

ANNA URSZULA OZGA

Jan Kochanowski University, Kielce  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8708-9671>  
[anna.ozga@ujk.edu.pl](mailto:anna.ozga@ujk.edu.pl)

## Students' Mental Well-Being and Its Determinants in Jesper Juul's Pedagogy

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*Dobrostan psychiczny uczniów i jego uwarunkowania  
w pedagogice Jespera Juula*

**Abstract:** Jesper Juul is a Danish educator, family therapist, creator of a humanistic approach to education, founder of the international organization Familylab which operates in over 15 countries around the world. The author equates the psychological well-being of an individual with mental health and developed psychosocial competencies, and in his numerous works he suggests teachers how to achieve such a goal. He believes that the following four areas should be developed in a young person: personal integrity (self-awareness, knowledge of one's own needs, emotions, values and boundaries), self-esteem (i.e. what an individual knows about himself/herself and how he/she feels about it), self-confidence (which depends on the skills one has) and self-responsibility (in order for a person to be responsible for his/her own decisions, actions and choices). Juul repeatedly points to the crisis of the school and its destructive impact on the mental well-being of students, who in this institution are constantly assessed, required to be obedient, and cannot decide on the fulfillment of their basic needs. To improve the situation not only of students, but also of teachers and parents, he proposes: 1) to replace compulsory schooling with the right to education; 2) to modify the management culture at school and to develop a new type of leadership in education; 3) to take care of teachers, and, in particular, to equip them with competencies to build relationships; such content should also be introduced into the pedagogical preparation program for students – future teachers; 4) to thank students for going to school.

**Keywords:** personal integrity; self-esteem; self-confidence; self-responsibility; student; teacher

**Abstrakt:** Jesper Juul to duński pedagog, terapeuta rodzinny, twórca humanistycznego podejścia wychowawczego, założyciel międzynarodowej organizacji Familylab, która działa w ponad piętnastu krajach świata. Autor ten dobrostan psychiczny jednostki utożsamia ze zdrowiem psychicznym oraz rozwiniętymi kompetencjami psychospołecznymi i w swoich licznych pracach podpowiada wychowawcom, jak taki cel osiągnąć. Uważa, że należy rozwijać u młodego człowieka cztery obszary: integralność osobistą (samoświadomość, wiedzę dotyczącą własnych potrzeb, emocji, wartości i granic), poczucie własnej wartości (czyli to, co jednostka wie o sobie i jak się z tym czuje), pewność siebie (która zależy od posiadanych umiejętności) oraz osobistą odpowiedzialność (po to, by człowiek sam odpowiadał za swoje decyzje, czyny i wybory). Juul wielokrotnie wskazuje na kryzys szkoły i jej destrukcyjny wpływ na dobrostan

psychiczny uczniów, których w tej instytucji nieustannie się ocenia, wymaga od nich posłuszeństwa i decyduje o realizacji podstawowych potrzeb. By sytuację nie tylko uczniów, ale także nauczycieli i rodziców poprawić, proponuje: 1) obowiązek szkolny zamienić na prawo do nauki; 2) zmodyfikować kulturę zarządzania w szkole i wypracować nowy rodzaj przywództwa w edukacji; 3) zatroszczyć się o nauczycieli, w szczególności wyposażyć ich w kompetencje do budowania relacji; treści takie należałoby też wprowadzić do programu przygotowania pedagogicznego studentów – przyszłych nauczycieli; 4) dziękować uczniom za to, że chodzą do szkoły.

**Słowa kluczowe:** integralność osobista; poczucie własnej wartości; pewność siebie; odpowiedzialność osobista; uczeń; nauczyciel

For them [teachers], it would be most convenient  
if children left their souls at home  
and only took their heads to school.  
However, this approach will have to change one day,  
because they take their entire existence to school. (Juul, 2016, p. 82)

## INTRODUCTION

Jesper Juul (1948–2019) is a Danish educator, family therapist, creator of a humanistic approach to education, author of many books in the field of education, and the founder of the international organization Familylab, which popularizes his views in over 15 countries around the world (Juul, 2016).

