

“I experienced freedom within the frame of my own narrative”: The contribution of psychodrama techniques to experiential learning in teacher training

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Abstract To prepare Dutch students in education for critical situations in their professional life as a teacher, part of their training is to ask them to reflect upon their own experiences in their life as a child, a pupil and a student – experiences of crucial moments or with significant others which are still of the utmost importance to them. This article underlines the significance of so-called “experiential learning” in student career counselling. In this context, experiential learning is understood as an extension of *in-depth reflection on critical incidents and critical persons* in the biography of pre-service teachers. This reflection – customary and effective in Dutch teacher training – is a verbal process. However, this technique does not seem to be adequate for many students from other cultural backgrounds (e.g. second-generation descendants of migrant workers). By consequence, some of these students are not able to take newly offered information on board, but remain imprisoned in their own culture-related narrative, their own ethnic *society of mind*. Research has shown that for these students, psychodrama techniques, focusing on non-verbal and playful aspects of reflection, seem to be more suitable. The author of this article presents a sample case from a pilot study which used one of the psychodrama techniques called *the empty chair*. The findings of the pilot study are promising in the sense that experiencing different *I-positions* does seem to help students from other cultural backgrounds to develop agency in responding to hitherto unfamiliar and confusing situations.

Keywords Multi-voiced self · Psychodrama · Agency · Student career counselling · Professional development · Teacher training

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Résumé « Je me suis libéré/e à travers mon propre récit » : contribution des techniques du psychodrame à l'apprentissage expérientiel dans la formation des enseignants – En vue de préparer les étudiants néerlandais aux situations critiques de leur future vie professionnelle d'enseignant, la formation prévoit une analyse personnelle de leurs propres expériences en tant qu'enfant, élève et étudiant – les vécus de moments décisifs ou avec des êtres chers qui revêtent encore pour eux une grande importance. L'article souligne l'intérêt dans l'orientation professionnelle des étudiants de ce que l'on appelle « l'apprentissage expérientiel ». Il signifie dans ce contexte une extension de la *réflexion approfondie* sur les *incidents décisifs* et sur les *personnes déterminantes* dans la biographie de ces enseignants en formation. Cette réflexion, qui est courante et efficace dans la formation des enseignants aux Pays-Bas, consiste en une démarche orale. Cette technique ne semble cependant pas adéquate aux nombreux étudiants issus d'autres contextes culturels (par exemple les descendants de seconde génération des travailleurs immigrés). Certains de ces étudiants ne peuvent donc tenir compte de l'information nouvellement proposée, et restent enfermés dans leur parcours rattaché à leur culture, à leur *communauté ethnique de pensée*. Les études de recherche constatent que pour ces étudiants, les techniques du psychodrame axées sur les aspects non verbaux et ludiques de la réflexion semblent plus adaptées. L'auteure de l'article présente un cas type tiré d'une étude pilote qui a appliqué une technique du psychodrame appelée la *chaise vide*. Les résultats de cette étude sont prometteurs en ce sens que le vécu de différentes *positions du Je* semble aider les étudiants issus d'autres contextes culturels à développer une agentivité, en réagissant à des situations jusqu'alors inhabituelles et perturbantes.

Introduction

Students training to be teachers need to be prepared for a wide range of future situations with pupils and their parents. Therefore, it is part of Dutch teacher training to invite students to reflect on their own pivotal experiences which they made as a child, pupil or student, or which influenced their career choice. Such experiences might include living through crucial moments or interactions with significant others which are still of the utmost importance to their (future) career as a teacher. This article focuses on the importance of so-called *experiential learning* in student career counselling (SCC). Experiential learning is understood as an extension of in-depth reflection (Kelchtermans and Hamilton 2004; Kelchtermans 2006) on *critical incidents* and *critical persons* in the biography of students aspiring to become teachers.

