

DAY 1



# Empathy for children

**ERASMUS + SCHOOL STAFF TRAINING TEACHERS**

BY IBEN DISSING SANDAHL



# Introduction for trainers

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There are some essential features for the implementation of the Empathy for Children program. 'Implementation' here is defined as the way the program is put into practice. We should not think of the program by itself as being effective. It is the well implemented program that is effective. Therefore, it is important in the Empathy for Children program to carefully consider how to support implementation regarding a number of factors that are crucial for quality implementation. Adherence, dosage, delivery, participant responsiveness, program differentiation, monitoring of control, program reach, and adaptation are all very important. Here I would like to emphasize two key points, **adherence and adaptation**. Adherence to the program requires thoroughly working with the core components and activities in the program. The various elements that the program is comprised of are crucial to producing the intended effects. But adaptation to the local context is also necessary. Changes made in the program to fit the school's capacity and resources, to students' and teacher's cultural values and former experiences can also be crucial.

I recommend that trainers follow this manual closely, but at the same time I must emphasize that the trainers' sensitivity to the teachers, and the specific needs of the group, and the teachers' adaptation and sensitivity to a specific school context and learning situation are crucial factors for the success of the Empathy for Children program. The trainers' willingness to dive into dialogue with the participants is absolutely imperative.

The dialogue exercises, the physical exercises and the inner exercises are all vital for the process, but the trainer can switch some of the exercises presented in the program with the 'extra exercises', which can be found at the end of this manual. This allows for the possibility of fine-tuning the balance between the various types of exercises. Bear in mind that the teachers have to become familiar with the dialogue as well as the physical and inner exercises. Trainers should be mindful of the fact that it is important to repeat the same exercises several times to support awareness.

# Trainers introduction to the teachers

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It is important that everyone participates on their own free will without feeling coerced.

Never the less I hope that all the participants will take an active part while showing appreciation for their own and their colleagues' wellbeing. It goes without saying that confidentiality is expected.

First of all I would like to introduce you to some of the theories, and ideas that underpin the program and the work we are going to do together. In your capacity as teachers you play the most important role in implementing this program. It is you who have the strongest ability to influence the learning environment in the classroom. This is true not only of the subject matter but also of "how" you teach and how you teach is not least important when it comes to empathy competencies.

