
International Handbook of Holistic Education

Edited by
John P. Miller
Kelli Nigh
Marni Binder
Bruce Novak
Sam Crowell

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CORE REFLECTION

Nurturing the Human Potential in Students and Teachers

Fred A. J. Korthagen and Ellen E. Nuijten

This chapter describes the core reflection approach, which is a practical approach to student and teacher learning, aiming at deep learning. The core reflection approach uses a holistic framework based on several theoretical foundations, such as positive psychology and theories on professional development. Greene described it beautifully in Kim and Greene (2011, p. 14):

[Core reflection] is about the opportunity to be who you really are or really want to be. Some people might call it self-actualization. Some people might call it authenticity, some might call it flow, but I'm not sure it's any of those things exactly. I think it's about being human, being very natural in responses, and being very present.

The central goal of the core reflection approach is to overcome various habitual patterns in education that are counterproductive to deep learning and personal growth. The following example shows how small changes in habitual patterns in classrooms can make a significant difference.

Peter is six years old. He loves making buildings with wooden blocks, and he is very interested in technical pictures that he sees in his encyclopedia for children. He looks forward to entering grade 1 in a Dutch school for primary education, as he expects that things will now really become interesting.

However, during his first weeks in grade 1, Peter does not like what he has to do. He gets classroom handouts dealing with small words such as dog, bed, and so forth. This does not really interest him. After two weeks, he no longer wants to go to school, but, of course, he has to.

After a month, Peter's parents receive a 'progress report' from the school. It describes many concerns about Peter, shows the word backlog three times, and does not contain any positive remarks. Peter's parents wonder if Peter may have an awareness of how the teacher perceives him and whether this might influence him. After a talk between the teacher and the parents, the teacher changes her behavior. She now starts to mention Peter's qualities to him and allows him to work more at his own level and pace.

The effect is surprising: within a week, Peter starts to like school again. He shows more self-assurance and more cooperative behavior in the classroom.

Three patterns surface in this example and can be observed in many traditional educational settings. We will now discuss these patterns.

The first pattern that often occurs in traditional education is *an emphasis on the cognitive side of learning* (Hoekstra, 2007). At all levels of education, academic standards promote a focus on cognitive abilities. Although there is nothing wrong with developing cognition, this one-sided focus tends to lead to a certain imbalance. It is often overlooked that including the affective and motivational dimensions in learning and professional growth leads to more positive outcomes, including academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011).

Second, relatively more *emphasis is put on what goes wrong* and on what should be improved than on what goes well. When we ask teachers or school principals whether they find it important to emphasize what goes well, they generally say that they give this much attention. However, reality is often different. A common situation is that a teacher says to a student: “Well done, but . . .” In such cases, it is not at all clear for the student *what* was done well. In addition, from psychology we know that there is a tendency in people to remember the part that comes after “but”. This is the *negativity bias* (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997). Therefore, as Voerman et al. (2014) emphasized, the “well done” type of feedback is not very beneficial to learning.

Third, if teachers or school principals do mention positive aspects, they tend to *focus on behavior* (“you did it well”) and not on the person (“you are a creative person”). We call this a tendency to focus on the *outer side* of observable behavior instead of the *inner side* of personal strengths. We can see the same tendency when they coach people on problematic issues. In such situations, they will typically look for a solution in terms of a behavioral change (what to do) rather than for people’s personal strengths and inner obstacles that block the enactment of these strengths. This means that the personal guidance of students and teachers generally remains somewhat superficial.

Core reflection is an approach that aims at changing these three patterns. This approach benefits teaching and learning situations in classrooms, as well as individual student learning. Core reflection makes a significant impact on the professional development of teachers.

Theoretical framework

In this section, we will discuss three underlying theoretical principles of core reflection.

Principle 1: Combining Thinking, Feeling, and Wanting

For deep learning that really influences behavior, the emotional and motivational aspects of learning need sufficient attention (Durlak et al., 2011). This view is supported by brain research showing the strong interconnection between the cognitive and affective processes in people (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Attention to the motivational dimension of learning means taking the needs and ideals of learners into account, that is, what *they want* (Deci & Ryan, 2002). This is crucial for keeping the love for learning alive (Miller, 1997). Recognized is how shifting the attention between thinking, feeling, and wanting generates more ‘inner movement’ and energy (*flow*) in the person (Korthagen, Attema-Noordewier, & Zwart, 2014).

