

Perceptivity, Communication and Conflict Management

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“Teacher, do not say too often
you are right.

Let your pupil see you are.

Do not overtax the truth:

It does not take kindly to that.

Listen while speaking.”

Bertold Brecht

“Know thyself”

Socrates

During teacher training in Germany, and also in the other countries involved in the project, training in perceptivity is rarely conducted over a longer period of time or even practised at all. This is true also against the background of Gestalt psychology findings. The central component of teacher training after a university degree in the subjects to be taught is instruction in didactics and methodology related to those subjects during the second phase of teacher training (Seminar Training). This appears to be the general rule in all the countries involved in this project.

However, in all discussion forums there is agreement that aspects of perception, assessment of significance within perception against the background of one’s own history and reflection about perception and assessment of the significance of snapshots in lessons are very important for interaction between teachers and pupils.

In this context terms such as:

- attentiveness to oneself and to others,
- awareness and
- mindfulness

must be considered.

A consequence for training perceptivity is an initial important piece of advice :

TIP 1: Be attentive and use eye-contact

For beginner teachers and students it is too complex to manage steps to reflection on the basis of learned perception while carrying out an action (Reflection in action (cf. Comenius Project Utrecht 2001-2004), (cf. also Kounin 2006). Operating on the meta-level while at the

same time carrying out actions is often (too) difficult for beginners. However, they can be expected during the course of their training to think afterwards over the actions they have carried out (cf. the A-L-A-C-T Model by F. Kordhagen, 2002). To do this requires, however, a more complex level of perceptivity and training, which should be developed during the course of teacher training, particularly with regard to the senses of seeing and hearing but also with regard to the training of self-observation, self-monitoring, empathy, to more complex phenomena of interaction – Kounin uses here the terms teachers' withitness and overlapping – with regard to reviewing one's own biographical "baggage", to one's own feelings that arise during a situation in which one acts or frequently as a result of introjects internalized in one's childhood. In this context it is important to remember that in particular the spheres of emotional intelligence are not encouraged enough by academic study and as a result it is just those people with good cognitive training that lack the ability for empathy. (cf. also www.zwischen-schritte.de or Spitzer, M. 2003)

I. Training of Perception

For initial training in empathy, but above all of one's own emotional world, not only Gestalt therapists recommend **breathing** exercises and exercises of **physical weightiness**, i.e. exercises for consciousness of the phenomena of gravity and one's own vitality. With these two fundamental main elements that create awareness of one's own mental state, individual perceptivity can be trained and bridging to and foundation of the development of self-observation and empathy can be found (cf. Goleman, 1997). Examples of this could be simple breathing phases backed up by gestures (cf. here breathing exercises from Tai Chi, yoga and also breathing exercises according to the Ilse Middendorf method etc, cf also DVD extract from the Czech Republic contribution to this EU project TIPPP)

Breathing exercises

- Training long phases of exhalation, beneficial for mental and physical relaxation,
- Identifying the length of phases of inhalation and exhalation,
- Inserting the breathing pause consciously (for 85% of people after exhalation),
- Practising pursed lip breathing in order to exhale consciously,
- Voiced vocal exercises using correct insertion of breathing,
- Tai Chi exercises: the tree – during this exercise feeling the breathing centre deep down inside the body,
- Breathing in stress situations, especially concentrating on relaxation of the neck muscles – lowering the shoulders (cf. Bibliography)

Gravity exercises

- Becoming and being aware of how I, as the person with responsibility, am standing in front of the group and also how I move about the room.
- (Assistance from video recordings – reflection – position resulting from my own history)
- Which foot do I put my weight on most, in which stress situations do I forget that I am weighty?
- How is my head anchored to my shoulders?
- Am I relaxed: primary indication my shoulders are hanging loosely downwards towards the ground?
- How am I sitting on my chair?

