

Naslov članka/Article:

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Zaupanje: temelj samovodenja učiteljev

Avtor/Author:

Knut Ove Æsøy

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.59132/vviz/2020/1/3-15>

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Priznanje avtorstva-Nekomercialno-Brez predelav



Vodenje v vzgoji in izobraževanju 45, 1/2020, letnik 18

ISSN 1581-8225 (tiskana izdaja)

ISSN 2630-421x (spletna izdaja)

Izdal in založil: Zavod Republike Slovenije za šolstvo

Kraj in leto izdaje: Ljubljana, 2020

Spletna stran revije:

<https://www.zrss.si/strokovne-revije/vodenje-v-vzgoji-in-izobrazevanju/>

Inner Trust: The Root of Teachers' Self-Leadership

Knut Ove Æsøy

Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

This phenomenological article explores inner trust as an essential aspect of self-leadership. More specifically, I examine inner trust as a vital piece of becoming a professional worker by applying my theoretical approaches to a letter from a teacher. The letter is a genuine expression of teacher's professional knowledge and exemplifies inner trust. My theoretical approaches are drawn from Bengt Molander (2015), Carl Rogers (1961) and Stanislas Dehaene (2014) and connect scientific philosophy with person-centered experiential therapy and neuroscience. I will focus on four ways of enabling individuals to increase their self-trust: trusting their own emotions, trusting their knowledge in practice, trusting routines and traditions, and trusting their holistic view of their profession. I will focus on the tension between trust and criticism. This tension must be balanced to enable teachers to be governed by self-leadership.

Keywords: inner trust, criticism, emotional knowledge, knowing in practice, routines and traditions, holistic view

Introduction

Inner trust is a kind of emotional knowledge and a necessary foundation for self-leadership. Trust is a deep sentiment, a part of human nature (Løgstrup 2010, 17). This natural feeling can exist within the self and at the same time between people. To trust yourself or other people is risky. Trust in a relationship is understood as giving yourself to the other (Løgstrup 2010, 26). However, to surrender in this risky way – to become trustworthy – you have to have inner trust, in other words trust in yourself. This inner trust is ontological and innate to humans at birth. It cannot be created because it is inborn, but our actions and experiences may create distrust. The ontological understanding of trust connects to love, affection and caring. To trust in yourself is to love and care for yourself; this creates a positive view of the external world and strengthens our attachments to others.

Carl Rogers ontologically understands trust in a way similar to Løgstrup. When it functions freely, human nature is constructive and trustworthy (Rogers 1961, 194). Trust is not a question of be-

lieving in yourself; it is better described as faith in yourself. It is impossible to convince yourself or anybody else to trust themselves or others. Like faith, trust has to come from within and is discovered by each individual. Rogers understands trust as freedom to accept yourself and to act in a mature manner. It is the freedom to be and act without rewards or punishments required (Rogers 1961, 102). According to Rogers, external evaluation is not a part of helping relationship (1961, 55). To trust yourself or others is to feel accepted without rewards and punishments.

Bengt Molander's (2015) understanding of trust is more dualistic. According to Molander, trust is a part of a dialectical tension; the opposite of trust is criticism. His theoretical approach removes almost all dualities, but he views the polarity between confidence (trust) and criticism as an essential part of existence. This tension between criticism and confidence has to be balanced (Molander 2015, 289). Humans may never be fully free in Rogers' sense of the word; relationships shall always involve external evaluations. There shall always be rewards and punishments; this is a part of what Molander understands as criticism. One's inner trust depends on the community. He explains: 'A community is therefore always presupposed when we refer to intentional actions, dialogue, knowledge and rules. Tension will, however, always remain: my *certainty* is my own – and yet it depends on *descriptions*, the validity of which I do not have the sole authority to determine. This is genuine tension' (Molander 2015, 258).

Trust is one's confidence in oneself, while criticism creates insecurity and is always present. Humans can never escape the feeling of criticism or judgment from themselves or from the others, as assessment and interpretation are human cognitive abilities (Dehaene 2014). Everyone shall always feel the tension between trust and criticism. We need trust to do good, but criticism may undermine trust. At the same time, we trust criticism and consider it positive for development while criticizing trust is considered as something that prevents development.

