

Oplæg på symposium med HHDL i Frankfurt, 14.9.17 v. Helle Jensen, Børns Livskundskab

As HH often emphasizes – we are all born with a sense for ethics in our hearts. So one question could be:

How do we create the best possible climate for our children for developing this sense for ethics as a basis for creating a good climate for learning and well being in our schools and society as well?

You cannot meet others or the world more fully than you actually have met yourself. This is one of the key sentences in the work that we are doing and this is what brings us to work with the teachers, because research has told us that the teachers are in the best position to pass on to the students good habits for taking care of oneself and for others.

On this basis we have chosen to focus on helping teachers to improve their *ability to develop and maintain healthy and mutually beneficial relationships between the teacher and the students* – this is what we call “relational competence.”

Improving relational competence necessarily involves developing mindfulness, self-awareness, empathy and compassion. The teachers need these qualities themselves in order to pass them on to the children. For four decades we have been working at this in different countries in Europe, helping teachers and students to enhance their innate capacity for ethics and sense of solidarity; and local as well as global responsibility.

So how are we doing that? In our work we have turned for inspiration to age-old contemplative techniques. And as we all know, it is necessary to find a secular way to use the techniques if you want to make any good use of them in a public school.

We do so by focusing on developing some of our innate natural competences – basic capacities which in all the major religions are seen as a basis for developing mindfulness, self-awareness, empathy and compassion.

We have chosen to focus on the following 5 innate competences:

- *The heart:* we all have the potential to feel empathy, compassion, and gratitude, and we all have the natural instinct and need to feel connected with others.
- *The body:* we all have the ability to feel our body and to relax it.
- *The breath:* the ability to breathe and use the breath as an anchor.
- *Consciousness:* we are all capable of being aware, present and awake and to be in a state of clarity.
- *Creativity:* the ability to respond appropriately to internal and external impulses; the creativity which is the source of a never ending flow of dreams, language, and thoughts.

To return to our key phrase: *You cannot meet others or the world more fully than you actually have met yourself.*

When you look at the arrows in the figure you see the ones pointing to the concepts of wholeness and authenticity in the centre. Our experience is that when we are working at strengthening our contact to our natural competences, we come into contact with our

deeper sense of wholeness and authenticity. But of course we are not only interested in working inwards – we do so because of *how* better contact to our sense of wholeness and authenticity can result in a better ability to meet other people and the world around us.

This movement outward towards other people and our environment is symbolized by the longer arrows back to the world around us. So the arrows symbolize the ongoing circulation between contact with ourselves and engagement with others and the world.

We are practising this circulation by doing small simple exercises on a regular basis.

These can be a short breathing exercise or a longer body scan. It can be contacting the area of the heart and remembering the feeling of gratitude. It can be just observing the thoughts passing by and perhaps being aware of the breaks in between the thoughts. Or it can be to pay attention to the ongoing stream of impulses from the body, the mind and the senses.

When we have practiced being in contact to these innate competences individually, we will gradually become able to be aware of more than one at the same time. Being in contact with more of the competences simultaneously provides an even better contact to oneself, to the feeling of wholeness and authenticity.

An important part of the training is also to remember the breaks and to change gears once in a while during the day in order to stay aware and empathic. Many of the exercises are done with physical movements and many are done together with one or more others. Especially when giving the exercises to the children we emphasize doing them together as a direct way to enhance empathy and compassion.

Only when the teachers have themselves gotten sufficient experience with doing the exercises they are asked to pass them on to the pupils. They will then be using the principles of the training that they have learned through their own practice and experience.

Beside the inspiration from age-old contemplative techniques, we also base our work on existential psychology and psychological knowledge about the importance of being in relationships. It is important for teachers to know about the psychological mechanisms behind our behaviour, and how we can practice a form of dialogue that is acknowledging and appreciative. Such a dialogue can help reveal and remove the obstacles that prevent us from getting into contact with our innate competences.

We are working with different forms of dialogue which all include an emphasis on acknowledgement and taking an interest in each other, as well as empathy and compassion. Much scientific research shows that precisely these qualities are essential to creating a good learning environment. In the dialogue exercises, the professionals work with examples from their own working life, where they have had difficulties or met challenges and where they have felt unable to create the learning environment that they wanted to create.

Through my work in many different schools, I have experienced many teachers and children who have felt under pressure and who react by losing contact with their feelings and their inner core. When this happens, they are no longer able to be in contact with themselves; and they are also no longer able to be in contact with the other person in the relationship.

It is difficult to discuss a challenging situation when both people in the relationship are not present – “not at home”. So in our work we work hard to help both the teacher and the child to get into better contact with themselves. Here it is necessary to create a space where it is possible for the teacher to be open and authentic in her way of presenting a challenging situation. And also to be open about the fact, that she herself is the responsible part of the problem, and that she by changing her attitude in the situation can turn it all into a positive learning experience for all the participants.

GOALS:

So for both teachers and students the goals for the training are:

- To enhance and develop empathy and compassion
- Enhance the contact to the inner strength and core
- Enhance the ability to be aware and present.

MEANS:

- And the means to do this is
- To remember the natural competences
- Use more of the competences at the same time
- To remember to take breaks – to change activities and to change gear.
- To give acknowledgement through dialogue

RESULTS:

We have been part of different research projects – one of them a 4 year research project at the studentteacher programme at the VIA University College in Århus, Denmark, where both studentteachers and teachers in the Danish Public School participated. Let me share a few quotes from participants:

“I am in particular fond of the concrete exercises [..]I can go directly out as a teacher and work with relations. Especially the mindfulness-exercises are really useful to create calm and to see the big picture in class ...”

I’ve grown to be more robust – do not need so much room in a conversation, it is OK just to listen – with attentive presence and empathy I give room for them to tell what they want to say – that I am proud of.

The combination of strenghtening the contact to oneself through the work with the innate competences of heart, body, breath, consciousness and creativity and the work with the dialogue and conflict resolution is what we find most valuable for enhancing empathy, compassion and responsibility in the classroom. We hope that this responsibility will carry on in the students when they leave school as the next generation to take care of our planet.

