

Dynamic Reflection

The quality of the inner dialog as a fundamental aspect of good education

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Introduction

The Dynamic Reflection Model can be used to visualize the inner dialogue. The model uses four chairs that reflect the four different positions a person can take in the internal dialogue. In the second paragraph we will give an illustration of this principle using a few examples of thoughts and feelings that may occur in the educational context. We will continue by explaining how you can be the director of your own thoughts and feelings by using the Dynamic Reflection Model. In the following section we discuss how the model is related to certain aspects of developmental psychology, and in the fourth paragraph we explain what we mean by a deficit in the internal system of a teacher. We conclude by discussing the aspects of group dynamics that are incorporated in the Dynamic Reflection Model. With this article we want to clarify and prove the power of applying the Dynamic Reflection Model to the educational context. We also would like to demonstrate the importance of the inner dialogue for both teachers and students in the light of high quality education.

1. Examples of thoughts and feelings in the educational context

The four chairs of the Dynamic Reflection Model reflect the positions **thinking, feeling, deepened thinking and deepened feeling**. Every day we are constantly thinking and experiencing feelings. In the case of a teacher, one of the thoughts could be: 'my students are not motivated and don't respect me.' Along with this thought one might feel emotions like irritation, helplessness and frustration. As a result you do not feel appreciated and valued as a teacher, despite your good intentions.

Other common thoughts of teachers are: 'they are testing me', which can elicit feelings of uncertainty, or 'they are not looking forward to my lessons', which can give the teacher a feeling of uneasiness and might decrease his desire to teach. These automatic, negative thoughts cause automatic, negative feelings, which in turn lead to anxiety on the part of the teacher.

However, your student needs a teacher with a positive disposition of acceptance and trust. If a teacher radiates anxiety and negativity, a student with a lack of self-confidence does not have a person to stimulate him to look forward to class and to behave like the teacher desires.

Back to the chairs of the internal dialog. Chair number 3 and 4 represent deepened thinking and deepened feeling. It's clear that the previous examples of thoughts and feelings have a limiting effect, both internally for the teacher and externally for the student. For both parties

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it seems to limit the learning and the ability to act effectively. So the question is how the teacher can broaden his² internal dialog, and therefore handle the situation successfully. When you picture the four chairs in your mind, you can get up from the chair of normal, automatic thinking and sit down on the chair of deepened thinking.

The position of **deepened thinking** implies that you put things in perspective, use humor, ask yourself questions and limit your own negative and probably unrealistic thoughts.

In the example we mentioned above, you can ask yourself the following questions:

- Did I use adequate knowledge and skills to present the material in a way that is meaningful and stimulating to my students?
- What seems to be the problem with my students? Why do they act so indifferently towards the teaching content and this education program? And why do I feel so angry?
- What kind of feelings do students have when they enter the classroom? Towards me, as well as their fellow students, and the profession they will be training for?
- Does that apparently indifferent attitude have anything to do with me, or is it about something that the student hasn't resolved internally? In other words: Should I be upset because of the negativity I witness in students? Is it actually about me?
- Do I truly show interest in my students?
- Which knowledge do I actually have about this target group?

By asking yourself such questions, you create room for viewing the issue in a different light. This way you will be able to think of different steps and actions you can take, instead of the ones you would be inclined to take if you would act on your first thoughts. For example: *'When I realize that these teenagers are mainly dealing with themselves and with their uncertain position in the classroom and in the world, I can stop thinking that they have negative intentions towards me as a teacher.'* Maybe then you will see the bright side of their spontaneous attributions and their nerve, even if that is something you do not need during class.

The position of **deepened feeling** implies that as a teacher you breathe calmly, relax, and view the other and yourself with a sense of tranquility and confidence. In the position of deepened feeling you accept every feeling in yourself or the reality around you. You are allowed to be who you are, you don't have to ignore or change your feelings, and you feel compassion for yourself and the students. When you accept your feelings instead of fighting them, you clear the air of the dominant, sometimes oppressing feelings. This also leads you to think of new and possibly successful actions.

When we return to our example, it could mean that you will feel compassion for those tough boys and girls, for their search, the difficulties they experience in (school) life. The students need your understanding and support to help them move forward.

² When we talk about 'he' or 'his (dialog)', we explicitly address women as well!