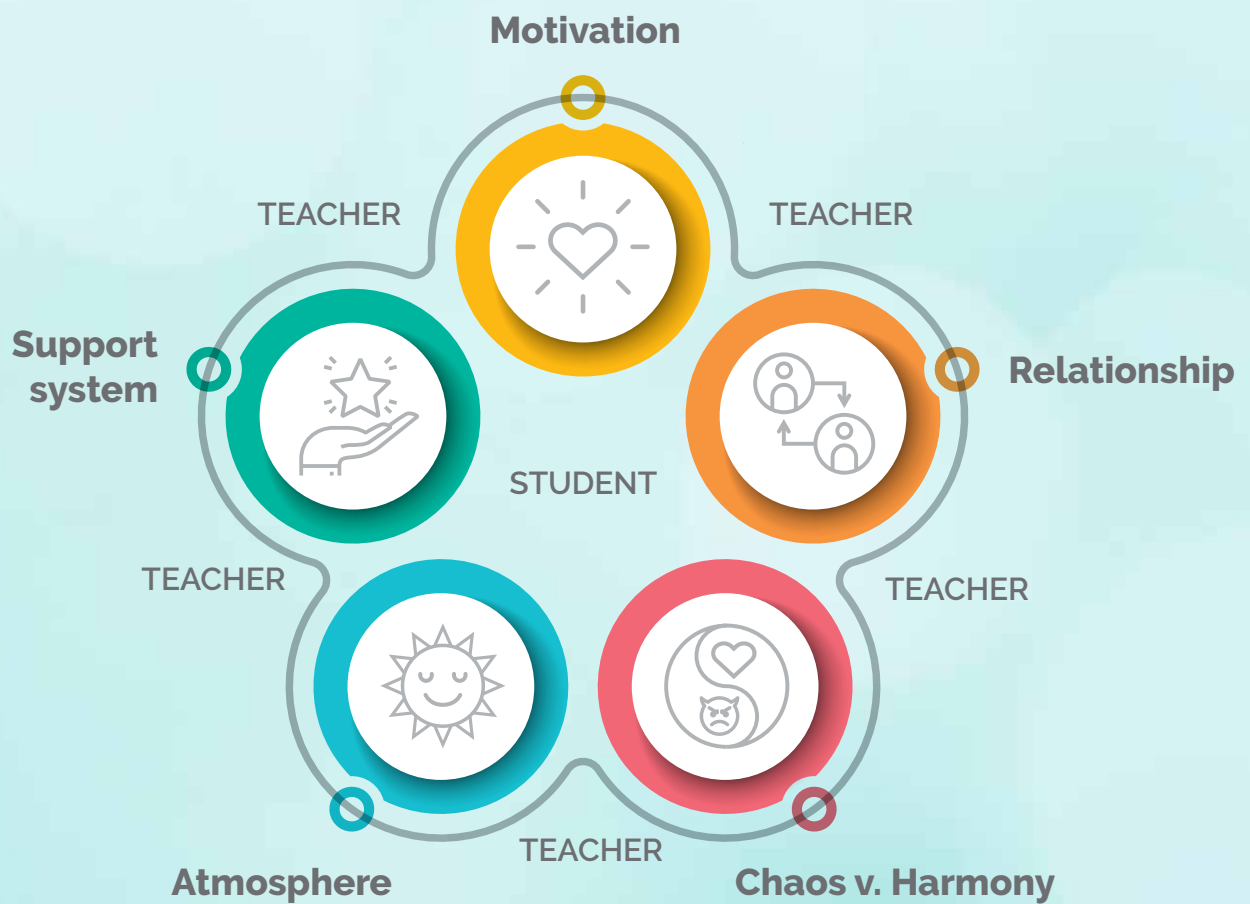
Most teachers almost always focus on their students. How they react and how they best can learn. This is natural, but just for now let's do something unusual. Since I know that your well-being and your awareness of your professional qualities have a positive influence on the learning environment I would like to focus on you. I want to give you the opportunity to look at your own competencies and your own ways of dealing with challenges in the classroom.

Teaching empathy begins with you. You have to be fully empathic yourself to teach empathy authentically. So let's start with some simple exercises as we get introduced to each other. These exercises can be seen as part of the training in empathy competences and of course function as icebreakers.

# Empathy

## – A way of being

A toolkit on implementing empathy in schools



# Why empathy?

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### THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

According to World Health Organization, 2018, there is in the WHO European Region a high and increasing rate of mental and behavioral health problems in adolescents at population level. The latest Health Behavior in School-aged Children survey states that, 29% of 15-year-old girls and 13% of 15-year-old boys in European countries reported “feeling low” more than once a week; also, more than one in ten adolescents were regular weekly drinkers by the age of 15 (9% of girls and 16% of boys).

Half of all mental health problems in adulthood have their onset during or before adolescence.

Depression and anxiety disorders are among the top five causes of the overall disease burden (measured in terms of disability-adjusted life years).

Suicide is the leading cause of death among adolescents (10–19 years old) in low- and middle-income countries and the second leading cause in high-income countries in the European Region. In 2015, there were over 4000 deaths from suicide among 10–19-year olds in the Region, principally among boys (see Fig. 1).

Young people who are disadvantaged – including minorities and migrants – are particularly affected.

Looking outside Europe, a 2016 survey by Pew Research Center found that nearly one-third of American adults (pretty much the same for all of us) never turn off their smartphones. But the degree of empathy is six times weaker for online connections than it is for real-world interactions.

A study published in 2011 suggests that empathy is declining sharply. The results, based on a survey of nearly 14,000 students, show that the average level of ‘empathic concern,’ declined by 48 per cent between 1979 and 2009. There was a particularly steep decline between 2000 and 2009. This is part of the reason why a growing number of young people feel lonely, confused, frustrated and even angry. Lonely, confused, frustrated and angry students will not grow up to be happy, resilient, and robust.

