

Pedagogical tact: Designing an ecological approach for teacher education

Paolo Bonafede* 

Università di Trento (Italy)

Submitted: November 17, 2025 – Accepted: January 30, 2026 – Published: June 9, 2026

Tatto pedagogico: elaborazione di un approccio ecologico per la formazione degli insegnanti

This article examines pedagogical tact as a philosophical concept central to contemporary teacher education, arguing for its reinterpretation within an ecological and phenomenological framework. Drawing on the continental tradition from Herbart and Schleiermacher to van Manen, the paper reconstructs pedagogical tact as an embodied, situational, and ethically charged mode of practical knowing that resists procedural codification. Building on Friesen's reconfiguration of tact through the pedagogical triangle, the analysis moves beyond a purely dyadic understanding of pedagogical relations and foregrounds the mediating role of educational content and environments. Through critical engagement with phenomenology of practice and recent debates in educational philosophy, the article proposes pedagogical tact as an ecological principle of mediation, immanent to lived educational situations. This perspective highlights the relevance of tact for teacher professionalization in contexts shaped by standardization and technocratic rationalities, offering a non-instrumental pathway for re-connecting educational theory, practice, and world-centred responsibility.

L'articolo analizza il tatto pedagogico come concetto chiave della filosofia dell'educazione, proponendone una riformulazione in prospettiva fenomenologica ed ecologica per la formazione degli insegnanti. A partire dalla tradizione continentale che va da Herbart e Schleiermacher fino a van Manen, il tatto pedagogico viene ricostruito come forma incarnata, situata ed eticamente orientata di sapere pratico, irriducibile a modelli prescrittivi. Assumendo il contributo di Friesen e la struttura del triangolo pedagogico, l'analisi supera una concezione puramente diadica della relazione educativa, mettendo in luce il ruolo di mediazione del contenuto e dell'ambiente educativo. Il tatto pedagogico viene così interpretato come principio ecologico di mediazione, immanente all'esperienza educativa vissuta. In conclusione, l'articolo evidenzia la rilevanza del tatto per la professionalizzazione docente in contesti segnati da razionalità tecnocratiche e standardizzanti, offrendo un percorso non strumentale per ricollegare la teoria educativa, la pratica e la responsabilità incentrata sul mondo.

Keywords: Pedagogical tact; Teacher education; Philosophy of Education; phenomenology of practice; vignette.

* ✉ paolo.bonafede@unitn.it

1. Introduction

The construct of pedagogical tact represents a persistent and fecund challenge for the philosophy of education, standing at the intersection of ethical theory, embodied praxis, and professional formation. Although its genealogy is robust—stretching from Herbart and Schleiermacher to the influential reformulations within the phenomenology of practice, understood as an interpretive-descriptive approach to lived educational experience (van Manen, 2016)—tact remains a notoriously elusive concept. It resists facile empirical categorization and poses significant difficulties when attempting to translate it into formalized frameworks for teacher education and professional development.

The present article pursues three closely interconnected theoretical objectives. First, it aims to clarify the relationship between pedagogical tact and phenomenology by reconstructing the historical and conceptual development of the notion of tact, from its early formulation in Herbart's pedagogical theory as a mediating capacity between theory and practice, through its subsequent elaborations, up to its phenomenological reinterpretation in the work of Max van Manen. This reconstruction is intended to show how pedagogical tact progressively shifts from being conceived as a mediating judgement or professional aptitude to being understood as an embodied, situational, and pre-reflective form of practical knowing, grounded in lived educational experience (paragraph 2 and 3).

Second, the article seeks to highlight how, within Norm Friesen's reflection, the concept of pedagogical tact becomes increasingly connected to the structure of the pedagogical triangle, thus moving beyond a dualistic understanding of the educational relation centred exclusively on the teacher–student dyad. In this perspective, pedagogical tact is oriented toward a relational field that includes not only the educator and the learner, but also the material, symbolic, and situational dimensions of the educational context, thereby offering a conceptual framework particularly suited to contemporary teacher education (paragraph 4).

Third, building on these theoretical premises, the article proposes an ecological reading of pedagogical tact, understood as an ethically oriented yet embodied principle, immanent to educational experience rather than externally imposed upon it. From this standpoint, pedagogical tact functions as a principle of mediation in the professionalization process of teacher education, enabling educators to navigate the complexity of pedagogical situations by attuning ethical responsiveness to embodied, contextual, and relational experience (paragraph 5).

First, a clarification on the meaning of tact and whether it can be discussed in phenomenological terms. Contemporary educational practice is increasingly shaped by standardization, accountability, and technocratic rationalities, and this distortion of pedagogical experiences is conducting to a renewed attention the interpersonal—and at times intimate—phenomenon of pedagogical tact. Frequently described as undergoing a contemporary “renaissance” (Fageth, 2021), pedagogical tact nonetheless resists easy definition. In its most general sense, tact refers in social terms (since Voltaire), to a ready and delicate sense of what is fitting and proper in dealing with others. In pedagogical contexts, these others are children, young people, or students, whose vulnerability and developmental openness give the exercise of tact a distinctive significance (Friesen, 2025).

