Possibilities of applying the Core Reflection to optimise the activity of future religion teachers

PhD thesis in theology

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Keywords: reflective thinking, Core Reflection, onion-model, religious spirituality, awareness in the search of one's image of God, self-reflection technique, (binding of the professional and emotional self), basic theological principles and reflection in supervision, core qualities of the supervisor, methods of positive education and thinking.

In choosing the theme for my doctoral thesis a crucial role was played by my professional experience concerning the necessity that during the training of teachers (beside their professional and methodological formation) we have to enhance their sense of vocation, dedication, and, as a result, to enhance their personal development. In Romania there has been no such development concerning vocation so far, and even if during the professional training it constituted implicitly a topic to be spoken of, no emphasis was laid upon the strengthening of the vocation and upon the role it plays in the development of one's personality.

As Bagdy Emőke affirms, 'the main instrument of the teacher is his/her own personality'.[1] The accomplishment of this during the training of religion teachers is a very complex as well as an unavoidable process.

Related to the essence of the dedicated, professionally and emotionally mature professorship our Dutch colleagues have presented us a quite new perspective. It was mainly the Dutch researcher F. A. Korthagen,[2] who in the so-called onion-model has shown that within the individual there are several levels that can be affected, and in his opinion every single level can give us an answer to the question concerning the most important qualities of a good teacher. These perceptions can and must be used in parallel during teacher training. The model touches some relatively new research areas, such as the *professional identity and vocation* of the teachers. This is why we consider that it can be used as a framework for the development of future religion teachers. Through the use of the model we look for those optimal ways of intervention with which we can develop certain levels of the behaviour of the learning teacher – alongside his/her pedagogical

[1] Badgy Emőke: *A hivatásszemélyiség fejlesztése*. Debrecen, KLTE Pályaszocializációs Műhely, 1993, 54.

[2] Korthagen, F. A. J.: In search of the essence of a good teacher: towards a more holistic approach in teacher education. In: *Teaching and Teacher Education*. No. 20, 2004, 77.

formation.

In our dissertation we are making a detailed presentation of the internal layers of the onion-model (vocation, mission), the way of intervention named Core reflection, which aims at the development of these levels, and implements the formal framework which makes possible the summarisation of all the elements that we acknowledge both as supervising teachers of the practice and as Christian teachers.

The methodology of Core reflection relies to a great extent upon those new directions which have appeared in the last few decades in psychology and psycho-pedagogy (positive psychology, transpersonal psychology), and which in our opinion until now did not influence properly the basic theoretical directions of teacher training.

We try to implement the research results of positive psychology in the field of the training of teachers of religion, since this new perspective can make us aware of hidden factors in the process of teaching and education, which subsequently may enrich the perspective and methods of practical pedagogy. The inclusion of the results of positive psychology in the training of religion teachers is motivated also by the fact that the future teachers will propagate the gospel among children and for this the formation of a positive attitude of the tutor is needed.

Following the above rationale, the first chapters of our dissertation present the historical and theoretical aspects of our topic. Upon these we build the presentation of the method of Core Reflection, together with its ways of implementation and possibilities of future development.

In the first chapter of our doctoral dissertation we present those directions of research of the twentieth century, which analyse the components of the efficiency of teachers' activity.

Before the 1960s the main supposition was that the philosophical, pedagogical, psychological and sociological knowledge has an explicitly positive influence upon the efficiency of one's work, concluding with an emphasis upon the precedence of theoretical knowledge. But as empirical researches have revealed, the erudition within higher social sciences has a minor effect on pedagogical practice.[3]

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[3]Combs, Conant & Koerner cited by Falus Iván: Gondolkodás és cselekvés a pedagógus tevékenységében. In: Báthory Zoltán, Falus Iván (eds.): *Tanulmányok a neveléstudomány köréből.* Bp, Osiris, 2001, 213.

As a result of these experiences, during the sixties and seventies, the attainment of elements of practical activity came into the focus of training. The scientific observation of classroom activity was commenced. It was demonstrated that practical pedagogy contributes significantly to the efficiency of the teacher's work as well as to the increase of the pupil's accomplishments. Micro-learning appeared as a possible solution to interiorise those competencies which are necessary for a good teacher.[4]

The seventies brought a new shift in this field, by recognising the role of *decisions*: the decision is a result of the teacher's thinking. In essence, the researches and developments that have been carried out in the last two decades concerning practical aspects of teacher-training have focused on the questions of the form, content, specifics, role and development of thinking.[5]

The study on thinking and decision-making that has been carried out in the 1980s and 1990s have led to the description and analysis of the teacher's knowledge.

