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Sensory-based transmethodology in practice research

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Abstract

In this article, I present a sensory-based transmethodological research approach based on body-phenomenological conceptualizations of embodied memory and lived experiences, and on cultural-historical conceptualizations of modes of socializing behavior and mediating means as the nexus for personal learning and development. The transmethodology combines sensory methods to study individual research participants' lived experiences and describe them in detail, and methods to study how these same individuals use sociocultural mediating means in communication and to make meaning of their lived experiences as participants in social communities of practice. The particular methodology was developed during practice research, where we as a research team engaged in embodied and contemplative practices together with student teachers in Denmark to explore how they experienced the effects of contemplative practices on their encounters with students, colleagues, or parents in challenging situations during their

education and in school practice as newly educated teachers. The practices of the sensory-based transmethodology created a corpus of qualitative data with the potential to transform our ideas about relationship-building and education.

Keywords: Sensory-Based Transmethodology; Interview; Embodied Knowledge; Lived Experience; Phenomenology; Culture Psychology, Cultural-Historical Activity-Theory.

Introduction

In this article, I outline and discuss a transtheoretical sensory-based transmethodology to study lived experiences as perceived and transformed in sociocultural practices involving intersubjective encounters. By transtheoretical I understand research approaches that transgress application of theories as defining the topics of study. Instead, transtheoretical research include awareness of and reflections on how different theoretical approaches contribute to the constitution of the studied phenomena (Khawaja & Kousholt, 2021, p. 4). Such reflections may produce transtheoretical approaches and transmethodological research, that transcend limits often defined by certain relations between ontology, epistemology, theory, and method (as in Shiels et.al., 2021). In doing so, transmethodological research transverse dichotomies and familiar splits between different methods and different theoretical conceptualizations (Khawaja & Kousholt, 2021, p. 4).

The sensorybased transmethodology I present in this article was developed during a longitudinal practice-research study of student teachers' experiences with contemplative practices and 'relational competences' in a teacher education project running 2012-2016 at VIA University College in Denmark. The aim of study emerged during our first year as participant researchers. We – the research team from the Danish School of Education,

Aarhus University (DPU, AU) – experienced contemplative practices and theories in the teacher education course with our bodies and senses as well as in conversations and interactions with student teachers, and we experienced how they applied terminologies introduced in the education. It appeared significant to study their sensory and bodily experiences and how meanings of these experiences were articulated and produced in their use of mediating means in their community of practice.

To enable this study, the transtheoretical approach integrates a body-phenomenology framework focusing on lived, sensory, and embodied experiences, including transient and often pre-reflexive dynamics of meaning-making (Merleau-Ponty, 2014/1962; Fuchs, 2011, 2016), and a sociocultural and activity-based framework focusing on societal motives for activities (Leont'ev, 1983) and sociocultural mediating means (Vygotsky, 1986) that scaffold meaning-making and intentional orientation.

A body-phenomenology-based methodology enables study of subjective and lived sensory experiences, and relevant research methods therefore invite individual subjects to explore and describe in detail their lived experiences by conducting interviews (Petit-Mengin & Bitbol, 2009). A sociocultural and activity-theory-based methodology enables study of individuals' participation and motives in societal practice, as well as the functions of mediating means, and relevant research methods therefore explore individual subjects' participation in social communities of practice, including their use of mediating means, by conducting observations and/or interviews (Lave & Wenger, 1997; Vygotsky 1994).

The transmethodology developed in the project aimed to study how participants in a specific sociocultural practice experienced this practice as affecting their perceptions of challenging working situations and thereby the repertoire of activities and actions available to them in these situations. The methodology based on body-phenomenology

calls for methods to study individual subjects' experiences through introspection and description in sensory detail. The methodology based on sociocultural and activity theory calls for methods to study participation and communication in social communities of practice. By transgressing the differences between these two approaches, the transmethodology I present in this article combines both methods to study individual research participants' lived experiences and describe them in sensory detail and methods to study how these same individuals use sociocultural mediating means in communication and to make meaning of their lived experiences as participants in social communities of practice.

The research participants' embodied experiences were of particular interest because we were studying a course within a broader educational program that included a focus on contemplative practices. We – the research team from DPU, AU – were interested to learn how these practices affected the participants' experiences and perceptions of themselves and others, and the repertoire of actions available to them when faced with challenging working situations.

The theories and concepts introduced during the educational program and this specific course offered a terminology for labeling experiences, but we wanted to learn about the participants' various sensory, embodied perceptions and experiences in practical settings rather than simply studying how they applied this terminology. We therefore developed the sensory-based interview based on a body-phenomenological onto-epistemology and conceptualizations of embodied memory and a dynamic unconscious (Fuchs, 2011), and on a cultural-historical ontology and conceptualizations of modes of socializing behavior (our term for 'socializing methods of behavior' in Leont'ev, 1983) and mediating means

as the nexus for personal learning and development (Leont'ev, 1983; Vygotsky, 1986).

Based on these approaches, we designed a method that uses mediating means to:

- Enable embodied memories of subjective experiences, articulate in sensory form by drawing the recalled situations, verbally describe and share reflections with peers – to explore lived experiences and highlight diversity and consensus regarding the role of relational competences and contemplative practices in teacher education.

I describe the relational project in teacher education in section 1, while the study's theory, methodology and methods are detailed in section 2. Section 3 outlines the analytical approach, with findings presented in section 4. Finally, section 5 presents reflections on how this transmethodology relates to participants' experiences of 'authenticity' and 'relational awareness' in intersubjective encounters.

Section 1: The relational project in teacher education

The project studied here was part of a teacher education program and involved a special course focusing on the development of relational competence, which is a term used to denote teachers' ability to deal with difficult interactions and build supportive relationships with students (Juil & Jensen, 2002). A systematic review of research on teacher competences in 2008 found relational competence to be equally as important as subject competence and classroom management competence (Nordenbo, Larsen, Tiftikci, & Østergaard, 2008). Combined with an increase in the number of newly educated teachers in Denmark leaving the profession after a short time, reporting that they found the job too relationally demanding and stressful, this led to the launch of the 'relational project' in 2012.

This project sought to develop knowledge regarding *how* to equip student teachers with relationship-building skills and 'relational competences' in addition to the more well-established

teaching of curricular knowledge and classroom management competences (Jennings, 2011; Jensen et al., 2015; Laursen & Nielsen, 2016; Nordenbo et al., 2008). This ‘relational project’ sought to expand student teachers’ theoretical knowledge, as well as encourage embodied recognition of relational experiences, to a greater extent than in existing teacher education programs, which combine courses in pedagogical theory and subject content with practical training and experience in the form of several teaching placements (Jensen et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2017).

