Lack of Understanding and the Desire for Re-Cognition

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An educational process must install a lack in the pupil, a lack that is the condition for identification. Any successful educational praxis must establish a gap between the ideas the pupil has concerning his own abilities and ideas of who the pupil could become if enough effort were put into it; a field of possibilities that the pupil did not know existed has irreversibly been opened.

Hyldgard (2006, p. 153)

From time to time, whether in a social setting or on our own, we are all confronted with the experience of not understanding. When we are faced with this reality (if we can admit it to ourselves) we tend to feel alienated; a sense of not being part of the situation, as if we were left outside. This experience can cause several emotional reactions, such as feelings of shame, frustration, anger, sadness, or stress. Sometimes, it can even give us a thrill and be approached as a challenge. Similarly, the actions we take can vary between a range of passive and productive responses. Do we give up? Or do we try to overcome the lack of understanding? If so, in what ways? Furthermore, at what point do we give up and, contrastingly, what conditions help stimulate our motivation?

Even though theories of knowledge and practices of learning are at the center of scientific and philosophic reasoning, and have been since the ancient Greek *lógos* and virtues of *epistêmê*, *technê*, and *phronêsis*, and later in the positivism that developed during the Western Enlightenment, systematic examinations related to the negation of understanding (i.e., its lack) are rare. In search of a

conceptualization of this void-like phenomenon, no evident theory was found. Philosophical, psychoanalytical, and some pedagogical theories often depart from an interactionist perspective, leaving organizational and structural conditions behind. Yet, organizational and structural conditions cannot, on their own, be deployed to examine the topic. Thus, this essay has a tentative character in terms of theoretically outlining the state of not understanding.

Due to the absence of discussion around the topic of not understanding, the aim of this essay is twofold, the first of which is to theoretically explore the concept of lack of understanding. Through a theoretical inquiry, I will contribute to a conceptualization related to the formal education setting by applying a tentative approach, one influenced by disciplines such as philosophy, psychoanalysis, pedagogy, and sociology. Furthermore, as some of my guiding questions deal with the bodily and emotional experiences of not understanding, the essay will partly employ a phenomenological approach. Departing from this theoretical exploration, the second aim of this essay is to illustrate with empirical examples how students in elementary school narrate their experience and attempt to overcome situations of not understanding in relation to curricular schoolwork. The guiding questions used here deal mainly with the interactions that take place in the classroom; how is the student–teacher relationship experienced and organized? What are the structural factors surrounding the educational setting? Does the school provide students with a space that is sufficiently safe to allow them to admit (to themselves and in front of others) that they are in need of help, encourage them to ask for it, and thereby help them identify themselves as learning subjects? As the opening quote of Hyldgaard (2006) expresses, lack of understanding is not simply an inevitable element of being a student; it is perhaps the basic condition. As mentioned above, the dual aim being a theoretical exploration and contextual concretization of the study demand a multidisciplinary approach. Through such synergy, a more informed analysis can be demonstrated.

First Inquiry: Theoretical Investigations

Contextualizing knowledge

According to Cilliers (2000), the conceptual definition of knowledge has traditionally originated from one of two main perspectives: either from positivism/objectivism/rationalism or a personal/culturally specific orientation (see also Kelp, 2015). The ongoing contestations between these perspectives within the field of the theory of science will not be elaborated here. Instead, I will promptly give prominence to what Cilliers calls for, that is, "[a]n understanding of knowledge as constituted within a complex system of interactions." This approach, or model, opposes an atomized view of knowledge as "facts" with objective meaning in and of themselves. Instead, knowledge derives from a dynamic network of interactions, a network that does not have distinctive borders. This perspective also denies that knowledge is something purely subjective, since one cannot conceive of the matter as prior to the network, "but rather as something constituted *within* that network" (pp. 8–9). Furthermore, Cilliers stresses a dialectic understanding between knowledge and the system within which it is constituted as they codetermine each other. Thus, they are both in continual transformation.

> The system is constituted by rich interactions, but since there is an abundance of direct and indirect feedback path, the interactions are constantly changing. Any activity in the system reverberates throughout the system, and can have effects that are very difficult to predict; once again as a result of the large number of nonlinear interactions. (Cilliers, 2000, p. 9)

In this way, knowledge as matter does not exists *a priori* but is ever-evolving due to constant motion.

Applied on a more concrete level in an everyday setting, this relational point of departure can be related to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural perspective on learning—that relational and environmental impacts interact with children's actual development (cf. Jarvis, 1987). Central to Vygotsky is that understanding is situated in a concrete setting, a "system" within a process of

development. It is within this system that methods of learning—that is, imitations and experimentations—are being made. Like Cilliers, Vygotsky does not only describe environmental impacts but also emphasizes dialectical movement by introducing the concept of *zone of proximal development*—a transcendental state where the potential development of a child can be stimulated by those more capable. Thus, "[c]hildren can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). Combining Vygotsky with Cilliers, "the system" can be understood as the pedagogical surrounding, which includes interactions with peers, teachers, the school organization, etc., all of which exist within the formal education system.

It should be noted that this model can create difficulties when defining the contours of the system as the problem of boundaries "is compounded by the dynamic nature of the interactions" (Cilliers, 2000, p. 9). Here, one could also add the interplay between different subsystems (i.e., different classroom environments within one school). Despite the complexity of the formal schooling situation, as such, it can be defined as a system for itself as there are economic, curricular, and social factors that regulate daily activity therein and, thus, the roles and interactions of students, teachers, and other staff (Lundgren, 1972). It is through concrete interactions and communication within this system that certain experiences and interpretations, as well as certain forms of knowledge and understandings, emerge.

As with all social contexts, some participants have a more favorable prior experience than others, depending on the rigidity involved in acquiring the specific qualifications to be part of the system. Since schooling mainly employs theoretical forms of practicing knowledge processes, middle-class students have historically been privileged within this system (Bourdieu & Passeron, [1970] 1977; Willis, 1977), a social fact upon which I will elaborate in the following sections.