In the same first chapter of our dissertation we present the reflective pedagogy, the case-connected knowledge, emphasising the *intuitive* character of pedagogical activity. The concepts of 'reflective learning' and 'reflective teacher' are usually connected to Schön's[6] name, yet the labels were provided by Dewey.[7] Nowadays the reflective view has a well-developed position, as the collegial character of the reflection has been enhanced, since in almost every case the teachers reflect on their activity during the discussions among themselves, so the collegial interaction becomes increasingly important.

Jank–Meyer[8] defined three levels of reflection. At the *process level* the reflections during the concrete teaching-learning are situated in the case of the common activities between teacher and pupils. At the analysing-*perspective* level we find the reflections which appear during the analysis and prospection of the processes of education and their frame-conditions. On the *meta-level* the teacher systematically reflects on the conditions

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[4] Sántha Kálmán: Történeti áttekintés a 20. századi pedagóguskutatásról. In: *Neveléstörténet.* 3, 1-2. 2006. 206 -213.

[5] Idem. 208.

[6] Schön, D. A.: *The reflective practitioner. How professionals think in action*. London,Temple Smith, 1983,30.

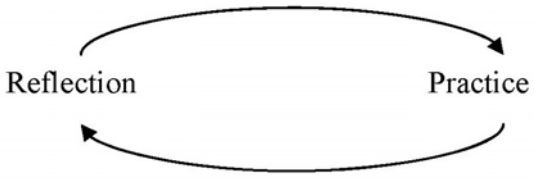
[7] Dewey cited by Falus Iván: op. cit.. 228.

[8] Jank – Meyer cited by Sántha Kálmán: op.cit. 213.

of the processes of teaching-learning, and draws conclusions concerning their own activity.

The reflective view has been also accepted among the teachers' competencies, as the reflective teaching appeared to be an indispensable competence in the activity of the teacher and has contributed to the increase of the efficiency of the teacher's activity**.** In the second chapter of the dissertation we give a detailed presentation of these elements, mainly presenting the role of reflective models in pedagogical practice. We embed this in our current political and social context, outlining the importance of *practical learning*. According to Aristotle, men of experience succeed even better than those who have theory without experience.[9]

The relation between practice and reflection is very well presented by the picture below:



Cyclical relationship between reflection and practice
(Korthagen, F.; Vasalos, A. 2009)

The dissertation then turns to present the various teaching methods, drawing attention upon Kolb's and Korthagen's reflection models.[10]

Korthagen's reflection model is called the ALACT model, in which the *person, the personal emotions and needs* have a far more central place. Korthagen describes reflection as a whirled process containing five phases. We also present the possibility of extrapolation of the ALACT model upon the behaviour of the teacher, i.e. the manner in which this may be applied in the training of Reformed religion teachers.

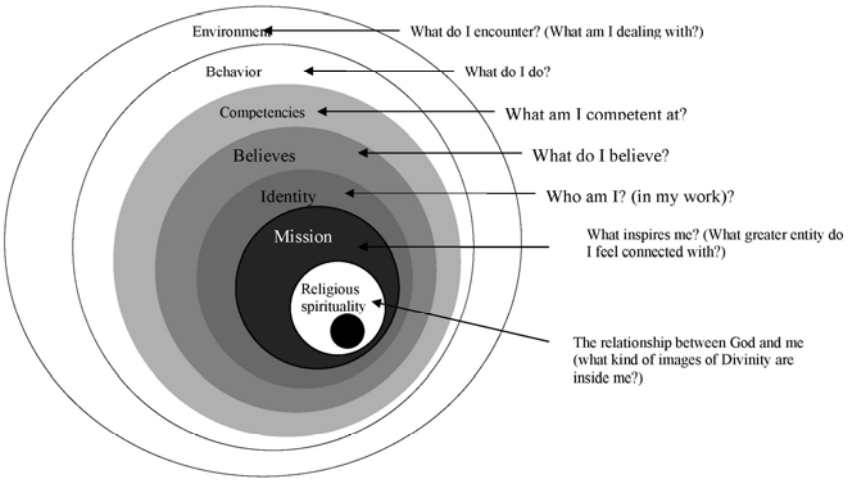
In the third chapter we present the essence of teacher's reflection using the onion-

[9] Aristotle: Metaphysics I, 1 (981a).
[10] Korthagen, F.: In search of the essence of…87.

model, developing further the original Bateson-Korthagen model. According to our research, the training of the Reformed religion teachers can be improved substantially through the innovative completion of the onion-model. Based on the relevant and up-to-date bibliography, no such model-completion has been performed so far. This completion also constitutes the original scientific contribution of the present thesis.

The presence of the various layers within the future teacher of religion (currently a student) is essential, because in our view without these core qualities and competences he/she is unable to accomplish the mission presupposed by this complex religious-ethical education. We have also completed Korthagen's original onion-model with a new level, which is essential from the perspective of a religion teacher's profile. Considering this specific profile of competence, the new level is that of *religious spirituality*, meaning the accomplishment of professional identity and missions.