The relational project included contemplative and embodied practices that went beyond existing teacher education practices at that time. An experienced psychologist and psychotherapist (Helle Jensen) planned and taught the course, introducing theories of relational competence and associated practices alongside selected co-teachers from the NGO *Foreningen Børns Livskundskab* (Children’s Life Skills). Instructors from VIA University College’s bachelor degree program for teachers were also involved in the planning, realization, and development of the project, as were principals and teachers at the schools hosting the participating student teachers during teaching placements as they were expected to exhibit relational competences themselves in their teaching, acting as role models. Our research team from DPU, AU also participated in course activities, as did researchers from VIA Teaching and Learning at VIA University College, the latter focusing on the instructional methods and strategies developed within the project.

The teacher training program in Denmark lasts four years and combines a theory-based curriculum with one or two teaching placements each year at primary and lower secondary schools or other educational institutions. The theory-based curriculum focuses on school subjects, didactics and psychology of learning; during teaching placements, meanwhile, student teachers are expected to observe and learn from experienced teachers, as well as ‘learning by doing,’ gradually playing a more active and independent role in lessons as they progress through the program.

The special course on relational competence was included as part of the standard teacher education program for all four years (2012-2016)¹ and comprised knowledge about relational approaches to developmental psychology, trust and emotional triggers. The course included

¹ The project was a collaboration with The Danish Association for promoting life wisdom in children.

physical embodied training involving breathing exercises, guided relaxing ‘body scan’ exercises, energetic exercises and group exercises focused on balance, interdependency and trust (Jensen, 2014). The embodied training sought to develop the student teachers’ awareness of the intra-activity of their past experiences and their perceived affects, experiences and understandings in present interactions (Nielsen & Laursen, 2017, 2020).

Monthly one-day seminars included introductions to psychological theories, discussions on pedagogy and contemplative training. These seminars typically began with a short introduction and a physical activity, such as a group dance, followed by the presentation and discussion of a particular theory. The presented theories concerned topics such as the importance of relational patterns based on mentalization and the development of self in children’s interactions with parents (Fonagy & Target, 2003; Stern, 1998), or how adults, through their ability to become aware of their own response patterns and thus adopt the child’s perspective, can also adapt their interactions with children to give them opportunities to develop new types of relationships (see Jensen et al., 2015).

The seminars included guided meditation focusing on breath and/or the body and activities with inter-corporelational contact, such as the student teachers giving each other gentle neck and shoulder massages while being prompted to be mindful of their own sensations and experiences. After such guided activities, the participants were invited to reflect on their personal experiences and to connect these experiences to situations in which they had experienced difficult relationships, whether at school or in another context. The student teachers shared such reflections in groups before applying the previously presented theory to help them understand their experiences and those of others.

The relational project included a number of project-specific concepts. One was the phrase to be ‘60% at home in oneself – 40% in the other,’ a term used to remind participants to be mindfully aware of themselves (60%) as a basis to care for themselves and to be mindfully aware of the other (40%) in a relation. The 60/40% framing was applied to help the student teachers to carefully cope in challenging situations. In this way, the contemplative training presented

participants—individually, in pairs, and in groups—with embodied and conceptual knowledge about relational psychology in teaching and training practices once a month for four years.

Participants

We studied experiences in two classes of student teachers in Denmark that were randomly selected by the management team at VIA University College to be part of the relational project while attending the teacher training program (Jensen & al., 2015; Nielsen & Laursen, 2017). For the first three years, 49 student teachers participated – with a slight majority of female students (Nielsen, 2017). The majority of the participants were ethnic Danes in their 20s; fewer than ten participants had other ethnic backgrounds. In the fourth and final year of the teacher training program, 26 of the student teachers chose to continue the course as an elective, with nine of them participating in individual interviews almost a year after their graduation. The criterion for selecting these nine participants was that they taught at a public primary and lower secondary school – the kind of schools which were struggling to attract and retain newly educated teachers. Among the remaining participants, several had chosen to work in the diverse field of special needs education, some had chosen to pursue a master’s degree or a career in another sector, and others had found teaching jobs abroad, making it difficult to conduct interviews.

Section 2: Theory, methodology and methods

We studied the student teachers’ experiences of how contemplative practices affected their relational competences during their participation in the relational project and, later, as newly qualified teachers working in school settings. This included their views regarding the significance of the project’s integration of contemplative and embodied practices, such as mindfulness meditation, for their intersubjective encounters in school settings. In the following, the project’s theory, methodology and development of the sensory-based interview approach are described in more detail.

Theory

A body-phenomenology approach provides a coherent theoretical framework for conceptualizing and studying sensory experiences, emotions and thoughts in intersubjective encounters (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014; Petit-Mengin & Bitbol, 2009). Through this lens, persons always orient themselves towards the world through an intentional and first-person perspective towards the world, while other persons, objects, actions and phenomena in the world simultaneously appeal for the person's attention (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). Attention is considered essentially responsive, and a person responds to changes in the world by attending to the new situation (Waldenfels, 2011).

Intersubjective encounters involve ongoing inter-bodily and intra-bodily processes of bodily resonance as the basic dynamic “which conveys an intuitive understanding of others' emotions in our embodied engagement with them” (Fuchs, 2016, p. 195). This intuitive understanding originates from unconscious processes of mutual modification of bodily and emotional conditions that influence the person's emotional perception of the situation and are articulated in their expressions and readiness for specific actions (Fuchs, 2011, 2016). These unconscious processes of resonance are vital for empathy, understanding and communication, and as interpersonal encounters always affect us, challenging encounters can stress and overburden professionals.

In school settings, students can behave in ways that draw the teacher's attention to phenomena unrelated to the intended learning outcomes – the teacher's feelings of anger or helplessness, for example. Such emotional responses may result in actions based on the teacher's immediate interpretation of the situation, formed by previous experiences with similar situations (Stern, 1998; Fuchs, 2016). The body-phenomenological tradition provides rich insights and conceptualizations of subjective experiences, and this approach does not view subjects as only responsive, but as intentionally orienting themselves towards meanings in context. Meanwhile,

how the sociocultural and historical context relates to these subjective experiences has received less attention within this approach.