Something has to change. Education in empathy can be an essential tool for teaching future generations the skills necessary for personal and societal advancement, based on compassionate and empathetic understanding.

### THE BENEFITS OF EMPATHY

Denmark is one of the happiest countries in the world. The fact that teaching empathy has been mandatory since 1993 in schools in Denmark is a factor that contributes to the happiness of the country.

### THE FOLKESKOLE ACT FROM 1993

In 1993, the law implemented rules on educational differentiation. It appears from this that the organization of teaching, including the choice of teaching and working methods, methods, teaching aids, and substance selection, must in all subjects live up to the primary school's purpose, goals for subjects and be varied so that it corresponds to the individual student's needs and prerequisites.

Thus, the teaching in all subjects must be based on the individual student's prerequisites and current development stages with an aim to what the individual student can achieve.

Helping students develop a strong sense of empathy is beneficial because it helps them to build a sense of security and stronger relationships with other students and teachers. It promotes social harmony and reduces the likelihood of bullying all of which positions them well for learning. Many frameworks, approaches and interventions for promoting and protecting the mental health of adolescents have been proposed, and their effectiveness was reviewed in a report commissioned by the WHO Regional Office for Europe. Over 300 research articles were found in a search of the literature on interventions in schools and communities and digital interventions, and especially there is strong evidence that high-quality preschool programmes to develop children's social and emotional skills can have positive, enduring benefits for their development, including their emotional and social well-being, cognitive skills, readiness for school and academic achievement, especially for those who are the most vulnerable.

A substantial body of evidence further more indicates that effective implementation of interventions to teach social and emotional skills at school has a significant positive effect on those skills, on students' attitudes to themselves, others and school, on the commitment of children from a diverse range of backgrounds to school and on their academic performance. Empathetic behavior also benefits students later in life. They are better at dealing with conflict and have more satisfying relationships. They have lower levels of stress and higher levels of overall happiness. Empathetic adults have greater success personally and professionally. In Denmark, for example, the health system is characterized by busy weekdays, making it difficult for doctors to have sufficient focus on showing empathy towards patients. International research shows that education in itself is not enough. Therefore, empathy is put on the school schedule, where "Man First" has become a compulsory part of education. This is to ensure that the future doctors can meet the patients with an understanding of their situation

## EMPATHY – A WAY OF BEING

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and thereby be able to better see the person behind the diagnosis.

### TO CARRY THE RESPONSIBILITY TOGETHER

All close relationships around the student are essential for empathic development. Robust international evidence shows that parenting interventions that incorporate social and emotional skills development (empathy) have significant positive outcomes. This important process of socialization, which parents take care of, continues when the student begins school. Here, however, it becomes a merger – or collaboration between parents and teachers – about a common task. Neither parents nor school staff can be separated when it comes to influencing students. Therefore, it is a task that must be solved jointly, with the resources that each adult brings into the student's life.

Empathic teachers contribute to students' capacity and motivation to learn. Empathic teachers strengthen their students' sense of belonging to their schools and their relationships with teachers and classmates. Various international documents have stressed the importance of such 'soft' skills. According to the Council Recommendation by European Commission, 2018 on Key Competences for LifeLong Learning, 'soft skills,' like cognitive (critical thinking and responsible decision-making), personal (awareness, drive, self-management), and interpersonal skills (communication, negotiation, cooperation and teamwork, inclusion, empathy, and advocacy) are essential for a good and healthy life.

A meta-analysis of over 18 empathy training programs found that empathy training is effective. The findings suggest that empathy training programs are significant overall, and indicated

that 4 factors were statistically significantly associated with higher effect sizes:

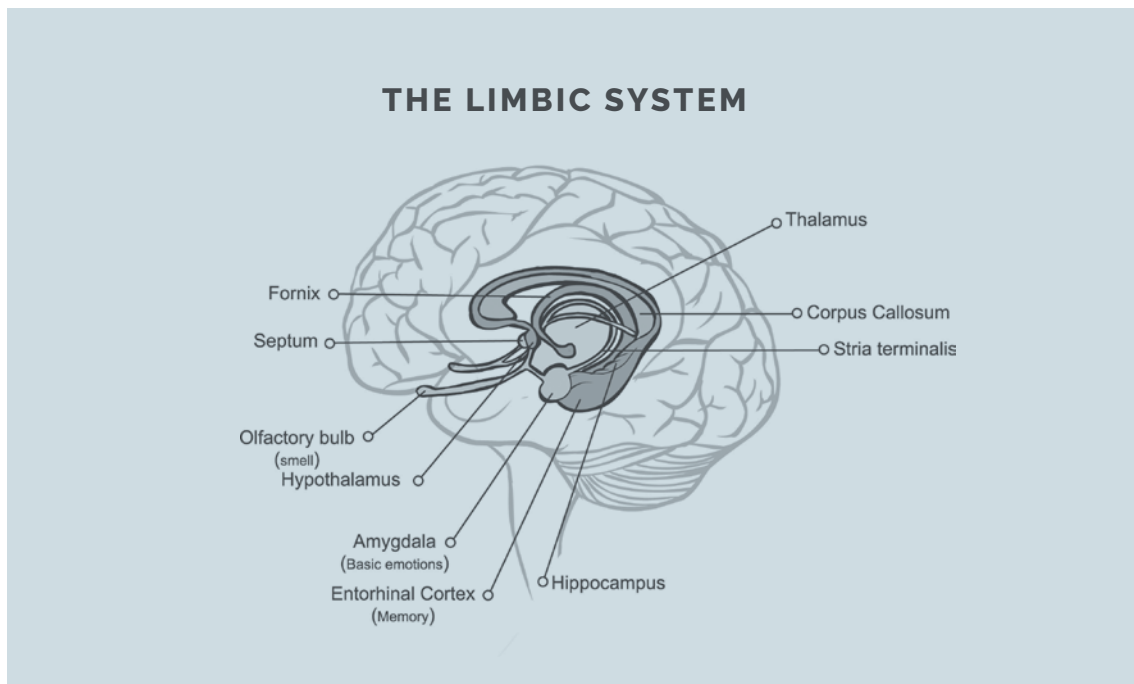
1. Training health professionals and university students rather than other types of individuals.
2. Compensating trainees for their participation.
3. Using empathy measures that focus exclusively on assessing understanding the emotions of others, feeling those emotions, or commenting accurately on the emotions.
4. Using objective measures rather than self-report measures.

The findings indicate that (a) empathy training tends to be effective, and (b) experimental research is warranted on the impact of different types of trainees, training conditions, and types of assessment. Looking only at the teacher's role in this toolkit, five prerequisites are crucial for students' optimal empathic outcome. These are:

- Their feeling of self-accord and motivation
- Their ability to build good relationships with students
- How they deal with challenging situations
- Their awareness of building a safe classroom atmosphere
- And having a strong support system around

Teachers must know what **motivates** them to have authority and inner anchoring to build self-accord and create **healthy relationships**. These preconditions are necessary for a practical, empathic approach to positively impact the relationship and the student's learning. This is to ensure an excellent **classroom atmosphere** so that empathy can take place, even in difficult and **challenging situations**. This can only be done with a good **support system** around both students and teachers.

# Theoretical foundations



People used to think that babies were born without empathy. But that is simply not true. We are all wired for empathy; we just have to learn how to connect the wires to make it work. Empathy sits in the brain's limbic system (vises grafisk). This controls memory, emotions, and instinct. It is a complicated neurological system involving mirror neurons and the insula. What many don't realize is that we are biologically predisposed to connect to others. This is made possible through many neuronal systems that are embedded in the right hemisphere of the brain, the mirror neurons being an important aspect of this. The self is not an individual entity,

you see, but a relational construct. There is a new field in brain science, social neuroscience that have found the circuitry in two people's brains activates while they interact. And the latest thinking about empathy from social neuroscience is that our default wiring is to help. That is to say, if we attend to the other person, we automatically empathize, we automatically feel with them. These newly identified neurons, mirror neurons, act as a neuro Wi-Fi, activating in our brain exactly the areas activated in theirs. We feel "with" automatically. And if that person is in need, if that person is suffering, we are automatically prepared to help.