According to this first definition of tact, the term *phenomenological* does not designate a generic ethical attitude—such as openness, care, or empathy—nor does it refer to a normative framework prescribing desirable pedagogical behaviours. Rather, it denotes a specific epistemological and methodological orientation, which aims at the descriptive and interpretive clarification of lived experience as it is meaningfully enacted in concrete situations. From this perspective, pedagogical phenomena are not approached as observable behaviours to be classified, but as experiential events that unfold within embodied, relational, and situated contexts. Phenomenological inquiry, therefore, suspends causal explanation and evaluative judgement to attend to the way pedagogical situations are experienced and given meaning by those involved, prior to their theoretical or technical objectification.

Within this framework, pedagogical tact cannot be defined through operational criteria or behavioural indicators; rather, it is understood as a form of situated practical knowing that manifests in the immediacy of educational encounters and resists abstraction. The ethical dimension of pedagogical tact, accordingly, is not presupposed as a normative demand but emerges immanently from phenomenological descriptions of educational experience, insofar as these disclose the relational

vulnerability and singularity inherent in pedagogical situations (van Manen, 2014).

2. Historical roots of pedagogical tact

The concept of pedagogical tact has a rich historical and theoretical lineage that has evolved significantly from its inception in the work of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841), who first introduced the term *pädagogischer Takt* as a fundamental aspect distinguishing competent teachers and educators (Herbart, 1802). Herbart conceives of pedagogical tact as a process of transformation: the conversion of pedagogical and/or moral theory into practical action takes place through the mediation of judgement brought about by tact. This is why tact is *mittelglied* between the theoretical, the general, and the specificity of pedagogical practice, and acts as a bridge between knowing and doing (Müssener, 1977). This is an interpretation of tact rooted in Kantian critical philosophy, which emphasises the importance of a dynamic integration of theory and practice in education (Kenklies, 2012; Kenklies 2023; Bonafede, 2024b).

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) further contributed to the discourse by emphasizing the relational and ethical dimensions of teaching, underscoring the necessity for educators and teachers to act with sensitivity and adaptability to the unique circumstances of their students (Friesen, 2022). Within this framework, pedagogical tact appears as a situated capacity, guiding educational action through the labyrinth of practical dilemmas, establishing a dynamic balance between opposites (Kenklies, 2012). Likewise, Jakob Muth (1962) advanced the understanding of pedagogical tact by articulating it as a critical capacity for instantaneous judgment, essential for addressing the singular and often unpredictable educational contexts in which teachers operate (Rovea, 2024).

After these German theoretical developments,¹ influential contemporary conceptualization comes from Max van Manen, who reinterpreted Muth vision on pedagogical tact (Fageth, 2021) and consider the tactless action fundamentally linked to “thoughtfulness”—a thoughtful receptivity that recalls intentionality, combining perception, sensitivity, creativity, and the willingness to engage with uncertainty:

Tact possesses the mindful quality of reflection, perceptiveness, thoughtfulness. In tactful action the adult orients concretely and thoughtfully to the child. Often tact involves a holding back, a passing over something, which is nevertheless experienced as influence by the person to whom the tactful action is directed. So the onto-epistemological relation between thoughtfulness and tact is such that thoughtfulness kinesthetically incarnates itself in tactful action. Tact is the active embodiment, the body-work of thoughtfulness (van Manen, 2015, p. 97).

Van Manen—like Muth—understands pedagogical tact as inseparable from the asymmetrical and ethically charged structure of what Nohl termed the “pedagogical relation” (van Manen, 1991, pp. 72–78; Muth, 1962, pp. 107–108), which gives to tact the characteristics of being ontologically unplannable and requiring an “improvisational gift” to connect educator and learner. However, van Manen articulates a conception of tact that differs in important aspects from the German pedagogical tradition. Tact, he argues, “is not simply some kind of mediator between theory and practice” (2015, p. 102). Instead, he defines it as “the sensitive application of thoughtfulness in action” (2015, p. 102) and as “the most personal embodiment of a pedagogical thoughtfulness” (1991, p. 9). Pedagogical tact, in this sense, is said to be grounded in “a certain kind of reflection, or better, in an active intentionality of thoughtfulness” (1991, p. 209; 2015, p. 102), and it is understood as an embodied, situational, and pre-reflective form of practical knowing that becomes manifest in the educator’s immediate responsiveness to the child and to the educational situation.

Crucially, this thoughtfulness is not conceived as emerging within the immediacy of the pedagogical situation itself, nor as a responsive mediation of opposing demands. Rather, van Manen emphasizes that tact is “formed by careful reflection on past experiences” (2015, p. 100) and can be understood as both the “process and product of self-reflective reflection on the life of human experience” (1991, p. 127;

1. We should cite even the contribution of Elisabeth Blochmann, disciple of Herman Nohl, and her connection between tact and *Gelassenheit* (1950; 1951).

2015, p. 102). In this way, the authority of tact derives from accumulated experience and from the educator's individual work of reflection and self-reflection. Thoughtfulness and tact thus appear as an inseparable unity: pedagogical tact is thoughtfulness in action, reflection embodied. Action, here, takes on the quality of reflection, while reflection itself becomes active and engaged in practice.

In this sense, pedagogical tact can be approached phenomenologically through reflective description, which seeks to render experiential meaning intelligible without reducing it to technical rules or normative criteria. For these reasons van Manen's approach seems departed both from transcendental phenomenology and from empirical-analytic methodologies by focusing on the interpretive description of lived experiences as they are enacted within professional practices (van Manen, 2014; 2015; 2016). In this sense, the phenomenological orientation adopted by van Manen represents a distinctive development within the phenomenological movement and has been explicitly articulated in relation to educational research.