Maybe the next lesson you can try to empathically connect and show them warmth. For example by starting to express interest, by asking what they are interested in, how they like to clothe and what they like to do.

You radiate positivity, confidence, and enthusiasm, and you are looking forward to teaching your students something that will make them happier and helps them to function better in society. By deliberately taking this position as a teacher, you take responsibility for your own sense of peace and positive emotions, enabling students to raise themselves to a higher level.

2. Be your own director: increase self-direction

With the Dynamic Reflection Model you visualize your inner dialog, which enables you to direct yourself. You can simply put four chairs next to each other and start talking about something that is on your mind. When you notice you are speaking based on your thoughts, you sit down on the chair that represents the thinking position. When you are talking about feelings, you take a seat on the chair of the feeling position. When you are deliberately asking questions or putting things in perspective, you can take place on the chair of deepened thinking. And when you take a moment to breathe calmly and relax, you sit down on the chair of deepened feeling.

With the Dynamic Reflection Model you can raise the quality of your internal dialog by tackling something within yourself that you initially described as a problem (from the position of narrowed thinking and feeling) with relevant questions, relaxation, a sense of peace and confidence.

By intentionally changing chairs while talking, you activate a different position within yourself. You are your own director, and this will most likely result in being a more effective director in dealing with your students as well!

We know from experience that a teacher always projects the result of his own psychological development on his students, whether it be negative or positive.

Even if there were some things you didn't learn while growing up, you can increase your self-direction and communication skills by deliberately practicing with the help of an instrument like the Dynamic Reflection Model.

3. Aspects of Developmental Psychology

To support a student in growing more self-confident and increasing his self-direction (which means being able to intentionally apply the positions of deepened thinking and deepened feeling while communicating), we need teachers who can use that deliberate deepened thinking and deepened feeling during their contact with students.

So what is the reason that not all teachers take a position of deepened feeling and thinking towards themselves and others? Why are teachers sometimes withdrawn, quickly irritated, arrogant, brusque and unkind towards students? Why is it sometimes so hard for them to be the adult children can build on? When we look at this from the perspective of

developmental psychology, there is one important explanation for the tendency for automatic thinking and feeling.

In essence, this explanation is both simple and confronting: a lot of teachers did not learn to broaden their thinking and feeling, neither at home, nor when they were training to be a teacher. If the teacher experienced a lack of security, tranquility, confidence, warmth and interest within the family he grew up in, he didn't develop a basic sense of self-confidence and faith in others. And when this lack of personal and internal skills goes unnoticed during college – for example because teacher educators are not sufficiently aware of this, or are not trained to notice, and most attention is focused on the transfer of cognitive knowledge – the future teacher does not develop in this regard. And when school management teams are also not sufficiently aware of the importance of personal coaching for the professional development of their teaching staff, there is a high probability that these shortcomings within the teacher will continue. Then how can this teacher be or become autonomously positive and acquire interpersonal and pedagogical skills?

We observe a deficit, so to speak, in the internal system of the teacher.

4. What do we mean by a 'deficit in the internal system'?

There are various ways in which people carry the experiences with their parents or caretakers during their childhood to their current life. We carry our parents with us; we internalize their voices. Sometimes these can be very supportive, sometimes they are destructive, depending on the messages we received during our childhood. Negative messages are commands and prohibitions like 'do your best', 'be perfect', 'be strong,' 'don't be a child,' 'don't grow up', 'don't feel', 'don't come any closer'. They can stand in the way of a healthy development.

When a teacher is not sufficiently aware of the possible effect of these negative messages from his past on his current thoughts and feelings, we call it a deficit in the internal system. A few examples:

How can you put up with a student that is ruled by his emotions if you are not aware that because of your childhood you have developed negative opinions about emotions and that you did not learn how to deal with them within yourself and in others?

If you do not realize that your personal history has something to do with the fact that you are a perfectionist and always work hard, it is possible that you cannot stand that lazy teenager that prefers to be in a horizontal position at his desk. Maybe you think he does not deserve another chance in your class or school. Let alone that you will actively search for his possible qualities and opportunities for development, which certainly can be found. Probably you will be inclined to reserve your positive attention for the hardworking students. And maybe you are not aware of the fact that you always pay attention to what students are doing wrong – because you do the same thing to yourself and you want their work to improve – instead of realizing that for the wellbeing and self-confidence of students, it is important that you comment three times as much on what they did well this time, rather than on what went wrong.