Method

Trust is a phenomenon that occurs deep inside human beings. As Molander says, 'The understanding of concepts such as confidence, familiarity and the like depends almost exclusively on *examples* and, hence, on activities that are relatively familiar and which *we are capable of monitoring*' (Molander 2015, 235). Trust

may be observed in pictures or examples. To examine trust, this article will consider an example: a letter from a teacher who ended her career after teaching primary school for twenty years. Sonja (not her real name) wrote this letter just before she quit. She intended it as a warning, a statement about teachers' working conditions in the school system in 2019. She considers herself a skillful teacher, and (in her own words) the letter was wrung from her soul. Therefore, this letter is an authentic source that provides a glimpse into the inner world of teaching.

In the letter, Sonja writes her conscious thoughts about her situation. Inner trust or self-esteem is not explicitly addressed, but it can be felt beneath the surface, in the metaphors and parallels she uses to express her emotions. My goal is to examine inner trust as an essential tool for teaching by considering experiences of this teacher through the lens of philosophical and scientific theories.

Trust in Your Own Emotions

Sonja says she works against constant headwind. This metaphor conveys a feeling she cannot really express. She also mentions the feeling that she is constantly pushed in different directions, which makes her dizzy. This feeling is due to many conflicting recommendations teachers are given regarding how to work in the classroom. Different suggestions focus on different issues and use different methods to improve pupils' results, pushing teachers in different directions.

In the third metaphor, she compares teaching to running: 'It's a bit like jumping on a hamster wheel where you're running a marathon, but the speed is set to run 200 meters.' She compares these conflicting recommendations to headwind, to being pushed around, and to moving away from inner trust.

These metaphors express feelings, telling her there is something wrong in the classroom. These feelings do not arise in one situation; she has been recognizing a mixture of feelings over several years, and it finally ended her career of a teacher. She felt that all those different recommendations were not something that would really work in the classroom. She sensed that the focus was often on the wrong things. She writes, 'Things are decided from a distant office, and I think they know little about the everyday lives of pupils and teachers. How, then, can they know what changes we need to make; how can they see where the shoe pinches or decide what goals are best for the school?'

After many years in school, she doesn't believe any external advisors can tell teachers what to do in the classroom. To know where the shoe pinches, you must wear it. This is called first-hand knowledge (or, in this case, first-foot knowledge).

To know where the shoe pinches, you have to trust your own emotions. Feelings express important inner knowledge. Feelings show us values and sensations that are significant in a given situation. Neuroscience has discovered this important part of our unconscious brain: 'our brain host a set of clever unconscious devices that constantly monitor the world around us and assign it values that guide our attention and shape our thinking' (Dehaene 2014, 79). These unconscious devices also shape teacher's thoughts; 'no "pure" element of knowledge can be separated from an emotional aspect' (Molander 2015, 257). This means teachers should not suppress their feelings but learn how to understand them and trust what they are saying. These feelings are more useful to teachers than external recommendations.

Sonja also feels criticized if she expresses her concerns: 'And when several teachers object and talk about how difficult the teaching job has become, they receive criticism from all sides. Even from their own [...] It felt like a punch in the stomach.' We cannot choose how we feel. The emotional sensation of a punch to the stomach indicates a feeling of betrayal and a threat to your core values.

To be criticized for feeling what you feel is an attack on your primal being. Feelings express essential knowledge, and this kind of criticism dilutes your trust in that essential knowledge. It is very difficult to explicitly state this knowledge but it is even more difficult to trust its message. In any profession, you experience dialectical interactions between internal and external experiences, and you have to trust your inner world in order to do the right thing in the external world. External criticism of your inner world creates an imbalance in this dialectical interaction, and people may end up trying to control or suppress their inner lives. Such people do not learn to express their feelings or the values and knowledge those feelings indicate.

Rogers points out the incapability of feeling something and listening to those feelings as an adult. Even negative feelings are part of our emotional knowledge. A mature person will become angry when anger is realistic and appropriate but will not be carried away by aggression or anger (Rogers 1961, 194). Feeling anger means that important values are at stake.