3. Tact and thoughtfulness in phenomenology of practice

Max van Manen has looked to address the challenges connected with the concept of pedagogical tact by developing a phenomenology of practice, grounded in the descriptive and interpretive analysis of lived experience, explicitly contrasting it with explanatory and objectifying empirical methodologies. Rather than aiming at generalisable models or explanatory frameworks, phenomenology of practice seeks to cultivate pedagogical thoughtfulness through sustained engagement with concrete situations in their singularity, ambiguity, and temporal unfolding.

His phenomenological approach emphasizes interpretive analysis, characterized by fragility and a deliberate focus on the singularity and uniqueness of educational phenomena (van Manen, 1991; 2015). Within this framework, educational events are analysed through a semiotic-textual lens, underscoring the hermeneutic understanding of educational situations rather than their objective measurement. This interpretive method privileges detailed qualitative descriptions that aim to reveal the nuanced and context-specific nature of pedagogical interactions (van Manen, 2014). This is inspired in this sense by the direction taken, according to Joseph Kockelmans (1987), by the "Utrecht School" or "Dutch School", which is the historical example of an approach that 'does' phenomenology on concrete life-world topics, focusing on the phenomenological study of ordinary and professional phenomena (van Manen & van Manen, 2021).

The aim of the van Manen phenomenology of practice is fundamentally straightforward: it seeks to infuse educational practice with heightened reflexivity and interpretive attentiveness by adopting a consistently questioning stance. In other words, as soon as we become vividly aware of the pedagogical significance of our role, we begin to question ourselves and harbor doubts about our actions. According to van Manen, educational reflection—or what he terms pedagogy—is precisely this ongoing questioning, a continuous doubt accompanying every educational decision without succumbing to scepticism. This perspective has two key implications.

Firstly, such an approach does not result in a fixed doctrine or a systematic body of knowledge; instead, it generates a form of embodied knowledge—or body-knowledge—visible in educators' ability to respond tactfully to the unique circumstances of educational encounters. Thus, van Manen presents pedagogy as a reflective-interpretative-phenomenological practice, promoting a pedagogical stance grounded in sympathetic insights and profound understanding, challenging conventional assumptions radically: "phenomenology tends to foster ethical sensitivities, interpretive talents, and thoughtfulness and tact in professional activities, relations, and situations" (van Manen, 2014, pp. 67-68).

Secondly, van Manen's phenomenology of practice constitutes an epistemological project that understands pedagogy from within the situated practice of formative relationships. By modifying the prefixes of the term 'formative', diverse educational relationships emerge. Phenomenology is formative as it informs, reforms, transforms, performs, and pre-forms the relationship between being and practice. (1) Informatively, phenomenological studies provide thoughtful guidance and consultation; (2) reformatively, phenomenological texts provoke critical questioning, fostering our transformation into new possibilities of ourselves; (3) transformatively, phenomenology holds practical value by penetrating deeply into individuals, prompting their development; (4) preformatively, phenomenological expe-

rience reveals formative meanings that influence us before we even consciously grasp their significance; and finally, (5) performatively, phenomenological reflection enhances pedagogical tact, central to educational experience, given van Manen's emphasis on educational practice and singularity. Educators, according to van Manen, must be capable of seizing spontaneous learning opportunities that appear in everyday life, tailoring their responses to meet the unique needs and classroom dynamics.

Grounded in this theoretical approach, van Manen views pedagogical tact as more than merely mediating theory and educational practice; it constitutes the ontologically significant trait of pedagogy itself. Such an ontology is elusive, partial, and fragmentary, reflecting the epistemological structure to which it refers. Pedagogical tact, mirroring pedagogy's event-like nature, emerges as a prompt, sensitive response to students' individual needs, refraining from predetermined strategies. Cultivating this immediate educational responsiveness means embracing the singularity of each pedagogical encounter, responding to each individual request respectfully, discreetly, and attentively, and developing empathetic openness attuned to the uniqueness of every individual life.

Tact is the practical language of the body—it is the language of acting in pedagogical moments. [...] In other words, while we are acting as teachers or as parents with children we do not objectify or take distance from our acting. Tact as a form of human interaction means that we are immediately active in a situation: emotionally, responsively, mindfully (van Manen, 1991, p. 122).

This is coherent with Spiegelberg's call (1975) for a "return to the spirit of doing phenomenology directly on phenomena, on things". In this sense van Manen's approach is part of this attempt to return phenomenology to its original focus on lived educational experience and his conceptualization of tact—as an immediate, pre-reflective, and embodied praxis—poses a significant methodological dilemma: how does one research and foster a capacity that is, by its very nature, elusive, fragmentary, and resistant to objectification? If tact is, as van Manen (1991) posits, an immediate "language of the body" and, following Spiegelberg (1975), a "doing phenomenology directly", then capturing it for collective analysis and professional training becomes a paramount challenge. It is precisely this methodological gap—between the lived experience of tact and the requirements of pedagogical research—that recent research has sought to bridge.