Furthermore, a teacher's unfulfilled need for recognition, love, confirmation, etc. can play a role in the current contact with students. This involves transference and projection (Weisfelt, 1999). The teacher subconsciously tries to fill these deficits by demanding or forcing students to behave right. We witness a conflict in the classroom, and maybe the teacher even condemns the student for who he is. This may cause a downward spiral with all kinds of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Naturally parents also send positive and therefore growth-enhancing messages to their children. For example when they let their children know that their existence gives them joy, that they are proud of and happy with the child and what it is learning, when they are having fun with their children, when they show that they appreciate it when a child thinks for itself, when they take their own feelings and the feelings of their child seriously and teach their children – mainly by setting an example – how to deal with feelings like anger (Weisfelt, 1999; Oosterhof-Van der Poel, 2009).

These kind of childhood experiences make that a teacher can be relaxed in the contact with students, can work from a position of trust and acceptance, can continue to observe and correct himself in the contact with others when he notices that maybe he is responding too much to the student as a person. Annoyances with others can always play a role (see the core qualities of Ofman, 1998), but a teacher should be aware of what is going on inside him from a mature position. He takes himself and the student seriously and is able to focus once again on the present after a confrontation.

In relation to this we want to point to the theory of ego states like it is described in the **Transactional Analysis**. The tendency to take the position of a parent, child or adult is often based on experience in someone's past. For example, unconscious patterns in the interaction influence the tendency to act from the state of a Critical or Nurturing Parent, or to react out of the powerlessness of the Compliant Child.

A teacher who has been taught by his childhood or by more recent experiences to maintain a good relationship with himself, is more capable to take on the state of the Adult as a central regulating principle (Weisfelt, 1999). He is able to broaden his thinking and feeling, and he therefore directs both himself and his students. He wants to be autonomously positive and knows how to correct and redirect himself in situations where negativity threatens to prevail.

People like this are worth a fortune in the contact with students that are considered complicated or difficult. A student that at home does not receive enough security, peace, warmth or interest in his own being and his own development, will experience feelings of uncertainty, inferiority, a lack of confidence, and tension. Most of the time, a difficult child is a discouraged child (see Miedema in De Boer et al., 2004).

The students does feel little security within himself, but also with a teacher who is not aware of his own psychological development. When you realize that it is necessary to leave your

comfort zone in order to learn, you will understand that a student in this situation will not learn much. Most likely, he will be discouraged.

However, if the teacher is aware of his own unfulfilled needs (for example the need for respect or for others to acknowledge him for all the work he is doing) and of his capability to deal with these deficits from a mature position, he can welcome a student that is late for class in a clear but friendly way, for example. He can stimulate him to display positive behavior instead of starting a power struggle and being irritated by the fact that the student does not respect him or does not treat him right. He can say, for instance: *'Glad you are here, please sit down quickly. I will come talk to you in a moment to hear what is going on, and why you are late to class.'* This way the teacher remains autonomously positive, but at the other hand he makes it clear that there are limits. He is capable and displays interest, trust and transparency during the contact with the student.

When a teacher takes a position of autonomous positivity, this will create a safe environment in which students can further develop themselves and feel invited to ask themselves questions, to see themselves in a different light, to relax, and to develop confidence and tranquility. These are necessary, affective building blocks from an authoritative parenting style that enable optimal cognitive and meaningful learning (see Oosterhof-Van der Poel, 2009). Oosterhof-Van der Poel (2009, p. 15) writes:

'Essential authentic behavior commands respect and therefore natural authority. So practice being yourself and acting calmly. Confidently mention what you do and feel, and why. Speak respectfully about everything that bubbles up from within the child. If it is at all possible, give him the choice to be self-directing, provided that he doesn't violate the self-direction of others. Be a leader, as a good manager should be: not in an imposing way, but by addressing the child's joint contribution.'

5. Aspects of Group Dynamics

The Dynamic Reflection Model also contains several aspects of group dynamics. Within every group there is conflict or tension. Partially, this is related to the phase which the group is in (according to Remmerswaal, 2008: preliminary phase, orientation phase, control phase, affection phase, autonomic group phase; or according to Tuckman & Jensen, 1977: forming, storming, norming and performing). It is also related to the behavior of the leader, the teacher in this case.

