

# DIFFERENTIATION COMPETENCE IN TEACHING, ILLUSTRATED BY A FICTIONAL FILM ON REGULATING CLOSENESS AND DISTANCE IN THE TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

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## **Summary**

*Relational competence has proven to be an important component in teacher professionalism. The overall purpose of this article is to adopt a social psychological perspective and discuss aspects of teachers' relational competence. More specifically, the article aims to construct a theoretical concept for understanding the aspects of relational competence that concern regulating closeness and distance in the teacher–student relationship. In the concluding section, the result is presented in terms of “differentiation competence”. This concept labels a communication pattern characterized by fine-tuned regulation of closeness and distance in the teacher–student relationship and by ongoing coordination of verbal and nonverbal behavior. The emerging concept is illustrated by verbal and nonverbal communication in a classroom setting as portrayed in an episode from a fictional film, including detailed transcription, and interpretation.*

**Keywords:** *relational competence; nonverbal communication; teacher–student relationship; differentiation competence, teacher professionalism*

## **Introduction**

Within educational research, characterizations of “good teachers” have been a central consideration for more than a century. Fibaek Laursen [1] describes how teacher competence was comprehended during the 1900s: For most of the century, good teachers were supposed to uphold a number of personal qualities or intelligences. Extensive research was conducted that sought to demonstrate and measure such qualities and enable the selection of individuals best suited for the profession. However, around the mid-1960s, and after thousands of research projects, it became obvious that there is no simple correlation between success in teaching and personality traits. The ambition was misguided: certainly, personal qualities are an essential aspect of teacher professionalism, yet they cannot be defined as individual attributes. Rather, Fibaek Laursen concludes, good teachers are distinguished by interpersonal qualities—by their way of relating to, for example, students and colleges. Fibaek Laursen used the concept of *authenticity* to explore qualities that characterize good teachers' attitudes and practice.

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Other researchers have constructed concepts to analyze teachers' positive influence on students: e.g., van Manen [2] talks about *pedagogical tact*, Feldman [3] about *teaching as a way of being*, and Polkinghorne [4] about *practical judgment*. Researchers at the Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research [5] systematically reviewed 70 international and national impact studies from the period 1998–2007 to detect what signifies successful educators. As a result, they speak of three main teacher competencies, of which the first two—*didactic competence* and *leadership competence*—are widely recognized. However, the third competency of *relational competence*, i.e., the skill of entering into and building relationships with individual students, is often forgotten [5]. Such research is reflected in policy documents describing how teacher education should be organized in the Scandinavian countries. For example, in the Danish policy document on teacher education “Bekendtgørelse of uddannelsen til professional bachelor who lærer in Folkeskolen” [6] relational competence is explicitly regarded as one of three key competencies that teacher-students should develop.

The overall purpose of this article is to adopt a social psychological perspective and discuss aspects of teachers' relational competence<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the article aims to construct a theoretical concept for understanding the aspects of teachers' relational competence that concern regulating closeness and distance in the teacher-student relationship. In the concluding section, the result is presented in terms of *differentiation competence*. The emerging concept is supported by verbal and nonverbal communication in a classroom setting as portrayed in an episode from a fictional film, including detailed transcription, and interpretation.

Studies of relational competence in education can focus on different types of relationships, e.g., teacher–student, student–student, teacher–parent, and teacher–student group; in other words, researchers can observe what Kenneth Gergen called different “circles of participation” [9]. The present article focuses on “Circle 1,” i.e., the teacher–student relationship. More precisely, it focuses on teachers' relational competence as it appears in interpersonal, and especially nonverbal, communication. This focus follows from the theoretical notion that a teacher's manner, *how* she/he communicates, is of special importance for the quality of the relationship [10].

