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HIDDEN QUALITIES

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRED KORTHAGEN

The interview took place in Brno on February 25, 2014, during a visiting lecture at the

Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University,

Czech Republic. The interviewers were Roman Švaříček and Zuzana Šalamounová.

RS (Roman Švaříček): *Okay, so the first question. As I said earlier, you are known for two themes – reflection and teacher education. They are both old issues in education, but you were able to bring new, inspiring ideas. And the question is: How did you discover these themes for yourself? How did you re-discover these old themes, which have been around since Dewey, or maybe longer? How did you find out that this is your theme, where you wanted to do something?*

FK (Fred Korthagen): It's quite a long story. When I became a teacher, I was amazed… When I was in teacher education myself, I was amazed by how my teacher education was. At that time in the Netherlands, it was really old-fashioned and traditional. You were sitting in a lecture hall, listening to a theory, and that was your education. You went to a school for maybe eight hours and if you were lucky, the teacher would say that you could do some teaching. And that was all the preparation there was.

And then I became a mathematics teacher and I encountered a lot of problems in the beginning and I thought: 'Well, my preparation was really insufficient!' After some time when I changed jobs and became a teacher educator, I started to work at an institution, which was also in Utrecht, but it was a teachers college, it was not at a university. That was at a time in the Netherlands when new colleges for teacher education were being founded. It was a really exciting time when the people working there felt: 'This is new, now we can be innovative.' In the department of mathematics education, where my job was, the head of the department had a strong belief that if you become a teacher, it's more than only learning mathematics; it's even more than only learning about pedagogy; it's learning about yourself. And he asked people from the field of andragogy to come in and train us as teacher educators in helping people reflect, which was by then common in the field of andragogy, where there was also knowledge about reflection that was completely unknown in the area of education. It

kind of opened up a world for me. That is what I had missed in my own preparation as a teacher. This is important, to help people think about who they are, why they do what they do, etc. I worked there for four years. We had an intensive training that I think almost changed my life, because I suddenly started to reflect on feelings and on questions like: *What do you want?* and things like that. All the questions that are now in my framework – it started there, with the training I received.

And then after four years there was a budget cut. As I was the last person who came in, I had to be the first to go. I decided to try to get a job at the university, which I got. I didn't have my Ph.D. then, which was okay back then, you could work at the university without a Ph.D., but, well, people did expect you to do some research. And I thought, well this topic of reflection which I have been learning myself, trained in myself; I thought it should be spread throughout teacher education. So I decided to do my Ph.D. on reflection. At a time when, you say it's an old topic, but in those days it was not very central in education. So I did my Ph.D. on reflection. The title of my thesis was *Promoting Reflection as the Basis for Teacher Education*. I published it in 1982. And then for five years nobody referred to it. It was as if it went into a black hole. And then suddenly in the United States people like Ken Zeichner started to write about reflection and suddenly it became popular in the Netherlands. And then people realized: 'Oh, there is a Dutch book on that.' And they started to look at my work, and started to use the ALACT model, etc. I think now in every teacher education program in the Netherlands you see the ALACT model and you often see the onion model. It started to spread.

RS: When you are talking about teacher education programs, you talk about connecting or integrating theory into practice. But when I teach courses for undergraduates, I always tell them: 'I will never tell you what the best theory is, what the best teaching style is, I will never tell you how you should teach.' I sometimes sense that they feel that they are in a very uncertain position, because they don't know exactly what to do. I think that this is the reason that they are attracted to the belief that teaching means a transfer of knowledge. From your point of view, what could be a way that students in education programs can find stability or the feeling that they are doing well?

FK: Here I am quite influenced by Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development. I think you should always give people what they want to the degree that they feel safe and then challenge them, not challenge them and then try to get them to feel safe. So that's why I was listening carefully to what you were saying about what students are used to. And I thought about tomorrow morning, when I have to teach 200 students, I thought I should take care and stay more at the safe side when I give instructions. And even though I didn't do it perfectly today, you could see how in the 90 minutes this afternoon when I worked with people I started with questions that were rather doable and then generally they became more complicated. But by then people had the feeling of, 'Okay, I'm safe with Fred. He won't give me the feeling that I said something stupid or anything.' I always teach teachers: Give people what they want first. So if they want tips, if they want you to say what they should do as teachers, tell them. I had an experience that was quite extreme. I had some students that really wanted me to tell them what they should do. And I did so. And I kept doing it. And then: 'Oh, Fred is a good guy. He tells me what to do.' But then when they felt safe with me and trusted me, then I said, the next time when they asked me: 'I can keep going on and tell you

what to do, but I am starting to feel unsure about what I am doing.' 'Oh, you are starting to feel unsure about what you are doing?' 'Yes, because now I am helping you over and over again with your question *What should I do?* But I am thinking ahead, to when you finish your program and I am no longer there for you to ask me *What should I do?* How can we get to the point where you can start to answer your own questions?' They were interested to think about that question because they had developed trust in me. To a large degree, my idea is to give people what they want in order to gain their trust