Trust in Science, Lack of Trust in Practical Experience

External recommendations can be seen as criticism and a lack of trust in teacher's knowledge. This may create tension: 'the tension between the "the certainty *in action*" of living knowledge and "enlightened" certainty which *presupposes* calculation, description and representation and hence a level of abstraction that leads us away from the sensual and away from certainty' (Molander 2015, 260). Calculation, external descriptions, and imitations of what to do are abstractions of the essence of teaching. The consequence might be soulless teaching, a lack of trust in one's own practice. Theoretical descriptions of what teachers should do are in many ways the opposite of practical routines developed through lifelong learning. Sonja expresses this tension by questioning her own knowledge in practice:

But why do things feel so much harder now than before? How can I find that I do my job poorer today than when I graduated?

Do we – trained teachers – steer this ship at all, or do we just ride it out as well as we can? We are more capable than ever. We *must* be, with all the experience and expertise we have gradually accumulated. However, I feel that we are not taken seriously enough.

These questions express the tension between inner trust and external recommendations. The teacher is questioning her own ability to teach. It seems like other forces have taken charge of practice without being part of it. She even questions the knowledge she has accumulated through experience and expertise. She is asking to be taken more seriously, to be respected for all the good work that she does in the classroom, writing, 'But I think we need to get more respect as teachers, for the jobs we do and for our pedagogical insight and knowledge.'

Sonja cannot clearly say why she feels this lack of respect. However, the dominant mindset in teacher education today lacks respect for practical knowledge (Æsøy 2017). A focus on research-based teacher education creates distrust of all knowledge that has not been scientifically tested and is not expressed as theory. This dominant mindset argues that teachers should do what science tells them to be the best practice.

Sonja's feeling of tension represents a conflict between opposing values. She has to address social problems in the class, but, 'at the same time, there is constant guilt that there are too few

subjects, that we spend too little time on Norwegian, math, and English, and soon we will have national tests. *Help!* How will we place well in the national statistics?' This dilemma is well known. What is new is the interest in comparing test results between different schools, creating competition that turns some schools into winners and the rest into losers. Teachers are responsible for the results, making it a form of external evaluation. In Sonja's case, even though she considers herself a skillful teacher, she has negative feelings about these external evaluations. This forces her to focus on external evaluations rather than on what she considers the most essential parts of teaching.

Sonja describes the problem of external critics: 'We adapt, adjust, and stretch in all directions, and even when stretched to the breaking point, we still hear a lot of criticism.' Later she uses the metaphor 'it's hailing criticism.' This criticism is external; it doesn't come from the teacher herself, and it challenges her trust in her own knowledge. Criticism and outside recommendations make it impossible for her to do a good job as a teacher. She explains, 'We follow all the current trends and are constantly learning better ways of teaching, better ways of leading classes. We barely have the chance to start something new before we must throw ourselves at something else that is probably even better or more correct.'

The main problem with all these recommendations and criticisms is the time needed to do anything properly. To do something properly requires working without criticism.

Knowledge *can* be destroyed when people are paralyzed by questioning. Asking questions may on occasion be a calling into question. The knowledge people have, their own faith in that knowledge is often an important part of their identity, frequently connected with a certain professional identity. Questioning such knowledge can easily become calling a person into question. This kind of questioning can kill knowledge (and individuals). It is equally clear that prohibiting critical questioning *can* have the *effect* that people continue to believe they have knowledge when they do not. [Molander 2015, 119]

In practice, it may be possible to express recommendations, questions, or criticism without creating distrust in one's knowledge: '[W]e understand our activities by relying on the practice we have trained to acquire, we rely on those who have taught us

and those who give us advice' (Molander 2015, 234). This trust must be mutual (Molander 2015, 244). Teachers of teachers and those who give advice must trust practitioners. Overbearing suggestions, patronizing scientific descriptions, valuing external theory and evaluations over internal judgment, and a lack of interest in practical knowledge may destroy teachers' identities.