Experiencing and reflecting on connections between breathing cycles and weightiness

Further perception exercises

- Recognising another person by listening with eyes closed,
- Reacting to auditory signals with eyes closed and at the same time taking notice of the depth of breathing,
- Performing balance exercises:
How do I keep my balance, how can I stand on one leg, can I do that with eyes closed?
- Further exercises are to be found in reference sources (cf. Bibliography).

Initial phases of contact

The next steps towards better perceptivity and so relevant for steps to communication and interaction and also to coping with conflict situations, lead to the first phases of contact with others.

- How do I behave when someone leads me – with eyes closed, do I let myself be led or am I reluctant to be guided by others? Would I prefer to do the leading myself? Polarity – “leading – being led” – a relevant aspect with regard to teacher behaviour and therefore for the capacity for interaction of a person that works in social professions (cf. photos on the website). Can I trust the other person and give up my weightiness, can I lean on the other person, possibly even trust him to catch me when

I fall, or am I not happy to expect the other person to carry or catch my weight, or as some say, the responsibility for me?

- What difficulties do I have in putting myself in someone else's hands?
- What were my experiences with my breathing in these really quite stressful situations? Did I take any notice of my breathing? Did I hold my breath?
- What happened to me when I gave up my weightiness?

There are many further exercises to be found (cf. Bibliography)

The point of these exercises is to perceive one's own body, one's own feelings in order in this way also to develop empathy for others. (What makes me angry, what annoys me, what makes me especially happy, why do I find certain people more pleasant than others etc?) (cf. Dreikurs et al. 2007, Kounin 2006).

When these phenomena are felt, they lead to increased social and emotional intelligence that is not only founded on the rational-cognitive level, to improved empathy that enables one to act more securely, more confidently and above all more authentically in situations of communication and interaction. The perceptivity exercises make it easier to work out initial phases of reflection with the aid and assistance of video recordings (cf. Kounin, 2006, 1. Edition 1976):

- How do I manage the contradictions arising from the demands of dealing with heterogeneity?
- Am I able to deal with contradictions at all? Or as a more focussed question: To what extent am I able to deal with conflict situations? (cf. also Rhode, 2006, see below)
- Which antinomies are a problem for me?
- How do I deal with concepts for didactical reform? (cf. Wischer, 2007)
- If the first forms of contact with others were initially passive – how do I allow myself to be led, how do I allow myself to fall, what am I willing to expect the other person to do for me – do the first active measures that a teacher always has to put into effect with a class lead to active forms of contact?
- What part does eye-contact play for me, how can I listen to what is being said by the members of the group that I, as the teacher, will guide?
- How important are the members of the group as individuals to me? (cf. Kounin, 2006)
- Which remarks, comments, provocation do I take personally?

These are all questions that teachers must constantly ask themselves and that – at least to some extent – will be dealt with in the next two chapters.

2 Communication

In the Bielefeld teacher training seminar, a module with the title “Communication” has been developed for a compact workshop (1 to 2 days). Elements of communication in theory and practice (body language, active listening, setting impulses etc) are imparted. Using different forms of organization and methods (freeze image, case situation, group work with different tasks), the participants become aware of the effect they have on others. During reflection they understand the relevance of this topic for their actions as teachers.

This module assists the understanding of the following standards that have been set down for the seminar for training:

- Comparing, evaluating and practising important forms of communication in teaching.
- Assessing and accepting one’s own function as a role model in its significance specific to those being addressed and developing one’s own personality in this respect.
- Perceiving, describing role-specific aspects of one’s own personality and assessing and evaluating of them in their effect on learner groups (...).

In practice the compact workshop is offered in three parts:

1. **Perception of how communication proceeds** in teaching / learning processes may enable teachers to decode body language signals from pupils more clearly and use them for their own teaching, to develop reflection competence for their own body language articulation and to recognize the possibilities and limitations of conscious influence.
2. **Active listening** enables teachers to gain empathy towards the person they are speaking to, their problems and/or topics.
3. Command of strategies for improvement of dialogue can be achieved through exercises on **shaping dialogue as instruction**.

For all these parts, in addition to selected material on theory, concrete exercises on implementation in teaching practice are offered. Pre-condition for participation in the communication module is extensive study of the material on a CD (texts and source references) that is made available to all participants before the workshop begins.

