

'Quality from within' as the key to professional development

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“To me the project ‘Quality from within’ means: inspiring, stimulating, critical self-reflection, motivating, self-respect, self-confidence, warmth, flow. In short, a wonderful eye-opener to even greater (educational) quality in life.”

Ted Nefkens, teacher at Primary School De Liaan, the Netherlands.

Recent attempts to improve the quality of education often focus on explicit competencies that teachers should have and standards for assessing teachers, something strongly supported by many policy-makers (Becker, Kennedy, & Hundersmarck, 2003; Sykes, 2008). Many scholars, however, have emphasized that the plea for more competency-based teacher education could lead to a process of de-professionalization (e.g. Klaassen, 1996). The danger is that teachers do not feel themselves to be taken seriously in their own professionalism and inspiration for the profession. In addition, Teune’s (2004) study into competency-based teacher education at teacher education college in the Netherlands showed that the ‘beliefs’ of most of the student teachers basically did not change, and largely did not concur with the competency-based approach that was used.

It seems to be time for a radically different approach, even more so because it gradually becomes obvious that repeated attempts to pressure teaching staff to change have little or no effect. All the same, competencies remain important. The question is, though, how people can develop them in an optimal manner, without losing any of their personal power, and how they can hold on to the inner motivation to keep developing. Below, we will outline a promising approach to in-service teacher education that holds a radical reversal. The approach is essentially bottom-up, because it starts from the qualities and commitment that teachers already possess. It focuses on what we call the development of ‘quality from within’.

Introduction

An example from practice, which took place in May, 2005, in a school for secondary education in the Netherlands:

A young mathematics teacher, Marian, has a meeting with the school principal on whether or not her appointment will be made permanent after her first year. She is told this will indeed be the case, which makes her very happy. The meeting continues after this message. Eventually, she emerges from the principal’s office dismayed and in tears. Whatever happened here?

A second example, taken from Hoekstra’s (2007) research on practicing teachers’ informal learning:

Peter is an experienced teacher, very motivated professionally, forever thinking about improvements to his teaching, and with a good reputation at his school. As a result, the school board asks him to act as a guinea pig in an approach they have devised to improve the quality of teaching. Peter agrees, and participates in the experiment. It ends with him being angry and negative about the board’s approach. Peter feels that his qualities are not being acknowledged. What happened here?

In both cases, a list of competencies had been submitted to the teacher in question. In the first case, the focus was on what still went wrong, and was accompanied by information from students and colleagues. In the second case, the experienced teacher had to compile a portfolio to show that he met the competencies as formulated in a recently developed Dutch national ‘standard’ for teachers. The teacher wondered whether his quality was being questioned, and he felt that these competencies did not do justice to him.

It is always risky to generalize on the basis of two examples, and one might easily object that in both cases the competency lists were used in the wrong way. But over the years, the number of negative examples have become so many that the Dutch inspectorate of education is beginning to get worried about the effects of the use of competency lists in the Netherlands. It appears that they often lead to limited views of the teaching profession, and to evaluation practices that lead to

demotivation of teachers. Of course, this is not what the emphasis on competencies in teaching was meant to create, but that is how it often works out in practice.

Is there an alternative?

Korthagen (2004) analyzes what he calls ‘the essence of a good teacher’ and develops a much more holistic vision of the teaching profession. In this vision, more justification is done to the layeredness of professional functioning, as expressed by the onion model (Figure 1). The onion model is central to an approach of learning that focuses on efforts to harmonize the six layers. This approach (described by Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005) is called *Multi-level Learning* (MLL). In this approach, the development of competencies is important, but essential is that they form just one of the layers of the onion model, a layer that rests on the deeper layers of the onion. These deeper layers represent the person’s sense of identity and mission. Through this vision of learning and professional growth, the competency-based approach is not only further deepened and integrated with a more holistic view of the teacher, but it also leads to a fundamental change of view on the question of how competencies and behavior can develop, a change of view we will discuss below. It is a further elaboration of the successful concept of *realistic teacher education* (Korthagen et al., 2001), in which the real experiences and concerns of teachers are taken as the starting point for professional development and not the theory that the teacher educator thinks should be presented to teachers. In fact this shift towards a more ‘realistic’ view was already a big change in perspective in comparison with traditional approaches to teacher education. However, the MLL approach goes one step further in the sense that it starts not only from the teachers’ own experiences and concerns, but from the implicit potential that is embedded in the inner layers of the onion.