The goal that Juul sets for teachers (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 127) is to educate an individual “characterized by mental balance and developed psychosocial competences”, which is why in his works he promotes the ideas of respect and cooperation in mutual relations with the child and mature adult leadership. Fundamental values for this educator are, “equal dignity of adults and children, protection of personal integrity, adult authority built on authenticity (not power or violence), adult responsibility for relationships with children” (Juul, 2017, p. 104).

The areas that, according to Juul, are worth developing in a child, because they will be the basis of their mental well-being, are personal integrity, self-esteem, self-confidence and self-responsibility. In the main part of the text, they were characterized, possibilities to strengthen were indicated, examples of their violation in a school functioning in the Prussian system were presented, as well as proposals for changes by Juul, the introduction of which would multiply the well-being of school youth.

## PERSONAL INTEGRITY

The central category in the work of the Danish pedagogue is integrity, which he explains as self-awareness, identity, the sum of needs, emotions, values, beliefs and individual boundaries (Juul, 2012, 2013). A person builds his own integrity when he

seeks answers to the questions: who am I? What do I like? What do I want? What do I need now? What are my boundaries? What are my values? This area is "the foundation of the child's emotional, social and spiritual health, and in the future of the adult" (Juul, 2013, p. 13).

For centuries, when an obedience-based model of education prevailed, children's integrity was compromised, meaning that their boundaries were mentally and physically pushed (Juul, 2016). The words of adults that destroy the integrity of the child are, for example: *you must, apologize, do not argue, do not do this, wrong, calm down, I know better, do not cry, do not exaggerate, I will do for you how can you do this*. Equally detrimental to a child's integrity is the definitional power of adults to label them as good or bad, attentive or inattentive, obedient or naughty, dirty or clean, etc. – this is because "the more you define someone, the less room you leave for them to discover independently who they are" (Juul, 2016, p. 93).

Supporting children to develop personal integrity means building good relationships with them, in which the role of the ward is to set their own boundaries, i.e. to define themselves (Juul, 2016), while the task of an adult is to learn these boundaries and respect them, as well as to teach the child that other people also have their boundaries that should not be crossed (Juul, 2013, 2011b, 2017). When creating opportunities for a child to learn about themselves from an early age, it is worth teaching them to recognize their needs, as well as to distinguish what they need from what they want<sup>1</sup> (Juul, 2017). It is also an important task for adults to teach children a language through which they can express what they feel<sup>2</sup> (Juul, 2016). The following phrases addressed to the child will help: *How do you feel?, What do you think? Tell me, you have the right, I understand, I hear, I respect you, try, I count on your opinion*. Moreover, the adult must not only take the child seriously, but have an equal dialogue with the child. It can be neither a discussion nor a negotiation, because this meeting is not about someone winning and someone losing, or about convincing someone of something or being convinced (Juul & Qien, 2012, p. 243). Dialogue is a type of conversation to which each partner contributes something, which allows searching for answers to the question of who the child is. The role of an adult cannot be limited only to asking questions, because in this meeting there is a need for a flow of emotions, experiences and real information (Juul, 2016). According to the Danish educator, the key to good communication "is not what an adult says, but how and why he says it" (Juul & Qien, 2012, p. 7). In order for an adult to be able to conduct an equal dialogue with a child, the adult himself must cover half the distance between himself and the interlocutor, in addition, he should abandon the impersonal language of convention in favor of

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<sup>1</sup> This creates opportunities for adults to give him what he really needs at the moment and will protect him from spoiling the child, i.e. a situation "in which he gets too much of what he wants and too little of what he needs" (Juul, 2013, p. 99).

<sup>2</sup> "All adults who have some problems in their relationships have one thing in common: they lack the language to express what they feel" (Juul, 2016, p. 38).

personal language. Juul (2014, p. 22) emphasizes that personal language “expresses the thoughts and feelings of an individual towards other people in a specific situation and time..., applies only to its author, and contains neither criticism nor instructions”.

## SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is, according to Juul and Krüger (2014, p. 110), “an existential trait of a person that expresses the knowledge of who that person is”. This dimension, at the cognitive level, indicates how well the individual knows oneself, while at the affective level, it helps to answer the question of how an individual feels about what he knows about himself (Juul, 2016), as well as whether he accepts himself as he is (Juul & Krüger, 2014). Self-esteem, called by the Danish pedagogue “the elixir of life” (Juul, 2017, p. 22), determines the quality of human life, as well as the nature of relationships with others. A high level of this trait means that a person can rely on himself and feel good about himself (Juul & Krüger, 2014), while a low level reveals insecurity, increased self-criticism and frequent feeling of guilt. A person who suffers from deficiencies in this area finds it difficult to build good relationships with himself and with others – he has trouble saying openly what he needs, what his boundaries are, where his “yes” and his “no” are (Juul, 2016, p. 88). Juul emphasizes that lack of self-esteem is often the basis for mental health problems (Juul, 2016). Worth mentioning is the fact that the development of a healthy self-esteem in children is hindered by evaluative words spoken to them by accompanying adults – this applies to both praise and criticism. The first one is often used by adults as a tool to manipulate the child in order to develop certain behavior (Juul & Qien, 2012), while the second one not only causes the child to become ashamed of who the child is, but also exacerbates what is being criticized (Juul & Qien, 2012).

In order to build self-esteem in a child, an adult must give the young person a sense of being really noticed (“this is how I see you”). The parent/teacher should not only accompany the child in the process of getting to know himself, but also should observe and encourage the young person to talk about himself, about matters important to him – being an attentive listener reassures the speaker that he is someone important to him (Juul, 2012, p. 94). If, in addition, the adult expresses his joy openly – he will give the teenager tangible proof that his existence is more valuable to him than achievements (Juul, 2016). Juul repeatedly points out in his works that when a child lacks a sense of being of value to others (especially to loved ones), aggressive<sup>3</sup> or self-destructive behaviors appear in him (Juul, 2011b, 2013) – “it is a child’s cry for help in such language as is available to him” (Juul, 2013, p. 72).

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Perls – the creator of Gestalt – wrote that “aggression is the *teeth of the soul*, that is, an emotion that helps us crush our experiences so that we can then swallow and digest them” (after: Juul, 2013, p. 53).

## SELF-CONFIDENCE

Self-confidence refers to what a person can do – and therefore is based on what an individual can do best and concerns specific areas of life (Juul, 2014). Its level in a person depends on what skills one possesses and how valuable they can be to others (Juul, 2016). Self-confidence develops with the progress and success of the individual. If the child has little self-confidence, an adult can support him, for example, by helping him with learning, which will gradually improve child's results, and with it, the child will believe in himself more strongly (Juul, 2016). To develop this area, it is worth using trainings, exercises, coaching and factual feedback (Juul, 2017). Objective opinions expressed by a colleague, parent, teacher emphasizing the progress in the area of the child's skills will also be helpful.

Self-confidence and self-esteem presented above are two different areas, although strongly related. People with high self-esteem do not suffer if they lack success in a field. Indeed, they can be sad, but they can explain to themselves "Okay, I'm not good at this" and it is not a tragedy for them. A man who is characterized by low self-esteem in a similar situation will say, "I failed, I couldn't do it, I'm hopeless!" (Juul, 2016, p. 88).

## SELF-RESPONSIBILITY

Juul (2014, 2016) points out that a person has only two options in his life: either he plays the role of a victim who blames others for his failures, or he becomes a mature individual who assumes responsibility for the shape of his existence, "anyone who does not want his feelings, thoughts, actions and decisions to be ignored must take self-responsibility for them" (Juul, 2011a, p. 80). This means that a person "is responsible for his own decisions, actions and choices (Juul, 2017, p. 19), and that he "signs up to everything he says and does" (Juul, 2014, p. 10).