4. Tact in contemporary debate: Shifting through teacher education

A persistent difficulty nevertheless remains even after these influential reconstructions of pedagogical tact: the key terms through which tact is articulated—whether as *mittelglied* in the Herbartian lineage or as 'thoughtfulness' in phenomenology of practice—are intrinsically resistant to stabilization. They elude straightforward categorization and are not readily rendered commensurable with the epistemic expectations of conventional empirical research, which tends to privilege what can be isolated, operationalized, and measured (Juuso & Laine, 2005; van Manen, 2015). The problem is not merely methodological but philosophical: pedagogical tact names a dimension of educational life that is inseparable from tacit discernment, embodied timing, and the fragile intelligibility of interpersonal situations. As such, it cannot be treated as an object-like variable without losing the very phenomenon at stake.

The most compelling recent contributions confirm this point while seeking alternative ways to develop tact's conceptual relevance for teacher education. Prairat's monograph *Éduquer avec tact* (2017) reframes tact as a relational and ethical virtue akin to Aristotelian *phronesis* and develops a 'pedagogy of exemplars and dilemmas' as an indirect mode of cultivation that avoids reducing tact to rule-following or technique. Burghardt and Zirfas similarly refuse to assimilate tact to a competence model; by defining it as a *Problemformel* (2019), they treat tact as a heuristic principle that discloses constitutive tensions of pedagogical action—especially those between certainty and contingency, determination and openness—thus positioning tact as a concept that problematizes practice rather than prescribing it. Taken together, these approaches indicate that tact is best understood not as a deliverable outcome of training but as a reflective-practical orientation sustained through interpretive work on concrete cases.² These perspec-

2. While not all of these authors explicitly situate their work within phenomenology, their accounts of pedagogical tact are

tives are coherent with van Manen interpretation of tact as a responsive, embodied, and often wordless form of “knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do” in the immediacy of educational encounters (van Manen, 1991, 2015). Tact is neither a method nor a transferable procedure; it is an improvisational thoughtfulness of the educator, oriented toward the irreducible singularity of the child.

This focus on the educator-learner relationship is something that warrants further reflection. In fact, despite constant reference to the ‘circumstance’, the concept of tact tends to favor a dyadic dimension of the educational relationship, focusing on the educator and the learner (van Manen, 1991, 2015).³ So, the phenomenological scene tends to privilege the adult–child dyad as the primary site where an unexpected need emerges and where pedagogical response is called for. Contextual layers often remain background conditions rather than explicit constituents of tact’s structure. The philosophical consequence is that tact risks being tacitly identified with an ethically saturated face-to-face responsiveness, where the teacher’s practical wisdom is disclosed chiefly as an attunement to “this child here”, even when the situation is evidently shaped by curricular objects, institutional norms, and historically sedimented forms of schooling.

To address this interpretative problem, in the last decade Norm Friesen produces interesting reflections, taking up the phenomenological inheritance of van Manen while shifting its centre of gravity. Rather than treating tact primarily as a teacher’s internalized thoughtfulness in action, Friesen reconceptualizes tact within the relational architecture of the pedagogical triangle—teacher, student, and content—thereby transforming the conceptual grammar through which tact is understood (Friesen & Osguthorpe, 2018). This move is not a merely formal adjustment; it is a philosophical claim about what pedagogy *is*. If pedagogy cannot be reduced to an encounter between two persons, then tact cannot be reduced to dyadic sensitivity either. On the triadic view, tact is disclosed in how the teacher relates to the student through the content, and in how content is rendered present, modulated, delayed, intensified, or tactfully withheld so that it supports rather than overwhelms the learner (Friesen & Osguthorpe, 2018). The third term—content—represents here not as inert material but as an historical mediator: it carries curricular demands, forms of cultural authority, and criteria of intelligibility that shape what counts as an appropriate pedagogical move. Consequently, tact should be understood as a situated capacity to negotiate not only relational closeness but also the affordances and constraints of institutional practice, including the ways in which teaching is framed by assessment, accountability, and the temporality of lessons.

This triangulated reframing has direct implications for teacher education. It opens a path between two unsatisfying alternatives: on the one hand, reducing teacher formation to technical protocols and best practices; on the other, leaving tact as an ineffable gift that can only be acquired through inner talent. Friesen’s account instead supports a model of professional learning grounded in interpretive engagement with concrete situations, where student teachers can learn to analyse how relational, material, and institutional factors co-constitute pedagogical action (Juuso, Laine, 2005; Friesen & Osguthorpe, 2018). By using film and video analysis—close readings of classroom interactions, gestures, gaze, bodily distance, timing, and restraint (Sava, 2022)—he shows how tact manifests as a texture of embodied micro-decisions that cannot be captured adequately by post hoc self-report or decontextualized behavioural coding (Friesen, 2018; 2022b). In this sense, video-based exemplars do not function as templates to imitate, but as interpretive occasions through which the triadic structure of pedagogy becomes visible and discussable within teacher education. The pedagogical point is not to teach tact by prescription, but to cultivate professional discernment by making the relational field of teaching analysable without collapsing it into technique.

At the same time, Friesen’s contribution is not exhausted by the shift from dyadic to triadic attention in pedagogical tact. The deeper philosophical move concerns how the pedagogical relation itself is conceived. Where van Manen’s phenomenological ethics often presupposes an intentional orientation of the educator toward the child’s good, Friesen pushes the analysis toward a more critical and less

nevertheless deeply indebted to phenomenological modes of thinking, considering tact as a situated, embodied, and relational form of judgment that resists proceduralization and technical rationality—core commitments of phenomenological pedagogy.