Lack as missing links

The learning process is both preceded by and realized through several methods/experiences, such as imitation, by interpreting verbal and written instructions, improvisation, through intuition, by making mistakes, and accidental actions. However, if these experiences are to become knowledge, that is, subjectively integrated and linked to prior understandings, they must be followed by reflection. Thus, when consciously repeated (which is the first step toward systematization), a process of knowledge acquisition has occurred and laid the grounds for deeper understanding.[1] However, if one is unable to remember systematic connections or construct a relationship with the object—if interpretation has not been subjectively integrated—lack of understanding will remain persistent and, with it, a distance to the object in the world, that is, parts of the world.

If we return to Cilliers (2000), we find a definition of the learning process as cumulatively evolved through the act of interpretation. Thus, understanding is not about the quantity of information but the qualitative ability to integrate and translate information into knowledge and knowledge into understanding. From this perspective, experience becomes an epistemologically necessary steppingstone in the linking process (cf. Bion, 1984). This means that lack can be installed in at least two stages of the process: in the interpretation of information into knowledge and in the interpretation of knowledge into understanding. If we define "information" as unsorted bits of data, "knowledge" as processed and categorized data into systems and schemes, and "understanding" as a state of complex familiarization, such as a multiple and nuanced comprehension of the causality and change of a particular phenomenon, then we reach the conclusion that the character of lack can vary. We then need to ask ourselves whether

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[1] Similarly, Lappalainen (2022, p. 13) references John Dewey and exemplifies that "[a] child sticking her fingers into a candle flame does not automatically have an experience. But when the child associates the event with its consequences, i.e. pain, it becomes an actual experience. The pure perception becomes an experience by thinking."

it is a detail or a significant aspect of the phenomenon that one does not grasp. Does one comprehend the overall structure but not some aspects of it, or does one not comprehend the phenomenon at all? Sometimes, understanding significant parts can be enough for us to navigate and find meaning (Rumelhart, 1991). Accordingly, when unsure, prior experience can help us create the most plausible possibility.

However, at other times, we assume that we have relevant prior experience when we do not. Jarvis (1987, p. 28ff) calls this form of non-learning *presumption*, that is, when one thinks that one already knows. Other times, organizational frame factors, such as time pressure, can cause non-learning, what Jarvis calls a *non-consideration*, which happens when one misses out on a learning opportunity because one is overly busy or occupied. Lastly, Jarvis defines non-learning as *rejection*, which occurs when motivation for a certain learning opportunity is lacking and a sense of alienation arises.

How we respond to our lack of understanding is also dependent on how the outside world responds to our lack; what is socially acceptable and what the consequences will be for us. For instance: is it expected by society not to know of a certain phenomenon (which, for instance, is the main premise of a researcher's daily activity)? Alternatively, will there be sanctions if one does not understand (which is a common experience by students in the formal education system where one gets graded)? All this has implications for how we handle the lack, thereby affecting our motivation.

In the formal school setting, lack is mainly defined as difficulty understanding the subject matter—knowledge defined by the curriculum—which is often mediated either by the teacher or materials such as books and the Internet. The confrontation of not understanding can thus be activated either by an inter-personal encounter, which can lead to alienating questions such as "What is s/he saying?" and "What does s/he want from me?" or by an object/artefact that similarly evokes confusion and questions such as "What is this?" and "How do I use this?" In such cases, students

may experience a distance from the space in which they are involved (the educational institution). When lack occurs in relation to another person, for example, the teacher, it is important to remember that non-learning often has social and socio-linguistic explanations as well as driving forces, as illustrated in the works of, for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron ([1970] 1977), Paul Willis (1977), and Basil Bernstein (1971). These authors have provided insights into the incapacity of the school system to acknowledge students from working-class environments and, thus, its systematic sorting based on social class. [2] An embedded conclusion that one can draw from these works is the importance of diverse student recognition and how it relates to student rejections (cf. Jarvis 1987).

Inability as self-consciousness and the art of transmission

Whether lack of understanding stems from cognitive or social factors, the results are the same: a distance from the world that surrounds the student. The reason that the lack of understanding makes the world seem unavailable to us is because we become self-conscious of our inability; as the pedagogue Paulo Freire ([1970] 2017, p. 57) has put it, because "people know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompletion." Through this Hegelian notion of humans being able to understand themselves as not understanding—as "The one who is perceiving is aware of the possibility of illusion" (Hegel, 2018, p. 71)—the process of self-objectification can, in turn, cause several implosive or explosive reactions (e.g., frustration, "Why am I not able to understand?" or "It's the teacher's fault I can't make it!") as well as stimulate driving forces (e.g., "I'm going to find a way!" or "I might as well give up…"). Therefore, lack of understanding is not necessarily the antithesis of

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[2] Bourdieu and Passeron ([1970] 1977) describe this process as "symbolic violence." Others have explained the structural sorting in school as a "hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1968; see also Giroux & Purpel, 1983), a covert way of operating discrimination in the school system that tends to result in working-class students tacitly learning that they are unable to learn, thereby giving up beforehand.

understanding. Rather, lack expresses itself when phenomena reveal themselves as fragmentized, as isolated constituents without a coherent wholeness (Rumelhart, 1991).

When lack occurs among students, the essence of the pedagogical task becomes accentuated (especially in elementary school, given its compulsory character). It could even be stated that the *raison d'être* of the teacher lies in the art of transmission. It is a form of practical knowledge that must take into consideration didactic questions such as *what* is to be transmitted, *to whom* the content is to be transmitted, and *how* this content is to be transmitted. This involves professional judgments about students' present knowledge, their points of departure, language skills, etc. It demands an understanding of the student's zone of proximal development, as mentioned earlier (Vygotsky, 1978). If the teacher does not, or due to external factors cannot, recognize the student, there is an increased likelihood of destructive frustration, rejections, or even self-elimination among students. In a worst-case scenario, Covington's (1985, p. 404) statement becomes accurate: "from a student perspective, 'not knowing something' is often considered wrong, and seeking assistance casts doubt on one's capabilities. (...) In effect, these students have confused ignorance with stupidity, and by remaining ignorant, they are acting contrary to their own interests". According to Covington, achievable goals are important to keeping motivation alive as they give students a feeling of being capable and competent.