Therefore, I turned to the tradition of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), which offers an understanding of how human relations and individual actions are tied to a cultural and historical context through their relation to common societal goals that give meaning to objects, activity systems and mediating means (Leont'ev, 1983, 1994). The activity theory branch of this tradition can explain how experiences of intersubjective encounters in school are nested in societally motivated activities and operations in modes of behavior (Leont'ev, 1994). In this approach, it is through participation that a person acquires experience with what are culturally considered to be meaningful operations or activities. External means and signs such as concepts and models are transformed into internal signs that can be used to mediate the subject's own attention, resonance and behavior, and to focus on the aims of building friendly relationships or the sensation of breathing.

Within the sociocultural psychology branch of cultural-historical theory, Vygotsky's emphasis on mediating means gave rise to new ways of understanding the interconnections between culture and the person (Edwards, 2005; Vygotsky, 1986). In Vygotsky's definition, the term conscious awareness denotes "an act of consciousness whose object is the activity of consciousness itself" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 190). In this approach, the use of mediating means, such as artifacts, tools and particularly language, changes a person's mental processes. It allows reconfigurations of internal psychological structures and, in turn, is externalized in the person's actions on the world (Edwards, 2005). For Vygotsky, becoming consciously aware of the activity of consciousness involves using cultural mediating means (Vygotsky, 1986), a term denoting cultural and mental tools such as words, concepts, ideas, procedures, models and metaphors. Deliberate modes of behavior, including embodied practices such as mindful breathing and other meditative practices that can transform the person's state of being and actions, also serve as mediating means (Nielsen & Petersen, 2021).

The onto-epistemology of body-phenomenology and cultural-historical activity-theory, I argue, shares an ethos of alterity. With the ethos of alterity, the individual is understood as other-affected, dialogical, and basically related-to others and the world. Others are necessary to be and become ‘a self’ (Berteau, 2019). An enabling element “to the self to be a self” (Berteau, 2019, p. 8) is the sociocultural medium; that is, the space of meanings delimited in practice by ideas, habits, artifacts, preunderstandings, values etc. The sociocultural medium works as a ‘passive structuring’ of the space of meanings and thus entails a ‘passive moment’ that characterizes the categorical limits of an individual’s activity. The other-affected individual in an ethos of alterity is inside-outside permeable, relationally becoming and mutually formative with others, with a context-sensitiveness of values and attributes, and in this ethos, the “individuals are culturally-historically situated body-mind-spirit beings” (Berteau, 2019, pp. 8-9).

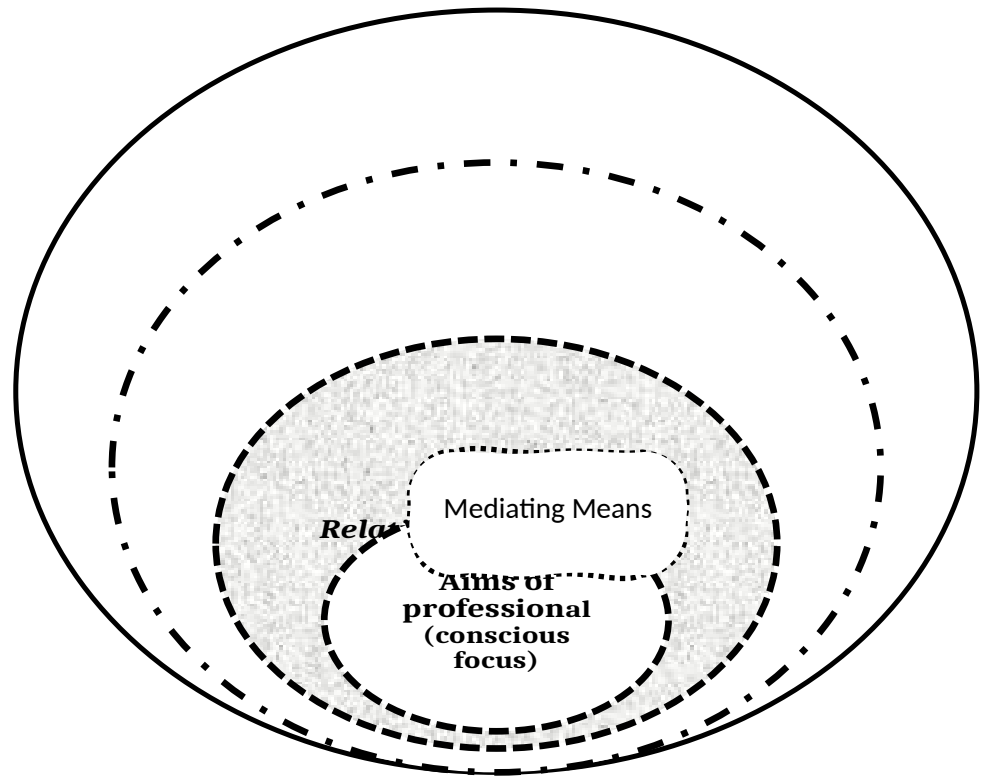
Berteau’s reflections on the medium structure as enabling the becoming of ‘selves’ through participation in a space of meanings nuances and widens the understanding of mediating means as tools for specific actions (Berteau, 2019). The medium structure is why mediating means can be experienced as personally and socially meaningful. It includes societally motivated arrangements such as material conditions, power relations, institutionalized positions, and procedures, as well as habitual activities and the use of material and mental tools, rituals and traditions, including expectations regarding the behavior, participation, and attitudes of persons and how they articulate affectivity and emotional conditions.

In the CHAT tradition, there has been little attempt to conceptualize intuitive, unconscious and pre-reflective processes or dynamics between affective, unconscious and conscious processes and reactions (Tart, 1975; Køster & Winther-Lindqvist, 2018; Vedfelt, 2017). Applying this perspective, human experience, sense-making and interaction are culturally specific, and it makes no sense to search for ‘abstract’ definitions of subject perspective or intersubjectivity, as some phenomenologists have done (see Zahavi, 2003). Instead, definitions of subject perspectives and intersubjectivity should relate to praxis and to how a central activity creates the foundation from which experience and intersubjectivity develop in nonlinear, dynamic ways (Garte, 2016, p. 259).

