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## The Dimension of the Teacher-Student Relationship: Frequent Language and its Conditioning Factors

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### **Abstract**

In our paper, we approach the question of the relationship between a teacher and a student from an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates philosophical, ethical, and pedagogical knowledge. Starting from a notion of a person as being open to reality and constitutively *relegated* to it, we wish to discern how to establish adequate relationships with each of the individuals existing within it. Specifically, we focus on the interpersonal dimension that can be established in a school context. As a result of this reflection, we propose a series of guidelines in relation to some linguistic expressions, to be carried out according to the student's own understanding.

*Keywords:* person, openness, language, education.

### **Introduction**

From their very essence, human beings are intimately in need of existing reality in order to be fulfilled and developed. This need – and it is a need – can be met thanks to our ability to move outside of ourselves,

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to transcend ourselves to move towards *the Other*. Understood by the Spanish philosopher Xavier Zubiri (1963) as *religation*, it helps us to recognize that humans exist in relation to things in the form of the *world*; in relation to others in the form of *society*; in relation to tradition in the form of *history*; and in relation to the totally Other in the form of *religion*. We recognize in this a trait of human nature that contributes a specific value to the person. The synthesis of this notion of person, proposed in this article, is the result of a previous, unpublished work on the *religated* dimension of the human being.

Accepting this anthropological approach – together with the philosophical currents that support it – we consider what would be an appropriate way (the way things *should be*) to establish relationships with each of them to treat them appropriately to their nature (i.e., ethically). Specifically, we will focus on the specific recognition of the person, of their dignity, to guide the search for adequate ways of establishing relationships with “others.” Faced with this challenge, we must first delve into the capacity for openness in general and show some differences in different beings, which demand a variety of modes of relationship. We then wish to take one step further and place interpersonality within the educational context, specifically in the possible relationship dimension that is established between an educator and a learner (a teacher and a student). We will reflect on certain linguistic expressions and vocabulary used in the classroom, primarily in teachers’ rooms, personally collected over 20 years in different institutions and at different educational stages; in a way, this material is the driver for the analysis of these expressions. As a result of this work, we wish to offer some guidelines that may help in considering the individual dignity of the student and appropriately recognizing this within the context of schooling.

### **Human Beings as Open to Reality – The Question of Being**

The development of the concept of humans as beings which are open to reality has a long history. To the concept of the human being that

the Greek and Semitic world already possessed, Christianity added – in a significant way – the unique elements that were their own and that configured a new concept of humans, which is still valid to this day. As Gómez (2015) indicates, Boecio (480–525) – influenced by Aristotelian thought from eight centuries earlier – offers a classic definition of person understood as an individual substance of a rational nature. This concept – later accepted by Saint Thomas Aquinas and scholasticism – was a reference in all Christian humanism for centuries and constituted the basis of Western civilisation until the 18th century, when the process of secularizing Christian ideas came about with the advent of the Enlightenment. In the second half of the 20th century, the earlier conception of the human being was enriched by various authors, including Zubiri (1898–1983), Scheler (1874–1928), and Buber (1878–1965), as well as the dialogical and personalistic philosophical currents that added to it, although the task remains incomplete.

### **The *Religated* Dimension of Human Beings as a Constitutive Aspect of their Being**

The individual appears to us a being that moves beyond themselves, an open and transcendent being. This capacity for transcendence, understood by Zubiri (1963) as the phenomenon of *religation*, helps us recognize that human beings fulfill their existence in relation to things in the form of the world; in relation to others in the form of society; in relation to tradition in the form of history; and in relation to the completely Other in the form of religion. Only *in* and *for* this support can a person live and be; consequently, we accept the proposition that human life is made of what is real.

### **The Dimension of the Relationship with the Reality of Things: The World**

The existence or non-existence of an external world, of the reality of things, are two assumptions raised by philosophy on different occasions, from which different statements are derived. This is the case of Idealism

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and Critical Realism, which, albeit from opposite positions, refer to the outside world as a *fact* and as something that is *added* to the subject's existence. Nonetheless, Zubiri (1963) considered that "this exteriority of the world is not a simple *factum*, but the ontological structure of human beings," since it is open to them from a formal constituent. Thus, human existence is presented as an *encounter* with things, as something that gradually creates itself, in contrast to Sartre's idea (1943/1984) of the human *thrown into* existence as a solitary being. Through the complexity of living with things, with others, and with ourselves, as living beings, the person is gradually fulfilled, so this relationship's capacity becomes the fundamental characteristic that defines the person.