In-depth reflection is a complex process of emotional involvement in and commitment to a situation, while at the same time urging distance, and accordingly requiring analytical skills. Most of the time in SCC, reflection is a verbal process. In a reflection session, coached by the teacher trainer/lecturer, a small group of students focuses on a "case", a so-called *critical incident* perceived during a practical period by one of the students. They discuss the ins and outs of the

situation, its possible causes and the more or less expected consequences, according to what is known in Dutch as the *zevensprong* [originally: a seven-step folk dance]. This problem-oriented learning method shows similarities with *Moreel Beraad* [moral case deliberation] (see Molenwijk et al. 2011; Ter Meulen 2016), considering the ethics of a solution by going through a process of seven successive steps:

Step 1: Introduction of the case by the person who is putting the problem on the table, and definition of a dilemma; “Should I ... or should I not ...?” related to the core value(s) at stake;

Step 2: Questions for clarification by the group members (e.g. what is the age of the person(s) involved in the case; what is the context of the case; etc.);

Step 3: In the group: Making of a systematic inventory of the values – and, by consequence, the norms – at stake for the different persons involved – from their perspective;

Step 4: In a group discussion: Elaboration on the pros and cons of the consequences in case “I do ...” and in case “I do not ...”;

Step 5: Each member of the group individually makes her/his choice for the best possible solution, according to her-/himself;

Step 6: In a group discussion: Comparison of the different choices made, resulting in a group decision on opting for either “I do ...” or “I do not ...”; and

Step 7: In a group discussion: Planning of actions to minimise the “pain” which results from “I do not ...”.

The *zevensprong* challenges group members to discuss the situation within which the *critical incident* occurred from different perspectives, such as the perspective of the teacher, the pupil concerned, classmates and possibly the parents. In the end, a comparison is made between how the student who brought the case into the discussion actually handled the unfamiliar and confusing situation, and the possible solutions arrived at by the group. Last but not least, lessons learned are brought to the table by each of the participants of the *zevensprong*.

Next, different *voices* and their different positions as they might possibly be present in the students’ *society of mind*¹ are focused upon (Hermans and Gieser 2012; Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995). In so doing, the students are expected to arrive at a better insight into the situation and into themselves, not as passive factors but as active actors in that situation.

However, research has found that, most of the time, the newly acquired knowledge and gained insight does not in fact appear to be integrated into students’ actual behaviour as novice teachers in the classroom (Ter Avest 2014a).

One other factor which is decisive to students’ sense of identity is culture. I am referring here to students who are members of minority groups in the Netherlands,

¹ The *society of mind*, as used in *dialogical self theory* (DST), refers to “the observation that many of the social processes, like dialogue and fights for dominance, that can be observed in society at large also take place within the self as a ‘society of mind’” (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010, p. 1).

which includes more recent migrants such as refugees, but also so-called “second-generation” descendants of migrant workers who came to the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s. For these students, to arrive at an integration of academically acquired insights into their actual situation as members of minority groups in the Netherlands, the verbal process of reflection – familiar to Dutch teacher training – seems to be inadequate for their deeper understanding of the “case”. By consequence, this way of reflection does not pave the way for these students taking on board the information acquired during the sessions with their peers and the lecturer.

Sometimes, according to the lecturers, students remain imprisoned in their own culture-related narrative, their own ethnic *society of mind* (Hermans 2006). In their discussion on culturally appropriate pedagogy, Phuong-Mai Nguyen et al. point to the need for harmony in “we”-cultures,² where “learners suppress their personal desires, avoid conflicts and hence avoid criticising their peers or claiming any authority” (Nguyen et al. 2006, p. 7). Lecturers are in urgent need of a more pervasive and culturally appropriate way of reflection, resulting in students’ deeper understanding of themselves as actors in critical situations (Janssens 2010). Psychodrama techniques focus on re-presentation of and re-enacting so-called *critical incidents* (Kelchtermans 1994) in non-verbal and playful ways, and as such contributing to *in-depth reflection* (Kelchtermans 2006). Psychodrama and its specific playful and non-verbal techniques seem to answer lecturers’ needs for *deep reflection* and at the same time to be more suitable for students with different cultural backgrounds and different levels of Dutch language proficiency as well as – partly related to their cultural background – a different level of development in their verbal expression of experiential knowledge. From the Dutch psychologist Jutta König, referring to “a number of cases [involving career coaches and refugees] in which subtle discourses [were] analysed in an action research approach” (König 2012, p. 275), we learn that

On the one hand, fear and uncomfortable emotions enhanced the tendency to withdraw from complexity in career coaches at the outset of their coaching trajectories and on the other hand, cultural hybrids hide their cultural diversity due to the dominant discourse in society (ibid.).