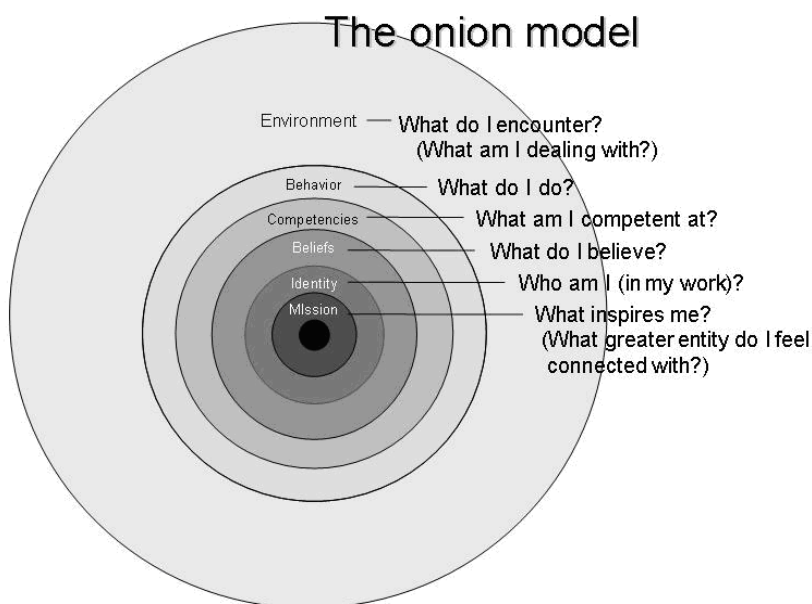


Figure 1: The onion model indicates a layeredness in teachers’ work

Educational innovation is problematic

For a good understanding of the MLL approach, we first have to understand that any process aimed at educational innovation is inherently problematic. As soon as educational experts or school leaders think they know how education can be ‘improved’, there is a tendency to change it in the desired direction. In terms of the competency-based view: once we know what competencies are important, we want teachers to develop them. The problem is however that this puts pressure on those teachers: the message is that at present they do not function properly, and will *have to change*. But what is much more serious: it all has little effect. In the *International Handbook of Educational Change*, published in 1998, a review of a large number of studies on educational innovation showed that most educational innovations have failed (Holmes, 1998, p. 254). However, it is only gradually that an awareness of the causes of this almost continuous failure has begun to sink in.

A first important cause is what Schön (1987) has called *technical rationalism*: the idea that if you know, based on research, what is needed for good teaching, teachers will just have to learn this. Though it sounds logical, it appears not to work in practice. As Fullan (1998, p.22) puts it: "If we know anything, we know that change cannot be 'managed'." We are not dealing with mechanical devices, but with human beings.

A second important cause of the failure of innovation attempts has to do with this human aspect. From psychology, it has long been known that people and organizations have a natural inclination to resist pressures to change: the organism wants to hold on to a balance once it has been achieved. There are three basic ways in which external pressure can be met: *fight, flight, and freeze* (Figure 2). The teacher in our first example can choose to confront the principal's approach; she can shrug it off and go her own way; or she can get all tensed up about it. All these response patterns are noticeable in various schools, and in teachers under pressure.