Here is a graphical presentation of our further developed onion-model:



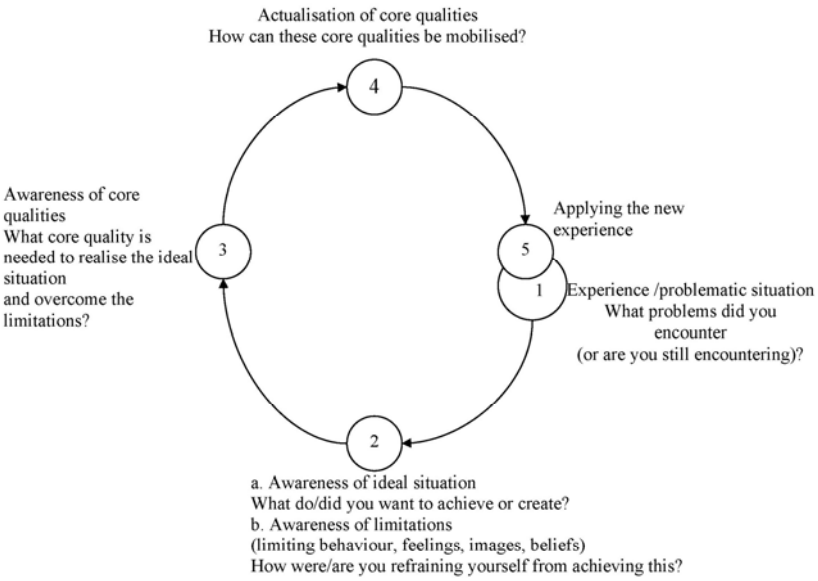
Korthagen, F. – Gorbai G.: Seven possible levels of the Onion model (2011)

Our next topic is the more detailed presentation of the basic principles, the essence of religious spirituality (the concept of spirituality, the experience of spirituality). This we use as the basis for the presentation of the specific role and place of the Christian community in the contemporary secularised and world, often ruled by extreme rationalism. In our view the importance of spirituality has a crucial significance in the relation between the tutor and the student teacher. Here we return to the relevance of the method of Core Reflection, to the 'identity' of the work of the teacher of religion,

to spirituality, to the formation and evolution of the student teachers' image of God within the process of reflection. In this chapter we provide a more detailed description of the analysis of spirituality from the viewpoint of the philosophy of religion. Further, we discuss the formation of the child's image of God during his/her early socialisation in the family and the school. We lay emphasis upon the crucial role of the teacher of religion in the proper embedding of God's image into the child's spiritual world, and the correct and trustworthy transmission of the biblical message.

In Chapter 4 we the present the model of Core Reflection,[11] which helps the student teachers to attain a higher level of professional development. On the one hand, concerning the content of Core Reflection the theoretical basis is provided by the onion model. On the other hand, in the case of the process of reflection it is the adapted version of the ALACT model upon the Core Reflection which represents the underlying principle.

[11] Korthagen, F. A. & Vasalos, A.: Levels in reflection: Core reflection as a means to enhance professional development. In: *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice.* 11, 1. 2005, 47.



The phase model of Core Reflection
(Korthagen, F.; Vasalos, A. 2008)

Beside the harmony of the different levels of reflection (the levels of the onion-model) the focus within the Core Reflection falls upon the possibilities rather than upon weaknesses, and on the strengths the student teachers can interrelate with their internal strengths (core qualities) which lead to the evolution of the optimal operational mode, the so-called flow-status.[12]

We have come to the conclusion that the ideals and the core qualities are very much connected, and thus, they are harmonised with the onion-model. The ideals often resonate with the inner level of the mission (vocation), i.e. with our most inner wishes, with our object of life.

In the fourth chapter we also present the competence-based pedagogical training, its highly relevant role in the formation of teachers, the phase-elements of the ALACT-model and their applicability in the development of the teacher's personality.

As a necessary requirement of any innovative study, we also present the embedment of Core Reflection within professional supervision as reflected by the experiences of the 'pilot-projects' performed with practicing religion teachers, based on

[12] Korthagen, F. A.: In search of the essence….90.

the multi-level learning approach (of Korthagen and Vasalos), that is the applicability of the Core Reflection in the school, first of all in the formation of the positive (but in the same time the negative) emotions and thinking, from both the teacher's and the pupil's point of view.

The closure of the dissertation offers a brief but essential presentation of the conclusions and proposals based on perspective changes in the training of Reformed religion teachers presented above. This in itself represents a shift of paradigm already within the concept of reflection. All these changes took place in a longer period of time, and, according to our opinion, were deeply influenced by Korthagen's reflection model – the ALACT model – and the new psychological views. We have outlined topics that can be of interest for all scholars involved in researches concerning reflection.