ZS (Zuzana Šalamounová): *If I correctly understand your approach and most of your studies, the general theories, or Theories with a capital T, are influenced by Gestalt and personal practical theories; even if you use theories you try to form it to personal practical theories. So, which Theories with a capital T do you think are still inspiring in teacher education? If there are any.*

FK: I think that many theories are inspiring. I can talk for hours about inspiring Theories with a capital T. But for all these theories the question is: 'How can you translate it to what the students are struggling with?' Personally I am quite fascinated by the system theory by Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues. It is almost unreadable for students, those Theories with a capital T. But the moment you take just one element like, you are talking louder and louder to get the attention of the pupils, there is a principle like 'Do less of the same', which comes from this theory but you make it very practical.

What is less of the same? Less talking louder. So what would happen if you talk less loudly? Suddenly, the children stop talking, because they want to hear you. Aha, it's so simple, a theory with a small t derived from a Theory with a capital T. But the big challenge for teacher educators is to be able to make that translation and to connect with the concerns of the student teachers at that moment. If a student has a concern about the children not listening, here the teacher educator makes that connection. He knows that Theory with a capital T and he makes a connection. But another student says: 'Well, I have a problem with three unmotivated children.'

'Okay, they are unmotivated. What can you do? Okay, you are struggling with it. What do you think is the problem?'

'Well, they are not active.'

'Are they not active, or are they active with something else? Okay, so they are active, but it's a question of how you can get them interested in your issue. Have you any idea of what they are interested in?'

'No, I don't know what they are interested in.'

'Okay, how would it be to…'

... and you use a capital T Theory about how important it is to connect with the world of children and connect your theory with the world of children.

So then the challenge for this teacher becomes: What are these children interested in? And, for instance, if I am a mathematics teacher, can I connect my subject with what they are interested in? Again you are using a Theory with a capital T, maybe you are not even presenting it to the student teacher but you use principles from it.

And the shift you make as a teacher educator is that your task is no longer to choose the right capital T Theories but to make that connection. And that's difficult for many teacher educators. I have given many courses to teacher educators in the

Netherlands. This is something that is, in my opinion, their task. Instead of choosing the theories, their task is to translate the theories. And the next question is: How do you do that? How do you work on the basis of experiences and connect it with theory? There is a five-step model in my book which most people don't notice, but it is another approach, five steps for working with groups and connecting theory with experiences. We have this five-step model and we work on it for two days with teacher educators.

What was your question?

ZS: *Oh, my question was: Which theories, formal theories, are still inspiring for you?*

FK: Okay, well, many, many, many. I realized as a teacher educator that if you really want to connect theory and practice, you have to be informed about a lot of theories. You cannot, for instance, as a mathematics teacher educator say: 'Okay, well, I am a mathematics teacher educator. I know a lot about mathematics methods, about pedagogical methods in mathematics.' No, because that student may struggle with discipline problems. Then you'd have to know something about discipline problems and theories about that. So a lot of my effort as a teacher educator has been getting to know other theories in other fields. In our program, that was the reason we always asked people with different expertise to collaborate together and work together with groups of student teachers. So the mathematics teacher educator collaborates with the learning psychologists for a year and after that year he has an idea about psychological theory and also about the translation of that theory to practice.

That's part of our approach in Utrecht, which I think is often overlooked. I wrote about it in my book. The idea is that if you really want to work in this way, you need to think about the professional development of teacher educators.

ZS: *I remember it. Interdisciplinarity. It means that student teachers don't need to know formal theories?*

FK: I think they have to know formal theories to have an overview of the field. I don't believe in formal theories as being helpful for actual teaching in practice so much. But you have to know that there is a theory by Vygotsky, you have to know that there is a Watzlawick theory. You have to know that there is learning psychology and I think that it's part of your profession to have that background. But it's completely different from the theory with a small t that derives from that and that helps you to teach better. That's my theory.