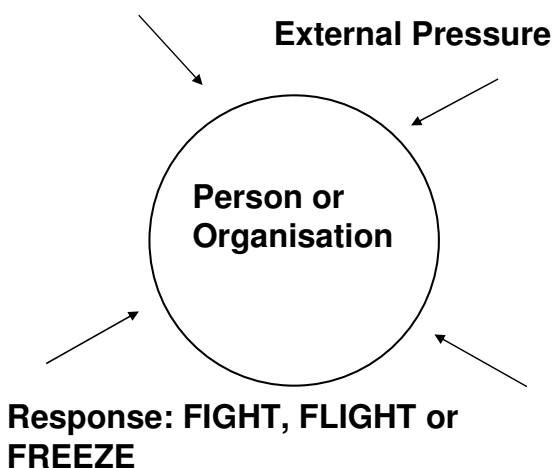


Figure 2: Response patterns to external pressure

Of course, in many innovations in education, one tries to minimize the external pressure as much as possible. The key word in those cases is 'ownership': the teacher has to become 'owner' of the innovation. But, that still means that he or she *must do* something, which implies a top-down approach. This top-down thinking is very much part of the educational culture. Holmes (1998, p. 250) even believes that the need for a top-down approach is a given fact: "Despite the rhetoric, school change projects are inevitably top-down. For all the talk of democratic decision-making, collaboration, and recognizing the importance of teachers, change projects are and must be implemented from the top".

However, Elliot (1991) argues that top-down approaches are threatening to teachers, because it impacts on their professional status. So, according to him a common flight or fight response of teachers is to put innovations away as being useless or impractical, and to speak negatively of educational innovators. According to Hargreaves (1994), educational innovators on the other hand have a lack of respect for teachers. In sum, the overall picture is rather hopeless: educational experts and teachers do not really interact, they do not really take each other seriously.

Emphasizing what is not good

A third reason for the failure of innovations is the emphasis often put on what is still not good or imperfect, and has to be improved. This not only generates little enthusiasm in teachers, but also is rather ineffective. This insight matches a new movement in a related professional domain, namely psychology. The emphasis in this movement, called *positive psychology*, is that the psychology of the past was too much based on traumas, and on what was wrong with people (and on what consequently has to be 'repaired'). According to the fathers of this new approach, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), this traditional line of thinking is ineffective: they state that psychology does not really succeed in contributing to the well-being of people. According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, we should depart more from the strengths of people, from what they call *character strengths*, such as enthusiasm, love, courage, determination, creativity.

These character strengths function as the link between individual and environment, and gives a feeling of 'this is who I am'. Within the MLL approach we label them *core qualities*, a term coined by Ofman (2000), because these qualities have to do with a person's core (the center of the onion model). Core qualities, which are closely related to the concept of *virtues*, are innate, they determine who you are, whereas your competencies, such as 'maintaining discipline' or 'giving a clear and unambiguous explanation' can to a high degree be learnt, also at a later age. But there are more differences between competencies and core qualities (see Figure 3). It is, for example, very important that core qualities can be broadly applied, in virtually all areas. In other words: they have high 'transfer value'.

Competencies	Core qualities
divisible	indivisible
learnable	already part of you
domain specific	high transfer value
a matter of 'doing'	a matter of 'Being'

Figure 3: Differences between competencies and core qualities

As a teacher, however hard you work at your competencies, it is your personal qualities that color the way you behave in your profession. Hamachek (1999, p. 209) puts it this way: "Consciously, we teach what we know; unconsciously, we teach who we are." This was something the teacher in the second example of our introduction understood, and it is no surprise that he resisted attempts to just measure him against the competency ruler. That, after all, triggers above all deficiency thinking (what is still lacking?), something that the positive psychology movement tries to do away with. We agree with Tickle (1999) that in education, too, the core qualities of people are too much neglected, as a result of a technical and analytical way of looking at people.