The term we use for moving between these three dimensions of thinking, feeling, and wanting is *using the elevator*. This is a metaphorical way of looking at the three dimensions, namely as being located on three ‘floors’ of human functioning (see Figure 10.1).

Hence a concrete guideline for enhancing core reflection is to deepen learning using the elevator, which means focusing on thinking, feeling, and wanting.

Principle 2: A Focus on Qualities and Ideals

Generally, teaching or coaching situations lack depth if the focus remains primarily on a problem or on the search for a solution. Of course, problems that students and teachers experience should

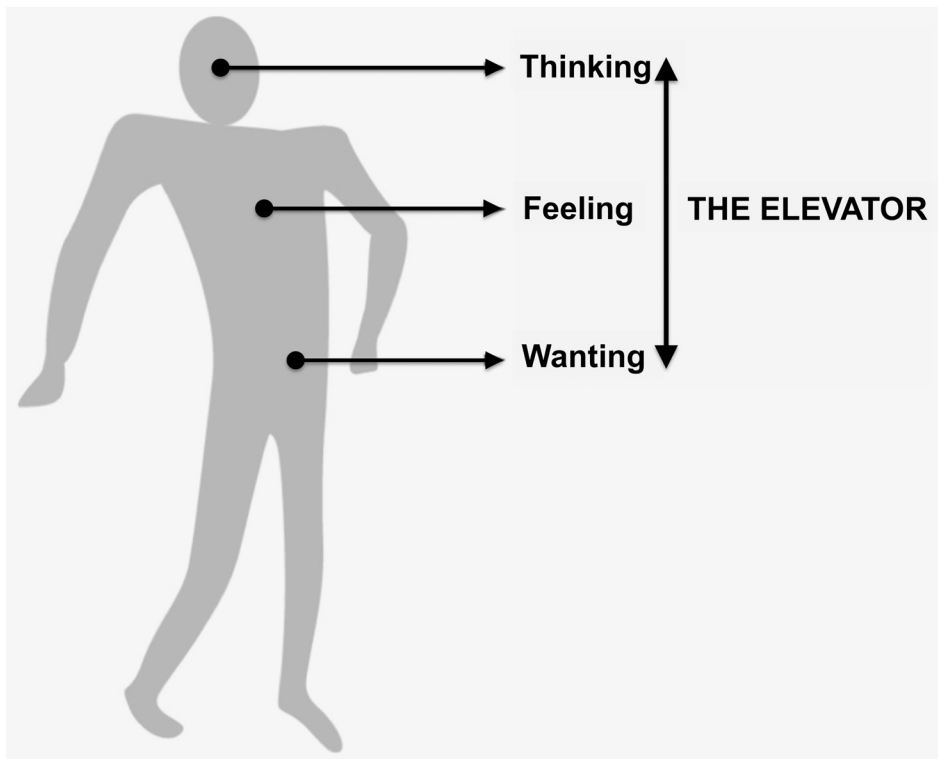


Figure 10.1 The elevator

be taken seriously, but a risk occurs when too strong of a focus on a problem creates negative feelings in them, which in turn narrow the cognitive and behavioral repertoire (Fredrickson, 2009). Moreover, someone experiencing a problem tends to think within the framework of this problem and does not develop a sense of strength. This often leads to a rather superficial solution to the problem, as it is not grounded in the person's inner potential. As a result, the problem will generally return (Scharmer, 2007).

Thus, positive psychology emphasizes the importance of building on positive experiences (Fredrickson, 2009). One way to do this is by shifting the attention from people's problems and deficiencies to their *strengths* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). There is considerable research evidence that this makes people more creative, motivated, and effective (Fredrickson, 2009).

The implication is that a teacher or someone coaching a person (whether this person is a child or adult) should pay sufficient attention to what *went well* and less to what went wrong. More specifically, giving positive feedback is important, preferably by naming personal qualities, which we call *core qualities*. Examples of such core qualities are goal-directedness, clarity, courage, flexibility, preciseness, and creativity. Although researchers have defined certain categories of such qualities, the list of possible core qualities is almost endless. The notion of core qualities is closely connected to the classical concept of *virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In Greek philosophy, a virtue was related to doing 'the good' and hence the term has a strong moral dimension. Aristotle, for example, related virtues to excellence at being human, which for him meant living life well and beautifully (Aristotle, 1975).