Trust in Tradition and Routines

Sonja explains how the focus on new trends creates distrust of routines and traditions. Trends and new ideas may help teachers constantly improve their practice, but the lack of time makes it impossible to implement every new idea. Each is quickly followed by another trend with even 'better' ways to teach. Sonja expresses the impossibility of implementing all these ideas: 'The constant shifting [from one trend to another] produces a lack of predictability; I really miss that.' What she misses is predictability.

Trust in practice is impossible without predictability. I believe this is one of the biggest problems in professional teaching today. Molander explains predictability as routines and traditions. 'Routine and traditions provide a form of *certainty* in action, and in being, which has both more subjective aspects – trust in oneself and more objective ones – frequently success in what one intends or plan achieve' (Molander 2015, 86). Today, the dominant mindset in teacher education views routines and tradition as negative, while openness to criticism and change are seen as positive (Æsøy 2017, 96). However, Sonja needs predictability. Furthermore, in a practical sense, trends can never be effectively implemented without the time and space to turn new ideas into routines and traditions.

Traditions, routines, and predictability are essential aspects of rational human behavior. According to Rogers, 'Man's behavior is exquisitely rational' (Rogers 1961, 194). Routine behavior and the ability to make good judgment in practice are functions of unconscious thought and emotions; 'even the simplest conscious observation results from a bewildering complexity of unconscious probabilistic inferences' (Dehaene 2014, 95). However, removing traditions and routines makes rational cognition impossible. Sonja struggles with her thoughts; she does not understand what has happened in the last twenty years. She writes, 'It feels chaotic, incomprehensible – yes, insurmountable [...] We are always traveling for courses, meetings, conferences, special training, projects

[...] I feel so inadequate. What do we get out of all this running around, all this stress?’

She feels the ‘wall’ is approaching, and she is thinking of giving up. She receives so much information that it overwhelms her conscious thought processes. She is constantly thinking about everything she is supposed to do to be a good teacher.

In today’s dominant mindset, a willingness to change is connected to belief that the ability to make conscious choices is what enables teachers to make good decisions. Conscious choices are understood as those that conform to scientific knowledge and most modern recommendations (*Æsøy 2017*). However, Sonja feels that this overload of conscious thought is one of the biggest problems for teachers today. The belief that consciousness will optimize teaching may actually be the problem; this approach creates mental chaos, confusion, overwhelm, and feelings of inadequacy. Trust in conscious choices undermines teachers’ trust in their routine behavior.

Humans lack cognitive capacity to make every choice consciously. According to Dehaene, ‘we constantly overestimate the power of our consciousness in making decisions – but in truth, our capacity for conscious control is limited’ (2014, 47). It would be extremely inefficient to consciously consider every choice we make, and this would paralyze our ability to act rationally. Instead, ‘our unconscious perception works out the probabilities – and then our consciousness samples from them at random’ (Dehaene 2014, 98).

Trust in routines and tradition is also a necessary precondition of creativity. Sonja considers herself creative, but she no longer has the energy to be creative in her teaching:

I have a lot of energy and I love to be creative, but I no longer want to use that energy to fight this headwind. I don’t want to use my creativity to try to trick parents into collaboration, to lure pupils to become a little more involved in schoolwork or to write more letters like this. I want to use my resources for something positive, and I know that I long to work with the wind and not against it. And I know that I speak for more than myself. I sincerely hope something is going to happen. I hope that we can come together and shout a firm ‘Stop!’ before it’s too late.

To be constructive or creative, you have to trust your routines or habits. Lack of predictability makes it impossible to open up

and be creative: 'Routines exist which encompass living alternatives and the readiness for change – preparedness that, for good or ill, leaves no room for uncertainty' (Molander 2015, 284). Trust in oneself means being open to the world and willing to be in a process (Rogers 1961, 122). Molander understood that the ability to go beyond the status quo is part of knowing in practice. He explains, 'In all "practical art" there exists a dialectic that resembles that of learning: a dialectic between "trusting blindly" in one's own knowledge and being forced to "go beyond" it and steer one's own course, with all the insecurity that may entail' (2015, 16).