## Theoretical Approach

The basic theoretical assumption of this article is the idea of the human as a relational being. This assumption is supported by classical philosophers such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Knud Løgstrup, as well as by contemporary educational theorists such as Gert Biesta, Kenneth Gergen and Nel Noddings. It implies an ontological notion of an essential relationship between human beings. Accordingly, it implies a relational perspective, “a notion of subjectivity as open and intersubjectively constituted” [11:160]. Yet the assumption does not suggest a blurred relationship between self and other. It rather suggests a distinction or separation between the two aspects, i.e., the existence of a dynamic dividing line. As Retzinger [12] puts it, “the regulation of togetherness and separateness is a life force—an existential fact of life.” (p. 30). This idea of regulation as a fundamental dilemma in all human relationships is confirmed by numerous social and behavioral theories (Ibid, p. 30).

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term *competence* as tantamount to the Scandinavian word *kompetens*. According to a definition often cited in Sweden [7], *kompetens* is an individual's potential ability to act in relation to a particular task, situation, or context. Unlike the formal and abstract concept *qualification*, which refers to expectations and demands directed at the holder of a certain institutional position, *kompetens* refers to the process of coping with concrete tasks and problems. Ellström's definition also suggests a relational concept, i.e., that someone is competent in regard to a certain context, situation, or relationship. Moreover, the definition suggests that *kompetens* is a dynamic phenomenon—that it is dependent on what takes place in an ongoing social process. Also see Jordan [8], in which relational competence is defined according to how the concept is used in this article.

The word *relationship* is often used as synonymous with *connection*. As already indicated, a relationship in this article is understood not only as a fundamental condition of human existence, but also as a connection that is continuously modulated in social interaction. In other words, relationships are understood as processes actually taking place between individuals, and not as more or less fixed structures located outside or inside of them. A relationship always involves more than one individual and has a different character depending on which side of the phenomenon is considered [11]. It hardly makes sense to discuss relationships without assuming the existence of at least two partners, somewhat distinct from each other. Nor would it make sense to study interpersonal relationships without recognizing joint shared processes.

Accordingly, from the adopted relational perspective, subjectivity is ontologically grounded in what happens between one being and another, in what Buber [13:241] called *the sphere of "between"*. Exploration of this reality is of primary importance for the relational approach in general [14], and not least for research in the field of relational pedagogy [15; 16; 17; 18]. For instance, Biesta [19] has suggested that educational discourses explicitly or implicitly assume a fundamental "gap" in the relationship between teacher and student. This idea, i.e., of a distinction between teacher and student as a condition for education to take place, is central in many contemporary educational theories [see, e.g., 20; 21]. Thus, in this context, adoption of a relational perspective on education supposes a gap or, as stated below, a *differentiation* between teacher and student. Moreover, it means studying social behavior when people are in direct contact with each other—i.e., it calls for a social psychological approach.

According to Johan Asplund [22:62], social psychology is a science about the "slash" (Sw.: "snedstreck") between individual/society.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the main object of the study is a problematic distinction between individual and society [22:53]. Expressions such as "slash" and "distinction" imply a tension between individuals. In terms of interpersonal communication, the concept of relationship involves two or more individuals maintaining various degrees of closeness and distance vis-à-vis each other. In Thomas Scheff's [10; 23] social psychological theory, such an idea of relationship plays a crucial role. The concept of *differentiation* (which Scheff borrowed from Murray Bowen [24]) is used to define and explore productive relationships—labeled *optimal differentiation*—as well as alienating relationships—labeled *over-differentiation* and *under-differentiation*. By using these concepts and applying them to various kinds of interpersonal contexts—mostly authentic but also fictional—Scheff demonstrated that social bonds have unique qualities in virtually every moment of communication. In other words, relationships are constructed in a shared, constantly fluctuating dimension, and subtle behavioral nuances play an important part in the process (see also Aspelin [25], in which the teacher–student relationship is explored using Scheff's concepts and approach).

Below, teacher's relational competence and, more specifically, the ability to regulate closeness and distance in the teacher-student relationships, is exemplified by a detailed description and interpretation of face-to-face interactions, i.e., in what Goffman [26] called *encounters*. Such an approach has theoretical roots in Mead's [27] definition of social psychology as the study of "an ongoing social process of experience and behavior in which any given group of human individuals is involved, and upon which the existence and development of their minds, selves, and self-consciousness depend." (p. 82).

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<sup>3</sup> Johan Asplund is a Swedish social psychologist. His magnum opus (1992) is titled *The Elementary Forms of Social Life* ["Det sociala livets elementära former"].