Giving feedback about core qualities (“you show the quality of preciseness, wonderful!”) is fundamentally different from a compliment such as “well done” and more beneficial to learning (Voerman et al., 2014). Deep learning is promoted if the learner is stimulated to consciously use the core qualities in various circumstances (Seligman et al., 2005). Placing emphasis on *wanting* (and hence on *ideals*) is another way of creating positive feelings. Doing so brings people more into touch with their strengths than an orientation toward problems. In the end, the life-long process of building on one’s ideals and developing one’s core qualities is crucial for self-actualization.

Hence, a second concrete guideline is the following: Emphasize successes and devote less attention to what went wrong. Combine this with creating positive feelings by naming core qualities and building on ideals.

Principle 3: Attention to Inner Obstacles

Currently, there are various approaches that give attention to strengths, personal qualities, and talents; this is a development strongly enhanced by positive psychology. The focus shifts from deficiencies toward personal strengths, which generally creates positive feelings. However, this is often only a short-term effect. Therefore, it is important to also give attention to obstacles limiting the person’s strength, specifically *inner obstacles*. This differs from a focus on the external problem. Inner obstacles are obstacles within the person that prevent core qualities and ideals from impacting behavior. A crucial aspect is to not only think about the obstacle, but most of all to *feel* its negative effect and to connect with the *will* to no longer go along with the limiting pattern (again the elevator movement). We call this *mindfulness-in-action*.

Therefore, the third concrete guideline is as follows: After core qualities and ideals have received attention and (most importantly!) have been felt, it is also important to focus on (an) internal obstacle(s) that are limiting the power of these core qualities and ideals in concrete situations. It is helpful if people become aware of an inner obstacle and its influence in the here and now.

The Core Reflection Process

Based on the three principles discussed above, a new perspective on learning and coaching emerges. The model in Figure 10.2 summarizes the core reflection approach by showing the intended process.

The three principles support this process. While the principles may seem evident, it is not always easy for people to use them, as this often requires changing habitual patterns that are common in our society. Such collective patterns are not easy to unlearn. In other words, for many people, the three principles require the expansion of one’s comfort zone and some training under the guidance of an experienced coach.

The Onion Model

To work with the core reflection approach, it is important to understand the onion model (Korthagen, 2004). Figure 10.3 shows this model, describing various levels (layers) in the learning that play a role during core reflection.

The levels of the onion model are as follows:

1. *Environment*. This level refers to the context the person encounters.
2. *Behavior*. This refers to what the person does in relation to the environment, which is often determined by habitual patterns.
3. *Competencies*. This level is about what someone is competent to do. It encompasses knowledge and skills.