Conversely, as instantiated in the introductory quote by Hyldgaard (2006), in a successful scenario, "lack becomes the condition for identification." Here, the teacher becomes a trustworthy authority, a guiding figure and perhaps role model, someone to imitate.[3] In a

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[3] Hyldgaard gives the teacher a central focus in the pedagogical relationship and, in her arguments, accepts the curricular frame. Others have criticized this model from a student's perspective by contrasting it with the process of *Bildung*. One such voice is Sven-Eric Liedman: "In education, typically there is a teacher who puts questions to the students, questions to which the teacher already has the answers. It is a poor

similar way, Willoughby and Demir-Atay (2016, p. 119) stress that "[u]nless teachers are recognized with their capabilities, the foundations of an effective education are undermined. Teachers are 'supposed to know' and sometimes they become ideal figures or role models in the eyes of students." This does not ignore the fact that overcoming lack involves commitment and work on the part of both the teacher and students. While the teacher's pedagogical skills become manifest in the art of transmission, a task that includes obviating students' defenses against learning, the student must—in order to overcome its alienated self-conscious state—be susceptible to the transmission and subjectively integrate the information and knowledge.

However, as many have pointed out before, the process of understanding is inevitably disturbed by our fundamental means of communicating, namely, language.[4] This makes misunderstanding a constant denominator in life (Gadamer, 1989a). One reason could be that language is "the enigmatic nexus between thinking and speaking" (p. 29), an ambivalent and analytical way of approaching the world. Closely tied to this, others have emphasized how fantasies and images of the Other affect the way in which we relate both to ourselves and our surroundings. In a schooling context, "students have fantasies not only about who the teachers are but

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education where the student does not ask any questions him/herself. The student's answers, not his/her questions, are constitutive of such an education. *Bildung*, on the contrary, is impossible without questions asked by the one who is actually undergoing a process of *bildung*. *Bildung* is an active process, where the subject is guided by his/her own curiosity, interest and reflection. The process may be collective or individual; what matters is the student's commitment" (Liedman 2009, p. 145; see also Freire, [1970] 2017).

[4] The aspect of language barriers can be further understood through the socio-linguistic work of Bernstein (1971). Bernstein relates the conditions of social class to the usage of language in the family and class community more generally and in schooling specifically. For a psychoanalytical discussion on how mediation and containment—which are understood as important capabilities when attaining knowledge—are developed via language through the parental relationship, see Willoughby and Demir-Atay's (2016, p. 117) interpretation of Bion's (1984) theory of tolerating frustration.

also about how their teachers perceive them" (Willoughby & Demir-Atay, 2016, p. 119). Furthermore, they have "fantasies about [the] future, which we may call wishes or desires; and the fantasies of educational institutions, which may overlap or conflict with the individual's own fantasies" (p. 124f). These fantasies affect how students perceive themselves as learning subjects as well as their motivation in both positive and negative ways. Here, language can unveil obscure or articulated fantasies, but it can also support them through unconscious misleading or misunderstanding. Therefore, one could, in accordance with Gadamer (1989a, p. 27), ask if linguisticality is "a bridge or a barrier? Is it a bridge built of things that are the same for each self over which one communicates with the other over the flowing stream of otherness? Or is it a barrier that limits our self-abandonment and that cuts us off from the possibility of ever completely expressing ourselves and communicating with others?".[5]

Despite the social, cognitive, emotional, or linguistic obstacles between students and teachers, the hermeneutic tradition, here represented by Gadamer, stresses the ontological capability of human beings to understand one another. "The ability to understand is a fundamental endowment of man, one that sustains his communal life with others and, above all, one that takes place by way of language and the partnership of conversation" (Gadamer, 1989a, p. 21). According to Gadamer, then, there is a universal potential for us to re-integrate the Other's point of view into a new, common understanding—a will to understand and engage in interpretative co-action to reach unification (a "fusion of horizons") of the Self and Other.

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[5] Turning to Derrida, who has become the personified opponent in this discussion, we find an emphasis on rifts and obstacles in the process of unity (see Michelfelder et al., 1989; Rasch, 1992). While Gadamer emphasizes a consensus in understanding, Derrida claims that the continual understanding of another person is simply not possible.

From alien to potential ally: "Self and Other" in the student–teacher relationship

Whether one focuses on estrangement or return, barriers or bridges, this philosophical reasoning has been questioned because of a common point of departure. As Rasch (1992) points out, the model of "Self and the Other" assumes a dyadic relationship. The potential fusion or inevitable rupture evolves out of a two-part constellation. In contrast, Rasch introduces a triadic model. Here, Self and Other are not understood as two opponents. "Rather, they are united against a common enemy, the parasitical third party called *noise*, in whose interest it is to interfere and promote confusion" (Rasch 1992, p. 63, emphasis added). The triadic model becomes productive as it moves beyond a personification of the Other as unfamiliar and, thus, makes the creation of intersubjective unions possible. In other words, the Other can go from alien to ally.[6]

Furthermore, the third party demands that the previous two be integrated into a symbolic relationship. In the school setting, where this philosophical discussion is to be applied, the question of inter-subjective transmission must be partly related to the overall aim of education, a precondition expressed through the national curriculum, and partly to its inherent roles, that is, students *vis-à-vis* the teacher. In this context, curricular knowledge, which is part of the national education system, that is, the state (Hegel, ([1821] 2008), becomes the third party that mediates the relationship between the teacher and student. As Hyldgaard (2006, p. 151) puts it, "the authority of the pedagogue rests on a knowledge that is not

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[6] For psychoanalytical perspectives, see Hyldgaard (2006, p. 147), who provides a similar triadic model to distinguish the teacher from the seducer. The teacher "guides both his own and the pupil's desire away from his own person and towards the object of knowledge." Therefore, "the aim of the teacher, as opposed to the seducer, is to be 'dumped', to loose his power over the pupil. The ritual of exams symbolically marks that 'it's over between us and we must all move on.'" See also the three types of object relations of Bion (1979 [1983]): commensal, symbiotic, and parasitic relations. In particular, commensal relations can be relevant here as it involves a relationship in which two objects share a third to the advantage of all three (p. 95).

his [*sic*] 'own' but the Other's. The teacher's authority depends on the pupil's or students' trust in the fact that the knowledge transmitted could be authorised by reference to relevant sources." In this way, the "system" through which interaction and knowledge evolve has expanded to include the socio-cultural context that is ultimately constituted by the state.