## Notes on Method: Studying Communication in a Fictional Film<sup>4</sup>

This article is connected to a larger research project that aims to explore how the teacher-student-relationship is constructed in authentic classroom interaction [e.g., see 28; 25; 29]. The following study highlights a teacher's relational competence as portrayed in a fictional film. In this section, I discuss why such data were selected.

In crucial ways, the chosen classroom episode differs from episodes taken from authentic environments, i.e., the kinds of environment that usually interest the researcher who study social interaction in education. To a significant degree, communication in fictional film lacks the characteristic features of authentic communication such as unpredictability, disorder, and complexity. Individuals in ordinary conversation do not follow a prescribed script, and their behavior is not guided by a director. In contrast, the events that follow are planned meticulously, down to the smallest detail. Audiences expect that words and gestures in a movie are designed, rehearsed, and produced with the aim of creating certain impressions. Hence, in a way, we might say that the following study is based on a director's view of social behavior.

However, the line between authentic and fictional material is in no way crystal clear. For instance, Goffman's dramaturgical studies—in particular, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* from 1959—as well as their enormous influence and popularity illustrate this point. Goffman's studies indicate that so-called authentic communication sometimes is even more theatrical than communication produced on the stage or screen. Everyday life in modern society is to a great extent controlled by social mechanisms and arrangements that characterize the art of acting. At least to some degree, scripts and scenarios, social rules and conventions set the framework for social behavior in every institutional setting. For instance, social activities in the classroom could in many respects be understood in terms of performance. Researchers in the field of performance studies have, among others, made this point clear (for a review, see [30]). A distinctive feature of the art of acting is an attempt to convince the audience that the impression given also is truly felt and meant, i.e., to make the viewer confuse fiction with authenticity. Great actors on stage or screen can portray social life in a trustworthy and multifaceted way. Film-makers can produce and form events that the consumer experiences as true and real. In addition, the notion that actors are in fact affected in the way that they appear to be cannot be excluded.

I propose that the significance of studies of interpersonal communication not should be considered strictly from the nature of the data, i.e., if they are authentic or fictive, but from how the researcher interprets, analyzes, and presents the material. Meaning in communication is not clear-cut and cannot be stated categorically. Words and gestures are never understandable in isolation. In the process of interpretation, every utterance has to be related to its social context, the local context, and preferably also the extended context [10; 23]. This idea—i.e., of a direct link between meaning, context, and interpretation—works not only for everyday life, but also for social activities taking place in a movie. Although film-making involves designing a scene in a highly sophisticated way, the researcher, from his/her chosen theoretical standpoint, can discover nuances that have not been recognized and comprehended before—neither by the talented, impression-making actor or the carefully instructing director, nor by the experienced film consumer.

Generally, a fictional film of high quality gives a concentrated picture of interpersonal communication. Thus, it can enable a penetrating, subtle description and analysis of social psychological phenomena, in ways that are considerably more difficult to achieve when the researcher uses authentic material. So, I propose that the most important question concerning social psychological research on fictional data is not how the fiction was produced or what the producer and actors intended, but how the researcher interprets the events and what he/she makes out of the interpretations. As social psychological researchers, we may approach a fictional film *as if* the

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed comment on the methodological approach, see, e.g. [28; 25].

interpersonal communication was authentic. If a movie convinces researchers that what happens on the screen could take place in real life and in fact *has* taken place in similar ways, i.e. finds a fictive episode trustworthy and manages to make this impression clear in a way that readers find meaningful and analytically plausible, the interpretation might be almost as substantial as if the object of study was authentic communication. I aim to prove this point in the following analysis.

## The Classroom Episode

### *School Context*

The classic American movie *Dead Poets Society* [31], is set in the year 1959 at a preparatory school called Welton Academy. The school is located in Vermont, eastern USA. All students at Welton are wealthy, white boys, recruited from the top stratum of the country. Welton's four cornerstones are tradition, honor, discipline, and brilliance. The culture is highly conservative, hierarchical, and authoritarian. By conforming to rigid social structures, students are expected to prepare for higher studies and future work as doctors, lawyers, economists, or engineers.

