

SUMMARY of the Lecture from Kees van der Wolf

by Thea Bredie, Member ME

Kees van der Wolf spoke about Inclusion at the 10th European Montessori conference in Krakow, following up his talk with a workshop for a smaller group of participants in the afternoon.

The morning talk summarised the 'Inclusion Debate,' in which 'Traditionalists' are pitted against 'Inclusionists.' Traditionalists tend to see the learner as having a problem and focus on how to help the learner to change and become a better learner and to fit in. Inclusionists tend to see the situation as a problem and focus on how to change the situation so the learner fits in the way he or she is.

Simply summarised: Traditionalists believe that learners with special needs develop better if they receive special education, and that specialist (SEN) teachers are more successful than generalists in meeting their needs; Inclusionists believe that diversity is best managed in inclusive learning environments where all children are active and valued and where families are welcome.

Kees puts himself and Montessori firmly in the Inclusionists' camp, calling Montessori an "Inclusionist avant la lettre."

Kees summarised his presentation by saying that his favoured approach would be to improve the inclusionist aspect of Montessori education, by focusing on the teacher's approach rather than the child's special need.

In the afternoon workshop Kees gave background information on motivation, using Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow diagram and other sources. His research has focused on teachers' intuition and tacit knowledge; a field not easily accessible and, at least in the West, not valued as much as reason and academic knowledge (Descartes: 'Cogito Ergo Sum').

Kees used 4 questions that formed the basis of the research culminating in the book he co-authored with Tanja Van Beukering "Behavioural Problems in Schools: teachers' thinking and practice. Intuition, theory & reflection" (2009, published in Dutch).

Q1: Give a description of the concrete behaviour of most challenging learner in your own school/class.

Q2: In what respect is this behaviour stressful for you?

Q3: What do you do in your classroom/school to prevent and handle this challenging behaviour?

Q4: What would you advise a colleague to do with such a student?

We spent some time answering these questions to ourselves and making notes. A discussion followed, with many examples shared. Kees gave us a list of 8 prevalent types of 'problem learners,' based on the research of more than 400 Dutch teachers' responses. All but one of us easily fitted our chosen child into one or more of those categories. Interestingly the vast majority of children we discussed were boys and this had been the same among Kees's teachers.

The next step was a list of 18 general and 24 specific strategies for coping with serious problem behaviour in schools effectively (useful enough in itself). A lively discussion of preferences followed.

The responses to question two led to a brief discussion of the possible feelings of the teachers and an acknowledgement of their importance. Feelings can include inadequacy, sadness, isolation, disempowerment and failure and even undermine a teacher's motivation for their profession. It is important that these feelings are recognised, that teachers are valued for their attempts to deal with behavioural problems and encouraged in the development of their practice. Kees summarised by recommending this process as a training tool and by stating that he was concerned that a disappointingly low number of teachers chose general strategy number 2, i.e. adjusting the educational working methods to the needs of the learner (goals, instruction, level or type of task, assignment); change the task, provide academic help.

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