In this contribution to a special issue on experiential learning, I first describe the dialogical self theory with its core concepts of *dialogue* and *society of mind*. Next, I present psychodrama and focus on one of its techniques, the so-called *empty chair* method. The third section is dedicated to the case study of “Rafaëla” and her experiences with *the empty chair*. I end with a discussion, conclusion and some recommendations for future applications of psychodrama techniques in experiential learning.

² Unlike European individualistic (or “me”) culture, people living in “we” or pluralist cultures (e.g. many Asian countries) avoid standing out as individuals at all costs and strive to fit in with the community or society as a whole.

Dialogical self theory

According to Alvin Goldman’s overview of the Theory of Mind (ToM), the family of ToM-conceptions refer to the “cognitive capacity to attribute mental states to self and others” (Goldman 2012, p. 2). Goldman distinguishes between a third-person approach, a third-person/first-person contrast and self-attribution. Dialogical Self Theory (DST) is part of the self-attribution family, claiming *privileged access* to a person’s own mental state. DST focuses on verbal expressions of these mental states of the person her/himself and her/his perceptions of physical changes due to emotional feelings accompanying strongly held convictions.

Through the lens of DST, a person is seen as a motivated storyteller (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995). *Critical incidents* and *critical persons* play their role in the biographical narrative, positioning themselves as inner *voices*, so-called *I-positions* in the space of a multi-voiced self, the *society of mind* (Hermans and Gieser 2012). In telling and retelling one’s narrative, choices are made about the sequence of situations, and relevant *voices* are allocated different positions. The narrator is thus making choices between more or less significant others who play a role in the narrative and also chooses which aspects are sufficiently relevant be included in the story. So, in the self-narrative, different so-called *voices* are heard – for example, the voice of the family of origin and its way of enculturating children into a particular tradition (Gregg and Gary 2013); the voice of a teacher who praised you for doing your homework and not only saw you as a student but noticed you as a person (Vandamme 2014); and possibly the voice of a religious community you were raised in (Pitstra 2013; Zittoun 2013). In a self-narrative, a story situated in a lifetime, the *voice* of a teacher might come more to the fore in a certain situation, and the voice of a classmate might be silenced at that very moment. One might say that the self-narrative is the result of an interesting process of voicing and listening; an intriguing dialogue between different voices, placed in a certain hierarchy in different *I-positions*, more or less dominant or more or less opposing each other – at the end of the day constituting identity and, in our case, constituting a normative professional identity.

The self, the *society of mind* in DST, is represented as a space consisting of two concentric circles (see also Verhofstadt-Denève 1995). The inner circle represents internal positions which feel as if they are really “me”, for example “me as a mother” or “me as an ambitious student”. The positions in this inner circle can be either *personal* positions or *social* positions. Personal positions are, for example, “reluctant me”, “Dutch-Moroccan me”, “ambitious me”, and “helpless me”; social positions are, for example, “sportsman/sportswoman me”, “student me” and “part-time supermarket employee me”. In the outer circle, positions are represented which concern feeling part of “my environment”, such as “my friends”, “my university” and “my colleagues” as I perceive them, the perception of them becoming a part of the multi-voiced self (see also Verhofstadt-Denève 2012).

To facilitate a dialogue between different voices and to integrate a dominant voice, a possible rigid *I-position* in one’s multi-voiced self, a person’s active involvement, is needed. To consider this active involvement, the competency of

agency, the concept of *identity capital* as described by the Dutch social-psychologist Mick Matthys is useful. In his PhD thesis *Doorzetters* [Go Getters] (Matthys 2010), Matthys follows the psychologist James Côté in his definition of the concept of *identity capital* as a diversified portfolio of psychological competencies enabling an individual to act in a strategic way and as such be the director of their own life, making use of context-related skills, role perceptions and qualities (Côté 1996; Matthys 2010, p. 96). The concept of *identity capital* is closely related to the concept of *agency* (Matthys 2010, p. 97), and to *metacognition* (Gonçalves and Ribeiro 2012).