An alternative: tapping quality from within

The three causes for the failure of educational innovations have indicated the direction of the MLL approach. What is important is to start much more from the strengths of teachers, from their qualities, their inspiration (the onion layer of mission), and to continue building from there. Frederickson (2002) calls this the *broaden-and-build model*, which means the broadening and extension of the basis that is already there. In the UK, McIntyre and Hagger (1992) have already and successfully been working for many years from a related principle, also using the metaphor of 'building on'. They warn (p. 271) that this metaphor can still be erroneously taken to mean as 'building something new', separate from and on top of what is already present. In their view, what is essential is that the new, that which is added, is integrated into what is already present, and grows from there.

In sum, there is a great difference between trying to change teachers from the top down, and making contact with and supporting the movement that takes place in them from within. The two ways in which we can use the verb 'change' imply a world of difference, and often also the difference between failure and success (see also Korthagen, 2001).

Core Reflection

However, the question remains how we can help teachers to use the qualities - that are sometimes hidden inside them - in an optimal way and how we can support that their missions become enacted. In terms of the onion model: how can we support professionals in harmonizing the inner and the outer layers of the onion model? One method that is central to MLL is the use of reflection on the relation between the layers. When the deepest layers are included in this reflection, we speak about *Core Reflection*. This view of reflection and its elaboration into supervisory strategies for promoting Core Reflection has been described by Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) and Meijer, Korthagen and Vasalos (2008).

The basis of Core Reflection is to focus on one's ideals (which are connected to core qualities), and to be aware of their potential, not only in a cognitive manner, but most of all by touching upon the emotional meaning of this potential. In this way thinking, feeling, and wanting become connected, and it is exactly this connection that is often lost in teachers (and pupils!) through a strong focus in education on thinking. Moreover, it is important in Core Reflection to become aware

of how the natural 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) of energy that comes from one's ideals and one's core qualities is limited by *internal* obstacles, such as limiting thoughts or behavioral patterns. Especially many experienced teachers have sometimes completely lost the contact with their ideals and core qualities. They often tend to focus on *external* obstacles (the principal, the educational system, the motivation of the pupils, etcetera), but Core Reflection re-directs their attention to the way in which this focus on external obstacles creates *inner obstacles* to flow (see Figure 4). Again, this is not so much a matter of *cognitive understanding* this limiting effect of internal obstacles, such as limiting thoughts, but of *feeling* how they limit you in bringing out the best in yourself and to reconnect to your ideals (*wanting*). In this context, Scharmer (2006) speaks about the necessity of having an open mind, an open heart and an open will, as a prerequisite for connecting one's inner potential to the work that has to be done. Important in the Core Reflection approach is that the participants learn how to use this approach both in inter-collegial conversations and in their guidance of students. Indeed, the basic principles depicted in Figure 4 are not fundamentally different in both cases, as they describe what it means to fully 'live' one's human potential.

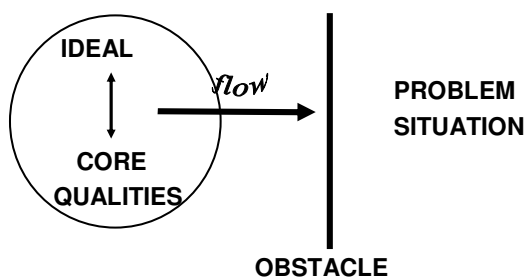
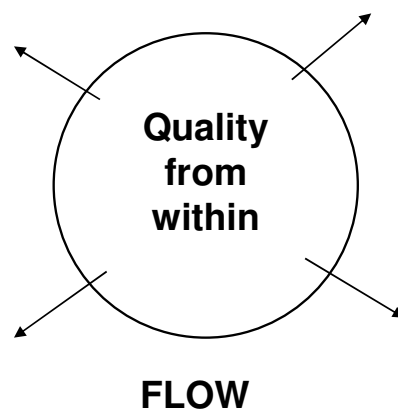


Figure 4: Basic elements of Core Reflection

Flow

When change is being based on quality from within and the obstacles are dealt with in a productive manner, a process emerges which is completely different from the one we know from traditional attempts at innovation. No longer is it a matter of fight, flight, or freeze in the teachers involved, but of a movement from within. A few characteristics of flow can be found in figure 5.