I find this critique answered by the phenomenological account of the sociocultural saturation of all the forms of subjective experience and intersubjectivity (Køster & Winther-Lindqvist, 2018). The phenomenological contributions to theorizing the embodied, pre-reflective and pre-verbal ‘being-with’ of existence is a dimension that Køster & Winther-Lindqvist suggest requires further theorization within the cultural-historical tradition because sociocultural influences deeply saturate the level of embodied and pre-reflective experience. They provide an outline of the pre-reflective embodied dimension of individual existence by “introducing a concept of *historical selfhood* to account for the processes whereby we become concretely individuated on an embodied level” (Køster & Winther-Lindqvist, 2018, p. 1).

To study the lived experience as it is saturated by specific (sociocultural) practices, the phenomenologists van Manen and Li have suggested an epistemology of practice and a language to objectify and reflect on the sensed and felt pathic dimensions in lived experiences: “...the terms empathy and sympathy bring out that this understanding is not primarily gnostic, cognitive, intellectual, technical – but rather that it is, indeed, pathic, that means, relational, situational, corporeal, temporal, actional.” (van Manen & Li, 2002, p. 219)

Mediating means of becoming consciously aware of responsive processes, perceptions and other pathic dimensions of experiences in the intersubjective encounter could be reflexive modes of behavior and a language to objectify and reflect on the pathic dimensions in lived experiences.

Figure 1*A transtheoretical lens on medium structure*

Note. Figure 1 illustrates how professionals work in space of meanings delimited in medium structure: in accordance with aims in specific contexts, situations and organizations with local participants (and cultures), nested in societal goals, conditions and cultures. In every encounter, the intentionality of the professional is based in the medium structure, and resting on this, the professional may have a conscious focus and aim, for example guided by mediating means such as a theory or curriculum. However, relational responsivity with unconscious dynamics in challenging encounters may disturb or overburden the professional and put her good work and wellbeing at risk. Mediating means can guide behavior and understanding to deal with relational responsivity in the space of meanings according to the aims and goals of the professional (personal level), the institution (local context level) and the culture (societal level).

Through this lens, the subjects' intuitive understanding of lived experiences and intentional orientation is guided by the medium structure and the use of mediating means such as modes of behavior and mental tools like a particular terminology to objectify pathic dimensions. Such terminology can potentially support reflections on what a person wants to achieve and how to do so in accordance with the goals of the institutionalized activity. In the studied project, for example, this involved participants telling themselves to accept, attempt to understand, and build supportive relationships with students, and remembering to breathe and then taking a series of deep breaths. These mediating means and modes of behavior can offer an opportunity to observe acts of consciousness, such as experiences of embodied responsivity, as well as usually unconscious memories and intentions. In the study, this transtheoretical lens prompted the transmethodological considerations detailed below.

Methodological considerations

Applying the transtheoretical lens, situations and encounters at school will always be experienced from a first-person perspective and include participants' embodied memories and dynamic unconscious perceptions, affects, emotions and immediate interpretations. Participants' understandings of situated meaning in the medium structure develop from their pre-reflective embodied knowledge and affective and hermeneutic repertoires, which may be perceived as transient sensations but are difficult to articulate in language (Køster & Winther-Lindqvist, 2018; van Manen & Li, 2002; Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009). Therefore, it is not only relevant to study curricula and teaching programs that define learning objectives and describe activities and teaching methods for achieving these objectives, because it is the medium structure of teaching practice, including content, activities, conditions, participation and participants' backgrounds, that enables and delimits the space of meanings for participants' experiences (and learning) (Berteau, 2019). An approach of sensory ethnography proved useful for studying what can be experienced in teaching practice.

According to Pink (2007), ethnography is not a method but a methodology:

... a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on ethnographers' own experiences. [...] It should account not only for the observable, recordable realities that may be translated into written texts, but also for objects, visual images, the immaterial and the sensory nature of human experience and knowledge (Pink, 2007, p. 22).

Applying this lens, the research team participated in the relational project seminars side by side with the student teachers during contemplative activities and group exercises (methods and design are described in the next sub-section). We explored how student teachers participating in the project experienced these activities and exercises, and the spaces of meaning and agency that may emerge in intersubjective encounters. Our research position was mainly as participant observers during the first years: we joined in with course activities and group reflections and took part side by side with the other participants (Pink, 2007; Stake, 2003). We presented ourselves by name and affiliation like everyone else, and when there was a dance, a massage or a meditation, we danced, massaged and meditated, following the instructors' guidance like the other participants.

Nonetheless, we were visible as researchers – taking notes during breaks and asking student teachers if we could talk to them about their experiences – and after the first five months, we invited the student teachers to write small texts in response to a few written questions. We followed up by presenting the main themes in their responses to the participants and invited their reflections. During the project we shifted between positions as participant observers, interviewers, and presenters of the results we created from their contributions. Each time we presented results, we asked how they interpreted them and had opportunities, through dialogues and group reflections, to correct, nuance, and further develop the knowledge production and findings.

As observers participating in the course activities, we had opportunities to observe activities and participants' articulations, and to observe our own embodied and perceptual experiences of the course activities. We were affected as participant observers – affected by the medium structure and space of meanings integral to the practices – as soon as we joined these

practices. Our observations were founded in the space of meanings given with the processes of participation; they were embodied, perceptual, and difficult to describe in language. Perceived sensations, affectivity, emotions and immediate interpretations are all associated with the lived experience and situation as perceived by all senses (Vedfelt, 2020).

Based on our knowledge and experiences in the project we sought to nurture a practice of introspection to approach the perceived and embodied memories of project participants, and mediating means to articulate their sensory perceptions and immediate interpretations. Experiences of memories with multi-sensory perceptions appear to be afforded by relaxation practices such as yoga and mindfulness (Hansen, 2016; Sadler-Smith, 2015; Vedfelt, 2017). As the participants in the relational project were introduced to guided bodily relaxation exercises (termed ‘body scans’), and some of them compared these activities to similar experiences practicing yoga, we assumed their space of meanings included such practices.

According to Pink (2007), it is important that the researcher explores what participants find meaningful in ethnographic studies. To this end, our methodological reflections took into account that ‘body scans’ appeared to be a meaningful activity for participants in the course. We therefore decided to conduct a gentle guided body scan before asking participants to recall significant examples of contemplative practices affecting their intersubjective encounters during teaching placements. As we wanted to study their subjective embodied experiences, we employed mediating means to provide opportunities for participants to engage with their embodied sensory experiences.