Conflict Management in Stress Situations

3.1. Possible causes and objectives in conflicts

(cf. Dreikurs, 2007)

“The main reason for conflicts in the class is the social equality that exists both between individuals and also between different groups. **When the social relationship between human beings is uncertain, unsettled, that leads inevitably to conflicts and disharmony.** Equality alone ... can ... lead to stable social relations. ... order cannot be achieved through dominance.” (cf. Dreikurs et al. 2007, p. 63). As teachers, we should and must therefore learn to give pupils the feeling by our practical actions that they are equal in the class – independent of their social background, their gender, their faith or even their academic ability. In particular the last criterion will cause parents, pupils and teachers to gulp: is there not especially at secondary school tremendous competition between parents, and nowadays also between pupils, that begins already at primary school? How is it possible that the PISA results – especially in Germany – demonstrate that pupils from less well-off families have considerably less chance of being recommended as suitable for grammar school at secondary level than better-off children?

“Above all those children seem unable to cope whose parents work full-time – and do not have time to help their children with their often unnecessarily complicated homework. “I would not recommend a working mother,” a mother from Lower Saxony thus affected summed up her experiences bitterly, “to send her child to a grammar school.”

In the case of the Nieswiodek family, the English teacher recently recommended their mother to get professional tutoring for one of their twin daughters. “We are considering it although it costs another 130 or 150 euros a month,” says Ellen Nieswiodek. “I would like to know what families do that haven’t got the money.”” (Spiegel Online 14.1.2008)

It can thus be seen that the **“social equality”** demanded by Dreikurs (2007) does not exist, at least at German secondary schools – as a result the necessary consequences for teacher training will have to be drawn if, in the long term, social conflicts and dissonances are not to become the norm.

But how do young teachers deal with these conflicts that lie ahead of them and are already occurring on a daily basis at more or less all schools?

- **They must be able to see them as abstract from their own person, must not take them personally.**

This is easier said than done for do we not all work on the principle of very individual upbringing, individual responsibility for the pupils entrusted to our care? Was not in the course of our own socialization our own responsibility constantly brought to our attention? How can a young teacher be liberated from these demanding standards?

TIP 2: By using video recordings and processes of self-observation and observation of others, teachers, as instructors and educators, can find out how often during a conflict with a pupil they fall into the trap of giving themselves the blame.

However, at the same time a second resultant step must be taken by the teacher in connection with this:

- **The children, the adolescents must be given the feeling that they are equal and can, together with others, take on responsibility (cf. Tip 2)**

Proceeding from their view of humanity, teachers will pass on to their pupils an optimistic, positive attitude to life. There is no place for praise(!!) and punishment (!!) in the interaction process of lessons, of collective experience and of togetherness. According to Adler, the feeling of togetherness should be encouraged, bearing in mind that children's actions are always and will always be goal-oriented, always seeking – according to Adler – to be able to experience a feeling of togetherness (cf. Adler,) This means – according to Dreikurs – that we as teachers must, in the case of conflicts, see the goal, recognize what is the motive for the child's actions (cf. Dreikurs, 2007). If we convey a positive view of humanity, have confidence in the child and try to find the child's goal-orientation during the conflict, conflicts in the situation of lessons can be reduced. This also requires appropriate perceptivity, appropriate self-observation and self-management on the part of the teacher.

Dreikurs describes three levels of goals, which the teacher should analyse by asking the question:

What does the child want to achieve by what he is doing, by his action?

Does he want, in the following ways, to

1. Attract attention:

- a) active – constructive: - ambitious, seeking praise, obedient, directed by expectation
- b) active – destructive: - cheeky, defiant, oafish
- c) passive – constructive: - charming, vain, helpless
- d) passive – destructive : - inactive, lazy, these are the *"I don't understand this"* children

2. Exert power:

This child, this adolescent wants to be boss (shouting, quarrelling, arguing, anger, stubbornness etc)

3. Take revenge:

Revenge is taken on everybody / everything but not on the person who caused the pain.

