed to take responsibility and create the safe spaces that the children needed.

Hence, children must first be helped by adults in order to be able to help themselves. If they have received such help, they will be more likely to develop bodily knowledge about how they can regulate themselves and consciousness about these processes. Then things that earlier were stressful become familiar and possible to handle. The healing process of the children implied developing a higher degree of emotional stability, which again led to better mental health for them. When human beings are going through tough phases in life, it is difficult, and for children, rather impossible, to stay grounded. Even minor stressors can cause anxiety. During such times, human beings experience a narrower tolerance window than at times when they are more in balance. When having come to a state where the person feels safe and in emotional balance, and the tolerance window is wider, it is possible to reflect upon, explore, process, and integrate the difficult experiences. Moreover, a deeper understanding of the range of emotional

intensities they experienced during the tough time can be developed. This again might lead to deeper wisdom in life. When operating within the tolerance window, they can more effectively manage and cope with emotion and stress.

This, Nordanger (2017) argues, is the universal recipe for children's healthy development. For this to happen, however, a basic sense of safety and trust needs to be developed in the child. Children who have established trust that they will receive help when they need it will be more able to further develop their repertoire by themselves compared to children who do not trust that they will get such help. When Dipali had seen the boy, and Chaitali had been seen by her teacher, the gradual active work to help them expand their tolerance windows started, leading both children to greater independence over time. This leads us to the next theme extracted through the critical reflection section, namely that of *acting* in ways that were of life-transforming support to the children.

On taking action

One thing was the teachers *seeing* the children in ways that made the children *feel* seen and cared for. Another thing was that the teachers *took action* based on what they saw. This actualizes the practical-ethical wisdom dimension in the Dialogos model, which is about practical knowledge, not so much in terms of the know-how of the teachers in our examples, but in the sense of *phronesis*, also often translated as practical wisdom, prudence, virtuosity or even mindfulness (see Helskog and Weiss, 2023), or as Halås et al. (2015: 9) put it, "the experienced professional is often capable of intuitively judging what a situation demands, and then act in accordance with this in a wise manner". According to the interpretation of Norwegian philosopher Olav Eikeland (2006), *phrónêsis* in Aristotle is both one of the intellectual virtues or excellences of the mind and an ethical virtue as well. Aristotle claims that we cannot be (intellectually) *prudent* (*phrónimoi*) without being (ethically) *good*, Eikeland (2006) argues. We cannot act virtuously without exercising *phrónêsis*. Except for contemplative wisdom (*sophía*), Eikeland claims, the other intellectual virtues are rational powers that apparently can be used for both good and bad ethical purposes. However, every ethical and intellectual virtue is the result of a process of perfection that makes a person able to perform a task or function in the best possible way. The virtues are neither written nor unwritten rules, nor are they merely "attitudes", Eikeland (2006) holds, stating that the mod-

ern word "virtuosity" (and even "excellence") actually carries the original meaning of phronesis better than "virtue", since it is more activity-oriented than attitude-oriented.

The teachers in the two examples seemingly acted with a greater degree of phronesis than many of their colleagues, as they were the ones who interpreted the situation correctly, saw the children, and took action in a way that proved to be among the best possible for the healthy development of the two troubled children. Moreover, they stood by the children and acted to support them as long as needed for the children to, metaphorically speaking, stand on their own feet. With the help of the wise actions of the teachers, the tolerance windows of the children were gradually widened, and their self-regulation abilities developed.

Meta-reflection: What does it imply to see a child?

The question we set out to explore through the reflective practice research process of this essay was "What does it imply to see a child?" The methods of comparative philosophical dialogue as well as written theoretical reflections and the experiences of Indian co-authors Dipali Mehakarkar and Chaitali Ghosh Sinha were first explored critically, synthesizing the phenomena of, respectively, *seeing* behind the immediate behavior and actions of the child by tuning in to their emotional and existential state of being and then taking proper *action*, doing what is right in the situation. In the theoretical reflection section, we applied the concepts of "empathic communication", "the tolerance window", "regulation" and "phronesis", as these are developed or interpreted by Norwegian scholars, in the interpretation and reflection upon the phenomena. As a final afterthought, we can say that the lives of these children lay in the hands of their teachers. Their *seeing* and *acting upon what they saw* were life-changing for the children.