An important task in the process of (normative professional) identity development is to learn to respond to different role expectations in different contexts and to cope with the tension(s) which may arise from different value orientations and a different hierarchy of the different positions. Values and skills in one context (for example, the context of a migrant family) may be appreciated less or not at all in another context (for example, the university context in the Netherlands). On the other hand, the transformation of a value or skill appreciated in one context can also facilitate successful self-presentation in another context. In order to handle competencies in a flexible and adequate way, it is very important to properly perceive, receive and interpret the situation a person is in; it is a matter of flexible role taking and role changing (Kortram 2004; Selan 1980; Sundén 1966). Some people feel forced to choose between different roles and forget what they have learnt in one context (Matthys 2010, p. 334); others show themselves able to reflect upon their roles in different contexts and play the game of *playful identities*, aware of the power of their competency to use their strengths and flexibly adapt to different situations (Matthys, 2010, p. 333). Matthys elaborates on the definition of Côté by articulating the *dynamics* of identity capital. Matthys adds to Côté's description that *identity capital* is a "potential" to be elaborated upon in a process of reflection regarding commitment to a variety of *situated identities*, or *I-positions*, and their relationships with cultural and social capital, as well as allowing for distancing in relation to the above-mentioned capitals, resulting in the dynamics of a *playful identity*. This process can be clarified with the metaphor of playing marbles: knowing the basic rules and the structure of the game enables a child to add to a perceived lack of marbles at the start of the game (his/her social and cultural capital) (Matthys 2010, p. 369) and stimulates the inclusion of a variety of other childrens' marbles (that is, the integration of different sub-cultures). It's all about "the game and the marbles" – even with a small number of marbles at the start, it is possible to play the game successfully.

The self confrontation method

As a method of *in-depth reflection*, or, according to Charles Taylor, *radical reflexion* (Taylor 1991) Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995) developed the *self confrontation method* (SCM). SCM stimulates the exploration of different voices which are positioned in the self and valued in different ways. Attentive listening to these voices contributes to creating an awareness of the situation and a hierarchy of the position of different voices, so-called *I-positions*. For example, in her family

life, the voice of student Rafaëla’s (see below) mother is dominant and urges her to be obedient and respond to duties according to her position in the family. In the specific context of her home, the voice of “my mother” is valued higher than the voice of “my friends”, whose voices might almost be silenced. Yet, when going shopping with her friends, the collective voice of “my friends” comes to the fore and their approval or disapproval is valued highly, while in that specific situation the voice of “my mother” moves to the background (although it is never completely silenced). When at a certain moment student Rafaëla receives a text message on her mobile phone from her mother to come home to assist in family affairs, the voice of “my mother” changes position, as does the collective voice of “my friends”.

Intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogues are interwoven; the collective voice of “my friends”, as it is heard in real-life conversations, can play a dominant role in an intrapersonal dialogue when standing in front of the mirror and deciding what to wear to a party.

For each person, it is a challenge to become both an agent and the director of the *choir* of inner voices. The *self confrontation method* is a means to start a conversation between the inner voices, coached by a facilitator, to construct a space and create a hierarchy of the voices in their so-called *I-positions* – representing the dominance or sub-dominance of critical situations and significant persons in the past, the present and probably also in the future. SCM is a dialogical method aiming at self-insight and discovering a way, or maybe changing the actual way, to become an active agent in the *society of mind*.

Coined as *identity capital* by Matthys (2010), Matthys’ starting point for becoming an agent is that every person has in some way a certain strength to recognise their inner *I-positions* and – depending on the context a person is situated in – to voice them, listen to them or silence them as necessary. Adding this concept of *identity capital* to Hermans’ concept of DST, it becomes possible to identify the inner strength and (hidden) competencies which feed the “author” of one’s own biography, aware of the need of autonomy as well as togetherness in professional and private life.