RS: *And your theory is full of visual metaphors and models. Like the onion model, floors, the elevators, ALACT model. Do you think that this is the reason that for example the onion model became so popular? Is it that the form of the story you are telling people, the metaphors and models you are using, play a major role in our understanding?*

FK: What plays a major role in my thinking is that you have to reduce the difficult things to five parts at the most. Otherwise people can't remember it. The human mind can only remember five things at a time or six maybe. I have always been driven by the idea that if I want to make something applicable in practice I have to reduce it to five parts. So, to give an example, here's how the onion model was developed and then the whole core reflection approach. I collaborated with a guy in Holland whom I admired

very much. He is a great coach and therapist. When I saw him work with people, I thought that it was magic. What he does in ten minutes with people is incredible. I said to him: 'This is incredible, we can use it in teacher education, how you coach people. Tell me: What is you theory?' I know him quite well, because he was my trainer in the Gestalt therapy training I had had myself for five years. And I admired him very much. But he said: 'I don't know what I do. I have done so many things in my life. I had training in Gestalt and other things, I have been to spiritual teachers in India, and I have integrated it all.' I thought, well this is interesting because I am a model builder. I wanted to understand what he was doing. So what we did was we started to videotape him and he gave me sessions on real problems in my life and we videotaped a lot and we put big papers up on the wall about the steps that he went through. And we had twenty steps with all kinds of substeps. I said: 'This won't work – twenty steps! We have to reduce it to five at the most.' I started to work on it and reanalysed things, and tried to combine all the papers, and then in the end I had five things. And I said: 'This is gold! This is gonna go all around the world.'

So my drive is not so much the metaphor, but the idea of how you can reduce things, you can draw it in circles, you can draw it in fours. Maybe I've learned that it is helpful to use a word, a metaphor like the onion or the floors. But the essence is to reduce it to five things at the most.

ZS: *And the result was the onion model?*
FK: Yes. And this is also how we developed the five steps you go through in core reflection. I did not talk about it today. And there are four things, four aspects you deal with, and the fifth aspect is the elevator. The idea of the elevator. If I give a core reflection workshop, which generally lasts for two days, people learn how to use these four, we call them four positions, but I didn't talk about that at all today, and the elevator. And if they know that, they can do core reflection coaching and it's incredibly transformative, and teachers can learn it, anybody can learn it, in only one or two days and create the magic that that guy creates.

So, yeah, my answer would be no, it is not so much the metaphors, but my idea that if you want to make things applicable for practice, you have to reduce it, reduce it, reduce it, reduce it. To simple things. To simple steps.

ZS: It's very clever. You deal with the essence or qualities of a good teacher and you suggest that a good teacher can't be evaluated on the basis of observable criteria, like behaviour, only. Not only. But in my opinion, it goes against the actual tendency of school accountability and so on. So, how do you deal with it and do you think that we can find a good teacher just with soft criteria?
FK: I published an article in Dutch entitled *The Pros and Cons of Competency-Based Learning,* which was critical about some competency-based approaches. But when people read it, and I can understand this, they said: 'Fred is against competences. And he knows about teaching, Fred Korthagen.' So a lot of teachers and teacher educators started to say to their bosses: 'Fred Korthagen said we should not deal with competences.' And that created quite a lot of tension. A lot of people are against me now in the Netherlands, because they started to believe I am against competencies, which is not

true. So now I try to convey the message that I am not against competencies, but I want to find a balance between competencies and the outer and the inner layers of the onion model. So, well, I'm not sure I'm answering your question, but I think I really believe that the essence of good teaching is the connection between all the layers. And I have some doubts about the question of whether it is soft and not measurable. First of all, I think a lot of what we measure in education is not very relevant.

RS: *We are talking about changing practices, and at the moment we are doing a research project at lower secondary schools and we are working with very motivated teachers. I am not worried at all that they will change and be better teachers because they are motivated. But the crucial point for me is what to do with the rest of the staff, how to change the others who are not motivated.*

FK: Well, if you want to know my honest answer, my response is: leave them alone. When I am asked by schools to do training with teachers, e.g. core reflection, which is my main job at the moment, I generally say to the school leaders, to the principals: 'Say to your people that they are not allowed to come to my workshop, unless they are absolutely sure they want to learn that.'

ZS: *And?*

FK: The result is that more people come than if you say: 'You should go.' Because suddenly everybody says: 'Why can I not attend, why not? I wanna participate.' And so you get the first group of twenty people in the school and they are enthusiastic. And the teachers in the teachers' room say: 'Wow, this is really helpful, finally we have a researcher who is really practical.' And then other people say: 'I wanna do that too.' And then I have a second group, and I generally have a third group too. I end up with three times twenty, so sixty people. And a general secondary school in the Netherlands has about eighty to a hundred teachers. The remaining twenty to forty teachers I'll never see. And I don't want to see them. I don't think that there is any chance that I could change them.