Trust in ourselves and in our routines also prepares us to learn from our mistakes. Confidence in ourselves lets us dare to move on. Without confidence in ourselves, we would stop trying to do what we do (Molander 2015, 86). Openness without trust in oneself and in routines is just chaos; a teacher like this will not have the courage to continue, for:

[...] openness can create anxiety. One can begin to lose confidence in one's own actions. This may entail a skeptical depletion of self-confidence; in extreme cases, it can lead to self-annihilation. What we can see reflected here are aspects of the dialectic of enlightenment [where criticism or skepticism is part of the mindset]. The all-consuming drive to demythologize – in this case, one's own action – can undermine action. [Molander 2015, 140–141]

That means that inner trust is a kind of mysticism, inner knowing. It is a kind of common sense that manifests in the ability to be creative or constructive even when the world around us hinders action through skepticism or demands that our actions be based on evidence.

Trust in a Holistic View of Teaching

The teacher must trust in a holistic view of teaching. Teachers should not analyze or act piecemeal about what occurs in the classroom; 'situations have faces' (Molander 2015, 244). Humans can recognize a face without conscious analysis (Dehaene 2014, 195; Molander 2015, 52). Facial recognition is a holistic skill based on sensations and signals. According to Dehaene, 'Some experiments even detect a correlate of conscious perception in brain signals that are recorded *before* a visual stimulus is presented' (2014, 141). He adds, 'Brain imaging is now sensitive enough to pick up

the signal that, prior to a stimulus, already index the readiness of the cortex to perceive it' (Dehaene 2014, 142). Experienced teachers trust their holistic understanding of teaching. They can sense and trust signals in the classroom the same way they remember and read faces.

This holistic approach is also connected to meaningfulness or moral value of teaching. The ability to understand the meaning (semantics) of a situation is not always conscious. Nor do we need to consciously combine pieces into a whole (Dehaene 2014, 62). This means 'that, in some respects, consciousness is irrelevant to semantics – our brain sometimes performs the same exact operations, all the way up to the meaning level, whether or not we are aware of them' (Dehaene 2014, 75). Without trusting these signals, we could not orient ourselves in the world or decide what to do in a given situation. Similarly, teachers bring their values and pedagogical philosophies into every situation.

Sonja does feel that her pedagogical philosophy and values are being developed in the classroom. She has less time for planning and teaching now than she used to have. Teaching is what she considers the most important part of her job. At the beginning of the letter, she discusses her colleague's (here called Märtha) pedagogical philosophy: 'I think Märtha is one of the most caring, warm, and generous teachers I have ever known. Märtha is a wise woman, and she probably saw this development before many of the others. Märtha concerns herself with the individual pupil and the human being, and I think recent developments make things a little difficult for small and large people in the classroom.'

In this text, Sonja implies that teachers are no longer interested in their pupils as human beings. Both Märtha and Sonja are still interested in the human being, but Sonja is not sure that new developments allow teachers to work with pupils in a holistic way. In the Norwegian school system, children are expected to reach specific learning goals, and teachers are expected to conduct external evaluations of each pupil based on each goal. Teachers become analytical judges, while children become learners. This completely opposes Roger's idea that external evaluation has no place in a helping relationship. Such a practice of rewards and punishments encourages criticism more than inner trust, creating an unhealthy classroom environment for both pupils and teachers.

Sonja has a different view of school purpose. As a part of her pedagogical philosophy, she considers school a kind of counterculture: 'I believe that classroom teaching is extremely important in

today's society, where young people communicate mostly through screens and rarely practice face-to-face interactions and real-life meetings.'

This viewpoint affects all Sonja's interactions in the classroom. The purpose of school is not only helping pupils to meet specific learning goals. Sonja's orientation here may or may not be true, but it provides insight into her teaching practice. Molander understands orientational knowledge as important theoretical knowledge that provides insight and directs our actions (Molander 2015, 191). Sonja positions school inside a broader theory about society and human beings. Orientational knowledge directs action and defines one's understanding of what is important and relevant (p. 192). This kind of knowledge is based on an overview of emotions, actions, ethical considerations, and logical arguments. This kind of knowledge helps define what knowing is and changes one's actions: 'One has to be able to rely on one's knowledge and one's experience but at the same time to "know" their limits; one has to be able to shift perspective – this is a matter of insight, attentiveness and, above all, ethics' (Molander 2015, 66). This kind of orientation is based on your trust in yourself as a whole human being. Dehaene discusses judgment of confidence that is not based on what one sees (which would be impossible) but on unconscious inferences and categorical answers in a situation (Dehaene 2014, 111).