The development and amplification of *identity capital* is central to Leni Verhofstadt-Denève’s model of developmental psychotherapy, and is denoted in what is termed *Verhofstadt’s wheel* (De Laat 2005, p. 40ff. Verhofstadt-Denève 1995, p. 65ff.). In dialogical conversations with her clients, Verhofstadt stimulates reflection with regard to the positions of a variety of voices, enriching Hermans’ approach by adding reflection upon a desired ideal situation, including the ideas a person has about “me, the best person in the world”, and ideas about significant others as she or he would love the others to be. Verhofstadt’s approach uses six fundamental questions,³ and the way a person responds to these questions gives insight into the degree of rigidity or flexibility with regard to further (professional) identity development. Although Verhofstadt’s approach is verbal, she did add a playful element to the method she and her colleagues developed for children (Dillen

³ The six questions are: (1) Who am I? [self-image]; (2) Who would I like to be and become? [ideal-self]; (3) What are the others like? [alter-image]; (4) What should the others be like? [ideal-alter]; (5) How do the others perceive me? [meta-self]; and (6) How should the others perceive me? [ideal meta-self] (Verhofstadt-Denève 1995, p. 78).

et al. 2009). It is this playful element which I see as the core aspect of psychodrama methods, in conjunction with the above-mentioned verbal instruments stimulating reflection. I will return to that later, after I have positioned our students in their phase of (professional) identity development.

Identity development

Students embarking on their studies in the field of education are generally in a phase of their identity development known as *early adolescence* (Breeuwsma 1993, p. 227ff.), between puberty and adolescence. In addition to physical growth in terms of height, changes in body shape relating to gender maturation, and a growing awareness of sexual identity, an important aspect of the phase of early adolescence is the change in relationships and position of the *voices* of the family and of peers, classmates and colleagues (Selan 1980). This is a matter of loosening bonding relationships and building up commitments with new significant others (Matthys 2010; Putnam 2001). To tackle this period of change, an attitude of curiosity and exploration is needed. According to Canadian developmental psychologist James Marcia, identity develops and is constituted between activities of *exploration* and the subsequent development of sustainable *commitments*. Among the areas young adolescents have to explore are, for example, the field of intimate relationships, political commitments and the field of professional life (Marcia 1980). Marcia distinguishes four stages young people go through as they explore these fields and develop their commitments: (1) foreclosure; (2) identity diffusion; (3) moratorium and (4) identity achievement.⁴

Identity development takes place in the context of family life, as well as in the public domain (of which the university is a part), in the peer group, and in the future world of the profession the student is educated and trained for at university and in practical periods. In these contexts, we find a variety of cultures and sub-cultures of which a person is a member – by birth (in the family) or by choice – either after a phase of exploration, like a sports club, or not: these are the so-called membership groups. For some young adolescents, belonging to a group by birth is very important – for example, for the students with an Islamic Moroccan or Turkish migration background (De Jong 2012). As a result, the comfortable and safe contexts of the family and the mosque play a decisive role in the lives of second- and third-generation Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch students (see Okafor and Honey 1998). Family and mosque are essential in the lives of these students, just like recognition and esteem by others are important (see also Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995). In their identity development, in their multi-voiced self, alternate different voices are dominant according to their own perception and self-valuation, or are given a dominant voice by appointment of others (Kortram 2004). The dominance of a cultural (e.g. Dutch), historical (e.g. Second World War) or

⁴ The four stages encompass: (1) *foreclosure*: blind acceptance of whatever ideology or value system their parents or family members have taught them; (2) *identity diffusion*: a struggle of indecisiveness which stands in the way of making progress; (3) *moratorium*: experimenting rather than making commitments to an ideology or a career; and (4) *identity achievement*: reaching decisions in terms of committing to ideologies and embarking on a carefully chosen career path.

religious (e.g. Islamic) voice may be at the base of a rigid self-narrative, excluding new experiences and knowledge. This kind of rigid self-narrative features similarities with the status of foreclosure, as described by Marcia (see above).