At the beginning of the movie, the audience is given a quick insight into different classrooms. In the chemistry class, the students are overwhelmed by schoolwork and the transmission of information. In the Latin class, they are occupied in bending verbs. The teaching in trigonometry is strictly focused on individual achievement. The students seem doomed to do what they are told, and especially to reproduce large amounts of facts. Students as well as teachers appear to maintain highly instrumental attitudes to education, i.e., see teaching and learning solely as the means of achieving distant goals.

This term, a new English teacher named John Keating (portrayed by Robin Williams) starts working at Welton. It soon becomes apparent that his teaching is radically different from what the students are used to. At the core of his teaching is the maxim *Carpe diem* (Latin for "Seize the day"), according to which an individual should search for a meaningful and active life, be fully present in the moment, and not follow the anonymous crowd. Keating invites the students to take personal responsibility for their actions and seek unique pathways in life.

### *Transcript of Verbal Communication*

As indicated earlier, the focus of this study is what happens between teacher and student, i.e., the interpersonal communication. The episode below, which is from the second time that Keating teaches the class, lasts five minutes and 25 seconds.

At the beginning of the scene, the student Perry reads aloud from a textbook preface. A highly formalistic view of poetry is conveyed. Perry reads with great enthusiasm. Parallel to this, Keating, with pretended naivety, illustrates the declarations on the blackboard. The recital is followed by a short pause. Next, Keating rapidly comments on the text, saying "Excrement." Not surprisingly, the students appear confused by Keating's remark indicating that the preface is worthless. (Excrement, in this context, is a synonym of "bullshit," and profanities are surely strictly forbidden at Welton.) At this moment, the conventional way of teaching has been broken. Next, Keating asks the students to rip out the preface.

After an initial hesitation, the students follow the teacher's exhortation and start ripping out pages from their books. In the next moment, Keating walks around with a waste paper basket, collecting the papers. He also announces his view of poetry and education: "Armies of academics, going forward, measuring poetry. No! We will not have that here. ... In my class, you will learn to think for yourself again. You will learn to savor words and language. No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas *can* change the world."

In the next sequence, Keating asks the students to form a group: "I have a little secret for you. Huddle up ... huddle up!" I now interpret the eight-second pause that follows this request:

4.10–4.11. Keating glances at the floor and takes a couple of steps forward in the classroom. By looking away, Keating provides space to the students for reflection on what has happened and what

is—or could be—about to happen. At first, the students look confused, but they soon move in the direction of the teacher. Apparently, once again, the ordinary teaching structure is confronted.

4.12–4.14. Keating crouches down and looks down at the floor with an unrestrained yet concentrated facial expression. He places his right hand on Perry’s bench and his left hand on another student’s bench. These small gestures could be understood as signs of closeness in the relationship (Keating is in direct physical contact with the students’ objects). Other students slowly move toward Keating, and soon they have all taken a seat next to him.

4.15–4.17. Keating raises one hand and brings his fingers together, which could be seen as subtle signs of distance. (An open hand would be a sign of closeness.) In the previous moment, Keating avoided eye contact; soon he seeks direct relationship again. First, he glances at a student in front of him, then at a student on his right, and finally at a student on his left. In these sequences, he seems to ask: “Do you follow me? Are you ready?” The students bend forward, and the viewer has the impression that they accept Keating’s invitation. Keating waits until the atmosphere is characterized by expectancy and concentration. Then, during approximately one minute, he gives the following description of poetry:

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|----------------|---|
| 4.18. Keating: | We don’t read and write poetry because it’s “cute.”   |
| 4.22. Keating: | We read and write poetry because we are members of<br>the human race.                             |
| 4.26. Keating: | And the human race is filled with passion!  |
| 4.31. Keating: | Medicine, law, business, engineering; these are noble<br>pursuits, and necessary to sustain life. |
| 4.37. Keating: | But poetry, beauty, romance, love ... these are what we<br>stay alive for.                        |
| 4.45. Keating: | To quote from Whitman:  |
| 4.48. Keating: | “Oh me, Oh life of the questions of these recurring. Of<br>the endless trains of the faithless    |
| 4.55. Keating: | ... of cities filled with the foolish.  |
| 4.58. Keating: | What good amid these, O me, O life?   |
| 5.01. Keating: | Answer: That <i>you</i> are <i>here</i> ... that <i>life exists</i> , and identity.               |
| 5.09. Keating: | That the powerful play goes on, and <i>you</i> may contribute<br>a verse.”                        |
| 5.16. Keating: | That the powerful play goes on, and <i>you</i> may contribute<br>a verse.                         |
| 5.25. Keating: | What will your verse be?  |