Characteristics of flow:

- it is a pleasant challenge that you like to meet
- you feel completely comfortable
- a feeling of 'this is the real me'
- rapid and natural learning

Figure 5: Tapping inner quality leads to flow

Where the development of competencies focuses on one particular (middle) layer of the onion model, in the tapping of 'quality from within', it is the source that comes first: the core of the onion, and the individual's mission and professional identity, as well as their penetration into all other layers. Once the layers have been harmonized, there is an experiencing of flow. As Evelein (2005) states, this leads to the satisfaction of the three basic human psychological needs (the need for *autonomy, competence, and relatedness*), as defined in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2002). The need for autonomy refers to the need to be in harmony with your own self-awareness (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231; Evelein, 2005, p. 25), which is different from being self-centred or individualistic. What is at stake regarding the need for competence, is the ability to exert influence on your world, the feeling of ability to use one's capabilities and be effective (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Evelein, 2005, p. 23). The need for relatedness refers to having positive relationships with and commitment to others (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Evelein, 2005, p. 24). The SDT shows that the three needs are interdependent: if one of the needs is suppressed, the fulfillment of the others becomes problematic as well.

Combining 'quality from within' with quality requirements

The above has provided us with a clear frame for an approach to educational innovation, which we refer to as 'quality from within'. In doing so, we do not close our eyes to the fact that demands are also made on teaching, and consequently on teachers, by the outside world, which in our opinion is correct. At the very least, one might expect students to learn something, and even that they will learn as much as possible. A certain degree of external pressure can never be avoided, if only from final examinations that reflect nationwide or state standards. The question is however: how in education can one promote a natural matching between putting demands and the development of 'quality from within'? How can one prevent the external pressure from triggering fight, flight, or freeze patterns, and see to it that people remain in flow? This is a key-question, which is as much of importance to working with teachers as it is to working with students.

As the three basic human needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are interdependent, our approach takes the needs for autonomy and fulfilling relationships very seriously, as prerequisites for the development of competence. In other words, the assumption is that only when we invest in both relationships and in establishing contact with one's own deeper layers (the sources of autonomy) can fundamental changes take place in the middle layers of the onion model. Hence, in the MLL approach much attention is being paid to the process of being in contact with colleagues about one's personal professional ideals, and the obstacles to reaching those ideals.

Outcomes

What are the results of all of this? The most important aspect that we observe is that teachers become more focused on their students by probing their qualities instead of their weaknesses. A next step taken by many teachers is that they also emphatically teach students to look at themselves and their fellow students in this way.

Add to this that more and more teachers begin to put the inspiration and ideals of their students in the centre of their teaching, and that they experience what this contributes, not only in terms of motivation of the students and themselves, but also of depth of the learning process. Teachers also become more effective in recognizing and tackling obstacles to learning and personal growth, in students and in themselves. Thus, much more potential is being liberated than before, again in teachers as well as in students. When looking at the professional development taking place in teachers, then it is evident that they become more successful in creating the conditions for optimal learning. Through all of this, the relationships between teachers and students and between students changes fundamentally, and the students' learning runs deeper and is faster. There is just more 'flow' in teachers and students. Even parents report as their observations that their children are changing in a positive sense.

Authenticity and commitment then become central themes in teaching. Teachers start to recognize that these form the basis for interpersonal relations supporting learning and growth. Thus, the entire idea of competency development changes color. From within, various changes take place in the classroom, but also in the team's functioning. This becomes perceptible in various discussions and meetings in the school, in which communication structures start to change and with it the culture of the school. Participants report back that this even expresses itself in coffee table conversations.