During the early phases of a group there are several feelings of sympathy and antipathy that play an important role in the course of the interaction. Usually the interaction is based on subconscious feelings, patterns and projection of the group members, the students. When the development of a group does not go according to plan, you know from a developmental psychological perspective that there are deficits involved. This indicates feelings of insecurity within the student, within the group, and probably towards the

teacher. There is a need for more structure, security and guiding instruments to strengthen everyone's interaction and the (intrapersonal) self-direction.

If the teacher is aware of this, he carries out the necessary interventions to lead the group to the next phase. In order to do this, it is important that together the group members gain new, desired experiences and that every student is made responsible for his own contribution in the current situation. This way students will start to view coordination and openness as something that will make them grow (Lingsma, 2005).

In the words of Bruber (1962, in Remmerswaal, 2008, p. 160):

'The life of people is based on two pillars, but in reality it is only one: everyone's desire to be acknowledged by fellow human beings for who he is, yes, for who he can become, and to be strengthened in this, and furthermore the ability of a person to acknowledge and strengthen others in this way.'

The mastery and application of the LOLL-competencies for teachers as formulated in the *LOLL-competency card* (Ruijgrok, 2009) play a crucial role in this. Examples are 'descriptive representation of facts', 'radiating a positive attitude of acceptance and trust', 'conveying that learning is something that takes place continuously and that failure does not exist, you can always learn from previous positive and negative experiences.'

The *COOL-card with competencies for students* (Ruijgrok, 2009) can be a helpful instrument as well. On this card you find about 20 important focal points from the field of group dynamics, arranged into five different categories (attention and contact, collaboration and learning, motivation and reflection, sympathy and respect, responsibility and rules) that with your help students can practice in class.

When each student is invited to identify which intra- and interpersonal competencies he has already mastered and which he would like and be able to develop, everyone is stimulated to work on his own development. When the teacher creates a climate in which everyone consequently pays attention to what they like about the behavior and development of one another and helps his students to actually mention this out loud – at the end of class or during moments of supervision – the student will adopt this constructive way of looking at himself and the other. Oosterhof-Van der Poel (2009, p. 9) states:

'Compliant and cooperative children are created when they feel equally appreciated within the family and the school, and when there is room for an individual contribution to the whole.'

By recognizing the student's ability to self-direct and by explicitly mentioning that everyone is learning to relate positively to themselves and to others, you will help putting a stop to polarization, problem-oriented thinking, comparing and judging, the predominance of feelings of failure and inability, and you will create a healthy affective climate in which

everyone learns and develops in their own way. **After all, whatever you pay attention to, grows!**

6. Conclusion

On August 1, 2006 the Netherlands introduced the new Law on Educational Vocations, as well as the Resolution on Job Requirements for Educational Personnel. Every school has to be able to prove that the teachers are truly competent and are given the opportunity to keep their skills and knowledge up to date (www.bekwaamheidsdossier.nl). Out of the seven defined teaching competencies, this article focuses mainly on the pedagogical and the interpersonal competencies (SBL-competencies, www.lerarenweb.nl).

Whether as a teacher you consider yourself an educator or not, it is important to keep in mind the following pedagogical principle: 'what you would like to get, you have to give first' (Diekstra, 2003). If you want your students to have a positive attitude towards learning, you have to show them first that you are open-minded towards your own learning experiences and those of others.

In the end it is the teacher who is responsible for laying a firm foundation for the learning process of his students during class (Schellekens, 1998, p.91). In order to give his students what he expects to get from them, the quality of his inner dialog needs to be adequate. This way he will be able to apply deepened thinking and feeling and therefore he will be able to direct both himself and his students. He wishes to be autonomously positive and knows how to correct himself in cases in which negativity threatens to prevail.

Not all teachers possess these competencies by nature. In the third and fourth paragraph we also pointed out that not all teachers have been able to develop such skills during their childhood or vocational training. Fortunately there are ways to correct these deficiencies, like personal coaching or training with the help of the described Dynamic Reflection Model and the accompanying competency cards for teachers and students, the LOLL- and COOL-card (Ruijgrok, 2009)³.

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