Throwing things away, scribbling on other pupils' exercise books, hitting, kicking)

4. Demonstrate inability

I don't care, I can't do it all anyway!

From this, the crucial criterion develops for teachers in such conflict situations, the situation in which self-observation and reflection are important but also observation of the pupil:

1.: If the pupil does not react to our reprimand and **we (as the teacher) feel angry** about that, then it is a pupil that wants to attract attention.

2.: If **the teacher** feels threatened or even challenged ,then it is a pupil that wants to exert power, demonstrate superiority.

3.: If **we (as the teacher)** feel hurt and pay no attention to the pupil, but would prefer to continue to reprimand him, then it is very probably a pupil that wants to hurt.

4.: And if **we** feel helpless, we have the feeling we cannot go on, then it is a pupil that wants to demonstrate inability.

(Summary according to Dreikurs, p. 30)

TIP 3:

In order to make these very different motives clear to the pupils too, interaction with the pupil should not lead to an accusation; it is a better idea, and one that we have

tried out ourselves, to ask a question that begins “Could it be that you ...” and considers the following aspect:

in the case of attention:

- would like me to listen and talk to you?
- would like me to take more notice of you, to do more for you?
- would like to be in the centre of attention of the group?

In the case of superiority / power:

- want to be the one who calls the tune?
- want to be the boss?
- want to show me that I can't force you to do something?

In the case of revenge:

- want to take revenge?
- want to punish me?

In the case of inability:

- want to be left in peace and quiet because you can't do anything?
- you think you don't know the answer and don't want others to know that? (cf. Dreikurs, et al., 2007, pS.34 ff)

A conversation of this kind could start like this or something like this. In this way, the equality, as called for above, of the pupil is underlined; the pupil feels that he has been stopped without being accused.

Dreikurs et al. emphasize that the child or young adolescent normally does not know why they act as they act. There are unconscious motives that here again are also revealed by “***Could it be that you .***” questions. However, the teacher must be conscious of his intervention.

An interesting study on this appeared in Tausch's work already in 1967: 94 percent of interventions by teachers in cases of conflict are ineffective, only 6 percent of any further help. The ineffective interventions usually consisted of reprimands, threats of punishment, shouting (cf. Tausch, 1967):

TIP 4: Especially in cases of conflict children and adolescents often have unconscious motives (Exception in many cases: children that want to take revenge. Here the situation is somewhat different.)

The teacher must use intervention very consciously and be aware of the consequences of ineffective intervention: the result could be that pupil's disruptive behaviour continues and intensifies.

We can establish:

1. Pupils must be given the feeling that they are accepted in the class, that they are equal and that they are not bullied.
2. Reprimands etc by teachers appear to be quite ineffective (cf. Tausch, 1967), probably also because consequences on the part of the teacher do not follow (s. DVD Conflict menu)
3. Power struggles initiated by the teacher and a teacher's feelings of being hurt and offended lead to destabilization of lessons and to loss of authority for the teacher.

TIP 5: Teacher, do not get involved in power struggles, you will lose.

3.2 Methods of reprimanding in cases of conflict

In his books, Rudi Rhode (cf. esp. Rhode, 2006) offers very concrete advice on how teachers should appear in a case of conflict and there he differentiates three categories of disruption:

Overstepping boundaries: Setting boundaries is necessary

Conclusion - boundaries (Rhode, p. 22):

1. An unclearly marked boundary invites overstepping. So boundaries must be set clearly and plainly so that "Stop!" does not become "How about stopping?".
2. Giving a reason for a boundary signals esteem to the person overstepping, creates transparency and has a potentially de-escalating effect.
3. Giving a reason for setting a boundary trusts that the boundary will be respected by the other person because he understands the reason and not because he is afraid of the consequences.

4. If a boundary was explained beforehand to the person overstepping it and also reasons for it were given, then giving reasons again in the case of a conflict takes time and is unnecessary.