On the question of outcomes, what those involved say is the most telling. A female teacher put it like this:

"I have never felt more at home in my team than I do now. We are really talking to each other. That to me is the biggest outcome. And add to this the wonderful fact that it has already been channeled to the children. Life in the school is vibrant again. Something I have missed for years. I think this is very precious."

Another teacher:

"I find it something very dear to me that I can stand there in front of the class and hand this 'flow' to these children, and that they hand it on to each other. And the trust you then give them and that they gain in each other. You then really have the feeling that you are giving them something for society, and that it is not just the maths lesson that matters."

The head of a primary school, says:

"Teachers' progresses can be observed in the student group. Even an 'old hand' tells me with a broad grin that he doing things differently! That, too, I have been able to observe. They are really involved in it. I also notice that relations between teachers and students are improving. Mutual understanding is genuinely growing. There is more openness between colleagues."

Another school head says:

"To have taken this road together as a team has tremendous added value, has triggered a lot of commitment and awareness, and is being much appreciated by the parents."

A teacher:

"The project 'Quality from Within' completely agrees with my motivation to contribute to a better world. By identifying the core qualities of children, parents, and colleagues, and by really making contact with each other, I myself am also discovering who I am. By addressing the best in myself, I am also bringing out the best in the other."

A colleague who was a regular visitor to one of the participating schools, but had not been there for the last three months:

"Something has changed here, something has happened. Earlier, there were frequent grumblings, now there is a positive atmosphere in the school and in the team room."

A teacher educator:

"I now feel much more relaxed when giving practice lectures and workshops. I have been awfully busy during recent months, do a lot of extra time, and still feel enormously happy in my work. I regularly find myself smiling when looking back on an entire day and evening at the college, and feel still energetic, even though I have been working far too long hours."

Given the many failed educational innovations we talked about before, comments like these are at the very least remarkable. The reader of this paper might wonder whether such outcomes are typical for the Dutch culture, and whether they would also occur in other cultural contexts. In this respect, we can now report that our experiences with the approach, in the UK, the USA and Australia have shown that the approach had to be adapted to some cultural features, but that the outcomes are not fundamentally different. Especially in the USA, the approach seemed to match a big need in the search for alternatives to the current pressure on test scores and competencies. Again, the evaluative remarks from participants speak for themselves:

- I have gained real insight into skills that I can apply to my supervision work with student teachers and my colleagues. To function from a place of strength, to affirm the qualities in self and other, and to have language that is approachable are all incredible valuable.
- Personally, a set of skills I feel will be empowering, professionally a set of connections to people and ideals which I feel will deepen and lighten my experience of work.
- A gained a sense of self-identity, freedom from limiting beliefs, empowerment to fulfill my life purpose.
- You would not know how much profound impact you've done to me personally and professionally. I feel so fortunate to be there at the first workshop you've given in America!
- Since returning, I have told colleagues and students that in my many years as an educator, I think this has been the most powerful and transformative experience I have ever had.
- I see this workshop as a tremendous gift.
- The techniques of Core Reflection are really limitless in their application.
- The biggest benefit for me has been learning new tools for refocusing problems and obstacles into strengths.
- This has been the most profound, influential workshop I've ever had in my life. It presented me with, no, immersed me in an ideal vision for my work, my teaching and my way of being that. I now feel inspired and equipped to bring into being, one small but sure step at a time.

In our view, the quotes make clear that with "Quality from within" we go for more than just another kind of teaching behavior in the classroom and that the outcomes go beyond cultural differences, because they are grounded in that what is basically human. For schools, it means a development in almost every aspect of the school. In this context, Cuban (1988) speaks of *second order changes*: profound changes in the school structure and culture that facilitate changes in the primary process. At the same time, we observe that much is still to be done regarding the further extension of our approach. Internationally, little theory as yet exists that connects deep learning of the individual professional to deep learning at the organizational level, and we ourselves are also still

seeking. We do have noticed, however, that a number of 'ingredients' are of importance in the approach, that we elaborate in the final section.