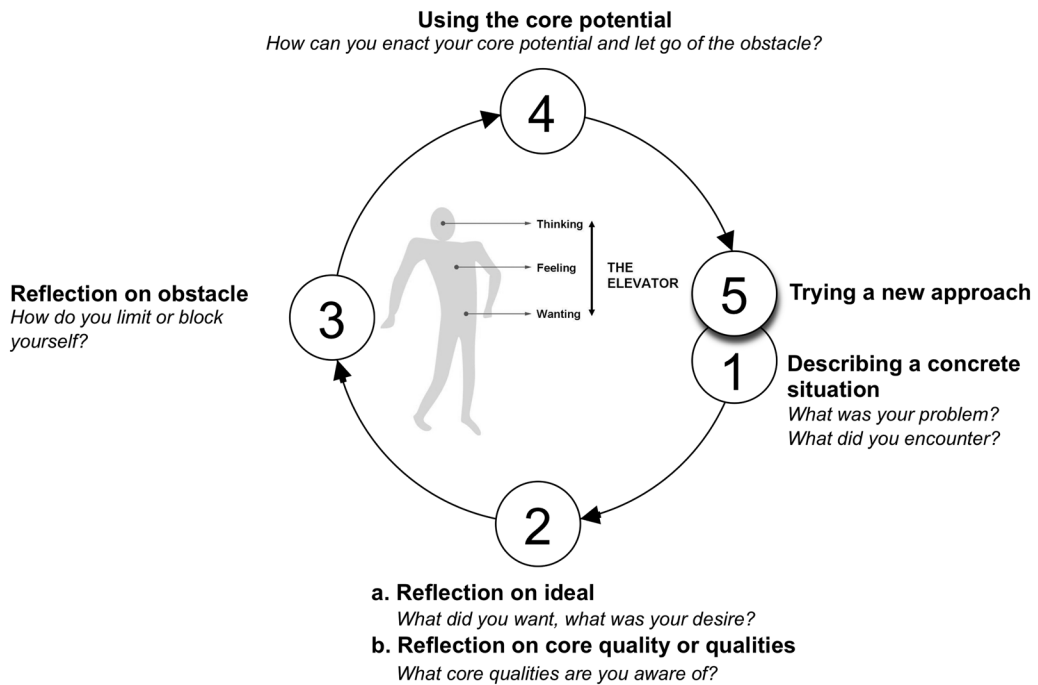


Figure 10.2 The five-step model of core reflection

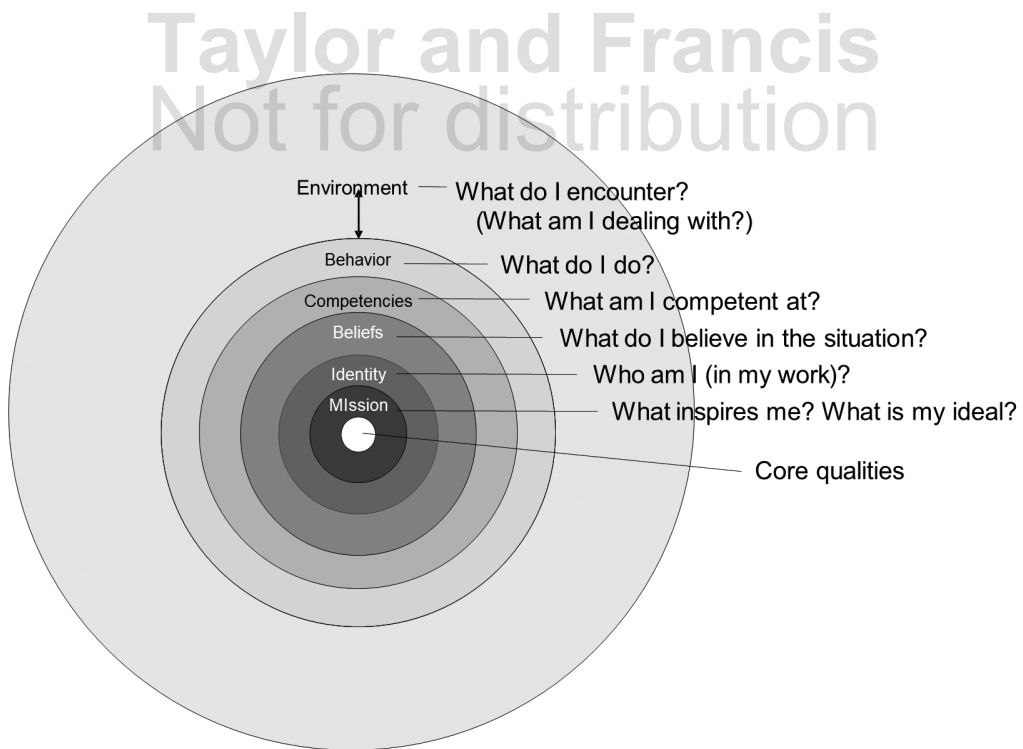


Figure 10.3 The model of levels in learning (onion model)

4. *Beliefs*. This level refers to beliefs or assumptions the person has about the situation and the environment, which are often unconscious.
5. *Identity*. This level refers to a person's assumptions or beliefs about themselves, their self-concept, and the role they see for themselves in the given environment. For teachers, this level concerns their professional identity.
6. *Mission*. This transpersonal level is about what inspires the person, what gives meaning and significance to life (or work). The level of mission is about *ideals* and important *values* and influences one's self-concept (identity).
7. *The core*. This final level concerns the person's core qualities.