Apart from the trust students must have in their teachers' authority, as Hyldgaard emphasizes, one could also add that the teacher's expectations and the organizational conditions to recognize students as educable subjects are equally pivotal for successful transmission (see, e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; cf. Good, 1980; Nejadmehr, 2020).[7] As Willoughby and Demir-Atay (2016, p. 125) stress, the "teacher needs binocular vision, with an eye on their own and their students' subjectivity and another on shared objective realities." Such sociological approaches requires taking into consideration a more holistic view of students, by including students' social relationships outside school (e.g., their socio-economically conditioned home environments, neighborhoods, and youth cultures), teachers' expectations of different student groups, as well as the political and material conditions that teachers and school organizations are confronted with in everyday life.

In the present Swedish school system, students face increased accountability in relation to their schoolwork (Allelin, 2020; Beach & Dovemark, 2007). Since the early 1990s, the neoliberal governance of education has been characterized by tendencies

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[7] Nejadmehr (2020) shows how Kant's educational paradigm, which has affected our present educational systems and views of knowledge, has intrinsically been built around the notion of a local universality, i.e., a Eurocentric perspective of the world. This involves, for instance, a dichotomization between nature and culture and, thus, what is natural and what can and should be subjected to culturalization. Applied to schooling, Nejadmehr shows that marginal groups have been viewed as uneducable, as if they lack the potential to be cultivated and Enlightened. For an explanation of self-fulfilling prophesies between the teacher and students in the classroom, which departs from organizational and social psychological frame factors, see Good (1980, pp. 81–83, 88–89).

toward marketization and individualization, which have resulted in a stronger demand for the measurability of student performance. It has also increased segregation among students and, thus, stronger social reproduction. Needless to say, this has affected students' approaches and strategies aimed at overcoming lack of understanding (Archangelo, 2014). [8] As a result, acquiring curricular knowledge, which is the possession of the teacher, has become increasingly important for students. Moreover, lack of knowledge has become not just a personal insufficiency in our society, it also brings with it material, long-lasting consequences. With so much at stake, such contextual factors must be considered when developing a concrete theory of the learning process (Archangelo, 2010; see also Ames & Archer, 1988, p. 264).

Before I move on to the second inquiry of this essay, I conclude by returning to my first aim, which is to provide a conceptualization of lack of understanding:

> (1) Lack of understanding means that something has not been linked and subjectively integrated—it is outside our ability to relate, hence what I have previously discussed as a distance to the world.
> (2) It is possible to lack understanding of some parts or significant shares of a wholeness.
> (3) As we increase our comprehension of a specific phenomenon, we become more self-conscious about our lack of understanding of certain parts.
> (4) Therefore, the lack of understanding is not necessarily the opposite of understanding.
> (5) Lack of understanding and the resulting self-consciousness can cause emotional reactions and inner fantasies that trigger different actions (such as curiosity, anxiety, rejection), depending on how much or little we understand, what or whom we do not understand, and what is at stake if we do not understand.

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[8] Fonseca (2012) has, for instance, explored how students view cheating as an everyday strategy to pass tests and how this relates to viewing grades as the hard currency of today's school results-based management system.

(6) The consequence of a lack of understanding, and the handling of it, is always conditioned by societal/organizational factors and will inevitably be related to a specific context/system.

Departing from these premises, I will proceed by integrating student narratives into my line of argument in order to further illustrate and deepen the conceptualization of lack of understanding.

Second Inquiry: Empirical Examinations

Methodological considerations

In the previous discussion, I stressed the importance of situating knowledge within a system of interactions (Cilliers, 2000). Applied to schooling, certain forms of interactions take place, such as that of teacher-students. These interactions can stimulate what Vygotsky (1978) calls the zone of proximal development, which in turn can influence the system of interactions (to a certain degree). There are, however, boundaries that condition these interactions: certain frame factors that are specific to the schooling situation, such as curricular demands, grading, and other compulsory activities. There is also a transmission within a triadic formation that includes the teacher, students, and knowledge as symbolic categories (Hyldgaard, 2006). It is within organizational and symbolic conditions, which are tied to structural and social facts and interactional conditions, which are tied to socio-psychological and cultural processes, that learning and lack of understanding take place.

In what follows, I will present excerpts from interviews—chosen and structured through thematic analysis—with ninth-grade students in their final year of compulsory schooling in Sweden in order to illustrate some of the theoretical discussions in the previous chapter. In total, 49 students were interviewed (individually, in pairs, and in groups of three and four). Among other questions, such as those relating to their relationship with

their school and neighborhoods, the students were asked what happens when they are confronted with a lack of understanding in relation to schoolwork, both emotionally and practically. Since lack of understanding has been poorly discussed as a phenomenological phenomenon within a schooling environment surrounded by institutional frame factors, the research question was exploratively investigated. The analysis of the interviews was inductively approached, meaning that recurring codes (patterns) were identified and later theorized and structured into central themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), which are presented below as headings. The numbers allocated to the students were chosen according to their order of appearance in this article.

The interviews were conducted at three schools characterized by poor grade statistics, where many students (around 40%) fail to gain eligibility to advance to upper secondary school. According to the principals and teachers, this is due to the fact that a significant share of the students count as newly arrived (which, according to the definition, means that their stay in the country has been a maximum of four years). Furthermore, all three schools are located in disadvantaged neighborhoods in which a majority of children grow up in families living below the poverty line. These specific statistics of segregation, as well as the overall tendencies that characterize the educational system in general, should be considered important structural conditions that surround students' lack of understanding.