Principles derived from concrete innovation projects

On the basis of the ideas described above, we have worked with a variety of Dutch schools, both at the primary and the secondary level, and with a couple of institutions for teacher education. As a result of a pilot project carried out in two primary schools in the south of the Netherlands, a number of important ingredients of the MLL approach have become more explicit:

1. We opt for a combination of group meetings of a maximum of 18, and much learning 'on the job'. The pedagogical approach of the meetings is based on the concept of realistic teacher education (Korthagen et al., 2001): we start from the present needs and concerns of the participants and their everyday practical experiences; on the spot experiences are constantly being created leading to Core Reflection.
2. Between meetings, the participants continuously try to apply what they have learned to practice, in the work with their students and with each other. They practice inter-collegial coaching in pairs, keep logbooks for reflecting on their experiences that they e-mail to the facilitators and the rest of the group, and read in-depth articles.
3. Obstacles that people encounter in their work are being taken as the starting point of the learning process in the group meetings and these obstacles are approached in the specific manner characteristic to MLL.
4. A real culture change can only take place if all levels within the school join in (students, teachers, school heads, and the school board). There must be congruency between the processes at all these levels. At present, not only do we always ask the school board or principal to join the teachers in the learning process, but we also invite students to at least one of the teacher meetings. On the spot, we practice what has been learnt, thus promoting its transfer into daily practice. Eventually, we also help the students apply to themselves and each other the MLL principles (such as focusing on core qualities and working from contact with one's ideals).
5. If possible, given the financial investments that a school can afford, we combine the above with *coaching-on-the job*. This coaching is, of course, again based on the principles of MLL and Core Reflection and thus helps at two levels: first, it supports the further application of that what has been learnt to practice, and second, it gives the participants more in-depth experiences with Core Reflection.
6. A launching pad for fundamental organizational development is that the individuals within the organization know and understand the main principles basic to the approach 'Quality from within.' Even more so, they should have *felt through* those principles, on the basis of their own practical experiences, and be able to formulate them using their own words. Only then will an 'educational identity' of the organization as a whole emerge. We are then talking of the deeper onion-layers at the organizational level, for in this way, also the organization's mission becomes much more explicit.
An explicit educational identity of a school or institution also improves the chances to respond adequately to new challenges, for example, new challenges facing the school/educational institution from the outside. Essential in this is the development of a common language, not only supporting the team's discussions on the relationship between theory, vision, and practice, but also deepening the reflection of the individual teacher on his or her own practice.
7. Of late, and much more than before, we are also stimulating the school or institute to come out with the innovation that is taking place, for example by organizing an afternoon for parents, for other schools or educational institutions, the educational inspectorate, the local press, et cetera. That forces an even sharper definition of the educational identity, the demonstration of effects, and the critical reflection on what has been achieved and what still has to be achieved. Public accounting is an important stimulus to development. Can the teachers involved show how what they are now doing is better or different, why they are doing it, and what the effects are? Can they substantiate it with video-materials, student materials, evaluations, tests,? In fact, this means a mini-research study into their own practice. All of this brings true 'ownership,' namely ownership 'from within.'
8. The same applies also to students: working from students' inspiration and their natural potential for flow in learning becomes even more powerful when they can and will demonstrate to others what they have learnt, and when they are thus stimulated towards a critical analysis of their learning process and the results achieved.

9. Finally: the approach does not succeed when the present vision of the school or institution focuses primarily on the technical aspects of learning, and too little on the inter-human and the need for safety, trust, and relatedness. We sometimes speak of the 'cold' and the 'warm' side of learning. For optimal learning and for school development, both aspects should receive integrated attention. Discussing everyone's qualities with colleagues, focusing on the strengths of colleagues and students, reflecting together on one's problems, all demands open and authentic contact with each other. Though there will always be within every team those that consider this to be too 'soft,' on the whole there should be a willingness towards authentic contact, with oneself and with others. For, as Palmer (1998, p. 10) says: "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher."

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