3. Van Manen does not strictly exclude broader mediations—language, institutional constraints, adult relations, cultural horizons—since these are woven throughout his descriptions.

reassuring account of relationality—one that foregrounds asymmetry, historical-political risk, and the irreducibility of otherness.

Within the pedagogical triangle, the educator is to engage with learner and world not just in individualized ways, but also while maintaining a certain figurative (and sometimes literal) distance from each. In other words, the educational challenge is to retain a certain free-play, balance, or equilibrium between all three, so that the child may exercise their own freedom and initiative in relation to both educator and subject-matter (Friesen, 2024, p. 384).

In dialogue with the continental tradition and with critiques of the pedagogical relation's latent authorization of adult power, he problematizes any tendency to treat tact as a refined mode of empathetic access to the child (Friesen, 2017b). Drawing on Waldenfel's responsive phenomenology (2007; 2011), Friesen reconceives the relation not as something that can be secured by intentional care, but as structurally marked by thresholds, alienness, and an asymmetry that cannot be overcome through sensitivity alone. On this account, pedagogical experience is shaped by what happens *to* the educator against the grain of plans and purposes: a pathic dimension that surprises, interrupts, or even violates, calling forth responses that exceed cognition and will. Tact, therefore, is not simply a more delicate form of intentional thoughtfulness; it becomes a mode of responsiveness to an eventful relational reality that cannot be mastered. This is precisely the kind of reality in which educational authority is always precarious, and in which the child's meaning-making may remain opaque or inarticulate (Friesen, 2017b).

Seen from this angle, the triadic structure becomes more than a didactic heuristic; it becomes a philosophical starting point for widening the construct of tact beyond the dyadic scene without dissolving tact into a diffuse set of contextual influences (Friesen, 2022a). The triangle makes explicit that pedagogy always unfolds in a field of mediations—material, symbolic, institutional, historical—that shape what can be done and what can be received, while the responsive account of relationality clarifies why such mediations cannot be treated as neutral background. In this view, unlike empathy or responsiveness, pedagogical tact does not primarily concern affective attunement but the mediation of relational, material, and institutional demands. They participate in how the child appears, how vulnerability is distributed, and how the educator's responsibility is triggered and constrained. This is also why Friesen's framework offers a particularly fertile bridge toward a broader, ecological theorization of tact.

5. A reconfiguration of pedagogical tact to an ecological horizon

If tact is a situated form of mediation enacted within a triadic and often multi-layered relational field, then the next step is to conceptualize how educational environments (spaces, technologies, rhythms, discourses, institutional logics) co-shape the conditions under which tact becomes possible, distorted, or blocked. The ecological expansion, therefore, does not abandon tact's phenomenological core; it radicalizes it by treating the pedagogical situation as a relational ecology in which ethical responsiveness is immanent to embodied experience yet irreducible to either individual attunement or technical rule (van Manen, 1991, 2015; Friesen & Osguthorpe, 2018; Friesen, 2018).

This expansion is difficult to present and explain even for recent authors. For instance, one emblematic vignette comes from Nicolas Philibert's documentary *Être et Avoir* (2002). Friesen reads a brief interaction in which the teacher, Georges Lopez, physically and verbally prompts a pupil, Letitia, who is struggling to recall the number seven; tact, on this view, appears in minimal gestures, calibrated proximity, timing, and in what the teacher withholds from doing or saying. According to Friesen (2018), this is a practical example that illustrates how the teacher's body language communicates presence and support even through silence or refraining from direct intervention.⁴

Yet the same sequence can show an inverted interpretation: the child's visible discomfort (hesitations, nervous movements, withdrawal) is taken to indicate not tact but tactlessness (Steffel, 2024; Bonafede 2024), exemplified by impatience, insistent questioning, and the destabilizing presence of the camera.

According with this second interpretation, we can argue two important elements. First, pedagogical tact emphasises the necessity of an ecological passivity (Roth, 2007; 2011), claiming a relational and

4. This is coherent with the idea of *Gelassenheit* proposed by Blochmann (1950; 1951) and even with the phenomenology of the body presented by Merleau-Ponty (1945).

contextual responsiveness. Lopez's impatience—manifested through gestures such as sighing and eye-rolling and his pressing, insistent questions towards Letitia—shows an absence of spontaneous trust and compassion; moreover, his behaviour reflects a rigid and structured vision of teaching, one which prevents him from truly connecting with Letitia's emotional and relational difficulties, as he fails to grasp the subtle, yet significant, cues signalling her discomfort. This lack of intuitive sensitivity may have contributed significantly to Letitia's discomfort, preventing the establishment of an authentically tactful educational relation. Secondly, the vignette from Nicolas Philibert's documentary offers confirmation of the most relevant idea of this paper: pedagogical tact can be interpreted as an ecological concept that offers further insights to grasp more deeply the nature of the educational profession and of teaching itself.