A basic principle underlying core reflection is that if these levels are in harmony with each other (*alignment*), the person can act on the basis of the inner potential of core qualities and ideals. This has both a strong effect on the environment and leads to a sense of fulfillment and flow in the person. On the other hand, if someone encounters a problem, this means that there is friction between one or more levels of the onion model, creating an obstacle that limits the person's inner potential (Korthagen, 2017). For example, Peter's beliefs and self-concept influenced his feelings about school, which blocked his core qualities.

With the aid of the onion model, we can understand why a focus on a problematic situation and on what to do in this situation leads to a superficial type of reflection. In the onion model, such a focus corresponds with the outer levels, whereas for deep learning it is important to include the inner levels. This was confirmed in a study by Hoekstra (2007), who showed that teachers' reflection focusing on what to do in particular situations (i.e., the outer levels of the onion model) did not contribute much to these teachers' professional development. Hoekstra showed that it is necessary for long-term professional growth to focus on deeper, underlying meanings.

A focus on the inner onion levels, in particular on core qualities and ideals, creates a deeper connection with the person's potential and helps him or her become aware of the inner obstacle limiting that potential. Such obstacles can exist at all levels of the onion model, but generally an inner obstacle stems from the level of beliefs (i.e., a belief about the situation), or the level of identity (a limiting belief about oneself). A person's conscious choice to overcome the obstacle restores the connection between the inner potential and behavior and creates deep and enduring change.

The Case of Lisa

We now illustrate the core reflection process and the onion model with an example from a coaching session with a teacher.

An example of a coaching session

Secondary school teacher Lisa's ideal (*level of mission*) is to value each student's contribution. She views each human being as having personal qualities that deserve respect and should be nurtured, so that each person can contribute to a better world. She considers herself to be a teacher who models this view in the classroom (*identity level*).

In a coaching session with a colleague, Lisa describes an unpleasant experience she had that morning. Two students had handed in a written report on the subject of volcanoes that looked so perfect that Lisa suspected it to be copied from the internet. A quick search had confirmed her suspicion. She felt cheated and when she saw the students that morning (*environment*), she reacted furiously (*behavior*). In retrospect, she did not feel good about this. She felt she was not respectful toward the students, but did not know how to deal with such a situation in a better way (*competency*).

Her colleague mentions core qualities she notices in the here and now: openness, honesty, and commitment to her work. She asks whether Lisa can feel the strength of these qualities

inside her (*core qualities*). Immediately Lisa starts to feel better. This was visible in her face. The colleague asks how she felt about the situation with the two students. Lisa says she felt sad and uncertain. Her colleague shows empathy for these feelings. Next, she asks for Lisa's ideal in this situation (her wanting). Lisa says that she values respectful relationships and care for other people, in particular in educational situations (*mission*).

Now her colleague says: "I notice many qualities in you: openness, honesty, commitment, respect, and care. Can you feel what a strong teacher you are?! Now, what happened inside you so that you lost touch with these qualities and with your ideal of respectful relationships?"

Lisa becomes aware of the strong impact of her *belief* "I am being cheated". As soon as this belief took hold, she became angry. This stopped her from acting in line with her ideal. Now she feels she has a choice: either she can let herself be taken away by the belief, or she can take charge of herself and not act upon the belief, but upon her ideal. She now knows what to do. She wants to go to the students and apologize for her furious reaction. But she also wants to start a respectful conversation and ask the students to have more respect for her value of honesty.

The case of Lisa illustrates that the essence of the core reflection approach is to elicit a deeper process than merely a reflection on a problem and a search for a solution in behavioral terms. The colleague does not give a suggestion for new behavior, but uses Lisa's inner potential (her core qualities and her ideal) for helping her develop a new perspective and approach to the situation.

Looking at Figure 10.2, this example shows that from phase 1, phase 2a can be easily reached by using 'the elevator'. This is even easier and more motivating when reflecting on a success experience. It is interesting that when a person is in touch with an ideal (phase 2a), immediately core qualities become visible (phase 2b). The person may recognize such core qualities and name them, but sometimes a teacher or coach is needed to make the person aware of core qualities that surface in the here-and-now. This may further enhance the person's awareness of his or her inner potential.