The only thing is that I just had a Ph.D. student who worked on giving feedback to pupils, and she worked with teachers. She developed an approach in which she goes into the classroom and shows the teacher how she gives feedback to the pupils. She puts it on a video and she and the teacher look at it afterwards and then even the most resistant teachers say: 'Oh, something is happening with the pupils here. This is interesting. I never saw this enthusiasm in this pupil like I see there.'

'Okay how come?'

'Because you give positive feedback.'

'Well, now try to do it.'

'I don't know how to do it.'

'I'll help you.'

And she found that even very resistant teachers started to change. She says we are overlooking the idea of modelling. That someone models the behaviour, and that modelling is combined with the teacher getting what she calls data-driven feedback when they see on the video the effect of the modelling. I've been influenced by that approach. Maybe you can reach resistant teachers in that way.

RS: *In the afternoon, when you were talking about the position of psychology and about Martin Seligman, the former president of the American Psychological Association, you recalled that he said that psychology had gone the wrong way because psychologists concentrate on problems. Could that be said about education as well? Because…*

FK: His message was that we concentrate too much on what goes wrong, traumas and deficiency. I think that's a real problem in education too. We are focusing on what goes wrong, we are focusing on those resistant teachers. It makes quite a difference if you focus on the motivated teachers. Somehow it has an influence on the whole school culture if they are enthusiastic.

But if I give a core reflection course which really goes deep with people and there are only two unmotivated teachers in the group, the whole effect is diminished enormously. There are two teachers sitting like this [closing up] while the other teachers are asked: 'Well, think about what inspires you in your work.' And, if there are the two teachers like this: [*in a dull voice*] 'What inspires you in your work, this is soft!' what's the effect on the other eighteen in the group? They become hesitant to talk about it. So I don't want to have those two teachers there. And the same applies to teaching a classroom of pupils. Many teachers focus on those few pupils who are unmotivated, are the weakest, whereas it makes quite a difference to focus on the motivated children and work with them and create a kind of flow with them. Then the other children think: 'Oh, if I want to be part of this flow, I have to do something.'

RS: *We should concentrate more on the positive outcomes of educational theories?*

FK: Yeah, that's something that positive psychology has opened up my mind about. What fascinates me the most at the moment is how the human mind works. The human mind is always looking for problems, for things that go wrong. The human mind is not made to look at successes, to look at inspiration, at ideals, that's not the way the human mind is created. It's created to survive.

ZS: *Yeah, that's what I wanted to say. That it's a question of the survival of mankind!*

FK: But the problem is not those five simple things, it's to unlearn how you are, what you're used to. And we're used to focusing on problems, as well as we're used to thinking about solutions to problems. These two things – focusing on problems and on solutions – bring us, in the long run, go into a kind of a tunnel thinking.

ZS: I want to go back to the afternoon lesson workshop as well. You said that teacher behaviour is mostly immediate and is mostly based upon Gestalt. It is close to the thesis that the disposition or ability to be a good teacher is inborn, like being an artist. What do you think about that?

FK: It's partly true. I think that a lot can be developed if you say, like I said this afternoon, that things like empathy are important for a teacher, and you believe that flexibility is important for a teacher. Things like creativity and making contact, maybe that's the most important thing. There are those people who didn't really learn that during their lives, to be really in touch with other people, to be really empathetic, to be really flexible. But I still have a strong belief that every person somewhere has that

capacity to be in contact with another person; somewhere has the capacity to be flexible. So you can hit on those core qualities and help them develop in people.

Yeah, but maybe the time you have in teacher education is not enough to reach the point that you'll be a good teacher. So it's more a question of how much time you have and how motivated the student is to really develop that in himself that makes the difference. So I think a lot can be developed but you sometimes need more time than you have, to develop that.

If I look at myself, if I am really honest, when I studied mathematics, for seven years, I was completely focused on thinking only; I had forgotten what feeling is. And I got married. When I look back on my first marriage I think: Was there any feeling involved? And then everything went wrong and my marriage was suddenly over and I came into a big crisis. And I tried to understand in my thinking what was going on. But the whole problem was about feeling, making a connection on the feeling level. And that's when I started to go to therapy myself and suddenly a whole world opened up which I found fascinating and I started to follow therapy courses myself. And now I can say, well, there is a kind of a balance in me between thinking and feeling. The elevator is something that is part of me. But it took 30 years. So if you would have met me when I was 28 and you would ask: 'Well, will this be a good coach or a good therapist?' If I am honest, it took ten or fifteen years and that wouldn't be enough time in professional training to become a good coach. That's the reality. So on the one hand, yes, you can do a lot with training, but on the other hand, you need a lot of time sometimes with some people.