Psychodrama

Psychodrama, according to Marijke Arendsen Hein, is about “imagining and playing situations, memories, fantasies and dreams of a person’s biography, instead of talking about these things” (Arendsen Hein 2004, p. 11). Psychodrama is about living through and experiencing anew either suppressed or not suppressed aspects of the life span, without comment or discussion. The purpose, according to Jacob Moreno, the founding father of psychodrama, is “gaining insight by acting” (quoted in Arendsen Hein 2004, p. 11). Many techniques have been developed and recognised as specific psychodrama techniques, including storytelling, voice dialogue, *mirroring*, *social atom* and *the empty chair* (Gilhuis et al. 2014).⁵ Results of research on the effects of psychodrama are promising, especially with regard to dysfunctional anxiety and precipitous mood swings and/or changes in attitude. In particular, it is through the technique of *doubling* (playing two roles in the same scene) and *change of position* that individuals not only manage to gain insight into their own behaviour and motivations, but find they can also make a start on changing their attitudes (Gilhuis 2014).

Below, I present the case of Rafaëla,⁶ a student who experienced feelings of anxiety related to her ambitions regarding her planned career choice. The advantage of a case study is its “avoidance of diagnostic categories and labels” and its “concern with what a person does, thinks and feels” (Maddux 2005, p. 22). In this way, justice can be done to the “richness of the empirical reality” by using the respondent’s own language as much as possible (Swanborn 1994, p. 158). Considering Rafaëla’s case, I concentrate on *radical reflexivity*⁷ as experiential knowledge, and pay close attention to “the thick of what is going on” (Stake 2005, p. 449). In doing so, I aim to parallel the reader’s “actual experience feeding into the most fundamental processes of awareness and understanding”, thereby facilitating knowledge transfer, that is, enabling “people to make some generalizations entirely from personal or vicarious experience” (ibid., p. 455). In my view, using *the empty chair* in teacher training offers a promising example of *communicative generalisability* and *case-to-case transfer* (Smaling 2009) and is an applicable and useful technique for gaining an insight into these kinds of student’s anxieties.

⁵ The *mirroring* technique allows the person to look at their own behaviour, facial expression, their way of speaking, as this is represented (mirrored) by an other person – as if the person sees her-/himself in a mirror. The “stand-in” imitates the person concerned (De Laat 2005, p. 143). The *social atom* technique invites the person to represent her/his own network by way of several empty chairs. To enliven the *social atom*, the chairs are decorated with colourful shawls and other objects articulating a particular characteristic of each person represented (De Laat 2005, p. 169). The *empty chair* technique is demonstrated in the case study of Rafaëla later on in this paper.

⁶ This is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the student.

⁷ *Radical reflexivity* enables one to step outside of oneself in order to reflect upon the roots, the basis of one’s own reasoning and desires. The adjective “radical” refers to the original meaning of the Latin word *radix* [roots].

The empty chair

In *the empty chair* technique, students are invited to take the position of “the other” in the way “the other” has a position in their own *society of mind* (Verhofstadt-Denève 1995), not only by thinking of *the other*, or by role-playing *the other*, but in addition to that by literally sitting in the chair of *the other* – occupying the *other’s* position physically as if this were a real-life person. In this way, the student’s qualities are challenged to empathise with *the other* inside her or himself. This may result in a conflictual experience in the student’s *society of mind*, and, as such, stimulate reflection and thinking, or an internal dialogue (Arendt 1978, 2013). *The empty chair* is a method often used to explore critical situations, or to examine the plot of a self-narrative in more detail. The method of *the empty chair*, in my view, is one of the many ways which enables experiential learning and thus contributes to the normative professional development of students living in two cultures, be it the Dutch and the migrant culture or the middle-class Dutch and the working class culture. As part of a pilot study on facilitating and hindering aspects in career development, we⁸ invited students to talk about their life, first sequencing their biography into “chapters” from baby and childhood to today’s student life, and then focusing on a particular *critical situation* to be explored using the *empty chair* technique. In the following case study, the student’s active participation in *the empty chair* adds to her cognitive knowledge an experiential knowledge of what it means to be a multi-voiced self with different voices in different positions in the *society of mind*.

