Child Centred Approaches

It appears that there are some general misunderstandings about the issues of child friendly and child centred approaches in education. Many educational professionals tend to think that child friendly is more or less the same as child centred. Therefore it is important to make a clear division between these two approaches:

- **Child friendly approaches**: the teacher behaves in a safe and respectful manner towards the children, regardless of their gender, without any abuse or physical punishment. The children feel safe, encouraged and happy in school; their performances improve gradually and the drop out rates decline.

- **Child centred approaches**: the teacher challenges the children in a safe and respectful manner to develop (together and individually) their own solutions to problems given, thus encouraging co-operation, the development of life skills, their analysing power, their capacity to organise themselves. The children feel safe, encouraged, happy and empowered in school, and have more fun; their performances rise significantly and the drop out rates decline even more.

**Life-skills competencies**

It is a general assumption that education should teach the pupils or students (boys and girls) how to participate effectively and satisfactorily in their society. In other words: education should teach them how to become a responsible person, who takes the obligation to be accountable for relatives, for the development of the society, and for the maintenance of the environment. It also teaches them how to achieve appropriate living conditions and health, hence helping them to care for themselves and for those who are depending on them, like elderly people, children and the disabled. Finally it teaches them how to create safe living conditions, through honest, peaceful and righteous attitudes and behaviour.

In order to enhance the life skills competencies (or values) of responsibility, care and safety, it is necessary to make the pupils acquainted with real life situations, hence strengthening their problem solving capacities. For solving problems it is necessary to organise oneself. Through processes of self-organisation people learn to deal with problems in a satisfactory manner. This can only be achieved through child-centred approaches: the child friendly approach might still be teacher centred and knowledge based, while the child centred approach is empathically problem and process oriented. The children learn themselves to analyse a problem, to develop strategies and to mobilise resources to solve them, and to evaluate the outcomes critically. This way they strongly enhance their life skill competencies. In other words: they learn how to empower themselves. Empowerment is understood here as a process by which people learn to achieve control over their own lives and resources, through self-organisation.

A paradigm shift from teacher centred towards child centred approaches could be enhanced and supported by a better understanding of some constructivist concepts. One of these is the Empowerment Triangle (ET), for building self organisation.
competencies and thus empowerment, through step-by-step classroom learning experiments.

The ET is an easy to adapt educational instrument, which helps people to organise themselves, in order to create the necessary life skills of responsibility, care and safety. It also identifies (in a comprehensive manner) the objectives, contents and approaches which are necessary for the development of self-organisation competencies.

In general the ET is a quality classroom leadership instrument, that helps educational professionals to develop and assess processes of self-organisation (empowerment) in education. It helps to develop and understand the goals through the **purpose-question** (gives the objectives and responsibilities: the *head* of empowerment), to identify and to describe the necessary tasks and activities through the **what-question** (gives the contents of activities people care of: the *hands* of empowerment), and to develop the path towards the coherent implementation and assessment of the activities through the **how-question** (gives safe methods, approaches and assessment procedures: the *heart* of empowerment). All with regard to the final goal, that is the empowerment of the students or pupils, and of the teachers themselves. To put it differently: through the three leading questions (on purpose, what and how) teachers become more focussed on their tasks, at the same moment enhancing their professional consciousness (head), their professional competencies (hands), and their professional ethics (heart). To put it simply: be fully accountable for your actions (head), do what you do to the best of your abilities (hands), and do it with zeal (heart).

**Self-organisation competencies**

The process of building a self-organisation competency among pupils unfolds itself by answering the same leading questions, assuming that there is a problem which needs to be solved:

1. **Face the problem, by thinking about it:**
   a. Why is this problem hindering me (gives motivation)?
   b. Why do I want to solve this problem (gives an obligation or purpose)?
   
   Now the head is watching the problem.

2. **Tackle the problem, by describing it:**
   a. What are the elements of the problem (gives a description)?
   b. What are the origins or reasons of it (gives an analysis)?
   
   Now the hands are grabbing the problem.

3. **Feel the solution, by developing a strategy:**
   a. How do the steps look like, which I should take (gives a strategy)?
   b. How can I get the necessary help needed to solve the problem (gives necessary resources)?
   c. How do I know that I have been successful (gives an evaluation)?
   
   Now the heart is overwhelming the problem.
After having developed answers on all questions, the pupils start acting, in order to solve the problem given.

Afterwards they evaluate the problem solving process, by asking themselves:
1. Did I achieve the purpose: is the problem taken away?
2. Am I able to describe what I have done: did I obtain new knowledge and skills?
3. How do all involved feel now: is everybody satisfied?
If there is any negative answer: re-develop the problem solving process from the beginning onwards and start acting again, until a satisfactory situation has been achieved.
Child-centred competencies

Finally, the ET helps teachers to internalise the following successive child centred competencies, for purposes of effectiveness and for being a role model for the pupils (the future citizens):

A. On responsibilities (the head element):
- The teachers are responsible for guiding a process of awareness, empowerment and development;
- The teacher has a strong and well developed capacity for mature critical self-reflection;
- The teacher stimulates the thinking of the pupils, without any interference from personal prejudices, irrational loyalties, traumas, hang ups, fears or irritations on the side of the teacher;
- The teacher facilitates self-reflection about the own positions, qualities, problems, needs, and opportunities by the pupils. During this, the teacher makes careful observations, whereby he or she tries to allow everyone to express him or herself individually.

B. On care (the hands element):
- The teacher assumes an inquisitive position;
- The teacher should not be suggestive in any sense, because this would pre-empt the pupils and take away their chance of putting forth a thought, expression or idea;
- The teacher is always well-prepared.

C. On safety (the heart element):
- The teacher makes never use of physical punishments;
- The teachers must take the answers and expressions given seriously at all times, even if they themselves do not agree;
- The teachers should realise that pupils have their own truth and reality, a truth which is appreciated without prejudice and should be valued according to its own merits. Without this appreciation pupils will fall silent. Thus, they must never experience rejection and must be shown trust and respect at all times.

Seen from this angle teachers must have freed themselves fully from any prejudice to gender-aspects and/or from any (irrational) loyalties related to nationality, race or even religion. Prejudices and loyalties that could hinder the full understanding of gender equality and of peace and respect at all levels. Prejudices and irrational loyalties enforce exclusion: meaning that the other human being who does not belong to the same sex, nationality, race or religion could be treated with less respect. And thus women abuse is still close and disrespect, discrimination, hatred and even war are just around the corner.

It is the great challenge of each and every teacher to fight with zeal for a climate of inclusion: meaning that all human beings, irrespective their sex, race or background, should be treated with equal respect, not looking at the others ascribed (given) positions, but only by giving full value to his or hers individual and achieved qualities and competencies. Only then abuse, discrimination and worse can be avoided or
eradicated. Only then processes of peace building and peace maintenance, empowerment and development can be fully fostered and facilitated.

This pedagogical approach is emphatically child-centred, aiming at enforcing children’s self-esteem, self-confidence and the development of a positive and realistic self-concept (self-image), and thus aiming at enhancing individual empowerment and the capacity to organize one-self for future development. Furthermore this approach aims at creating an environment which allows respect for characteristic and sometimes differing cultural features. By using a child-centred approach, teachers try to accommodate and support every individual child and its specific needs and possibilities.

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