The interpretative divergence on vignette situation is philosophically productive and coherent with our thesis: it shows that tact is not a property of isolated teacher behaviour, but a relational phenomenon whose meaning depends on how a whole situation is experienced, interpreted, and normatively weighted by different participants. According to this theoretical argumentation, we can finally define pedagogical tact as the creative epiphenomenal manifestation of (1) a sensitive receptivity, that produce (2) a thoughtful-embodied response oriented towards valuing (3) the singularity and uniqueness of every educational encounter⁵ (4) that takes place within the world. This fourth element is the one who require further explanations.

With Friesen's proposed inclusion of the pedagogical triangle, it is possible (a) to explicit a third component into the concept of tact, and (b) consider education not only about optimizing learning outcomes or intensifying interpersonal care, but about orienting subjects toward a common world that resists appropriation. This is coherent with recent research (Lewin, Waterman-Evans, 2024; Rothuizen, Togsverd 2024) and resonates with insistence that education must be *world-centred* (Biesta, 2021)—that it concerns how the subject is addressed by, and learns to exist in relation to, what is other than the self (including what is other than the adult's projects). In ecological terms, the world cannot remain a neutral stage on which the moral drama of adult-child interaction plays out; it is itself what calls, interrupts, and obliges (Rovea, 2024). Thus, the ecological orientation of pedagogical tact does not dilute ethics into contextualism. On the contrary, it radicalizes ethics by insisting that responsibility is not only *for the child* but also *for the world that the child is being introduced to*—a world of meaning and materiality that must not be reduced to means-ends rationality.

Friesen's pedagogical triangle offers a conceptual bridge, because it shows why world-centredness cannot be achieved by adding "relevance" to a dyadic ethics of care. Pedagogical tact mediates the student's relation to content, and it does so under institutional and cultural pressures that often invite "technification," intended here as the reduction of educational action to scripted efficiency. An ecological tact therefore entails an intentionality that keeps the world *present* in its demands and resistances while refusing to let those demands crush the student's emerging subjectivity. This is precisely a mediating task: tact holds open the space in which the world can be encountered as meaningful without being experienced as mere coercion.

These elements converge in a final claim: reconfiguring pedagogical tact as an ecological concept allows to consider it as a *principle of mediation* in the professionalization process of teacher education (Senkbeil, 2024; 2025). The pedagogical triangle specifies the "where" of this mediation: between teacher-student, teacher-content, and student-content relations, all within a pedagogical situation whose requires receptivity, creativity and authenticity. In technocratic environments, these relations are pressured to collapse into means-ends rationality, risking the reduction of student and teacher alike to instruments of performance (Biesta, 2010). Tact resists this collapse by keeping the world present in a non-instrumental way: content is not a neutral tool, nor is the student a test-score producer, nor is

5. This philosophical stance aligns closely with the phenomenological understanding of pedagogical tact proposed by Muth and van Manen, who similarly describe tact as an intuitive responsiveness that cannot be reduced to technical knowledge or pre-formulated methods. Specifically, van Manen (2015) underscores that pedagogical tact inherently involves a "holding back" and an openness to the uniqueness of the educational encounter, reflecting what Løgstrup describes as the spontaneous and receptive qualities of sovereign expressions: "One stands in danger of forgetting the deeper human meaning of caring as the ethical demand, as the Danish philosopher, Løgstrup, called it and how the caring encounter may help us understand in a richer way the nature of our profession as a vocation and as a domain of ethical responsibility" (van Manen, 2015, p. 225).

the teacher a delivery mechanism. The professional task is mediational: to hold open a space where the student can encounter the world meaningfully, even when the situation is fragile, underdetermined and propose a solution through rules-as-not-rules (Korsgaard, Zamojski, 2024).

6. Conclusion

The theoretical analyses proposed in this paper support a central claim: pedagogical tact is best approached not as an individual competence that can be operationalized into behavioural indicators, but as a situated, ethically charged mode of relating that is disclosed in concrete situations and remains irreducible to procedural knowledge. Van Manen's phenomenology of practice has been decisive for articulating this irreducibility. Even when his texts gesture toward language, institutional life, adult-to-adult relations, and cultural forms, pedagogical tact tends to be staged primarily within the adult-child unity as the privileged locus in which unexpected need emerges and must be met through improvisational thoughtfulness (van Manen, 1991, 2015). The ethical gravity of this dyadic scene is undeniable: the child's singular vulnerability calls forth a response that cannot wait for deliberation, and the educator's responsibility cannot be discharged by technique.

While the first part of the paper reconstructs the phenomenological articulation of pedagogical tact, the central theoretical contribution of this article lies in proposing an ecological reconfiguration of tact that exceeds both dyadic ethics and competence-based models. Friesen inherits this phenomenological perspective but shifts its conceptual centre of gravity. Instead of treating the pedagogical relation as primarily dyadic, he reconceptualizes tact within the heuristic of the pedagogical triangle, insisting that tact is always exercised through something: tasks, materials, curricular demands, symbolic forms and institutional norms. In this triadic frame, the educator's responsibility is no longer exhausted by face-to-face responsiveness; it includes the obligation to mediate how the student encounters "the thing" of study, so that content does not become oppressive, humiliating, or merely instrumental. Friesen's shift is therefore not a rejection of van Manen's dyadic attentiveness; it opens to a re-situation of that attentiveness within a broader relational field in which the "world" of education—knowledge, practices, artifacts, and institutional forms—must be conceptually foregrounded rather than treated as background.