Only after the person strongly feels his or her inner potential, as shown in phase 2, and flow is visible in his or her body language, is it fruitful to look for inner obstacles limiting the flow, which is represented by phase 3 (see Figure 10.2). Now the focus is not on 'solving the problem', but on feeling how one tends to block the energy of the inner potential in oneself. The effect of this process is often a different way of relating to the situation under reflection. Scharmer (2007) named this process *presencing*: the person *senses* his or her inner potential and becomes more *present* with this potential and mindful about the inner obstacle. Often, the person then suddenly knows what to do. This comes from a formerly suppressed inner knowing, which is strongly connected to the person's whole being. Moreover, the will to act upon the inner knowing is evoked (see Figure 10.2, phase 4). The new behavior resulting from this process is completely different from the outcome of a rational analysis of the problem and the search for a practical solution. It is a process that brings one's consciousness to the deeper levels of the onion model and uses the power of these levels to change one's relationship with the outside world. This is what we call *learning from within*.

Practice and Research

We now look at the implementation of the core reflection approach in various educational contexts. We will give examples from practice and summarize research studies.

Primary and Secondary Education

In primary and secondary education, core reflection is being implemented for the individual coaching of students and teachers and for supporting learning in groups of students. Through the coaching of individual students, there is more awareness of personal strengths and talents, which creates more motivation and flow in the learning processes. It is noteworthy that the phases of the

core reflection model (Figure 10.2) can be also used in the coaching of children as young as 7 or 8 years old. Coaching children is often easier than coaching adults, who tend to have more fixed and complex inner obstacles and an inclination to focus on external obstacles. In young children, such obstacles are still relatively simple, such as “I am not good at arithmetic.” From our experience, children can relatively quickly understand how they themselves create a self-fulfilling prophecy through such a belief, which creates breakthroughs in their learning.

There have also been instances in which teachers taught principles of core reflection to students in grades 5 and 6, who then used these principles among themselves; for example, ‘moving the elevator’ during collaborative work and naming each other’s core qualities. For many educationalists, it is surprising to learn that primary school children taught these principles to student teachers who came into their classroom. We have even seen a group of 12-year-olds give workshops on core reflection to teachers and teacher educators.

In secondary education, core reflection was also found to be helpful for preparing groups of students for a test. A teacher can support the students in their awareness of individual core qualities and the negative thoughts limiting their potential. Students then become more consciously aware of how they prepare for and take a test, and how they can use their core qualities more optimally while doing this.

The coaching of teachers based on core reflection can strongly push their professional development forward, as we have seen in hundreds of cases. This was also documented by two research studies. In the first study, Hoekstra and Korthagen (2011) investigated the learning process of an experienced teacher in secondary education, named Nicole, who struggled with a national educational development toward more self-directed learning. She was coached six times, based on core reflection. The researchers used quantitative instruments to show statistically significant changes in the teacher’s educational beliefs, measured before and after the coaching, and in her behavior, as scored by her students, again before and after the coaching. This study yielded evidence that a deep learning process had taken place.

In particular, through the coaching, Nicole discovered that she tended to block her own development through the limiting belief that her students should not feel insecure during her lessons. As soon as her students struggled with working more independently, she herself also became insecure, returned to her traditional style of didactic teaching, and tended to conclude that her ideal could not be reached. The coaching helped her realize that this was a second limiting belief. Nicole gradually learned to be more aware of the relation between the cognitive, emotional, and motivation aspects in herself *while teaching* (core reflection in-action). She also became more aware of the dimensions of thinking, feeling, and wanting in her students, and even started to guide them in dealing with their emotions, for example by using their core qualities. In this way Nicole developed a different view of the role of a teacher, that is, of her professional identity.

Looking at the coaching process, it was interesting that the focus was not so much on Nicole’s question of *what to do* in the classroom (i.e., the onion layer of behavior), but on the inner levels: the coach helped her explore her *ideal* of promoting self-directed learning in her students and helpful *core qualities* in herself, and he supported her awareness of her own *limiting beliefs*. Most importantly, he helped Nicole learn how to use the elevator in reflection on herself and in the coaching of her students. The significant change in her teaching behavior was a natural outcome of this core reflection process.

