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Affect Is Contagious

THEO

Theo is a restless boy. It's a bit more difficult for him to sit still than for the others in his class. He glides around on his chair when he's supposed to be listening or working at his desk. He's very active during breaks and plays a lot of football.

Theo has two teachers. Pearl is his main teacher and teaches English. Pearl is a dedicated person, on fire for her subject. She loves to get the pupils to discuss texts and what they mean for the pupils' own lives. Pearl finds situations where the pupils don't engage themselves extremely difficult. If a pupil throws a rubber instead of taking part in the discussion, for example, she can get really angry.

One day, late in the afternoon, Theo is quite tender and is having difficulty concentrating in his English class. He starts moving around on his chair and knocks over a book, and with it his papers and pencils. Everything falls on the floor. In the confusion, Theo's chair also tips over, and he falls backwards. Pearl gets angry and shouts: 'Theo! Pick up your things and leave the classroom. Why can you never learn to sit properly like everyone else?' Theo gets angry in turn: 'Why do I have

to go? I fell over because your class was so damn boring that I couldn't concentrate!' Then he leaves.

After the lesson Pearl talks about the incident in the staff room. She thinks Theo is a pain in the neck who can never do what he's meant to and is just a disturbance because of his restlessness. She's also tired of him screaming and shouting in class every time she tells him off. Theo's other teacher, Peter, who is a very calm person, says: 'Theo? Sure, he has a little trouble sitting still, but you'd have to look far to find a more polite and hard-working boy.'

AFFECT IS CONTAGIOUS – MIRROR NEURON PROCESSES

The principle 'Affect is contagious' was formulated by the American psychologist Silvan Tomkins in the 1960s. He built his thinking on observations made as early as the 1880s by researchers in psychology. The one who later discovered how it really works was the Italian neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti at the University of Parma. In the 1990s he discovered that the activity pattern in the brain of a person performing a certain action is mirrored in the brains of others. This means that if someone smiles, then the same activity will be repeated in the brains of those looking at the person, as if they were smiling themselves; this can also make them actually start smiling. In other words, we experience other people's feelings by being infected with them ourselves. It is easier to be happy if you are together with happy people, and it has a calming effect to be with calm people. In the same way, it is easier to get angry at an angry person – someone who shouts and screams has a tendency to make other people shout and scream.

The extent to which people can screen out other people's feelings varies. Most pupils (and teachers) are only affected to a limited degree by how others around them feel, some are affected very little by others' feelings, and still others are completely dominated by other people's feelings. In an ordinary class you will probably find all kinds, which means that the pupils and the mood in the class will be affected by the teacher's mood, or by a pupil who is restless.

Theo is sensitive to other people's feelings. His ability to concentrate is affected by how much fuss other people make, so Pearl and Theo make a bad combination. Pearl's dedication and extrovert personality affect Theo so much that it reduces his ability to manage at school. Pearl's temper is the biggest problem; when she gets angry Theo reacts strongly. He is influenced a lot by other people's affect and can't regulate his own affect as well as other people. This means that he feels good and develops well when he has calm teachers around him who are good at controlling their affect, but gets stressed by Pearl's energy and temperament.

THE LOW-AROUSAL APPROACH

If we go back to the principles from the earlier chapters, we can conclude that Pearl is placing demands that are too high on Theo's ability to regulate his affect. Since she is the teacher and he is the pupil, she is the one who needs to change her ways. Alternatively, in order to take responsibility for his learning, she can shield Theo by letting him work more on his own.

Problems of this type increase in importance the more conflicts we have with a pupil. I often find that the more conflicts you have, the more decided the tone of voice and body language become. If, in demand situations, we use

marked body language, demand eye contact, or move closer to the pupil, the affect will just be more infectious, which will result in the pupil also becoming more determined and the risk of conflict increasing. To reduce the risk of conflict, the following are important:

- *Never demand eye contact.* This is a simple dominance tool, which most often results in escalation of a conflict.
- *Never maintain eye contact for more than three seconds in a demand or conflict situation.* Eye contact for more than three seconds leads to a powerful transmission of affect in either a positive or negative direction, but never in the direction the school wants. The American psychiatrist and development psychologist Daniel Stern once said that 30 seconds of eye contact ends in either violence or sex.
- *Take a step back in demand situations and situations of potential conflict.* By moving closer to the pupil when you make demands or mark a limit, you are increasing the pupil's stress level. If you instead take a step back at the same time as you make a demand, the stress from the demand will be balanced by the reduced transmission of affect.
- *Sit down if the pupil is uneasy.* Or lean against a wall. A relaxed body is as contagious as a tense body, and you want the pupil to be relaxed.
- *Distract instead of confronting.* By shifting the pupil's focus you prevent the transmission of affect that arises between you and the pupil in situations where you want to mark a limit. You distract by making the pupil think about something else. During the

escalation phase mentioned in the model described in Chapter 6, distraction is perhaps the most important active intervention there is.

- *Don't take hold of a pupil with tensed muscles.* Muscle tension is just as contagious as affect. If you have to take hold of a pupil, do it gently and move with the pupil's movements. To physically restrain a pupil by holding them tight will in most cases lead to violent conflict.

THE ONE WHO WINS LOSES

There is a minor principle which perhaps deserves a chapter of its own and which I will return to in Chapter II on leadership in the classroom – namely, 'The one who wins loses.' By this I mean that if we win a conflict with a pupil, it will not improve the pupil's learning or cooperation, since it will negatively affect the alliance between pupil and teacher. On the other hand, if the pupil wins a conflict, they will fail to learn whatever it was we were trying to teach them by holding on to our demand. Since we don't want the pupil to lose, neither of us can be allowed to win. Methods that are based on dominance do not belong in today's school. We must get the pupils to move in the same direction as us, rather than creating a relationship of opposition.

Summary

We are all influenced by one another's feelings. If we are together with happy people we become happy; and similarly, angry people make us angry. Pupils with behaviour that challenges are often more highly influenced than others by the affect of those around them. It is therefore important that you are not confrontational and angry in the way you express yourself, since it will rub off on the pupil. By moderating your body language and tone of voice, you can reduce the number of conflicts with pupils.