Sensory articulations of unconscious and embodied memories are documented in arts therapy using many different mediating means, such as music (Lindvang, 2007), dance (Ravn, 2014) and drawing (Jensen, 2012; Larsen, 1989). In Denmark, drawing is an independent subject as well as an activity integrated in many assignments in other subjects in primary schools. Furthermore, as in many other countries, Danish children usually have access to drawing implements at home and in daycare, so most people in Denmark have at least rudimentary drawing skills. In the context of teacher education, some of the project participants had taken courses in

visual arts and drawing as part of the curriculum, and several talked about their experiences writing and sketching simple images on the blackboard during placements.

A simple drawing can be a visual mediating means to articulate the participant's sensory perceptions in a given context, including the (often unnoticed) perspective of the perceiver. Such drawings can serve as an object of reference for spoken language associations and descriptions in sensory detail of the illustrator's recollections of a particular experience. We therefore considered visual articulations in the form of simple drawings meaningful for the participants, and useful as mediating means in the study.

To study how the participants used the mediating means of language to reflexively articulate teachers' relational competences, we decided to conduct focus group interviews. In such settings, the individual participants' drawings could scaffold their individual memory, and become objects of perception and affect, encouraging associations and shared reflections within the group, articulated and negotiated through the mediating means of language.

Design and methods

The research design included participant observations, participants' questionnaire responses, and sensory-based focus-group interviews. In 2014, we conducted interviews with 22 student teachers, divided into groups of 3-4. Of these 22 student teachers, 12 participated in the contemplative teacher education project while the remaining 10 were student teachers from a standard teacher education program and served as a control group for comparing experiences among participants and non-participants ('First Round'). In 2016, interviews were conducted with 16 project participants in groups of 3-5 ('Second Round'), including the 12 that were interviewed in the first round. Finally, almost a year after graduation, individual interviews were conducted with 9 participants in 2017 ('Third Round').

Figure 2*Methods and participants in the study*

Year	Project participants		Methods		Research participants
2012-2013	2 classes, teacher ed.	49 student teachers 90% ethnic Danes	Participant observation	Questionnaire	49 student teachers
2013-2014	2 classes, teacher ed.	49 student teachers	Participant observation	Focus group interview	12 project 10 control
2014-2015	2 classes, teacher ed.	49 student teachers	Participant observation		
2015-2016	Project class elective	26 student teachers	Participant observation	Focus group interview	16 project
Spring 2017	Teaching in school			Individual interview	9 graduates

Note. The design is illustrated in figure 2, which provides an overview of the methods and numbers of participants in the study of the relational project. One group of research participants is labelled ‘control’ (2014) and comprises 10 student teachers attending the standard teacher education program, but not the relational project.

During the four-year teacher education program, we observed and actively participated in monthly course activities, as described above. During the course in relational competences, the instructors introduced theories about good and mindful contact with students, and how a good teacher should be able to improve relationships they consider unsatisfying and to motivate students and engage them in school activities. They also led various activities, including contemplative

exercises and interactive exercises, in which the participants were guided to explore their embodied, sensory and affective experiences. As participant observers, we began by having informal conversations with participants, learning how they grappled with the theories they were taught and their desire to do well. In these conversations, the student teachers talked about how they hoped to establish a good rapport with students, build positive relationships and become good teachers.

We sought to study the student teachers' experiences with relational competences during teaching placements, including their transient sensations, emotions, wonders and difficulties, rather than to assess whether they lived up to their ambitions of being good teachers. Based on the methodological reflections above and an ethical responsibility to create knowledge without harming research participants (Fog, 2004; Mathiassen, 2011), we designed the sensory-based interview approach to explore how the course participants experienced contemplative embodied practices affecting their intersubjective encounters with students in school practice (Nielsen & Laursen, 2020; Nielsen, 2020).

Sensory-based interviews

The interviews in focus groups and with individual student teachers sought to produce knowledge about the participants' experiences in practice during teaching placements, and we therefore asked them to recall and describe such experiences and situations in sensory detail rather than asking them to assess or evaluate specific activities or approaches. During the focus group interviews, participants were also asked to depict these incidents in drawings², which were then used to facilitate associations, memories and shared reflections.

² The individual interviews did not include body scans and drawings, and participants appeared to recall many detailed sensory perceptions they associated with the relational project. They may have become acquainted with the sensory-based interview form through previous participation; however, this, and the format of the interviews with individual participants, is not something I will explore in further detail here.

The interviews took place at the teacher training college in a room often used by students for group work, meaning that participants were familiar with the surroundings as well as each other. Each interview session began with a brief presentation round. The interviewers then outlined the purpose of the interview, underlined that any information provided was confidential and informed that any published results would be anonymized. The participants agreed to keep to themselves any information they became privy to during the interviews within the group. The intention was to create a safe space where participants could speak openly with full confidentiality.

Participants were introduced to the format of the sensory-based focus group interview and the objective of conducting a brief body scan was explained: to ease their recollections of significant incidents during their recent student teaching placement. As most people recall several incidents when asked to recall a particular type of situation (Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009), they would be asked to select a specific incident for closer consideration. They would then be asked to sketch this incident individually and in silence before being invited one at a time to talk about their drawing and the incident it depicts. We explained that once all participants had shared their experiences, we would facilitate a group reflection process. Very few participants questioned their ability to draw a recalled incident. Participants were each provided with crayons in a wide selection of colors and given a sheet of A3 paper, which we suggested they fold so as to have a page for each of two incidents we would ask them to recall.

After this introduction, the interviewer guided a 2-3-minute body-scan meditation, with participants seated around a conference table. The room was silent despite having a glass wall towards a corridor with regular passersby. Participants sat quietly with their eyes closed while the body scan guided their attention towards their feet, up their legs, back, stomach, chest, hands, arms, shoulders, neck and face, sensing their body, emotions and thoughts. They were then invited to think back to the school where they had spent their recent student teaching placement, remembering how it felt to arrive at the school for the first time, their perceptions of the building, corridors, classrooms, colleagues and students. This took approximately 6-7 minutes. They were

asked if they could recall visual impressions, smells, atmospheres, emotions, persons, actions and situations.