It is worth noting that conducting interviews about lack of understanding in schools located in unprivileged neighborhoods, where many students do not gain eligibility to advance to upper secondary school, demands careful ethical consideration from researchers as there is a risk of reproducing stigmatized images of students as ignorant, cognitively incapable, or "losers." However, my aim is not to discuss the particular conditions of underprivileged students as such. Instead, the research questions deal with lack of understanding as an existential premise and *raison d'être* of the student identity, irrespective of social position. Since my main aim is to contribute to the philosophical and pedagogical research field, the interviews should be considered as cases of more

general claims. In this way, the risk of positioning certain groups as problematic can be avoided.[9]

Dealing with accountability, fatigue, and stress

As mentioned earlier, the educational system in Sweden has undergone several major reforms over the last three decades. Overall tendencies include higher expectations for students to be self-responsible in school (Allelin, 2020; Beach & Dovemark, 2007) as well as a refined measurability of knowledge and knowledge progression (Carlgren, 2015). These tendencies have evolved as a result of market reforms that have made Sweden internationally unique with its fairly unregulated voucher system and competition among schools. The students I interviewed highlighted rigid demands by referring to how they perceive their teachers' attitudes.

INTERVIEWER:	When you are sitting with a task, or when you are reading something, or when the teacher's speaking, and you feel that you don't really understand, how does that make you feel? What bodily sensations do you experience?
STUDENT1:	Difficulty.
INTERVIEWER:	Difficulty?
STUDENT1:	Yes.

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[9] The study, which was part of a larger research program called Between Resignation and Future Prospects: A Transdisciplinary Research Program on Educational Pathways and Learning Processes Among Young People in Stigmatized Urban Settings in Gothenburg, was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

STUDENT2:	Tired.
INTERVIEWER:	Tired?
STUDENT2:	Yes, one loses motivation, I'll tell you. And focus.
INTERVIEWER:	In what way is it difficult?
STUDENT1:	Because it's… you want to understand. But then… and it all goes so fast, everything. They have curriculums, and "we have to go through this" and…
STUDENT2:	It's difficult.
STUDENT1:	Yes. So it happens that one gets all "but I can't take it anymore."
INTERVIEWER:	A bit like giving up?
STUDENT1:	Yes, exactly.
INTERVIEWER:	Yes. And how does one proceed from that state?
STUDENT1:	Yes, well then you have to ask the teacher. And I think also… they say to us all the time, "you have to take your own responsibility; in high school, you won't have us" and stuff like that. So yeah, you get… you put a bit of a pressure on yourself and

	think, "maybe I should study at home instead."
STUDENT2:	That… yeah, that it's my job to take responsibility.
STUDENT1:	Yes, exactly.
INTERVIEWER:	Mm. And how does it feel when they say that?
STUDENT1:	Well, I mean, I understand them. They are right when they say it, but sometimes, it can feel like, "fine, but we're not in high school *yet*, we're here now."

In another interview, the students describe lack of understanding as a state of anxiety.

INTERVIEWER:	When you read a book or when you listen to the teacher and so on, and you don't follow, don't understand, how does it usually feel in the body?
STUDENT3:	When you don't understand, it doesn't feel funny.
STUDENT4:	Mental breakdown.
STUDENT5:	Shiver.
STUDENT3:	Chills.
STUDENT5:	Chills, yes. You start to freeze like this in the spine.

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> It just... I freeze, I just think "what have I done, what have I done, what have I forgotten?" continuously. And then the whole lesson goes away and you just think "well, I didn't do anything during the lesson". Even if you've read maybe five pages, you'll forget it. Because of the stress.

Some students described their bodily sensation of not understanding as fatigue. Others described it as a stressfull situation, explained as a "mental breakdown" and feeling ill at ease. In another interview one of the students described the state of not understanding as "irritating", and another one said: "I just get a headache every time". Thus, it is noticeable that lacking understanding, which is a mental state, causes physical stress as well. Furthermore, this negative bodily sensation must be understood in relation to its context, as lacking understanding in the formal educational setting does have implications for future opportunities.

If we accept Gadamer's (1989a) interpretation of Hegel—that it is through work, as in putting in effort in order to witness an intended change, that we reach meaningful self-consciousness—and argue in line with Covington (1985)—that achievable goals are important to keep motivation alive among students, which is what the students communicate above—it becomes clear that, from the students' perspective, this is not always the case. In an educational system where visible performance and results stand in the foreground instead of the actual process and relative progress of each student, there is a risk of instrumentalization in how students relate to work. There is also a risk that they will assess themselves according to how they are ranked. Furthermore, under a strong results-based management, the pace of content transmission tends to increase, leaving less room for systematic reflections or

spontaneous mediations. Instead, a hunt for right answers is prioritized as time becomes scarcer. Scholars have warned that should students enter a process of sublimation rather than a state of depression—that is, if they are to keep their spirits alive—curricular demands would have to be diminished (Högberg et al., 2021; Allelin & Sernhede, 2022).

The strong results-based management in the education system has elsewhere been discussed as the precarization of teachers' work (Attick, 2017; see Lundström, 2018, for the Swedish context), which could explain why some teachers, according to the students, resign from their tasks and hold students responsible for their lack of understanding. In such situations, students experience a distance from their teachers, failing to see them as role models worthy of imitation or from whom to obtain guidance (see Hyldgaard, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). This is most starkly indicated in the statement, "maybe I should study at home instead."

By reducing the curricular criteria and documentation and, instead, reintroducing greater professional autonomy, teachers and students would be able to develop a greater "ally-relationship." In such a scenario, noise—the inevitably disturbing third party (Rasch, 1992)—could become a starting point for students and teachers to enter a safe and meaningful encounter as they push the zone of proximal development, and the risk of students personalizing their teachers as the pressuring and antagonistic Other could be reduced.

Breaking the symbolic order and the importance of recognition

Personalizing the teacher as the pressuring and antagonistic Other was a recurring theme in the interviews. In another interview, a similar transference was expressed. Here, the teacher was described as someone who reminds them of ongoing and repressive assessments and someone who functions as a gatekeeper that regulates hard currency (the grades) and, indirectly, their future prospects. In response, the students

navigate to find a fitting transmission for themselves, even if it means that they turn to their family for help instead of insisting on the symbolic order provided by the school. In such cases, the family becomes a refuge and a place to find recognition.