In his famous book "I and Thou" (1992 [1923]), Martin Buber distinguishes between two basic attitudes in human life: the *I-Thou* (you) and the *I-It* relationship. The world appears differently to the person who relates to others and to phenomena in the world through an objectifying I-It relationship than to the person who relates to others in an I-Thou relationship. I-Thou relationships are pure encounters of one whole unique entity with another equally whole unique entity in such a way that the other is known without being subjected to a universal principle or to classification or limitation. Dipali's and Chaitali's experiences, respectively, with their student

and with their teacher can be characterized as I-Thou relationships. Moreover, in the process of telling the stories of their experiences, they related to the other philosophical dialogue participants as "Is" to "Thous", and vice versa. As Buber puts it, the I in an "I-Thou" relation *participates* in a living, dynamic, and dialogical process in which "the You" is an equal participant.

In contrast, the "I-It" relation is driven by the need to categorize phenomena under interpretations of "same" and "different", focusing on universal definitions and principles. Wasn't this what we did in this particular, comparative Dialogos dialogue? And in the theoretical reflection section in this essay, did we not subject the experiences of their relationship, respectively, to their student and to their teacher under universal principles?

We did, but in the dialogue process, only after the participants had found and formulated an experience, told it, and contemplated it together with the rest of the group in profound I-Thou relationships. As such, the participants experienced two attitudes, which created two qualitatively different experiences of the phenomena. When analysing the experiences through comparison, the I in the analytical "I-It" relation needed to *detach* from the narrated experience, fixed in time and space. However, since the whole group participated in shared thinking and dialogue about the experiences, the relationship became three-jointed, as Skjervheim (1976) would express it. Therefore, while the "I" of the "I-It" relation is a self-enclosed individual, both participants in an "I-Thou" relation exist in a relation whose centre lies *in the between*. The in-between participants in the philosophical dialogues were the narrated experiences of Dipali and Chaitali. Buber sees the "I" as a developing and ongoing achievement, a self that can become either more fragmentary or more unified through its relationships to others. In the philosophical dialogue, there was first a unifying process going on, then a fragmenting process when looking for differences, then a unifying process again when looking for commonalities. In Buber's understanding, the human being becomes whole through a relation to another self, not in a self-enclosed mode of being. Thus, even though there was both categorization, comparison and generalization going on, this was done in collaboration between the participants. Their "I"s thus developed and expanded in the I-Thou dialogue, focusing on the in-between. The characteristics of Buberian dialogical I-Thou relationships were all at play: mutual respect, mutual exchange in language, and mutual unification through shared efforts.

Notes

[1] Guro Hansen Helskog holds a position as professor of pedagogy at the University of South-Eastern Norway. She developed the Dialogos approach to philosophical practice from 2004 on and has published several books and research articles both in Norwegian and English, amongst them *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education. Between Critical Thinking and Spiritual Contemplation* (Routledge 2019). Together with Michael Noah Wise, she is co-hosting the *ResponsAbility Podcast.*

[2] Dipali Chandrakant Mehakarkar is an Assistant Professor at H.G.M. Azam College of Education, Dr. P.A. Inamdar University, Pune. She has 13 years of experience from teacher education and has done a PhD in Education. The title of her PhD thesis is *Developing A Program for Enhancement of Social Maturity Among B.Ed. Teacher Trainees and its Effectiveness.*

[3] Chaitali Ghosh Sinha has worked as an Assistant Professor for 10 years at Arihant College of Education, Pune, India. She obtained her Ph.D., M.Phil., and Master's degrees in Education from Savitribai Phule Pune University. She also completed a Master's of Botany and a Master's in Counselling Psychology. She is currently working as Vice-Principal at Priyadarshani School and Jr. College.

[4] The research is reported to SIKT – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

[5] In the original Danish: *Den etiske fordring*

[6] The programme was conducted as two three-day workshops in May and October 2022 at the School of Education, Savitribai Phule Pune University campus, and an online workshop in February 2023. Some of the teacher educators tried out exercises in between and after the workshop, reflecting upon their experiences in the anthology *Developing Teacher Education 2: Reflective Practice Research in Philosophising the Dialogos Way.*

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