Unlike animals, determined by the environment to behave in a specific way according to their species, people are *open* to the world. As spiritual beings, humans enjoy independence, freedom or existential autonomy in the face of the ties and the pressure of the organic, "free before the surrounding world" (Scheler, 2000, p. 55). Humans relate to their environment, adapting symbolically, allowing us to specify the difference between animals and humans, thereby understanding humans' open path towards the construction of culture and civilization. Humans create the world.

In the first instance, this is how we present people as being dependent on external things, *relegated* to the world, while simultaneously free to decide creatively in it. It is a necessary first level of the relationship in which humans exercise a certain dominance over things, a "dominion," where the relationship is asymmetric.

### **The Constitutive Relationship with Others: Interpersonality**

In the dynamics of opening oneself to the outside – a specifically human characteristic – the individual, in addition to encountering the world, encounters the existence of other human beings. Unlike what happens with things, establishing a relationship with other people does not initially present conflict, since neither party submits to the other, but rather the encounter occurs spontaneously between peers, *between equals*. We present below the vision of several authors and significant currents on this issue, which support this thesis throughout history to the present day.

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Consequently, we can glimpse the necessary conditions for an adequate way of relating to people while respecting their own uniqueness.

When Aristotle (4th century B.C.E./1993) proposed the basic principle defining a human being as “social by nature,” he presented sociability as an aspect that springs from their own being and leads them to live in society. In this way, *the polis* becomes a vital tool for human beings, perfecting them and ordering itself to their ultimate goal: happiness. Heidegger (1927/2002), for his part, presented a dimension of *being with others* that is not justified by the mere evidence of the existence of human beings in the world who necessarily have to share the same space. According to Amengual (2016), whose first existential is *being-in-the-world* as a dynamic relationship constituted by human beings’ peculiar way of behaving concerning worldly entities, the deep and genuine meaning of *being-with-others* (*Mitsein*) unfolds from this ontological characteristic and lies in the fact that the human subject, aware of itself, is never without reference to other human subjects. Personal existence is developed and fulfilled together with other beings in the world. Along with the previous contributions on the concrete dynamism of an encounter with *the other*, we must highlight the rise of the personalist currents of the 20th century, which managed to place the *individual* at the center of every philosophical question. As a result of the reflection on the foundations of these currents, Professor Gallardo González (2016, pp. 65-70) offers some characteristics or *assumptions of the specific being of the individual*: absolute value or presence; opening or encounter; and intersubjectivity or interpersonal communion. Therefore, it can be considered that these aspects must be present in every *interpersonal* encounter and must be respected so that this encounter may be personally fulfilling.

From this personalizing perspective of an encounter, we can consequently consider some of the appropriate conditions in which any personal relationship should develop.

1. In the first place, we can refer to the *need for interaction* between people, since it is a vital need for personal development. They cannot know themselves fully by thinking, generalizing, reading, or analyzing – while

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still appreciating the possibility of transcendence and the relationships that these activities permit. The personal relationship with others confronts us with our own being, so that coexistence becomes a source for our own knowledge and that of others. We can then ask ourselves if it is sufficient for two people to live together, or to relate to one another, for this experience to be revealing – for example, in the case where they are forced to be close to one another, or in other words, the relationship is caused by mere coincidence. The answer leads us to consider that it is necessary to put freedom at stake – we can only discover who we are through our free behavior. Companionship, friendship, or a spousal relationship in which only one of the members grows and develops professionally and personally, while the other does not, cannot be considered an adequate interrelation; people have a need to grow together.