ZS: *And when could you say to yourself: 'Now I am a good coach.' What was the sign?*
FK: The sign? When I was able to coach people in three minutes and they said: 'Thank you, thank you, this is great.' And I felt it. When you are competent at core reflection, you can coach people in three minutes about deep deep issues and do that in three minutes. And that was the point when I thought: Fred, you are a good coach. You can do it in three minutes, go deep and really be transformative. And it took many years to learn that.

RS: *It's very interesting that you mentioned the feelings, because there are so many concepts in teacher education. New concepts which are now very popular and very respectful, e.g. the thinking of teachers, teacher's beliefs, the biography of teachers, the works of Kelchtermans, the works of Clandinin and Connelly. What do you think, what kind of new concepts would be used in the future to help us to understand what is going on in teacher education and what is going on in the professional development of teachers? Is it something which is connected to feelings?*
FK: In 2004 I published an article entitled *In Search of the Essence of a Good Teacher* where I introduced the onion model. And I described it as a kind of historical analysis, and showed that in teacher education we started at the outer layers and we got more and more to the inside. At that time, teacher identity suddenly came up as a new issue. I had almost predicted in that article that the next step would be to go one layer deeper, to the level of mission. Now you see people publish about the passion, the inner drive of teachers. So my prediction would be that that's the next issue for the next ten years –

what is driving teachers, what is their passion. Of course feelings are part of that. But that would be my expectation, that that will be the next focus.

RS: *Our last question.*
ZS: *Okay, the deepest layer in your onion model, you already mentioned it just now, is mission. So in two minutes, what's your own mission? The core of your mission.*
FK: By the way, it's not the deepest layer. There is something in the middle.

ZS: Sorry? Yes, I know. So what is in the middle? What is the core?
FK: It has to do with a kind of spiritual influence. I am quite influenced by Buddhism, things like that, where they say that in the middle there is something like emptiness, which is completely full, and that is who you really are. If I say that, it sounds like a soft word, you know, but in my workshops, we get to the point where people start to experience who they really are, and they discover that who they really are is different from who they think they are, which is the identity level. There is a difference between identity level and the core. That's an important part in my workshops: to help people start to get in touch with who they really are.

ZS: *My question was about your mission, about what your mission is.*
FK: What my mission is? It depends on the moment when you ask this question and it depends on the context in which you ask this question. But it is in education. My mission is to help teachers draw the best out of pupils and to draw the best out of themselves. To get in touch with their deepest potential as a teacher in order to be able to see and develop the inner potential of children. That's, I think, basically the main goal of education. To draw the best out of people.

ZS: *It's simple but it's complete.*
FK: Yes, my core reflection workshops start with a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, who said: 'The real goal of education is to draw the best out of people.' That's my first slide and I always ask the group: 'Is there anybody who does not agree?' And I ask that in countries all over the world. And only once a person said: 'Well, I do agree, but…' [laughter] Everybody agrees with that quote. That's interesting, isn't it? But people don't know how to draw the best out of people. Everybody agrees but the next question in my workshops is always: 'Okay, if you agree, what's your way of drawing the best out of people?' And then people are confused. Or they say: 'Well, listening to people. That's my way.'

Then I say: 'Okay, great. That's your way. How do you listen?' And we go deeper and deeper and deeper. Because, of course, that defines your identity level. We can talk for hours about this…

RS: *It could be a theme for another interview.*
ZS: *Thank you for your time.*

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About the author

Prof. dr. Fred Korthagen has retired as a Professor of Education at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, and is now working in his own private organisation, as a senior-trainer, presenter and researcher. Originally, he was a mathematics teacher and later became a university researcher. His primary concerns are teacher development, the theory of the professional development of teachers, and the theory of reflection and core reflection. He has authored a number of influential books (*Teaching and Learning from Within, 2013; Linking Practice and Theory: The Pedagogy of Realistic Teacher Education*, 2001; *Teachers Who Teach Teachers: Reflections on Teacher Education*, with T. Russell, 1995) that have been translated into several world languages; *Linking Practice and Theory* was translated into Czech in 2011. He has published numerous frequently cited articles (*Two modes of reflection*, 1993; *In search of the essence of a good teacher: towards a more holistic approach in teacher education*, 2004; *Situated learning theory and the pedagogy of teacher education: Towards an integrative view of teacher behavior and teacher learning*, 2010).

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