*Nonverbal Communication in the Episode*

Starting from the verbal transcript, the nonverbal communication in the episode is now highlighted.

- 4.18. Keating: We don't read and write poetry because it's "cute."  
Keating sits down and faces the students on his left. His right hand is still on Perry's bench, as a link to the previous turbulence when the students were in palpable motion.
- 4.22. Keating: We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race.  
For a few seconds, Keating's eyes are closed. By this means, the students gain the space to orient themselves outside the teacher's field of vision. Keating speaks softly but stresses the words "read," "write," and "human race." In so doing, he demonstrates the seriousness of the message. At this point, the students hardly move, and the viewer is given the impression that they are concentrating fully.
- 4.26. Keating: And the human race is filled with passion!  
Keating's left hand is clenched, as an accompaniment to the dedicated statement. Keating glances at a student standing next to him. This student, apparently moved by the speech, leans toward Keating.
- 4.31. Keating: Medicine, law, business, engineering; these are noble pursuits, and necessary to sustain life.  
Keating first addresses Perry, then a couple of other students. At this moment, the verbal communication is directly connected to the students' ideas of their future occupations, i.e., the statement has an identifying effect and reduces the gap between students and teacher.
- 4.37. Keating: But poetry, beauty, romance, love ... these are what we stay alive for.  
Keating's facial and body movements reveal he is deeply engaged. Simultaneously, his verbal message creates a distance from the students' instrumental approach to schoolwork.
- 4.45. Keating: To quote from Whitman:<sup>5</sup>  
The camera is directed at the student Dalton, who appears fully attentive and concentrating hard, e.g., his eyes are wide open and focused on Keating. Moreover, his mouth is first open in a clear smile and then turns into a tiny smile. This subtle shift indicates that Dalton is inspired but not absorbed by Keating's words.
- 4.48. Keating: "Oh me, Oh life of the questions of these recurring. Of the endless trains of the faithless  
The camera is directed at another student, Hopkins. Hopkins's lips are clenched and he leans his head down. His eyes are open, focusing on Keating. Next, he closes his eyes, opens them, turns to a classmate, and finally closes his eyes again. From this small sequence, the viewer understands that Hopkins is ambivalent and wants to compare his impressions with those of other students. Next, the camera is directed at four boys who, with full concentration, are focused on Keating. One student looks up at the moment he moves into the picture, giving the impression that he has left his individual horizon and returned to the relational process.
- 4.55. Keating: ... of cities filled with the foolish.  
The camera turns to the student Meeks who smiles with open eyes and seems intensely present. Behind Meeks, we get a glimpse of a student who appears distracted (he first looks straight ahead, then quickly turns to his left, and finally looks in Meeks' direction).
- 4.58. Keating: What good amid these, O me, O life?

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<sup>5</sup> I have transcribed the poem as it is presented in the movie. The verses are cited from the American poet Walt Whitman's poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855. Please note that in the movie, Keating omits certain verses of the poem, and so these verses are not included in the transcription.

Once again, the camera is directed at Keating, who at this moment seems fully involved in the poem, without seeking direct contact with the students.

5.01. Keating: Answer: that *you are here* ... that *life exists*, and identity.

Keating continues the recitation and quotes Whitman's answer to the question. During a few seconds, Keating's facial expression changes from resignation to confidence. When he says "Answer," he speaks more quietly than before, and thereby initiates a closer contact with the students. Yet he emphasizes the words "you," "here," "life," and especially "exists," thereby, in parallel with the movement toward relationship, marking his position as a teacher.