## EMPATHY – A WAY OF BEING

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Daniel Siegel, a clinical professor of psychology at UCLA, says,

*"Empathy is not a luxury for human beings, it is a necessity. We survive not because we have claws and not because we have big fangs. We survive because we can communicate and collaborate."*

In other words, empathy facilitates our connection to others. It develops in infancy through the relationship with the attachment figure. A child first learns to tune in to his or her mother's emotions and moods, and later on other peoples.

That is why the role of teachers is tremendously essential in the social development of empathy in students. In particular it plays an important role in the development of the teaching staff by encouraging future teachers to strengthen their own emotional skills. Thus support can be given to empathy development and to the emotional regulation of their students. It is clear that teachers' empathy contributes to their ability to meet students' overall educational needs, and boost students' confidence in the school climate.

A systematic review of 70 studies from Danish Clearinghouse lead by Svend Eric Nordenbo from 2008 regarding *"Which manifest teacher-competencies affect the academic performance of the students?"* shows that three competencies are crucial for teachers:

- Didactic abilities/competence – knowledge of one's subject and subject-specific didactics.
- Management-competence/classroom management—the ability to create clear structures, overview, clear rules, and a healthy climate.
- Relational competence.

He further formulates it in this way:

*"If we want to create a good learning environment it's important to teach teachers to create good relations: To show tolerance, respect, interest, empathy and compassion to each child and appeal to the children's understanding of a conflict instead of bullying them."*

Danish psychologist and author Helle Jensen puts it this way:

*"It takes a lot of empathy to meet students in a way that meets them with respect and equality, while taking responsibility for developing their capacity for professional as well as emotional and social learning. It requires a lot of personal integrity of the professional to be able to maintain the respectful presence in relation to themselves and to others, especially in conflict-filled, challenging and stressful situations." (Jensen, 2014)*

Students need, more than anything support to maintain or develop their empathy skills and to this they need teachers who are motivated and master self-accord according to Jesper Juul et.a., 2016.

*"Self-accord means a person is at peace at the core of their being, which is the only place from where a person can relate deeply to other people and to a complex world undergoing extreme transformation, a world in which it is difficult to find role models."*

In the end, it is all about teaching student's empathy, and the crucial factor for this is the teacher's natural ability to meet the students empathetically. An empathic approach does not take place for one hour a week, but at all times

## EMPATHY – A WAY OF BEING

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and in all subjects during a school day. It is about for the teacher to make a difference for the students, create meaningful relationships, and be credible role models, to show the way through their actions, as a way of being.

Both empirical findings and philosophical, psychological, and pedagogical theory support that teachers' empathic competencies are of great importance for the students' possibilities to develop both social-emotionally and intellectually.

### INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE ACROSS CULTURES

Intercultural competence is about how to see things differently and how it is difficult to define a singular truth also in schools. Reality is always seen from different perspectives, and the societal reality - and thus the reality of the primary school - is multicultural. Therefore, there is a risk of doing the students a severe disservice if the primary school does not incorporate and reflect its teaching diversity, where students can practice getting in contact with their friendliness and compassion.

Intercultural competence supplements and expands empathy as a way of being for students and teachers. It gives a better understanding of cultural norms, binaries, the class, the teachers, and the school as a whole. Intercultural competences also help to adapt to new work environments and prevent culture shock while enhancing cultural awareness, knowledge, and practical skills.

Intercultural competences are not a subject that takes time and weight from other subjects. It is a pedagogical approach that considers the student-base in the primary school and incorpo-

rates the multicultural as a resource. Thus, the strengthening of knowledge and professionalism is still at the forefront. More importantly, the pedagogical approach is adjusted so that it further qualifies professionalism and the acquisition of knowledge.

Teaching empathy in an intercultural environment requires a shift in the teaching approach, from a **didactic model** (teacher to student) to a **dialogic model**. The teacher must facilitate a classroom environment where students can engage with issues through **questions that demand discussion, curiosity, critical thinking, openness and tolerance**. Motivate students to engage in intercultural interactions to help them make sense of their environment and advance their understanding of intercultural interactions.