INTERVIEWER:	What do you usually do when you don't understand; how do you handle it? You said that you painted during class.
STUDENT6:	Oh well. No, I mean I did that just to get… until time… until time passed.
STUDENT7:	I usually ask if I don't understand.
INTERVIEWER:	You usually ask?
STUDENT7:	Yes, yes, yes. I usually ask "why?"
INTERVIEWER:	Who do you ask?
STUDENT8:	The teacher. I usually ask the teacher. If I don't understand her, then I try on my own, and if I don't understand on my own, then, actually, I blame the teacher because she should, um… how do you say, she should help me. And when I don't get enough help, I'll go to her [another teacher], she's good at um… I mean, she's good at all of it, if I'm honest. So I'll go to the ones

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	that are good in order to understand—let them explain it to me.
STUDENT7:	But the thing is, I would've also asked the teacher instead of drawing, but this teacher, I don't know if she's trying to scare us to do all her homework, but she said, "every time you ask for help, I will notice it…"
STUDENT8:	"Lower the grade."
STUDENT7:	… I will, not deduct marks, but I will notice it, so I'll know that you've asked."
STUDENT8:	She'll lower it [the grade] too.
INTERVIEWER:	So, if you were to say… what do you usually do when you don't understand?
STUDENT9:	To be honest, I listen… When I don't understand, I just hear the teacher out on what I should be reading, and I'll remember that, and I'll do it at home.
INTERVIEWER:	I get it… But what happens if you don't understand at home, then?
STUDENT9:	The thing is, I have others that I can ask. Like, she [the

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teacher] just talks straight from the book; I don't get any other facts. It is already said in the book, so it won't help me to get it explained—because she doesn't know herself, that's the problem. So, I'll ask my father or mother or my siblings. Because they know so much more than the teacher, if I'm honest. They don't even need the book. But you take the book with you to see... yeah, kind of to have the correct answers, to see if you're right. Sometimes, they can also... one could also be wrong but that's...

INTERVIEWER: So, when you don't understand, you often ask your family?

STUDENT9: Yes, and it feels a lot easier when you listen to the nearest and dearest ones.

If the teacher represents an antagonistic Other, or an alien and not an ally, going in search of a safer environment—another system (see Cilliers, 2000)—to ask questions seems to be a solution. Student 5 stated that it felt easier to understand help provided at home from loved ones. While feeling safe with family is positive, it is an alternative that should be considered a privilege. The escape to the family is but an educational failure and, by extension, a societal failure. The household as a resource is not available to every member of society; it is not guaranteed as a means to attaining what is formally needed to become part of public life. As long as "the family continues to play a key role in the reproduction

of social class and class inequalities," as Pimlott-Wilson (2011, p. 113) states, then public institutions ought to play a vital role in the quest for equity. This is especially so given the compensatory mission of the Swedish compulsory school. Apart from equity, public education is also a question of societal integration, a form of *aufheben* and sublation from private and particular relationships, into a broader community shared through an abstract sense of belonging. To cite Hegel ([1821] 2008, p. 173), "Children have the right to maintenance and education at the expense of the family's common resources."

The poignant message from the students' turning away from the pedagogical relationship in school is the importance of trust and the sharing of references, or life worlds, in the transmission. As the students elaborated on the family's (curricular) knowledge ability, it became obvious that they also make mistakes (otherwise, the student would not rely on the authority of the book). Therefore, the navigation has less to do with the teacher's actual knowledge and skills and more to do with the importance of a pedagogical *relationship* (which arguably explains why the student tries to find another teacher to explain the subject matter). Whether this has to do with a lack of emotional trust, language barriers, or overly large gaps in life-world references, the breach seems overly difficult to bridge in the particular interaction.

Another example of the importance and desire for recognition was formulated by students 10 and 11 as they stressed the importance of having a teacher who is a trustworthy authority:

> STUDENT10: I'd wish that the teachers would've helped… or, I mean, it's not something that a teacher can do, but it's something a teacher can help you with, to get a better self-esteem and… or better self-confidence or whatever. Because I like to get confirmation when I do a

	task; I want to know if I'm on the right track or not. Some people here might not need it, and that's why it's important for teachers to know that *you* need it and get it.
STUDENT11:	A push.
STUDENT10:	Yes, exactly. It can be…
STUDENT11:	… "you did a very good job, really" or "yes, you're doing good," or "wow, I can really notice a progression."

Described as a necessary "push", Vygotsky's zone of proximal development becomes pertinent as the teacher has the ability—according to the students—to push students toward further development. However, what is expressed by the students is not only a transcendental process of understanding that is dependent on more cognitively/intellectually capable adults or peers but a social and emotional push that can stimulate positive self-esteem, enabling movement beyond present limitations. Thus, the students stress the dialectics of social and pedagogical processes, a recognition that goes beyond societal and symbolic interaction to an interaction that is social in nature.

Parrying social stigmas of classroom expectations

Apart from having difficulty understanding the transmission by specific teachers, the students also stressed classroom culture as a potential obstacle. They pointed to the risk of being ridiculed and laughed at if they exposed their lack of understanding. As mentioned in the previous section, little space seems to be available for exposing one's imperfections.

INTERVIEWER: When you're in class and you don't understand something, what do you do? Could it be that you don't get what the teacher says or what is written in the book or whatever?

STUDENT12:   I raise my hand; the teacher will come and explain it to me.

INTERVIEWER: You raise your hand?

STUDENT12:   Yes. Otherwise, I'll approach her after class and ask her.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, after the class, too? Let's say you raise your hand, and the teacher approaches you, but she explains it in a way that you don't get?

STUDENT12:   I would ask the teacher to explain it in a simpler way.

STUDENT13:   Sometimes, when… Not when she explains just to me, but sometimes when she explains to everyone in the classroom, it's hard for me to get what she means. So if you want to understand for yourself what it is she wants to say, you can just tell the teacher, "Can you repeat that in a way that will make me understand?" But

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	it depends on the people; there are some people who are ashamed of asking in front of the whole class.
INTERVIEWER:	Why do you think that one is ashamed of asking?
STUDENT12:	Maybe, they don't want other students to laugh at them.
INTERVIEWER:	Do you think it could happen?
	[collective agreement]
INTERVIEWER:	It happens?
STUDENT12:	It happens a lot.
INTERVIEWER:	Really?
STUDENT13:	It happens pretty often, I think.
STUDENT12:	It happens often.