2. An *encounter* occurs when people are present in relation to each other. Things simply exist, but people are present. From this statement we can extrapolate that, on the one hand, a person's existence is an absolute way of being and having value, and on the other hand, personal presence is at the same time a way of existing in a relationship, it is being-for-someone, which is why personal presence requires *recognition* by others. This must be understood correctly: recognizing their value means discovering that they already are valuable; it doesn't mean that we make them valuable. The person is (and should be) recognized because they are valuable, because they *are* a person, not the other way around. Hence, in all cultures, greetings are of great importance, and there is a profound anthropological reason for this: they are an expression of the recognition of being in the presence of another person. Denying a greeting means ignoring someone as a person, depriving them of recognition, or reducing them to an object. María Zambrano (2007) wrote that the greatest offense that can be done to a human being is to not be heard.
3. A true encounter is only possible if there is an act of trust in the person. Believing in the person means affirming from the outset their *absolute value*. The recognition of the person is approached as *faith*

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in the person. Trust is the required condition for personal openness in dialogue on both sides, for communication. Without believing in the value of the other, there can be no interest in knowing them and there can therefore be no encounter.

4. Openness is required in order to meet in interpersonal relationships. It is an inner attitude with which the person is welcomed into one's life. The first form of openness is *acceptance*: it is not possible to know oneself without accepting oneself, nor to re-know the person as a person, without being open to them. Accepting is much more than registering someone's existence theoretically or mentally; according to Pérez-Soba, (2005) it means letting that person enter one's life, letting their existence affect one.
5. An encounter and knowledge occur through dialogical thought. This means thinking in the presence of and with another person. The essence of human relationships is located not in the participants, nor in the world in which they occur, but as Buber (1984) says, in that common *sphere* in which communication occurs, which goes beyond the scope of each participant. This dialogic situation, which goes beyond the psychological or emotional aspects, is accessible only ontologically and can be described as one of the most synergistic acts between people.

Thus we have outlined the characteristics that can be proposed as required for an *encounter* between people to be valuable, allowing us to recognize whether or not they are adequate in the various situations of daily life.

### ***Religation with the Totally Other***

Until now, we have considered human beings as beings capable of moving beyond themselves and opening up to the reality of the external world, such as things and peers.<sup>1</sup> This can be seen as a characteristic

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, we are aware that human beings are also open to history via the condition of *religation*. However, this is not developed at this time in order to focus on the interpersonal aspect that encompasses peers.

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feature that constitutes the dimension: only *in* and *through* this support can the person live and be: *religation*. Consequently, we can raise the philosophical possibility of the existence of God in reality (Zubiri, 1955), and therefore, about the ontological need for openness to the Other for full personal fulfillment. Zorroza (2018) responds by stating that regardless of the position taken, “in the face of this question of acceptance, denial, or inconsideration, it does not mean introducing a religious or theological question, but rather raising the necessary clarification about a dimension that is constitutive and that will affect its faculties” (p. 468). The question about God thus goes back to a problem with an anthropological foundation, which at this time in the present paper is left open to further investigation.

### **Education as a Place of *Encounter* Between Educator and Learner**

Humans are called to develop themselves fully, to fully become their original version; this, according to the present investigation, cannot be achieved without the help of others. As mentioned above, humans relate to each other through possibility and necessity. Thus, companionship, a willingness to relate, and self-knowledge are revealed as some of the most important aids offered to human beings. Undoubtedly, this relationship has its risks, since *opening up* to others, to the other, allows – in the words of Gallardo González (2016) – “for them to enter my life, to challenge me, and by ceasing to be indifferent and by accessing the sanctuary of my intimacy, I also give them the possibility of hurting me” (p. 34). We call this *the risk of vulnerability*.

From these assumptions, education – if it truly supposes the harmonious development of an individual’s potentialities – must necessarily occur in the sphere of the interpersonal encounter between educator and learner. We can only speak, therefore, of true *education* if it generates adequate interpersonal relationships.



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### **The School Context and Considering the Learner's Characteristic Traits**

We will now consider from the educational context – a minor portion of the broader word – the learner's characteristic traits, which create the relationships with the learner's peers and which were listed generically in the previous section of this paper. Practically everything referred to will have the same value for the educator. In this case, we will focus on the importance of the educator in terms of the presence of the learner.