The case of Rafaëla

We, the facilitator, one other member of the research group and six students are seated in a circle in one of the classrooms of our Teacher Training Institute.

There are two chairs in the centre of the room: one is for Rafaëla, an ambitious student who wishes to finish her teacher training, and the other is for “the indecisive Rafaëla”, doubting whether she ever will be able to start her profession as a teacher.

Rafaëla positions herself on one of the chairs, saying:

“I am ‘the indecisive Rafaëla’. Very often I have to ask for help – for example, when I don’t understand the lecturer in workshops. In my family, there are two younger brothers. My younger brother, Mehmet, started to do business with the world of crime; my mother’s wish is that my father never will know about this. I translate letters from the Ministry of Legal Affairs for my mother. My mother says: ‘If your father ever gets to know about Mehmet’s practices, he will never ever name him ‘my son’ any more.’ I should study many hours a day, but ... the situation in my family keeps me busy. I don’t know what to do ... I am afraid, so afraid that I will never be the teacher I wish to be!”

⁸ “We” refers to the research group of which I was the leader at the time of the research.

The facilitator in this *dialogical conversation* (shared inquiry) then invites Rafaëla to sit down on her own chair, and respond to the story of her *indecisive self*. Rafaëla thinks aloud:

“To tell the truth, I would like to tell my ‘indecisive self’: ‘You know, little girl, this all is going on for too long a time; take care of yourself and focus on your study; take care that you pass your exams; it’s all about your future as a professional teacher! Don’t allow yourself to be tormented by your family!’

Instead of this, she asks her *indecisive self*:

“What would you like to tell your father, your mother and Mehmet?”

The facilitator then asks Rafaëla to position herself back on the chair of her *indecisive self* and respond to Rafaëla’s questions.

“To be honest, I’d rather tell my mum: ‘It’s your problem that you don’t want dad to be involved. Mind your own business!’ And regarding my little brother Mehmet: ‘I am willing to help you, but you have your own part in changing your life!’” The ‘indecisive Rafaëla’ immediately adds to this: “Of course, I never dare say a thing like that. Such a way of doing does not fit our culture of respect for parents. Imagine what my father will do when I tell him the truth about Mehmet. I hide myself behind my university homework, but at my desk there’s nothing else but racking my brains ...”

Back on her own chair, the facilitator invites Rafaëla to respond to the *indecisive Rafaëla*. Rafaëla’s reaction is full of empathy:

“I really do understand that for you this is an unruly situation, but dear ‘indecisive self’, what is the worst thing that may happen when you raise your voice?”

This is an inconvenient question for the *indecisive Rafaëla*, reflected in her answer,

“I really am afraid that my father will tell Mehmet that he is not his son any more, and I cannot live in a broken family. I really don’t know what to do.”

From her own chair, Rafaëla answers this deafening appeal for help from her *indecisive self*:

“Would it be possible to ask your father for help, and include him in the family affairs with his expertise as an older person? In that way you would give him the respect that fits his position as a father. Could you, for example, say something like: ‘Father, I have to tell you something about Mehmet: it’s not a pleasant thing to tell, but we badly need you to make things work for Mehmet again.’ Would that be possible?”

We notice the doubt on the face of Rafaëla’s *indecisive self*. The *indecisive self* is scared to trample a core value of Islam – that is, respect for parents. However, the willpower of Rafaëla’s *ambitious self* who wants to finish her teacher training is very strong and coming to the fore at this moment. This *ambitious self* knows how

to ask for help, because she did it many times during her study – for example, asking for help from classmates when she did not completely grasp the essence of a workshop.

Putting herself in the position of the *indecisive self*, she approaches the *ambitious self* with the question:

“Please come to the fore when I meet my father, and help me to have this difficult conversation in a respectful way”.

Back on her own chair, Rafaëla states in a self-confident way:

“Let’s take the challenge! I feel the strength of my ‘ambitious self’ with whom I can stand this situation!”