Humans must dare to think and learn by themselves, for 'the most important things, such as artistry, wisdom and virtue, says Schön, alluding to Plato's dialogue *Meno*, can only be learned for oneself' (Molander 2015, 175). Orientational knowledge is connected to artistry, virtue, and wisdom. Roger writes about 'significant knowledge and learning.' He explains that '[significant learning] is learning which makes a difference – in the individual's behavior, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitudes and in his personality' (Rogers 1961, 280). Furthermore, this kind of knowledge can only be learned from within: 'The only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning' (p. 276). This kind of knowledge is learned through relationships that involve an entire person. As Rogers further explains, 'it is my total organism which takes over and is sensitive to relationship, not simply my consciousness' (p. 202). The value of conscious knowledge is overestimated. For teachers to be wise, ethical human beings, they have to trust themselves enough to form relationships with pupils as complete human beings.

To summarize, trusting a holistic view of teaching is multifaceted. It means seeing the big picture in different situations, identifying how a situation overlaps with teacher's values and pedagogical philosophy, understanding the purpose of school, seeing pupils as human beings, and understanding teachers as complete humans who can learn from within in a holistic way.

Trust in Yourself: Finding Balance

To help others, we have to trust ourselves. A person being in balance with own inner emotional life will trust own feelings. Sonja does not talk about this inner balance, but she is aware of the need for teachers to balance their inner lives with external demands. She explains, 'I myself have tried to find a balance between supporting and following up with each pupil as best I can, while also setting boundaries for myself and saying that we teachers are the educators who do things that we know work, that we are actually very good at, that lead to the best results for the class as a whole.' However, Sonja also indicates that she has lost some of her trust in herself, that she is out of balance: 'We don't have a chance, I think. It really doesn't help to raise your voice; it's just provocative and increases the system's resistance.'

The problem is the system and the dominant mindset in education; this attitude of enlightened certainty creates Sonja's inner lack of balance. Sonja's criticism of the system comes from her inner self. It is expressed as chaotic feelings, a feeling that her work is unbearable, that she is not respected or taken seriously. It even manifests as criticism of the feeling of being criticized. The system, however, does not accept this kind of emotional criticism; the system is based on a kind of enlightened rationality that does not consider emotions or the inner life to be rational.

The mindset of enlightenment may turn humans away from humanity. The system embraces criticism, but not the criticism of the system itself. This imbalance makes it impossible for teachers to express their values and feelings as hopes, removing the possibility of hope itself.

Sonja writes, 'After all, I have dreamt that things will turn around, that the whole community will wake up one day and shout Stop!' But this dream is becoming an illusion. She doesn't really believe in it anymore. She doesn't believe in the system, and maybe she no longer believes in herself as a teacher. The only option left is to get out of the system.

Summary

Good practitioners have to trust their emotions, their knowledge in practice, their routines and traditions, and their holistic view of the profession. This is how we understand ourselves. However, this is not always the case. Mutual trust is essential. If those who offer advice do not trust teachers, their recommendations might feel like personal attacks. Even if teachers follow external recommendations, as Sonja has done, consequences in practice might include doubt, insecurity, and mental chaos. This is the case when teachers are given too many recommendations, when those suggestions are offered too frequently, when they are too detailed, and too contradictory. Criticism and doubt are not always good. It could become irrational. We should not doubt what we know and feel confident about in practice. Criticism may destroy our trust in our feelings and in our practical knowledge, leading to a lack of trust in our perspectives, insights, and philosophical orientations. However, there will always be criticism, and self-leadership means finding an inner balance between trust and criticism. The human criticism that comes from within, from one's emotions and orientational knowledge, should be valued as much as the scientific criticism of the enlightenment. What really counts is the ethical question of a good life.

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- **Knut Ove Æsøy** is Associate Professor at the Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. koas@oslomet.no