Student 13 elaborated on an interesting distinction: transmission in a general format versus in a particular direction. When the collective method of tutoring results in a lack of comprehension, receiving a personalized explanation can be a solution. According to the student, however, there is a potential hindrance when asking for help, namely, the reaction of classmates. Based on the students' statements, they sometimes contribute to a study culture where one is not supposed to demonstrate one's lack (see also Nyström et al., 2019, especially the concept of "stress-less achievement"). The classroom culture, which can be viewed as a system in itself (Cilliers, 2000) and forms a cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978),

could therefore be understood as a fourth party in the symbolic order as it constitutes an independent relationship that conditions the transmission between teachers and students. Adding this consideration, the triadic model becomes quadratic.

Being a student involves being guided by questions. These questions cannot be answered solely in an inner dialogue. They must be articulated and discussed inter-subjectively, especially in a schooling context where teachers formally fulfill this pedagogical function. This involves overcoming obstacles such as linguisticality, social stigma, and personal vulnerability. For this to become possible, the dialogue must be treated as permissive of examinations.

> What we find happening in speaking is not a mere reification of intended meaning, but an endeavor that continually modifies itself, or better: a continually recurring temptation to engage oneself in something or to become involved with someone. But that means to expose oneself and to risk oneself. (…) it risks our prejudices – it exposes oneself to one's own doubt as well as to the rejoinder of the other. (Gadamer, 1989a, p. 26)

Approaching the world with questions means exposing oneself both existentially (admitting to oneself that one is not the master of life and submit to this fact) and socially (demonstrating one's imperfection). In reality, these premises are sometimes complicated by an intolerant social environment, as expressed by the students in the quote above. Additionally, in a results-based school culture, which is part of an economy that seeks efficiency and progression, this intolerance tends to be structurally sanctioned (Allelin, 2020).

Feeling alone and overcoming lack through collective strategies

The risk of social stigma when exposing one's lack was not the sole response of the fourth party. There were also times when the students practiced solidarity by helping each other. However, when asked how they felt when they did not understand, they stressed

the feeling of alienation. Again, a feeling of distance from the world came up during the interviews.

STUDENT14: Sometimes, there are some students that don't approach teachers after class. So, we'll help each other.

INTERVIEWER: You help each other?

STUDENT14: Yes, if there's someone who's new here in Sweden, who won't understand, someone who speaks the same language as us. Then we like… "come here, I'm gonna help you." I can help with translation and such.

STUDENT15: We do that often.

STUDENT14: But if there are words and stuff, words and concepts that we don't understand ourselves, then we ask and get it explained.

STUDENT15: If there is something we don't understand, then we ask the teacher who…

INTERVIEWER: Like a link between the teacher…?

STUDENT14: Yes, and the student in order to help out. Otherwise, the teacher needs to have a

	translator with them. Or an interpreter.
INTERVIEWER:	So, you work as a translator sometimes?
	[collective agreement]
STUDENT16:	We help out sometimes.
INTERVIEWER:	That's cool. And when you read something and it's hard to understand and when the teacher speaks, and you like… What feelings arise when you feel as if you don't understand?
STUDENT16:	I always feel like I'm left outside.
INTERVIEWER:	You feel left outside? What do you mean?
STUDENT16:	As if I'm the only one, the only student who doesn't get anything. I don't admit that the others don't understand, only me.
STUDENT15:	Actually, sometimes, I… It feels as if everybody understands.
STUDENT14:	Everyone's nodding, you just see "you, you, you are the only one who doesn't understand. What's wrong with you?"

The students expressed a sensible feeling of being left outside, as if there was a distance or barrier between them and the rest of the world. When they could not follow the curricular knowledge being transmitted collectively, a self-conscious reflection arose, including a supposition that others, in contrast, do understand (see Archangelo 2014, p. 33). This lonesome state is perhaps accentuated by a sometimes intolerant classroom culture, as mentioned in the previous section. However, unlike in the previous section, a more empathetic attitude and solidary reaction evolved as the students emphasized a will to help each other.

Their schools can be classified as "multicultural," where Swedish is not the first language of most students. Some students had been in the country and the Swedish school system for only a couple of years (during my fieldwork, we sometimes had to conduct interviews in English), so language obstacles and parents' lack of the Swedish education system were sometimes a palpable issue. As one student put it, "We are like the first generation that has to manage all this on our own, so to say." In light of these conditions, students who were once new to the language could imagine the hardship their classmates were experiencing, hence their reason for volunteering as informal translators. Clearly, these students share a common life world. However, inasmuch as the practices of solidarity among students can be considered admirable behavior, it still depicts a failure in the symbolic order. When students turn to friends and classmates—or the family, as mentioned earlier— the trustful authority becomes absent. If we accept that "[t]he task of the pedagogue is not to produce knowledge" and, rather, that "[t]he task of the pedagogue is to transmit knowledge that is already given" (Hyldgaard, 2006, p. 152), then peer-to-peer transmission risks a situation in which students do not receive the educational provision they are entitled to. As another student pointed out, "I mean, of course I can help someone out, but I don't always know what to do because I'm not an educated Swedish teacher." Insisting on a meaningful student–teacher relationship— one where recognition can take place both collectively and individually—is therefore important.

Making space for social reflection and re-cognition

Through theoretical and empirical investigations, I have outlined in this essay three ontological domains or "layers" on lack of understanding. First, it should be considered a fundamental existential premise that humankind lacks understanding. Second, lack of understanding can be described as both the essence of a student's identity and part of the symbolic order in an educational setting. This setting was first described as a triadic formation comprising the student, the teacher, and the curricular knowledge. All three are in a mediating relation with one another through their various assignments. In other words, "The starting point is always that the pupil does not know. Therefore, to achieve recognition as someone who is in the know also depends on the recognition of the pedagogue. Additionally, it requires external examinations and assessments" (Hyldgaard, 2006, p. 152). This means that teachers become trustworthy because of the external recognition they get due to their curricular knowledge (which, in its extension, is a recognition from the state). Nevertheless, apart from this logical installation, the teacher is also a *real person* who confronts real students every day. Thus, this confrontation is both societal—in the sense that the teacher and students are part of a symbolic order— *and* social, meaning that they personalize and build concrete relationships with one another inter-subjectively. For this reason, when discussing lack of understanding in a concrete pedagogical setting, a sociological dimension needs to be merged with philosophical reflections.