5.09. Keating: That the powerful play goes on, and *you* may contribute a verse."

In a brief pause before this utterance, Keating looks with half-closed eyes at the students on his right side. Obviously, the message of the poem touches him deeply. A couple of seconds later, he turns with clear eyes to a student at his left side and regains direct contact. His right hand accompanies the words and he raises a finger toward the student when he says "you." By emphasizing this word, he creates a form of bridge by which the students, especially the one in focus, can identify with the message. Next, Keating moves his forefinger back to his right hand. As a sign of distance, he shapes his hand into a fist.

A three-second pause follows, in which Keating turns to the students at his right, as if he wants to see how they perceive the message. In this sequence, the other students have the space to reflect on what is going on. Keating then leaves the recitation, but reiterates the last sentence of the poem:

5.16. Keating: That the powerful play goes on, and *you* may contribute a verse.

In this sequence, Keating focuses on Perry and slightly moves his head and body in the student's direction. Keating's fist is clenched and he moves the hand up and down, as an accompaniment to the uttered words. In contrast to the previous moment (when he recited the poem), and as a sign of personal connection, Keating stresses the word "you" (in "*you* may contribute"). At this moment, Keating has eye contact with Perry, who in turn opens his mouth in a smile, indicating that he has reached an insight.

A five-second pause follows. During the first seconds, Keating looks at Perry with a fixed glance, and apparently, the two individuals are mutually connected. Next, Keating turns to Anderson, a student who is known for being insecure and shy. Keating looks at Anderson with firm and clear eyes.

5.25. Keating: What will your verse be?

Keating moves a little closer to Anderson. He speaks softly and his hand moves in the rhythm of the speech. The audience is given the impression that Keating is genuinely interested in receiving Anderson's—and the other students'—answers. Anderson is standing perfectly still, looking at Keating. Like most of his classmates, he is apparently touched by the event. First, he glances down, then up. In a way, he has already started to respond to Keating's question. With this picture, the scene ends.

### **Interpretation of Context and Episode**

The teaching at Welton Academy is boring, not to say soulless. Dominating or even despotic teachers attempt to strictly control the students' thoughts, feelings, and behavior. The teachers are occupied by transferring facts to the students and making them do what they are told. Teachers and parents are colluding in preparing the young boys for a hierarchical society in which they will reach top positions. In other words, the school is marked by an authoritarian and highly restrictive achievement culture. There is no room for creative work, collaboration, or topics that the students experience as meaningful. The principal and the teachers rule, and the students, in competition with each other, are expected to turn into successful market actors. In Keating's classroom, the students are temporarily released from the current regime. In the episode, the students leave their normal, disciplined, and self-conscious selves, and enter into an extraordinary, and unpredictable inter-human dimension.

Now, how does Keating's communication style contribute to the dense and dynamic atmosphere of the episode? One way of answering the question would be to point at Keating's non-controlling manner. Another important key, which I would like to highlight in this context, lies in Keating's way of regulating the degree of closeness and distance in relation to the students. Broadly speaking, this idea is illustrated by Keating's strategy of moving from a chaotic gathering, in which the relationships are very distant, to encounters characterized by a high degree of closeness. The transition is marked by Keating's invitation to "huddle up!" From the same broad view, the significance of relational adjustment is revealed by Keating's teaching—especially the creation of space for personal encounters—standing in striking contrast to the students' general experience of schoolwork.

Furthermore, the importance of relational adjustment becomes evident in the aspect of nonverbal communication. For instance, Keating's gaze moves from student to student as a strategy for including the larger group, yet it remains for some time on each student, so that the student has the opportunity to be identified and confirmed by the teacher. At some moments when the viewer does not expect it, Keating looks away from the students, as if he wants to avoid controlling them. Keating's voice, its volume and tone, shifts several times during the episode. When he says he wants to tell a secret, he speaks quietly and softly, whereas there is sharpness in his voice in the previous sequence. The modulation of voice is a way of regulating the degree of closeness and distance in the relationship. This regulation seems directly related to the ongoing communicative process and the concrete interpersonal relationship. Keating's body position during the main part of the episode—crouching down and looking up at the students—violates the expectations of how a teacher should act in the educational context. This body position also has a symbolic meaning: Keating does not "look down" at the students, i.e., he avoids reproducing the ordinary, strictly distanced, and hierarchical relationship.