We can safely conclude that in the formation of teachers the theoretical knowledge of the students has to be completed with certain competences in order to enable them to face the challenges of the 21st century. Further, beside the development of theoretical and practical competencies, the training of teachers has to focus also on the essential development of the personality, because only this may lead to significant changes, i.e. through the integration of personal and professional fields. The onion-model assists us by the deeper levels of reflection, and the level that we have added satisfies those needs of the student teachers of religion, which are important from the viewpoint of spiritual health. Students preparing to become religion teachers have to be able to reflect on their relationship with God, their image of the Divinity in formation, as well as the defining effects of these in their behaviour.

Apart from the professional knowledge the student teachers of religion have to be in possession of a spirituality and vocation, since without these factors their work will be reduced to a mere job. This is why we consider that the use of this model in the training of student teachers of religion is emphatically essential.

The Core Reflection model is an important addition to the ALACT model, as it lays more emphasis upon the levels of as well as on the wider acknowledgment of one's relation with God. Core Reflection assists the essential and original integration of each level and backs the realisation of the professional development by using the resources given by the personal strengths and inspiration of the teacher.

As a result, in our work we give a peculiarly different approach to reflection than it has been done so far, considering it as the instrument of the enforcement of personal strengths and potentials. Reflection still has to make a shift from the rational analysis of past experiences to a clear emphasis upon the present. We can summarise these changes as follows:

- In the view of the traditional approach to reflection the aim of reflection is its focus upon the problems, while the Core Reflection concentrates on possibilities and ideals.
- Whilst the traditional approach to reflection considers that the aim of reflection is its focus on the past, the Core Reflection focuses on the here-and-now as well as on the future.
- The traditional focus on the analysis of the situation should be replaced by the Core Reflection's focus upon strengths.

In the present dissertation we propose a view of professional development aimed at deep forms of learning, but not in the sense in which traditional therapeutic approaches define 'going deep', i.e. by putting an emphasis on traumatic childhood experiences. On the contrary, in Core Reflection 'going deeper' refers to the joyful adventure of awakening to the richness of the present reality, discovering new possibilities, and focusing on the positive feelings connected with one's inner potential, and one's inner sources of inspiration. Such strong positive feelings and fresh insights are usually not triggered when the learning process only focuses on the outer levels of the onion model.

We also emphasize the importance *of presence* which means being present to oneself and the environment simultaneously.[13] Here the interesting point is that contact with the outside world is enhanced through a deeper awareness of the self.

This is where in our view the important connection between the professional and the personal element in professional functioning takes place. Such a connection is important, since many authors emphasize that a strong divide between the personal and the professional may lead to an ineffective friction in a professional's identity.

[13] Beijaard, D, Meijer P.C., & Verloop, N.: Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. In: *Teaching and Teacher Education. 20*(2), 2004, 107-128.

According to Palmer it is in this sense essential for professionals to "live divided no more".[14]

Just as in 'ordinary reflection', the important thing is that teachers are finally able to make use of core reflection autonomously, i.e., to go through the process without the benefit of supervision. In ordinary reflection, one of the main aims is to enable experienced teachers to do so while they are actually teaching (*reflection-in-action*[15]). The same is true of core reflection: teachers should can learn to activate the process of core reflection during their teaching, and in this way to get in touch with the core qualities which are of importance at that particular moment.

During the presentation of our topic it has become obvious that the approach described above is connected to a holistic view of learning and learners. We consider that the affective aspects of human behavior and human learning need to receive balanced attention in reflection processes. We hope to have demonstrated that core reflection has the potential to stimulate an awareness of the emotional side of people in a non-threatening manner. This can help to make it more natural to include feelings, emotions, needs, and values in people's reflection on and decisions in educational settings. We are aware of the fact that such a more holistic view of reflection is not very common. Although several publications stress the role of affective and motivational factors in teachers, until now this has not led to many elaborated strategies to support teachers in their reflection on such matters.

Finally, we think that directing attention to core reflection during their professional preparation can help prospective teachers to become more aware of the core qualities of their pupils, so that they will be better able to guide these children in their learning, and help them mobilize their core qualities, in school and in their future lives.

This is of particular importance in view of the shifts currently taking place in the role of the teacher as a result of constructivist views of learning. World-wide, teachers have to develop a more supervisory role, which means that they must be capable of developing the self-directing capacity of their pupils. To that end, such core qualities as

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[14] Palmer, P.J.: *The courage to teach*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1998, 99.

[15]Reflection-in-action, Schön, D. op. cit. 87.

curiosity, commitment (e.g., to learning), and self-confidence must be stimulated.

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