Traditionally, adults take responsibility for many children's needs (Juul, 2014), although they are able to take on such a task themselves quite early – this applies not only to satisfying the need for hunger (how much and when they eat), hours of sleep, but also to experiencing emotions, thoughts and the meaning of life (Juul, 2016). The Danish educator confirms that many things can be done by children themselves but warns that they should not be left alone by adults – "it is necessary to accompany them without pressure and manipulation, to offer advice and show the way" (Juul & Qien, 2012, p. 129).

Teaching the child to take responsibility for their own life is mainly the role of the parent and the adult should be a role model for the child in this area.<sup>4</sup> According to

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<sup>4</sup> "Despite childhood experiences, every adult is responsible for who they have become" (Juul, 2013, p. 54).

Juul, an adult is one hundred percent responsible for the quality of the adult-child relationship and warns against repeated mistakes, “if everything is alright in the relationship with the child, it is my merit. And if something is wrong – it is his fault” (Juul, 2017, p. 21).

The Danish educator points out that the best time to learn self-responsibility is the first ten years of a child’s life – before he becomes a teenager and “will be forced to make many choices regarding, for example, school, alcohol, sex, drugs” (Juul & Qien, 2012, p. 150). The pedagogue explains that learning to take responsibility for one’s own life requires serious treatment of young people, as well as an equal dialogue – while the dialogue with the teenager is not used to teach discussion, but to teach responsibility (Juul, 2011b, 2014). According to Juul, adults should assume the role of a sparring partner towards the child, i.e. someone who puts up maximum resistance, causing as little harm as possible. This means that if an adult does not like a child’s idea, adult should clearly communicate it, as well as justify his position (Juul, 2014, 2016). Showing your opinion is to resist the child – “it is done so that he can make his own decision and also take responsibility for it” (Juul, 2016, p. 33).

#### THE DESTRUCTIVE IMPACT OF SCHOOL ON STUDENTS’ MENTAL WELL-BEING

Juul strongly emphasizes the crisis of the school, indicating areas in which it does not fit the requirements of the modern world. Created in the shape of a factory from the times of industrialization, it does not prepare creative and self-controlled employees sought by companies today (Juul & Krüger, 2014). According to the Danish educationalist, the school is a conservative institution serving not the welfare for the child but for society – one generation late. In fact, “no one feels good at school: neither students, nor teachers, nor parents” (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 52). The current situation in schools puts a strain on the mutual relations between parents and their children (e.g. the issue of doing homework, blaming parents for children’s bad behavior). Pupils still feel a lot of fear of the school where they are constantly being assessed and required to obey, “in the 1990s, there was a joke that schools would like to have pupils formatted to the A4 size. Today it would be size A5, and if it goes on like this, then perhaps in a few years we will talk about the format of the business card” (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 33).

Juul and Krüger (2014, p. 33) cite the position of experts who believe that “the school is an excellent institution for about fifteen percent of students. These are the nice, well-behaved boys and girls on the front bench. Schools like them the most because they don’t make noise, they don’t cause trouble”. The Danish educationalist, however, shows the damage to mental health which, after a few years, reveals itself in these individuals in the form of self-destructive behavior. School psychologists, for

example from Germany, estimate that half of primary school students in that country need therapy (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 21). In addition, the emergence of an increasing number of private schools is a clear signal of the crisis of the traditional school (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 154).

Reflecting on the destructive impact of school on the mental well-being of students, Juul primarily points to the weakening of three areas: integrity, self-esteem and self-responsibility of the student. As for the first of these spheres, it should be emphasized that this is because a young person cannot decide whether he wants to go to school or because it is compulsory, has no influence on the choice of classmates or teachers, requires obedience, and also sets the time for the fulfilment of basic needs. Juul believes that the shootings in schools, where teenage bombers shoot at students and teachers, are the result of violating this area.<sup>5</sup>

An adult who has mastered a personal language is needed to strengthen pupil integration. Juul claims that this is not possible at school because "teachers have no idea how to talk to children, they can ask questions, pass on knowledge, but they do not know how to talk to them. They did not learn this either from their parents or during their pedagogical studies" (Juul 2016, p. 67).