This brings me to my third domain: the symbolic order is regulated according to organizational, socio-economic, and historical factors that privilege some student groups while excluding others. Historically, lack of understanding and/or lack of will to understand have often been unbearable for students, leading them toward the tendency of giving up (Bourdieu & Passeron, [1970] 1977; Covington, 1985; Willis, 1977). As these tendencies have structural causes, one cannot blame a specific teacher or the specific object/knowledge at hand. However, in a real-life situation, it is a particular teacher that confronts a concrete group of students. From a student perspective, therefore, the teacher risks

becoming either an alienating representative of the excluding mechanisms that characterize the school system or an ally, someone who re-cognizes them. This ambivalence toward the teacher is evident in the student narratives presented in the empirical section.

By using interviews with students to analyze reflections on the state of not understanding, I have also shown how classroom culture can either help or hinder transmission and the process of understanding. Thus, the triadic formation, inspired by Rasch—involving the student, the teacher, and the knowledge that is to be transmitted (which sometimes turns into noise) —which I started with, was transformed into a quadratic model, taking into consideration social and material factors that the symbolic order fails to address. The social world, the "outer system" that is present in the schooling situation, is the third ontological domain when discussing lack of understanding. This "outer system" lies formally outside the symbolic order yet invades it by producing fantasies and putting material pressure on all parties; it reminds the students of what is at stake if they fail and it tends to contribute to reproducing social structures in society.

From a philosophical standpoint, there has sometimes been an idealistic and romantic approach to lack of understanding. An early example is the conceptualization of fifteenth-century thinker Nicolaus Cusanus of "learned ignorance," recently reintroduced by Bornemark (2018). Another is the Italian thinker Giambattista Vico ([1744] 1948, p. 116f) who holds:

> So that, as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them (*homo intelligendo fit omnia*), this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them (*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*); and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understand he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them.

A more modern formulation, inspired by Hegel, is Gadamer's (1989b, p. 57), who states that: "One must lose oneself in order to

find oneself." In this essay, I have materialized such an approach by dovetailing the existential dimension with an analysis of a concrete setting, more specifically, a socio-economically disadvantaged school in the Swedish education system.

Lack of understanding can certainly be a desirable state because it forces one to confront the world in a renewed way and is necessary for personal development. However, in looking at the present neoliberal school situation, this desire appears overly naïve. In an interaction between two equals, for example, the conversation is developed and continued through associations. In such encounters, we often communicate by exploring together and end up in places we would not have if it were not for the Other's presence. However, in a teacher–student encounter enclosed by curricular imperatives, communication is not developed primarily through associations or non-instrumental explorations. The process of understanding is always destined toward a search for correct answers, which explains why student attendance is made compulsory.

The search for correct answers has been accentuated by results-based management and demands for profitability in the education system, which has not only lost its ability to contain students' frustration and fatigue (Archangelo 2014) but has also displaced teacher autonomy, leaving little space to wade into uncertainty, take detours, or engage in personal reflections (Allelin, 2020). Today, many students suffer from anxiety and stress (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016). As Covington (1985) emphasizes, students are, therefore, often unwilling to expose their lack of understanding so as to "try to protect a sense of dignity" (p. 391). In other words, admitting to oneself that one lacks understanding is a vulnerable state; being graded in relation to this is even more so. Scarce institutional resources, both materially and time wise, have inevitable negative effects on participants. As Archangelo (2010) points out, "In social and economic conditions in which access to institutions and possibilities for meeting a person's needs are extremely limited, a lack of response or an inadequate response will tend to dominate the person's experiences." To this, one can add the high stakes that grades play in a student's future prospects (Högberg et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in a school where a great share of the students arrive in Sweden in their teenage years, have no knowledge of Swedish and no previous experience of the Swedish educational system, there will be many references in the life worlds that differ. Language barriers will also be inevitable, adding an extra layer to Gadamer's (1989a) existential question of whether language can be understood as a bridge or barrier. Yet, despite results-based management and the difficulties related to frames of reference, the student interviewees communicated a will to overcome their lack, even when they felt that help from the teacher would not enable them to do so.

To return to one of my initial questions related to the second aim of this essay—whether the school provides students with a space that is sufficiently safe to allow them to admit that they are in need of help and whether it encourages them to ask for help and thereby helps them identify themselves as learning subjects—the answer is yes. The students did not demonstrate any countercultural opposition to schooling, and there was no truancy or resistance to learning. Perhaps the stakes are too high in our so-called "knowledge society" as lacking merits usually means a life characterized by precarity, especially if you live in a disadvantaged neighborhood or have a structurally underprivileged social position. Furthermore, the students were not indifferent to their lack of understanding, and neither did their lack of understanding come from indifference. Indeed, according to them, lack evokes emotions of shame, tiredness, and a state of frustration—inevitable responses in any learning process. What was crucial in this situation, however, was the teacher's ability to make this frustration tolerable for the students and, thus, eliminate any learning resistance (cf. Archangelo, 2010; Willoughby & Demir-Atay, 2016). Results-based management, with its high pace and number of criteria, has not made this beneficial in terms of statistical results (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016). Yet, the students whose responses are presented in this essay, asked teachers for help, helped each other, asked family members for help when the symbolic function of the teacher failed, and tried on their own. Relating their responses to Gadamer (1989a), the

students expressed a will to reach unification through the exposition of lack of understanding.

Lacking understanding has been further described as a state of isolation, a breach between the subject and the world. To overcome this alienating state, the students requested a *re-cognition.* The hyphen indicates that it is not only about being acknowledged but also about wanting to be cognitively moved to a new point of departure, to be meaningfully challenged. Understanding through re-cognition can thus be described as the process wherein knowledge (the external object/the world) is subjectively integrated (which demands work/effort and commitment) through transmission (an inter-subjective meeting)—in other words, gaining understanding through the ongoing effort of an encounter with another subject. For this to be possible, all parties in the quadratic model must be willing to adjust for this purpose, which necessarily includes more lenient curricular demands that make it possible for subjects to acknowledge each other.

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