Discussion, conclusion and recommendations for future research

The case study depicts the troublesome situation of Rafaëla. Detailed consideration is given to the development of one person: the student Rafaëla. Her narrative, however, is exemplary in that it reflects the feelings of many other current students, in particular students from migrant backgrounds. They struggle with paradoxical academic cognitions conflicting with experiential knowledge, and conflicting feelings which go together with the dilemmas these students have to respond to in their actual behaviour (Ter Avest 2014b). Rafaëla’s case is thus representative of the situation which many of her peers are also finding themselves in. In psychodrama, Rafaëla is given time and space to do the necessary groundwork of exploring the pros and cons in her dilemma. She is an example, not because of her specific insights and her decision to go and meet her father, but because of her willingness to enter into a process of change. While Rafaëla should not be taken as a model in her personal solution for the situation, what *is* representative for the effect of the application of the psychodrama technique to her dilemma is the courage she shows in doubting her behaviour until now. She has been enabled to enter into a reflective process with an open end, and has learned a technique which she can use – in the long term – to meet and tackle future challenges.

Experiential learning is not learning from just one experience; however intensive this experience may be. Time, much time, is needed to change the position of a *voice* – not only just for the moment, but in a more sustainable way: time to leave the “prison”, which in some sense gave a comfortable position to the respective voices, or at least in Rafaëla’s case, a position she was used to; time to trust her own strengths, to experience how it feels when voices are heard from different – more or less dominant – positions. Let us keep in mind that “practice makes perfect”. Should we meet Rafaëla after a few years as a professional teacher, maybe her *indecisive self* will be almost silenced by that time, or at least have made room for the *self-confident self*; or maybe the *ambitious self* in dialogue with the *respectful self* has developed into a *respectful problem-solving self* – this latter voice Rafaëla uses to discuss family affairs with her father and invite him in a loving and respectful way to be a partner in the process of problem solving. Inspired by her

experience with *the empty chair*, Rafaëla has learned to bring voices to the fore or to silence them according to the situation. She embraces the playful flexibility of her *society of mind*. We can expect her to further develop differently positioned voices in her multi-voiced self – the multi-voiced self of a self-confident Muslim young woman in the multicultural context of the Netherlands.

The empty chair in our pilot study demonstrates its strengths in the situation of students in their adolescence, exploring and listening to the choir of their multi-voiced self, a self on its way from puberty to (young) adolescence. The technique shows the experience of what it feels like to bridge the gap – all of a sudden, and in an unexpected and intensive way – between old and in some way comfortable commitments, and new commitments, to which this experience may give way. Students in this pilot study experienced in a playful manner what it means to be liberated from a dominating voice in their own narrative, their own *society of mind*, and to arrive at a new voice, thereby adding to their coping strategies. Although the physical activity of changing chairs is helpful for some students in developing flexibility in their *society of mind*, not all students will feel free in the context of a classroom and amidst their classmates to open themselves up to unexpected questions and to confront new insights. Lecturers, in their role as facilitators, should be trained in group dynamics and be made fully aware of the (im)possibilities of *the empty chair* with some of their students.

In the example above, we have heard different voices related to one student’s migrant background, while less attention is given to the voice of the facilitator of *the empty chair*. Keeping in mind Jutta König’s remark, cited earlier in this article that “fear and uncomfortable emotions enhanced the tendency to withdraw from complexity in career coaches at the outset of their coaching trajectories ...” (König 2012, p. 275), the training of teacher trainers/lecturers to become facilitators of a culturally appropriate *empty chair* is of pivotal importance for the success of this intervention.

To make experiential learning even more effective for students, more research is needed into how *the empty chair* and other psychodrama techniques can be helpful in the development of the normative professionalism of students and novice teachers from all kinds of different and sometimes troublesome backgrounds and related different and maybe conflicting value orientations. Last but not least, further research is also needed in terms of listening to gendered voices and understanding the basic experience of ourselves – as lecturers, being different – in order to enable our students to experience freedom within the frame of their narrative.

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