The participants were asked to recall an incident they found challenging or difficult—which could involve a relation to a particular student, a group or an entire class—and then an incident where they felt they had been a good teacher. They were guided to recall and select specific incidents:

“Observe who was involved, where in the room it took place, what you sensed in your body, sensory impressions such as sounds, light, smells – and observe what you did and how you felt. Give it a little time so you can recall it in sensory detail. If it is difficult to recall [this situation] and another incident comes to the fore, then explore that situation. If several incidents appear in your mind, then select one to recall in detail. What happened – what did you do – what did you sense – how did the situation emerge?” (Transcript abbreviated, interview with group 3, 2014)

To end the process of recollection, participants were guided to become aware of their breathing, body, contact with the floor, and the surroundings. They were then invited to draw the first and second incident (6-7 minutes in silence), followed by two rounds in which participants described each of the two incidents. The group did not share their reflections verbally during these rounds, but while listening, participants articulated and mirrored sensations and experiences using movements, mimicry and emotional expressions such as smiling or frowning. After the presentation rounds, the participants shared their reflections and interpretations of the incidents and experiences with the group.

In summary: The sensory-based interviews conducted in focus groups were preceded by a guided body-scan meditation to help participants relax and recall lived experiences before inviting them to recall a specific incident during their recent student teaching placement that involved a challenging or difficult situation with a student, group or class, and another incident in which they felt they had been a good teacher. They then had about ten minutes to sketch individual drawings

of the incidents, which were presented to the rest of the group and the interviewer. When every participant had presented their incidents, the group shared reflections and interpretations.

Section 3: Analytical approach

The study's analytical approach was thematic, inspired by Brown & Clarke (2006) and Giorgi (2009), and the (dancing) steps in articulation analysis suggested by Nielsen (2018). The process of articulation analysis resembles a dance back and forth between five procedural steps: first, a description of the general impression; second, precise descriptions of and citations from selected situations; third, close examination of selected articulations of situations and the various sensory and associative aspects of articulations; fourth, comparing descriptions of associative aspects; and fifth, reflections on and discussions of themes leading to the identification of the 'essential structure' of the analyzed phenomenon (Nielsen, 2018).

The corpus of data from the sensory-based focus group interviews included both verbal and visual articulations. The interviews were transcribed, and each transcript was read in its entirety, identifying important themes, which were then coded by the researchers (Nielsen & Laursen, 2020). Likewise, the participants' drawings were compared to their verbal presentations of the depicted incidents, and through the dance of articulation analysis, we identified symbolic and metaphorical visual articulations of knowledge in transition from embodied unconscious towards conscious understanding (Nielsen, 2018). Two researchers independently analyzed the interview transcripts in 2014, 2016 and 2017 (one of them is the author of this article). Common themes and variations among participants were identified. The analytical approach is elaborated below with examples from the data set from 2014.

In 2014, the data set included ten student teachers (one group of four and two groups of three) that were not participating in the relational project, instead following a standard teacher education program (termed 'control' in fig. 2). The same data set also included twelve student teachers participating in the relational project (three groups of four) as part of their teacher

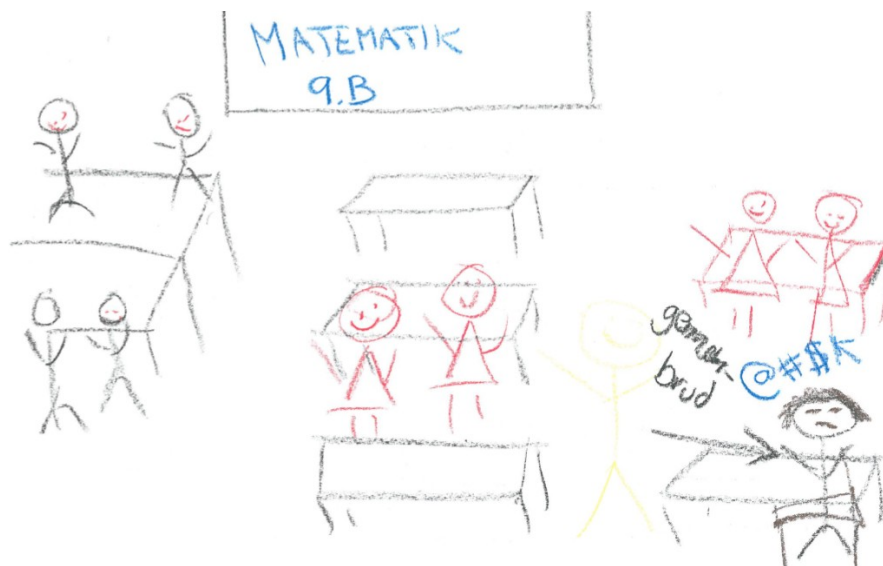
education program (termed ‘project’ in fig. 2). Across the 2014 data set, both researchers identified the theme ‘Good contact and relationships with students are important,’ articulated by student teachers in both project and control groups. In addition, we coded articulations by participants in the relational project that led to the identification of themes such as: ‘Contemplative and energetic exercises help make students pay attention to and engage in learning tasks’; ‘Contemplative exercises with mindful breathing help student teachers stay focused or restore calm’; and ‘Accepting the situation, not judging oneself or others and using the phrase “to focus 60% on myself and only 40% on the other (in the encounter)” all help student teachers cope with difficult situations. The analysis began by reading each interview in its entirety, then coding, returning to each interview to identify potential themes, reviewing coding, and looking for themes across the entire 2014 data set as recurring dance steps (Brown & Clarke, 2006; Nielsen, 2018).

The drawings depicting the participants’ recollections of different incidents were included as illustrations in the initial reading of each interview. As visual data, they lend themselves to sensory articulation analysis (Nielsen, 2018), in which coding and thematization are complemented by close examination of selected situations including verbal, bodily and visual articulations. This process begins with an awareness of and openness to the embodied sensations and affects that resonate with the visual or spoken articulation. By observing these sensations and affects, we can perceive them as embodied knowledge of being in a given situation. Being aware of our associations, such as thoughts, impulses and ideas, in relation to these sensations and affects, we can identify how some of our pre-reflexive preconceptions and unconscious experiences may contribute to how we ascribe meaning to sensory perceptions.

As an example, we can look at the drawing below by one of the participants in the relational project as part of an interview in 2014.

Figure 3

A sensory articulation of recalled incident



Note. The visual articulation presented in figure 3 was drawn by a student teacher in 2014 who recalled an incident he found challenging and in which he also felt he had been a good teacher.