In the second study, Attema-Noordewier, Korthagen, and Zwart (2013) measured the outcomes of a core reflection training of teams of teachers. In six primary schools, quantitative and qualitative instruments were used to establish these outcomes for both the teachers and their students. At the teacher level, reported outcomes were increased feelings of autonomy, increased self-efficacy regarding the coaching of both students and colleagues, extended coaching skills, new insights about

learning, and increased awareness of core qualities in students, colleagues, and themselves. The research showed that professional learning had taken place at all levels in the onion model. This is called *multi-level learning*, which is a noteworthy result of the core reflection approach. At the student level, a growth in communication skills and attitudes was reported, but these outcomes were based on observations by the teachers (see also Zwart, Attema-Noordewier, & Korthagen, 2015).

Quotes from teachers (translated from Dutch) may further illustrate what happens in schools when core reflection is implemented:

- Core reflection made us go beyond teaching subject matter. It makes you feel as though you are contributing to students' lives.
- This makes relationships with students more relaxed, we now have more fun and we experience real contact. The result is more depth, in a pleasant way.
- I changed my entire way of thinking about teaching. It is now more about stressing the good things instead of looking for mistakes, which is a habit in education. This creates more outcomes with less energy.
- Working on this together, as a team, brings a great value and is much appreciated by the parents.
- There is more cohesion among the teachers—more sharing, support, and care.
- This is it. This should be used in all schools! Our results have gone up, there are no longer any problems with keeping order in the classroom, and the problem of bullying has disappeared.

What 12-year-old students said about the application of core reflection in class is noteworthy:

- Our group has become a whole.
- Children who were not so much part of the group before, have now become part of it because we now see their qualities.
- Learning has become much more fun. The learning now comes from within.
- I would like many people to come here and see this.

Teacher Education

In several countries, especially in the Netherlands and the United States, core reflection is being used in the professional preparation of teachers. It is a strong means to connect the professional and personal aspects of teacher development. In particular, it appears to help student teachers to use their core qualities in their teaching and realize their ideals. Adams, Kim, and Greene (2013) showed this in their study on the role of core reflection in the professional development of six beginning teachers at Southern Oregon University. These students faced many problems in their teaching and often felt overwhelmed and disillusioned. The authors showed that core reflection enhanced the use of core qualities in these teachers and led to new insights, self-understandings, and behaviors. As one of them put it: "I feel like if I fall now, I can pull myself up." Another beginning teacher said: "The decisions that I'm making are from who I am—from my core."

Meijer, Korthagen, and Vasalos (2009) published an in-depth report of the learning process of a beginning teacher who struggled with her teaching and received core reflection coaching during seven one-hour sessions. Based on analyses of the audio-taped sessions and research interviews with this teacher, the study showed that the teacher developed more awareness of her core qualities and ideals, and reframed her initial negative self-concept and her educational beliefs. She started to act upon her core qualities and ideals, which helped her overcome her initial struggles. The essence for her was: "I am now more present while teaching!" This publication is very informative if one wishes to understand the details of the core reflection approach.

Teacher Educators

Core reflection can also be implemented to support professional growth in teacher educators. A three-year collaborative self-study by Kim and Greene (2011) described the impact of core reflection on their identities and work as teacher educators. The authors identified several core issues in their professional development process, such as more connection between the self as a teacher educator and as a person. Moreover, they found evidence of the beneficial influences of their own development on their student teachers. The authors conclude that core reflection served as a useful approach for aligning professional and personal identities with a sense of purpose, passion, and teaching ideals. The quote at the beginning of this chapter originates from this study.

Conclusion

In 2013, a book on core reflection was published (Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2013), which combines an overview of the basic principles of core reflection with detailed descriptions of research studies on the approach. This collection of studies shows the importance of addressing the whole person in learning and provides evidence that the core reflection approach can lead to a reframing of limiting beliefs and enduring effective behavior. The overall conclusion that can be drawn from the research on core reflection is that the approach leads to deep, transformative learning, that is, learning in which we experience “dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (Mirriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 130).

An important reason for this strong effect of the core reflection approach is that it makes people aware of both their potential and their inner obstacles. This gives them a sense of choice, and thus the freedom to align their behavior with their deepest qualities and ideals (Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2013). Therefore, as Miller (2013, p. x) stated, “core reflection offers real hope for significant change.”

More information on core reflection, including research articles, can be found at www.korthagen.nl.

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