In a sense, Keating acts independently. For example, he is not disturbed by the different signs of distraction that some students express. Yet, in another sense, he seems dependent on the students, or rather, he is directly linked to what is going on between them and him. Keating gradually seeks to encounter the student he is currently facing and addressing. In the pauses, the students have the chance to take a position toward the teacher, i.e., Keating establishes a temporary distance. In these pauses, the teacher also has the space to observe the students' responses and reflect on whether or not they are participating. However, what seems to be Keating's primary ambition in this episode is not to observe or reflect on the students'—or his own—appearance, but to make a vital and encouraging meeting possible. His nonverbal communication seems attuned to his verbal messages of poetry as a subject for life, of personal and existential responsibility, and so on. The engaging topic contributes to creating closeness (the students can identify with what is said), as well as distance (the students can temporarily leave the concrete encounter).

The teacher's nonverbal communication is characterized not only by distance and closeness, but also by extremely quick alternations between the two. In the joint line of action, the students are able to empathize directly with the teacher and his message; they also have the space to distinguish themselves, cognitively and emotionally. Keating acts in a direct way, and thereby becomes differentiated from the student he addresses, but he also seems careful not to disregard the student's integrity. Based on the interpretation, the teacher's gestures, facial activity, and body position are almost continuously expressed in a direct and concrete relationship with the students. Certainly, some students seem fascinated, yet they do not behave in ways that are associated with manipulation.

Moreover, the episode could be interpreted in terms of emotion, regarded as an "interactional" phenomenon [32, p. 119]. On the whole, the sequence of events includes a flowing emotionality that arises, not as an internal, self-produced effect, but as a by-product from the joint actions. Correspondingly, the emotional flow in great part seems framed by a shared behavioral order and does not appear as a response to the social situation as general authority. Thus, emotions are represented as immanent parts of a coordinated, inter-human encounter. In particular, the episode

appears to involve the emotion of pride (see also [10]). Both the teacher and the students perceive and evaluate themselves positively in each other's eyes. These feelings are not linked to individual achievement or the type of pride that the students probably experience in other classrooms when, for example, they deliver a correct answer to a teacher's question or score highly on a test. Rather, they experience pride as an immediate ingredient or accompaniment of the mutual and unreserved interpersonal process. Such emotions signal and promote interpersonal connection and maintain an adequate balance between closeness and distance between the participating individuals. The students see themselves from the teacher's appreciating eyes and feel proud *with* the teacher, without being overwhelmed by the relationship.

Consequently, I propose that the teacher's fine-tuned adjustment of relationships could be understood as an essential part of the authentic and creative atmosphere in the episode. The teacher navigates the flow of actions, and estimates and regulates the degree of closeness and distance in the teacher–student relationship. In other words, the vital and encouraging interpersonal communication is supported by the teacher's hyper-quick alternation between self and other.

### **Conceptualization: Differentiation Competence in Teaching**

Differentiation of self in relation to others is a general and basic social skill, developed in the process of socialization or, more concretely, in innumerable moments of interaction. However, concepts such as over-differentiation and under-differentiation [10; 23] suggest that this development is in no way an automatic, unproblematic task. Rather, individuals always run the risk of stepping into one of the two outer fields of communication. In other words, optimal differentiation [10; 23] is more an exception than a rule. And, therefore, researchers can speak of a more or less advanced competence in regulating togetherness and separateness in relationships [12]. I propose the concept *differentiation competence* as a representation of the art or skill of adjusting closeness and distance in interpersonal relationships. The meanings and implications of this concept were illustrated in great detail, as described above.

The classroom episode demonstrated a communication pattern characterized by fine-tuned regulation of closeness and distance in the teacher–student relationship and by ongoing coordination of verbal and nonverbal behavior. This communication pattern facilitated students to respond as unique beings in relation to the teacher, each other, and the topic. The interpretation of the episode suggests that differentiation competence, to a significant degree, has to do with nonverbal communication, i.e., how the teacher relates to the students.