### ***The Absolute Value of the Person***

As long as the person has an absolute value and this is manifested in their absolute uniqueness, the person is presented as irreplaceable, with value in and of themselves, implying that all actions carried out must have this value as a goal, without the person being used as a medium. Therefore, the learner is a singular, unique being, there are no doubles – not even in the case of twins – and therefore, we must know each one individually. Students deserve the recognition of their peers, who accompany them in their development, thus avoiding any idea of superiority or greater "worth" between them, while it is true that *dignity* should not be confused with *functions*, which are a consequence of the position held in the educational institution or the authority received as a teacher, director, etc. Consequently, some people must be open towards others in the context of education under the right conditions, that is, *with dignity*; we must avoid reducing encounters to potential professional or personal opportunities for self-interest, which could turn people into a means to achieving something as opposed to end in and of itself.

### ***Openness and Encounter***

The philosopher Zubiri, considers openness to others to be one of the relevant aspects of human substantivity. "The 'others' are not something added to me, but something to which I am constitutively connected" (2007, p. 61). This opening note constitutes the subject, insofar as it concerns other people. No one can be conceived as closed in on oneself, isolated and deprived of all communication; one's life finds meaning in these personal relationships.

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This respect implies the freedom for the person to express their desire to be available or not to the other, who must respect others' freedom at the same time. That is to say, it requires the expression of each individual's will to create an interpersonal bond, thus turning the encounter between two people into a voluntary encounter. A subject–subject relationship is established in an appropriate personal relationship, which exceeds that of a subject–object relationship, typical of knowledge. The key is that the level of encounter is of free wills and, therefore, at the level of equality and not dominance – which prevents openness – and whose price is a *vulnerability* in the relationship. The presence or irruption of another in one's life raises questions about life itself. This is the price that the person is willing to pay when establishing personal relationships because they know the richness that can come from interpersonality and freely want to take the risk with some people and not with others. For a learner to open up to their tutor, showing them some personal or interpersonal difficulties usually becomes a source of knowledge for the educator; however, this trust – which is conquered, not imposed – requires a lot of patience and non-judgmental listening. Here, communication presents itself as an expression of trust between two people.

### ***The Person Called to Communion***

This personal trait indicates that they are called to a common-union from their relationship of otherness, an objective to which every interpersonal encounter should tend. It shows that the absolute (the person as *being*) and the relative (“I” as a person, and “you” as a person) are given at the same time without denying themselves: singularity and relationality are two poles of personal being that come together in the free act, when the person is themselves without having to be another, and in turn, does not enclose themselves, but opens up to the other in a relationship. In this exchange, the person affirms themselves, and can reaffirm the other person if there is a true relationship with the other. In this sense, acts of love, of donation, are acts of formation and maturation of the person, who freely expands their capacity to love, to offer themselves, in such a way that the more they offer themselves, the better they are as a person.

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Education that enhances the development of the learner must tend to cultivate these two complementary dimensions of the human: the personal and the social. Growth is expected to be oriented in such a way that as personal qualities and knowledge grow, the learner also feels progressively prepared and involved in social commitment at the family, school, and societal level in a way that is appropriate to their maturity level. Coherently, good education aims to overcome the first difficulties that can be challenging for the child, such as coming out of their shells, withdrawing into themselves, or feeling more comfortable in a closed environment. Furthermore, the educator must prevent the student from generating excessive dependence on them, since the aim is to accompany them when necessary, not to supplant the will of the child or young person.

### **Communication as a Donation to the Learner**

Communication has previously been referred to as a donation that one person can make to another; we will now develop it by concretizing it in the school context as a place of the educational encounter. The main vehicle that human beings use to communicate is verbal language – despite not being the first<sup>2</sup> – as openness to the world. We paint pictures, say something to someone, and we establish a *dialogue* with the different realities present in the world. In verbal language, other aspects come into play, and to linguistic ability, such as the *degree of personal involvement* that occurs in it. Considering the different degrees of donation of the person when speaking, we can refer to a superficial or social level, a personal level, and a deep level of relationship. By *superficial* level, we refer to communication that usually occurs with people we hardly know, so it will be basic and based on an exchange of information: references to the weather, basic information to indicate whether a task has been carried out or not,

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<sup>2</sup> Prior to verbal language, we find the unarticulated sounds of a newborn in the form of gurgling or babbling, as well as expressions typical of childhood, such as crying and smiling, a way of communicating.