Analyzing the development of the child's self-esteem, Juul and Krüger (2014, p. 149) emphasize that school years are crucial in this matter "because then the image of oneself in one's own and other people's eyes is formed". The child's self-esteem suffers when the school puts pressure on him – when starting school education, every student tries "at all cost to make parents happy and bring the best grades. When he fails, he feels less valuable than his peers" (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 9).

Taking self-responsibility by the student in a school functioning in the Prussian system,<sup>6</sup> where coercion and obedience rule, is very difficult. Juul and Krüger (2014, p. 129) show how serious the consequences can be, "children who were brought up in obedience do not do very well in life because they have not learned how to take responsibility for themselves, they only know how to follow the orders of others; they prefer situations where someone else makes a decision for them and bears responsibility, and if there is nobody to do that, trouble begins". The Danish educator also believes that it is difficult for the student to learn self-responsibility in a school that "avoids responsibility – all the problems are blamed on students and their parents" (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 147).

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<sup>5</sup> One of the perpetrators of such an act left a letter in which he revealed the motives of his behavior, "I was in this school for ten years and every day they told me that I was nothing" (Juul, 2017, p. 115).

<sup>6</sup> It is completely different in Dalton schools, whose pillars of functioning are the student's independence and responsibility for their learning process (Sowińska & Sowiński, 2019).

## STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' MENTAL WELL-BEING IN SCHOOLS

Looking at the negative consequences of traditional school functioning observed in students, parents and teachers, Juul and Krüger (2014b) believe that the time for change has come. What suggestions does he include in his works?

First of all, compulsory schooling should be abolished ("the more a person feels forced to do something, the more he will resist", Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 66), in order to replace it with the right to education.

Secondly, the school management culture should be modified. For Juul, this implies the need to develop a new kind of leadership in education, "the culture of an organization is the responsibility of the managers, not the secretaries or the children" (Juul, 2013, p. 49), "not only the headmaster plays a leadership role at school, but also teachers in classes or in confrontation with parents" (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 63).

Thirdly, Juul and Krüger (2014, p. 64) emphasize that the change in schools will take place when we take care of teachers, "schools are like families: children are just as good as adults. If the adults are doing badly, the children will also do badly". According to the Danish pedagogue, the difficult situation of teachers in schools is due to the fact that they have to perform tasks for which they have not been sufficiently prepared. During their studies, they gained academic and didactic competences, but no one taught them the competences to build relationships that are necessary to implement a new type of leadership at school. Juul and Krüger (2014, p. 139) define it as "the ability to perceive the child as he is – as a unique individual – and to adapt one's behavior so as not to give up leadership while remaining authentically connected". In these competences, he distinguishes four important issues: "1) How to conduct a good dialogue with the student?; 2) How to have a meaningful dialogue within the group, in the classroom?; 3) How to talk to parents?; 4) How the teacher's leadership and authority towards children should look like?" (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 147). Therefore, Juul clearly indicates that such content should be included in the pedagogical preparation program of students – future teachers, while teachers already working in schools should be provided with training and supervision opportunities. The Danish educator emphasizes that the increase in teaching competences in building relationships not only means taking students' thoughts and feelings seriously or taking responsibility for the quality of contact with children by adults, but also allows to replace the authority built on the function with personal authority. Juul encourages teachers, in the case of poor relations with a specific student, to ask him about the solution: "children usually know very well why they fail or what bothers them, but no one asks them about it" (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 41).

Juul encourages adults to be thankful to students after each half-year for going to school. He suggests, for example, saying "we appreciate you going to school. We hope you learned something from it and that you enjoyed it. We know that not every day was joyful and that is why we thank you for sharing with us" (Juul & Krüger, 2014, p. 23).

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