This is the point at which an explicitly ecological conception of pedagogical tact becomes both possible and necessary. Reconceptualizing pedagogical tact ecologically does not mean turning tact into a general explanatory principle for all pedagogical phenomena. Rather, tact names a specific mode of mediation that becomes visible precisely where pedagogical action cannot be stabilized by rules, competencies, or outcomes. The specific contribution of this paper lies in reframing pedagogical tact as an ecological principle of mediation rather than as an individual pedagogical disposition. If Friesen shows that tact is structurally triadic (teacher-student-content), an ecological extension argues that the triangle itself is nested within a wider educational environment: classroom atmospheres, temporal rhythms, architectural constraints, socio-technical infrastructures, policies, cultural expectations, and the historical burdens that shape what can be said and done. The ecological move does not add context as an external variable; it treats the world as an immanent dimension of pedagogical experience, constitutive of what tact can be, even as absence of tact, in terms of weakness and hesitation of educator (Friesen, 2017a). The film vignette already illustrates this: the same gesture can be read as supportive proximity or as intrusive pressure; the same pause can be read as giving space or as abandonment. In this sense tact, is structurally configured as a struggle with tactlessness: an effort to respond within conditions that continually erode the preconditions of tact (time, attention, discretion, trust) (Bonafede, 2024; 2025).

On this view, tact belongs to professional action precisely because it addresses tensions that cannot be solved by rule-following. Concretely, this yields a distinctive orientation for teacher education:

1. Case-based, film-analytic formation that trains perception and judgement through exemplars and breakdowns, rather than through scripted competencies alone (Friesen, 2018; Garcia, Lewis, 2014; Lewis, 2018).

2. Attention to conditions in terms of temporal, architectural, institutional and technological ones (Lewin, Waterman-Evans, 2024; Rothuizen, Togsverd 2024), that shape whether tact is possible at all, shifting the focus from individual virtue to relational-infrastructural affordances.
3. Awareness of immanent presence of tension and tactlessness as a permanent risk and analytic resource, because tact is also clarified through its absence and through cultural critique (Bonafede, 2024a; Bonafede 2025).
4. World-centred ethical intentionality that refuses to let 'the world' be reduced to background context, aligning the professional task of mediation with an educational aim oriented toward subjectification-in-and-with-the-world (Biesta, 2021).

Taken together, these moves show the path from Friesen's theoretical innovation—triadic, relational, and structurally fragile—to an ecological conception of pedagogical tact: one becomes professionally formative as a mediating principle rather than a reproducible method (Priestley, Biesta, Robinson, 2015).

References

- Biesta, G. J. J. (2010). *Good Education in an Age of Measurement. Ethics, Politics, Democracy*. Boulder-London: Paradigm Publishers.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2017). *The Rediscovery of Teaching*. New York: Routledge.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2022). *World-Centered Education. A View for the Present*. New York: Routledge.
- Blochmann, E. (1950). Der pädagogische takt. *Die Sammlung: Zeitung für Kultur und Erziehung*, 5, 712–720.
- Blochmann E. (1951), Die Sitte und der pädagogische Takt. *Die Sammlung: Zeitung für Kultur und Erziehung*, 6, 589–593.
- Bonafede, P. (2024a). Tactlessness as condition for teaching tact: educational reflections based on Adorno. *Ethics and Education*, 19(3), 347–360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2024.2396789>
- Bonafede, P. (2024b). Dalla musica all'educazione. L'immagine dell'organista in filosofia e la sua ricezione teoretico pedagogica. *Rassegna di pedagogia – Pädagogische Umschau*, LXXXII (1–4), 145–160.
- Bonafede, P. (2025). *Sentire l'educazione. Tatto e risonanza come prospettive di estetica pedagogica*. Lecce: PensaMultimedia.
- Burghardt, D. & Zirfas, J. (2019). *Der pädagogische Takt: Eine erziehungswissenschaftliche Problemformel*. Beltz Juventa.
- Fageth, B. (2021). *Pädagogischer Takt in der Elementarpädagogik*. Weinheim Basel: Beltz Juventa.
- Frank, A., Gleiser, M., Thompson, E. (2024). *The Blind Spot. Why Science Cannot Ignore Human Experience*. Cambridge, MA, London, UK: The MIT Press.