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etiquette and politeness, etc. By *personal* level, we mean the type of exchange that takes place between friends, family members, etc., in which, in addition to information, the sharing of opinions, dreams, concerns, etc. is quite common. Finally, a much deeper, more intimate communication can be established, in which the person offers themselves to the other, as can happen in a confidential dialogue between close friends, in a romantic relationship, etc. In-depth communication can become one of the best means of establishing adequate relationships between people, and the objective is for this type of communication to ensure that the relationship goes beyond its starting point.

The analysis of the type of conversations that take place in the family or in an educational institution can give us a clear idea of what level of communication we are at and, therefore, what the relationship that we are establishing in those areas is. It may be inappropriate for a family not to exceed the superficial level of communication, or for there to not have been a deep or personal conversation at some point with a co-worker, or between a teacher and a learner, after years spent in an educational institution. Undoubtedly, we need to make an effort when we wish to raise the level of a relationship and, among other things, to reserve time and create favorable contexts for this type of communication to occur.

### **Linguistic Expressions and Vocabulary as a Means of Recognizing the *Being* of the Learner or Educational Conditioning Factor**

After studying communication as a means of promoting interpersonal encounters, we will now focus the presentation on the brief and concise analysis of some expressions and vocabulary used by educators. These have been personally selected from among those that I have heard most frequently in my educational journey over the last twenty years. They occurred in various educational stages and turned out to be a driver in the development of this research. We will refer to the use of terms used individually by the educator in the classroom and other places, especially the teachers' room. We agree to consider that language conditions thought and, therefore, linguistic as well as psychological and affective issues are mixed into the way we express ourselves.

### ***Singularized Expressions Versus Generalizations***

A specific singularity of a human being which makes them different from other beings is that of *educability*. This quality of humans that summarizes their ability to learn becomes a reinforcement for the educator, since they know that the nature of the learner is positioned in their favor due to the natural predisposition to be educated. From this it follows, in the words of Domínguez (2007), that we cannot say what the learner is, but rather what they are being, since the learner is a being *in fieri* and, therefore, they can change. Sometimes this ability to change is obscured, for example by such the intensity of an acquired vice or bad habit, advanced age, etc.

The use of labels or adjectives frequently associated with the same learner (smart, lazy, capable, incapable, etc.) is contradictory, as well as the generalizations that refer to what the person *is* and not to what the person *is currently being*, as this may change the following day. For example, it would be convenient to modify or replace the frequent expression “you are lazy” or “they are lazy” with something more objective: “This is the third day this week that you haven’t done your homework, you’re behaving like a lazy person.”

Going a little further, we should add the convenience of using only terms related to the educational world which can help with more objective evaluations. For example, it’s common to hear in evaluations and teacher meetings expressions such as “She’s very nice,” “He’s a bore,” or “She’s not a trouble-maker in class.” However, none of these expressions – just to name a few – appear in the evaluation criteria for an area or subject, and moreover, they can diminish the objectivity regarding the learner’s behavior according to the teacher’s sensitivity. The vocabulary could be adjusted more specifically in relation to observable events: “If a classmate asks him for a favor, he usually says yes,” “She is polite,” “He makes an effort to ask questions afterwards,” “She hits her classmates in secret,” “He doesn’t speak in class during explanations – therefore, he doesn’t interrupt – nor does he ask or intervene when it is time to do so,” etc. As can be seen, all these references are specific, can become more positive over time, and in no way condition the person’s being, although we cannot deny

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the importance of the acquisition of habits (virtues/vices). Thus, greater respect for the learner's dignity is considered since we avoid closing doors to the possibility of real change in the learner.