Conclusion – boundaries become rules (Rhode, p. 30):

1. If a boundary is overstepped repeatedly, it is advisable to mark it more clearly by changing it into a rule.
2. Reasons for the rule are given in detail at the time it is set. If a rule that had been explained before is broken, it should not be explained again.
3. If rule-breaking is dealt with consistently, it will happen less often.
4. If setting rules is too difficult for children and adolescents, then it is our responsibility as adults: we set them. The rules are explained and maybe even discussed but they are not negotiable.

No rules --- **without consequences**

Conclusion – no rules without consequences (Rhode, p. 49):

1. Breaking a rule is the result of an unconscious cost-benefit analysis. In order therefore to avoid rules being broken, the benefits must be minimized and/or the costs increased by appropriate consequences.
2. A rule that is seen as useful and necessary is overstepped less often than when the reasons are not accepted.
3. Thus it is advisable when setting a rule to achieve acceptance by giving explanations and reasons.
4. When it is evident that the reasons for a rule are not accepted, the minimal objective must be to achieve understanding that the rule is in force.

5. Personal authority can only be gained by consistent behaviour and showing respect in conflict situations. When authority has been gained, this makes it easier to argue in favour of rules..

The teacher must be perceived as an authority when presenting his point of view; clarity of voice and look in the eye, in the way of speaking and of posture are necessary; the requisite presence must be there. In conflict situations there should be no discussions about overstepping boundaries, breaking rules and consequences (stereotype statements like a broken record playing over and over).

Mental techniques (Rhode, 2006, p. 54 ff) :

It should be remembered that

- A conflict about rule breaking is always a disagreement about an issue and must never become a personal dispute!
- Staying calm should therefore be a priority in all disagreements, the person in authority must be sure not to hurt the adversary's feelings, but must not feel hurt himself. That means here as well: breathe in and keep calm!
- As people in authority, we must ignore or at least limit the insults of our conflict partner (s. TIP 5).

These three axioms regarding conflict disagreements from the point of view of the person in authority are unalterable. Assistance and support in this field can be gained from verbal and body language techniques.

Verbal techniques (Rhode, 2006, p. 69 ff):

The following techniques based on the mental principles are essential :

- When a rule is broken, the situation can never be dealt with by arguing and discussion but only by clear behaviour and repeated statements (Rhode talks of the broken record method).
- Even in the most severe conflict situation it is a good idea to signal the other person respect. This always (!!)

Body language techniques (cf.Rhode, p. 78 ff)

For these the following patterns can be established that were already mentioned in Chapter 1 and that every teacher has to practise (s. video sequences)

- The teacher as the person in authority must demonstrate stability.
- The teacher must be prepared for aggressive behaviour on the part of the pupil in cases of conflict, must nonetheless stay calm and not react with hurt feelings.
- Eye-contact, not staring but firm, signals inner stability.
- Use of space is often decisive in conflict situations; for the teacher this means always seeking to be near the pupil. This increases the sense of presence and forcefulness.
- However, nearness to the adversary must be differentiated – do not approach nearer than one metre to the “adversary“, normally a pupil.
- Sense of presence in a case of conflict must always be preferable to threatening gestures.

3.3. Classroom management

All this assistance that can offer young teachers support in many cases of conflict – experience derived from many workshops – can, however, only complement and not replace the generally necessary efficiency of good teacher behaviour. Kounin discovered with detailed video studies that it is dependent on a much larger number of practised, more complex behaviours and personality features in teacher behaviour to establish a successful style of management in lessons, defined as “low level of student misbehavior – high level of student participation” (cf. Kounin, 2006, p. 12). Kounin proved that when reprimanding it does not depend primarily on the methods of clarity, firmness, intensity and the main focus of instructions (Kounin, 2006, p. 81 ff) – at significant points no meaningful differences could be seen in the different methods of proceeding when teachers reprimanded pupils of one class, apart from one example of angry, punitive methods and procedures, that had different effects on the rest of the class.