This kind of environment will give a better understanding of the students, break stereotypes and make it easier to act empathically. Intercultural competences complement empathic skills like self-awareness, self-management, and good communication skills. They also promote interpersonal and situational sensitivity. It is all about teachers accommodating perceived student differences while focusing on the similarities between students.

According to Jensen (2013), intercultural competencies are closely related to social-emotional-competencies. She lists three aspects of intercultural competencies:

1. Social-emotional competencies (**empathy**)
2. Knowledge about cultures (one's own and others)
3. Knowledge about discrimination and cultural conflicts

ESSENTIAL 1

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# Your motivation leads the way

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Professional-personal development

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# Motivation

## Case: Amber

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**AS YOU ARE THE  
CLASS TEACHER,  
THE QUESTION IS:**

What do you do now?

- What do you do right there in the schoolyard?
- Which thoughts and considerations go through your mind?
- What do you say?
- Who do you involve – if any?

Explain in detail how this conflict is handled.

- How can you know that the conflict is resolved and everyone feels heard and listened to?
- What do you observe?
- Any other thoughts?

Use 45 minutes to discuss this in groups of two.

## The Diagram

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# How am I doing?



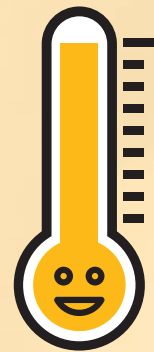
I am not motivated



I am a little motivated



I am motivated



I am top motivated

# The Diagram

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## RATIONALE

The diagram is a graphic way of visualizing students' motivation. Based on the teacher's judgment, they are made aware that they need to look at the diagram and think about how motivated they are. It will help them ask for a break, a hug, or something that can help them get in touch with themselves, their motivation, and regain energy.

## OBJECTIVE

Students must feel inward to scale their emotional and sensational state.

## MATERIALS

The diagram should be visible to everyone in the class (see in appendix).

## PROCEDURE

The teacher introduces the Diagram for the class:

This is a diagram we are going to use in this class because you will train your awareness of how motivated you are for teaching. Can anyone tell the rest of the class what the four different states mean? Get four students to explain one state each.

That way, the teacher involves the students to make them take ownership of the Diagram, which they will feel a responsibility to adopt into the class. Make them give examples of how their bodies look, how they behave, or what they say when they are in one of the four states.

Explain further, but acknowledge first:

- That is correct – you have already understood the Diagram and explained it very well. I can very well recognize your different states when you acted them out for us. Very fun.
- Many things can affect your motivation, and in this class, it is okay to feel as you feel. We want to take care of each other here and help if it is needed. Therefore, this Diagram can be a helpful tool for me as a teacher because I can pause from the teaching or go talk with you solely if you need me. But it is also suitable for you. Can anyone guess why it can also be a helpful tool for you?

## ESSENTIAL 1 / WORKSHEET

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Let them think about it and acknowledge their suggestions.

- There are so many right answers, thank you. Yes, it is helpful for you, too, because you can support your classmates to regain their motivation. You can do it because you are good classmates and because we take care of each other in this class. Isn't that correct?
- Can any of you come up with some suggestions on regaining motivation, if it is not existent?

Write their answers down on the board. Each answer will tell you what works for the student who says it. Students often know what works for them. Take your own notes or let all of the students come up with what works for them. Then it gets more comfortable for everyone to support better.

- So from now on, if I ask you how it goes, you can look at the Diagram and better explain how motivated you are for learning and concentrating. You are also welcome to raise your finger and announce that you are not motivated and need a break. It is also an option. You can either use the information for your own evaluation, share it with the rest of the class by show of hands, or I can talk with you about why the motivation is at one level or another. We are here for each other.

### WHAT TO OBSERVE

It feels good to be seen and acknowledged for the students, no matter what emotional state they are in. Therefore look for students who take their guards down, who show care and kindness towards their classmates – and feel better themselves. It feels good to receive positive attention, but it also feels fantastic giving back to others.

### NOTE TO TRAINER

This tool only makes sense if it is regularly used in the class. Make the teachers involved in this and don't stop after a week, but integrate it in the way the class function. Awareness of the agency the students will feel for their own motivation are priceless.