### ***Positive Language Versus Disqualification***

Destroying is very simple; constructing is not so simple. The person is called to apply themselves, to "go beyond" (Domínguez, 2007, p. 9); however, the effort is valued little, and on occasion we find learners who seem to have already reached their limit despite their young age. The expressions "No one can handle him" or "She's hopeless" can often be heard in nurseries or high school meetings. Some educators, such as Morales (2011), are convinced that a hero sleeps inside each young person and that the purpose of education is to awaken them:

Only on the basis of not being afraid to demand a lot, and of not getting tired of always insisting, is the young person able to climb the three steps that the perfect education entails. It is about trusting the person – despite the negative appearances that would lead us to abandon the educational effort – and trusting their possibilities; counting on their freedom to be realistic. He doesn't want to today, maybe tomorrow he will. Trusting the person and being available, accessible, gathering the required patience mentioned above. Expressions such as "It seems that now you do not want to talk-collaborate-rectify and I respect that; if you change your mind later I am here to help you." We could examine a number of positive or negative expressions in a teachers' meeting, whether the comments were constructive or non-constructive, what the general view of the learners is according to the vocabulary we use, etc.

### ***Silence, Listening, and Greeting***

As the last element to consider in this section on expressions of the educational reality that can help to better consider the unique dignity of the student, we propose an educational element that is frequently

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forgotten: silence, referring to the educator's ability to keep silent when appropriate, as well as an expression of respect. This has nothing to do with complicit silences or those resulting from malaise. Rather, we are referring to silence as opportunity, as prudence. Educating is about striking a difficult balance – nobody said it would be easy – given the richness and weakness of the person. It can be a short amount of time in which the value of each person is considered, and therefore the child is attended to and listened to on the playground, or an adolescent who expresses their anger or something that interests them – even though the learner may have difficulty realizing their interest in the subject in question. It helps to look at how the person is being attended to at that time, if other matters are postponed and attention is focused, if a phone call is happening at the same time, if the current task at hand is not interrupted, if appointments are postponed, etc. Working on active listening can be a training topic for educators and, above all, its practice can be a concrete way of respecting the learner, knowing that it is convenient to manage the time available realistically.

Greetings should be basic and simple: they are not merely a demonstration of courtesy or good manners, they are also a way of showing the other that we have made ourselves present for them, with all that that entails for the other person, as explained above. The tone of the greeting should be basic and simple when dealing with the recognition of others, since it is not only a measure of courtesy or good manners, but a way of showing others that we have made ourselves present to them, as has already been explained, that we recognize them and we connect with them with our presence, as opposed to ignoring them.

## **Conclusion**

After having mentioned authors who support the notion of a person as a being who is open to reality, we consider that this approach sheds some light on how to establish relationships with different beings and to conduct them conveniently. We have focused on interpersonal,

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that is, on relationships between human beings, between peers, although the appropriate modes of relationship have not been exhaustively analyzed here.

With a certain clarity about who we are, we feel more confident in knowing where to go and how to guide education. In the educational context, this conviction leads us to conclude that a quality education – so often proclaimed – can only be one that responds to what the person is and is called to be. In this research we have considered some expressions that take place in the communication of educational encounters and we conclude by stating that they affect the recognition of the person, specifically, the learner. With the desire to contribute to the better recognition of students' being, we have offered some concrete aspects, such as the use or not of generalizations, positive vocabulary, and expressions of trust giving opportunities, silence, or greeting, which can be taken as guidelines to deepen education through respect for others. It is apparently a simple task, and one readily available to educators and schools without the need for vast resources, yet it is also complex due to habits to the contrary and due to the lack, on occasion, of the deep recognition of the value of the person.

In turn, the necessary provisions to be able to assume the appropriate ways in relation to treatment and interaction with students may require training in aspects such as deepening the knowledge of human nature or active listening, among other things. We believe our reflection can offer a proposal that is specific for teachers and well-founded in our opinion, while simultaneously rich in possibilities – like people themselves – when establishing interpersonal relationships.

Finally, we conclude by highlighting that throughout the paper we have delved into aspects that were only touched on above and that may constitute new research opportunities. This includes the importance of the *presence* of other people, which connects with us and which does not ignore us. Our recognition of this presence is important in understanding the value of *being*, and this is not something arbitrary or that can be freely chosen: we need one another for our own development. It is human nature.



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