The important thing was in fact the styles of personality of the teacher regarding

Withitness:

Withitness was defined as the message communicated by the teacher's concrete behaviour from him to his pupils that he is aware what they are doing, that he has got “eyes in the back of his head”.

The criteria for the empirical study were here again cases of reprimanding, always referring to finding out: What is the right time, was it the right object, was it the right (disruptive) pupil? (Kounin, 2006, p. 91 ff)

Overlapping:

Overlapping was defined as the operation of a teacher who “has to attend to two issues at the same time” (Kounin, 2006, p. 95)

Kounin proved in his study that both dimensions of teacher style correlate clearly with a teacher’s management success and that evidently the dimension of teacher withitness is the more significant criterion (Kounin, 2006, p. 97).

Result:

- The teacher that is able to deal with two or more disruptions at the same time usually chooses the right time and the right object.
- Teachers that deal with only problem situation when several are happening at the same time usually take action against the wrong action and too late.
- It must also be noted that taking action against a disruption at the right time, caused by choosing the right object, is more efficient than the type of reprimand chosen – thus here a relativization of Rhode’s propositions. Kounin goes even one step further when he argues that the video studies proved “that the quality of reprimanding bore no relation to the pupils’ reactions.” (Kounin, 2006, p. 147).
- Kounin recommends teachers to acquire manifest overlapping behaviour and demonstrative withitness for their classroom routine.

Smoothness vs. Jumping about and Momentum vs. Delay

In addition, Kounin found out in and through his video studies that for successful management behaviour it is also extremely important to conduct lessons smoothly and with momentum and therefore avoid jumping from one action to another or delays in the progress of a lesson.

Kounin gives many examples. First of all, calm, accentuated looking around the class after a learning situation can be described; he describes for example that a teacher, when changing after one learning situation to another, should allow himself and the pupils a short break from eye-contact. Jumping straight into and continuing with another new teaching situation gives off a hectic, abrupt feeling (Kounin, 2006, p.102).

Other management criteria (according to Kounin) are:

- Group alerting in connection with group focus and accountability (cf. Kounin, p. 117 ff.)
- In his video study, Kounin differentiates between pupils working when the teacher directs the lesson and when they work on their own and are responsible for themselves. During the first type, teacher-directed phase, pupils participate more actively and misbehave less. (cf. P. 131)

Results according to Kounin – based on the two video recorder studies

(cf. Kounin, 2006, p. 148 f.):

- 1. It is not the techniques of disciplining that are important, the main focus must be on class management methods in order to avoid disruption before it happens.
Prevention before reaction!!**
- 2. In the study *prevention* of misbehaviour was given definite priority before *dealing with* misbehaviour.**
- 3. Techniques of class management are the same for all pupils, whether they attract attention by their behaviour or whether their behaviour is not noticeable, whether they are disabled, whether they are boys or girls.**
- 4. Techniques of class management are for groups and not for individual children.
All these techniques manage without being punitive or restrictive!**
- 5. Class management techniques represent – according to Kounin – necessary ways and means, mastering them extends the individual scope for action.**

For the TIPP project the following considerations and questions arise from the above:

1. The training of perceptivity for teachers in their everyday teaching activity should not only be developed and supported, it is essential in order to be able to carry out class management – by analogy with Kounin's results – successfully.
2. The kind of method used to reprimand may be helpful in de-escalating a conflict; if, however, the reprimand is too late or directed at the wrong object, it is ineffective. Most importantly, it is not so crucial compared with the correct implementation of class management techniques:

Prevention before reaction!

3. Questions for the project:

- Are there facilities for learning withitness and overlapping and also to train smooth direction of lessons and teacher behaviour with momentum?
- What concrete assistance can be offered to young teachers?

Appendix 1 (cf. Rhode 2006):

Anlage 1 (vgl. Rhode, 2006):

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Conclusion – no rules without consequences (Rhode, p. 49):

1. Breaking a rule is the result of an unconscious cost-benefit analysis. In order therefore to avoid rules being broken, the benefits must be minimized and/or the costs increased by appropriate consequences.

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