The student teacher described his recollection of this incident, which occurred during a recent student teaching placement in a 5th grade class and concerned a student who refused to speak to him:

“I thought to myself: ‘This is not right—as a teacher, I must take some responsibility for this relationship.’ The first couple of times I sat near him, he didn’t talk to me at all. He wrote in his diary, which had nothing to do with math, but I ignored that. When the class was doing geometry on their computers, I praised him, perhaps too much—but then he began to open up. In the end, we had a good relationship” (Oral description by participant during an interview conducted in spring 2014, transl. from Danish by the authors Nielsen & Laursen 2017, p. 62)

The student teacher's friendly and persistent approach to the student over several days eventually contributed to a relationship that enabled supportive academic and personal interaction. This student teacher described it as a personal challenge for him to stay calm and compassionate until he had gained the student's trust, stating that the training he had received in contemplative teaching practices had equipped him to take responsibility for building a positive relationship in a challenging situation.

Following the steps of articulation analysis (Nielsen, 2018), we begin by describing what is visible in the drawing: The drawing presents an open space with a number of stick figures and what the student teacher identified as a depiction of himself, drawn in bright yellow and only barely visible. This teacher figure is standing and smiling, arms raised, with the word 'breakthrough' written in black and an arrow pointing towards the figure in the lower right corner of the drawing, who sits in a swarm of blue digital symbols. The next analytical step involves observing our associations: The black figure in the lower right corner of the drawing has an angry or sad expression on his face, unlike the other figures in the drawing. The visual articulation is used by the student teacher to remember and present the incident. In addition to his spoken descriptions, the drawing presents a metaphorical and symbolic articulation of the incident.

The third analytical step includes interpretations of what the sensory perceptions and associations evoked by the drawing and the verbal description might include, namely the pre-reflective embodied aspects of the articulated experience: The ignoring boy in black who is 'stuck' below the 'blue' symbols (association: feeling blue). The student teacher reflected on the image of himself in the drawing as almost invisible by explaining that this teaching placement was abroad in a country where there were few blond-haired people, and as he was very blond, the students called him 'yellow.' At the same time, he describes this situation as something he experienced as challenging: The boy acted as if the student teacher was not there (was invisible), so it was difficult for him to remain compassionate. The student teacher did not react according to his immediate affects and sensations in the situation, and in that sense, he was not just 'himself.' A transient sense of becoming and emerging identity as 'myself as a teacher' can be articulated in the

visual form. The thin yellow lines depicting the figure of the student teacher appear less clear and less defined than other figures in the drawing. This visual articulation adds sensory-based knowledge about ‘how fragile it was to be in this situation’ to the student teacher’s verbal description of his experience of the incident.

In the transtheory-based analysis the body-phenomenology approach constituted focus on the transient, embodied and sensory experiences articulated with bodily movements in visual form, while the CHAT-approach constituted focus on the mediating means of terminologies, drawing conventions, and social expectations, values and motives articulated in the student teachers’ reflections and explanations in group. There was an interplay between the integrative transtheory-based analysis and interpretation of the drawings, as illustrated above, and a rereading of the interview transcripts in the 2014 data set. This part of the analysis was revisited several times as we searched for and identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), more closely examining selected articulations of situations and comparing descriptions of various aspects of these articulations (Nielsen, 2018). In this part of the analysis, it appeared that some of the student teachers articulated a growing sensation of looming danger, as well as describing their attempts to address difficult relationships in school as something that it was their responsibility to deal with.

Comparing the project group with the control group, the project group described what appeared to be calming and focused embodied actions using a terminology that helped guide such actions, both in their relationships with students and for themselves. Meanwhile, the control group highlighted relationship-building as an important element of teaching practice and described intuitive actions that could help them build relationships, but they lacked a common theory and terminology to guide their actions in pursuit of these aims. This part of the analysis led to definitions of different attitudes to relationship-building, as detailed below.

Section 4: Findings

The interviewed student teachers in both the project and control groups were aware of their relationships with students, which is not surprising as teacher-student relations is a topic included in the curriculum of the standard teacher education program. However, subtle differences in the two groups' articulations when describing their experiences of positive relationship-building with students revealed different ideas regarding who is responsible for ensuring good student-teacher relations.

By carefully analyzing sensory and verbal articulations, we saw how 9 of the 10 student teachers in the control group described situations where fortuitous circumstances made them aware that approaching students in an open and friendly manner could lead to a response of heightened engagement and help build positive relationships with students. These student teachers implied they would be reluctant to make further efforts to establish a good relationship with students who did not respond in this way. As these instances depended on the students responding positively to the student teachers' open and friendly attitude, we termed them *fortuitous relationship-building* (Nielsen & Laursen, 2017).

By contrast, 10 of the 12 student teachers in the project group described situations in which they made a conscious decision to build and/or change a relationship. Some of them experienced discomfort or even panic once they had decided to contact a student or group to change a relationship, not knowing how they would react. When asked during interviews why they sought to build relationships with students during student teaching placements despite finding it an emotionally draining experience, they explained that the psychological theories³ about relationship-building they had been introduced to as part of the project were a motivational factor. As such, they expressed a conscious decision to approach students openly and invitingly, even if they found doing so a highly stressful experience and regardless of how the students initially

³ For example, theories about self-development and mentalization by Fonagy et al. (2003) and Stern (1998), as mentioned earlier.

responded. Their approach revolved around deliberate interactions with students focused on building relationships, changing unsatisfactory relationships and promoting the students' engagement in school activities. We called these incidents *intentional relationship-building* (Nielsen & Laursen, 2017).

These student teachers explained how they used contemplative practices that they had trained in the course on relational competences to calm their emotions in challenging situations. They referred to specific practices introduced during the course, such as a breathing exercise called 'the elevator exercise,' which most of them practiced as a mediating means to calm their nerves. The interviewed student teachers varied in age and gender, and prior experience with embodied practices of mindful awareness also varied among the project participants, though most of them had no experience with meditation. As a mediating means to remember and guide the contemplative embodied practices, they used terminology drawn from the project, referring to experiences of being 'at home in oneself' and 'out of oneself,' and referring to the need to be '60% aware of oneself and only 40% aware of the other in an encounter' in order to 'maintain or restore calm and balance' (Laursen & Nielsen, 2016).

In the second round of interviews (2016), hardly any of the student teachers used course terminology such as '60/40 %', other than references to mediating means such as 'breathing,' 'being myself' or 'being in the situation.' The student teachers still practiced the activities they had previously referred to using the course terminology, but these activities appeared to have become habitual modes of behavior that were now integrated in their teaching practice. In the third round of interviews (2017), conducted after graduation, the nine interviewed participants emphasized that an accepting, welcoming and supportive attitude is central for teachers, describing habitual embodied practices that support friendly interactions with colleagues, students and parents, even in demanding and difficult situations.