- Friesen, N. (2017a). The pedagogical relation past and present: Experience, subjectivity and failure. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 49(6), 743–756. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2017.1320427>
- Friesen, N. (2017b). Radicalizing the pedagogical relation: Passion and intention, vulnerability and failure. In M. Brinkmann, M. F. Buck, S. S. Rödel (Eds.), *Pädagogik – Phänomenologie. Verhältnisbestimmungen und Herausforderungen*. Dordrecht-Heidelberg-London-New York: Springer, 177–190.
- Friesen, N. (2018). Embodying tact in teaching: Ineluctable ambivalence, sensitivity, and reserve. *Philosophy of Education Archive*, 74, 301–309. <https://doi.org/10.47925/74.301>
- Friesen, N. (2022a). *Tact and the Pedagogical Relation. Introductory Readings*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Friesen, N. (2022b). The antinomies of pedagogy and aporias of embodiment: A historical and phenomenological investigation. In A. Kraus & C. Wulf (Eds.), *Handbook of Embodiment and Learning* (pp. 91–106). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Friesen, N., & Osguthorpe, R. (2018). Tact and the pedagogical triangle: The authenticity of teachers in relation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 70, 255–264. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.11.023>
- Garcia, J. A., & Lewis, T. E. (2014). Getting a grip on the classroom: From psychological to phenomenological curriculum development in teacher education programs. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 44(2), 141–168. <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12042>
- Herbart, J. F. (1802). *Pestalozzi's Idee eines ABC der Anschauung* (eng. trans. *ABC of Sense-perception, and Minor Pedagogical Works*, Appleton and co., 1896).
- Juuso H., Laine T. (2005). Tact and atmosphere in the pedagogical relationship. *Analytic Teaching*, 25(1), 1–17. <https://journal.viterbo.edu/index.php/at/article/view/815>
- Kenkies, K. (2012). Educational theory as topological rhetoric: The concepts of pedagogy of Johann Friedrich Herbart and Friedrich Schleiermacher. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 31(3), 265–273. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-012-9287-6>
- Kenkies, K. (2023). Pedagogies in dissonance: The transformation of pedagogical tact. *Global Education Review*, 10(2), 114–120.
- Kockelmans, J. J. (Ed.). (1987). *Phenomenological Psychology: The Dutch School*. Kluwer.
- Korsgaard M., Zamojski P. (2024). Theorising education from within pedagogical tact: a matter of singularity, attunement, and rules-as-not-rules. *Ethics and Education*, 19(3), 320–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2024.2387984>
- Kraus, A., Senkbeil, T. (2022). Pedagogical tact: Reconstruction of a bodily moment of the pedagogical relationship. In C. Wulf, A. Kraus (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Embodiment and Learning* (pp. 145–162). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lewin, D., & Waterman-Evans, L. (2024). Joint attention, the pedagogical relation and pedagogical tact in the age of digital education. *Ethics and Education*, 19(3), 391–407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2024.2387950>
- Lewis T. E. (2018). Can one teach tact? *Philosophy of Education Archive*, 74, 310–314. <https://doi.org/10.47925/74.310>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge (Original work published 1945).
- Müssener G. (1977). Begriff und Funktion des Pädagogischen Takts in Herbarts System der Pädagogik. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 14, 259–269.

- Muth J. (1962). *Pädagogischer Takt. Monographie einer aktuellen Form erzieherischen und didaktischen Handelns*. Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer.
- Prairat, E. (2017). *Éduquer avec tact : Vertu et compétence de l'enseignant*. Paris: ESF.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Roth, W.-M. (2007). Theorizing passivity. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 2, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-006-9045-6>
- Roth, W.-M. (2011). *Passibility. At the Limits of the Constructivist Metaphor*. Dordrecht-Heidelberg-London-New York: Springer.
- Rothuizen, J. J. & Togsverd, L. (2024). Situated knowledge between purposes and facts and its relation to pedagogical tact. *Ethics and Education*, 19(3), 301–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2024.2400872>
- Rovea, F. (2024a). *Educare alla giusta distanza. Un'indagine sul tatto pedagogico dall'etica all'ecologia*. Roma: Città Nuova Editrice.
- Rovea, F. (2024b). Tuning into the world. A jazz-inspired approach to pedagogical tact. *Ethics and Education*, 19(3), 334–346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2024.2365115>
- Sava, L. (2022). Enabling student participation in syllabus design through film nominations and voting: an action research project. *Film Education Journal*, 5(2), 80–92. <https://doi.org/10.14324/fej.05.2.02>
- Schleiermacher F. D. E. (2000). *Texte zur Pädagogik. Kommentierte Studienausgabe. Vol. 2*, M. Winkler & J. Brachmann, Suhrkamp.
- Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*. Jossey-Bass Ed.
- Senkbeil, T. (2024). The performative triangle of tact as a professional “action competence.” *Ethics and Education*, 19(3), 408–429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2024.2394003>
- Spiegelberg, H. (1975). *Doing Phenomenology: Essays on and in Phenomenology*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Steffel, M. (2024). Transforming relationships: Pedagogical tact as a utopian figure of mediation. *Ethics and Education*, 19(3), 430–443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2024.2397937>
- Van Manen, M. (1991). *The Tact of Teaching: The Meaning of Pedagogical Thoughtfulness*. NY: State University of New York Press.
- Van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of Practice*. London-New York: Routledge.
- Van Manen, M. (2015). *Pedagogical Tact: Knowing What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do*. New York: Routledge.
- Van Manen M. (2016). *Researching Lived Experience. Second Edition*. New York: Routledge.
- Van Manen, M. & Van Manen, M. (2021) Doing phenomenological research and writing. *Qualitative Health Research*, 31(6), 1069–1082. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323211003058>
- Waldenfels, B. (2007). *The Question of the Other*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Waldenfels, B. (2011). *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts*. Evanston: Northwestern UP.

Paolo Bonafede – Università di Trento (Italy)

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2996-1545> | ✉ paolo.bonafede@unitn.it

Paolo Bonafede is Senior Researcher (RTT) in General and Social Pedagogy at the University of Trento. His research focuses on philosophy of education, phenomenology, and media education, with interests in critical educational theory, teacher education, narratives and dialogical practices. He is Vice-Director of “Antonio Rosmini” Study and Research Centre.