In order to stimulate an interpersonal flow and at the same time challenge and lead his/her students, the differentiation competent teacher adjusts the space between the participants. The teacher promotes a relationship in which the student has room to distinguish himself/herself from the teacher and his/her classmates. According to the interpretation, bridging the gap to students might be a relevant guiding light for teachers. Yet this does not mean *filling* the gap (see also [19]). Essentially, good teaching is about maintaining a dynamic, subtle balance between the participants. In other words, differentiation competence is not a matter of attaining consensus—in the sense of agreement and harmony—but of inspiring and cultivating personal expression *in* an ongoing relational process. From this perspective, differentiation competence may be regarded as an important part of realizing the educational aim that Biesta [33] called *subjectification*, i.e., the student's response as a unique being.

The classroom episode gives a portrait of a teacher manifesting a high level of differentiation competence. The interpretation suggests that such competence ensures that the teacher becomes neither too close to nor too distant from the students. Conversely, the teacher acts to ensure that the students become neither too close to nor too distant from him/her. The teacher takes an open and wondering attitude in relation to the students. In an attentive, flexible, and sensitive way, the teacher moves between being *there*, at the students' position, and *here*, as a pedagogical subject.

However, differentiation competence should not be understood in terms of goal-oriented behavior—the behavior of a separate individual accomplishing prescribed goals or effects. Instead, the

phenomenon has an immanent meaning, i.e., it is manifested *within* an ongoing process of social behavior and experience [27]. Moreover, differentiation competence is not about focusing specific parts of the previous experience, background, or knowledge levels of the partner, in this case the students. The students are not identified as separate individuals, composed of certain traits or attributes. Instead, their relational selves, i.e., their participation in an inter-subjective encounter, are at the center of the teacher's attention (see also [11]). Of course, the teacher's recognition is directed not only at the students' present selves but also at their *potential* selves (see also [13; 20]). Still, in a relational process that is optimally differentiated, the teacher is immediately present in relation to the learner. Thus, it is possible to assume that the teacher, in such processes, to a great extent acts on a pre-reflective level, i.e., intuitively confirms the subjective positions of the participants. At the same time, the teacher's actions have a clear direction, and it is in this sense that differentiation competence becomes pedagogically relevant. The teacher's actions maintain a vital interpersonal flow, and within this flow, encourage the students to discover who they are and could become.

## Conclusion

Relational competence has proven to be an important component in educational professionalism. The overall purpose of this article was to adopt a social psychological perspective and discuss aspects of teachers' relational competence. More specifically, the purpose was to construct a theoretical concept for understanding aspects that concern regulating closeness and distance in the teacher-student relationship. Through interpretation of a classroom episode from a fictional film, the importance of a teacher's skill in regulating the degree of closeness and distance in interpersonal processes was illustrated. The concept of differentiation competence summarizes the interpretation.

In using the concept of differentiation competence, educators could approach relational competence as a continuous, interactive, situational, contextual, and more or less observable process. Differentiation competence is not tied to the teacher as an autonomous actor. Instead, the teacher's actions are directly related to what takes place in the shared dimension, i.e. are to a significant extent included in *the sphere of "between"* [13:241]. The differentially competent teacher relates to students in ways that are momentarily unique.

Building on this argument, it seems reasonable to assume that teachers' differentiation competence plays an essential role in student performance. The student's potential for becoming a unique subject, i.e. for distinguishing himself/herself in relationships [33] is promoted by a teacher who is competent in regulating closeness and distance in the teacher-student relationship and who acts in a momentarily unique way. It could be expected that every teacher maintains some form of differentiation competence and that "good" teachers' communication is characterized by such skill. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that differentiation competence, not being defined as a personality trait, could- and should be cultivated in teacher education. A promising model for such cultivation has been developed by the Swedish researcher Anders Jönsson [34]. Following this model, teacher students could use video observations of their own teaching practice for describing and analyzing relational processes and their own communication style.

This article calls for more research that sheds light on the educational implications of differentiation competence—for instance, how it contributes to students' learning in different educational contexts, how it is promoted in teacher training, and how different structures interfere with such cultivation.

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