We consider this accepting, welcoming and supportive attitude and the participants' habitual embodied practices a form of embodied knowledge. This embodied knowledge is experienced by each student teacher in the context of their own personal encounters during their

education, with embodied activities and modes of behavior integral to the medium structure. This embodied knowledge was continually scaffolded and negotiated by sensory experiences and shared terminologies and theories in the student teachers' social community of practice during four years of education. In this way, the medium structure of teacher education and the relational project formed a strong base for each individual teacher's embodied knowledge and habitual approach as an integrated part of their educational and didactic work. Their agency in their work as teachers involved sociocultural mediating means, comprising modes of behavior (embodied contemplative practices) and symbolic means and tools (theory and terminology). This medium structure and space of meaning allowed them to become aware of their relational responsivity and act with relational awareness to build supportive relationships with and engage students in school (Nielsen & Laursen, 2020; Nielsen & Petersen, 2021).

Applying the sensory-based transmethodology, the interviews directed focus to the sensory experiences of the participants, and the findings demonstrate how student teachers were able to become aware of and intentionally apply modes of behavior to care for, deal with and transform their embodied responsivity and unconscious patterns of resonance in encounters in school.

Section 5: Reflections on the sensory-based transmethodology

The transmethodology in this study is based on a transtheoretical perspective and an interest in the 'ordinary,' understood as the lifeworld experienced by participants with both conscious and unconscious motives and intentions driving and leading their potential agency in practice. There is a growing body of practice-based knowledge concerning how unconscious dynamics influence the experiences and potential agency of professionals working in domains such as care and education (Hess, 2016; Lindvang, 2016; Nielsen, 2020). Articulation analysis is a sensory-based introspective lens that, in line with phenomenology, considers the researcher's

sensations in the encounter with other subjects to be part of cycles of affective resonance, and therefore as potentially illuminating a shared experience (Fuchs, 2016; Vedfelt, 2017). As ‘the researcher’ and ‘the other’ are not identical (Zahavi, 2003), it is always necessary to explore how sensory experiences may or may not align with other expressions and articulations in the data corpus. As with the alternation between coding and thematization across several cycles suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006), sensory articulation analysis cycles between describing the perceivable in a drawing (or other sensory mediating means) and exploring potentially meaningful associations to qualify the definition of a theme as central in the visual articulation. The cycles of ‘description – association’ of the visual data are included in cycles of ‘coding – thematization’ of the transcribed spoken articulations.

The sensory-based interview method and articulation analysis have similarities with the typology labelled ‘romantic’ by Roulston (2010). A ‘romantic’ conception of interviewing recognizes the role and potential contribution of the interviewer to the interview: the interviewer always has their own perspective and, likewise, the ‘romantic’ interview seeks to establish a trusting relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee to let the first-person perspective of the interviewee come to the fore. In this ‘romantic’ conception of interviewing, it is assumed: “that the researchers are able to access the authentic selves of interview subjects via interview talk” (Roulston, 2010, p. 218).

However, based on the CHAT approach, we challenge this assumption of accessible authentic selves. The focus group interviews enabled embodied subjects to participate in societally motivated activities and communicate through sociocultural mediating means with researchers and fellow students to describe, interpret, and negotiate meanings in actions. This part of the method has similarities with the typology labelled ‘constructionist’ by Roulston (2010). A ‘constructionist’ conception of interviewing considers the data to be co-constructed by the participants, and the material allows researchers to investigate how the participants construct meaning through their engagement in attributing, explaining, defining, and otherwise making sense of the situations and events they talk about (Roulston, 2010).

The transtheoretical and transmethodological approach in this study considers authenticity a quality of the subjects' situated and experienced resonance with others based in the medium structure. Seen through this lens, the experiences of each participant in group interviews resonate with the articulations of other participants, and the sensory details of recalled incidents visually articulated in drawings serve as mediating means for participants' memories and associations during these interviews. Roulston's typology of the 'romantic,' including an idea of gaining access to the authentic self of another subject via talk, builds on an assumption of subject and self as based on a dyadic structure – a 'me-you' structure directly defining the participating selves. This basic assumption was part of the theory the student teachers were taught in the relational project and, accordingly, they used the terminology of 'an authentic self', and 'being authentic to themselves'.

In the transtheoretical approach and transmethodology of this study, however, I consider the medium structure and the mediating means pivotal. Our interviews, including activities of embodied relaxation, recollection, visual articulation, personal presentation in groups and sharing reflections on these presentations, structured a space of meanings involving various modes of experiencing and recalling. The interview situation in this approach is not an encounter of authentic selves in a dyadic structure, but a medium structure and space of meanings that enables experiences, provides mediating means for articulation, and invites participants to engage in articulating activities. This flux of a medium structure enabling experiences and mediating means of embodied and sensory articulation and sharing within focus groups enables experiences of 'being self'. Such experiences may be perceived as and labelled 'authentic' because they rest on the medium structure and its sensory, embodied processes and space of meanings.

The study in cooperation with the participating student teachers created a new understanding and conceptualization of relationship-building practices. While the teacher education project applied a concept of relational competences as 'owned' by the professionals due to their acquisition of tools to reflect on their reactions in difficult encounters with students, a result of the transmethodological study was a new conceptualization. The new conceptualization

was that of ‘relational awareness’ as an awareness of embodied responsivity and activities of consciousness in intersubjective encounters:

“Relational awareness conceptualises an embodied and mediated awareness of the extended intercorporeal affectivity and resonance. It can be experienced as an immediate response and as an embodied reflection perceived as an impulse, affectivity, a mood, an emotion or a conscious reflective line of thought. The descriptions of relational awareness are simultaneously descriptions of self-awareness: of their extended affectivity, embodied sensations, affectivity and emotions, understood as meaningful and changeable through mediating means and discourses.” (Nielsen & Petersen, 2021, p. 147)

We explored the space of meanings developed by the embodied, sensory and theoretical parts of the relational project in teacher education. The practices of the sensory-based transmethodology created a corpus of qualitative data with the potential to transform our ideas about relationship-building and education. This particular research approach is interwoven with the studied practice, and the knowledge created during this study is possible because of the transtheoretical and transmethodological ethos of alterity.

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