

philosophy for democracy

exploratory phase

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In the first phase of the research, the central question was whether, and to what extent, philosophizing with children can truly be called a democratic practice: how all participants in a philosophical enquiry are equal and have an equal opportunity to influence the process; how an enquiry develops opinion, freedom of speech, and exchange; how philosophical enquiry shapes dialogue.

This research question was formulated on the assumption that democratic practices in education can contribute to the development of democratic citizenship competencies of children.

Our hypothesis is that philosophy with children can be a democratic practice in education, and can be a potentially powerful one. Many aspects of the democratic way of life could reveal themselves in philosophy with children and could in this way contribute to the development of democratic citizenship. Specifically:

- the development of thinking abilities and judiciousness, especially with regard to critical thinking and reasoning skills,
- the development of autonomous thinking, which can also contribute to the development of self-identity,
 - children learn to cope with differences of opinion,
 - the development of dialogue,
 - a setting where all participants are considered equal.

can
philosophizing
with children
be called
a democratic
practice?

Research outline

In March 2007 a new developed P4C programme and the accompanying research project started in 25 classes in several primary schools. Both the programme and the first exploratory phase of research ran until the summer of 2008.

In this phase of research we especially wanted to know how children participate in philosophical enquiries as democratic practice. In this period, we focused on five aspects of practice which should indicate that philosophy with children is a democratic practice:

1. equality
2. dialogue
3. autonomy
4. judiciousness
5. difference of opinion

We converted these aspects into practical question lists. In this exploratory first phase we used three instruments:

- two consecutive questionnaires for the teachers. The questionnaires were similar in purpose but were worded somewhat differently to broaden the scope. The main part of the questionnaire focused on the teachers' observations during the philosophy sessions. The question lists were partly taken from the examples in 'Kinderen leren filosoferen' (Bartels, 2007), which in turn were adapted from the well-known 'Barry Curtis list' (Curtis 1989).
- two short consecutive questionnaires for children from group 3 to 8 (age group 6 - 12). Again, the purpose of both questionnaires was similar but different wording was used to broaden the scope. The first questionnaire was completed by 393 children June 2007, the second questionnaire by 363 children in February 2008.
- class observations and interviews with eight teachers and their classes in order to clarify the statistical data from the questionnaire research. During classroom observation the same topics as on the questionnaire were used as a guideline.

The participants

25 teachers and all children in their classes participated in the programme in. Three complete school teams participated, the others were individual teachers, personally interested in participating. The research group represents a fair amount of diversity, with regard to type of school and to school population.

The representation of different school years (from age-group 4 to age-group 12) is biased for teachers, as well as for children. Teachers with groups of children older than 9 years of age are unfortunately severely underrepresented among the respondents. With regard to the children, there is an overrepresentation of children aged 7 and 8.



Is Philosophy with children a democratic practice?

During the philosophy sessions, we have examined communication on certain aspects that can be considered to indicate the democratic quality of these sessions. The results, forming the first phase of the research, seem to confirm our main hypothesis: Philosophy with children is – in most of the examined aspects – a democratic practice!

On the subject of equality, we see that the teacher is the dominant source of questions within the philosophical enquiry, and because of this, decisive in its direction and development. Still, we also observe considerable influence from the children. This is chiefly observable in the questions they put to one another, and in the way they react to each other.

Everyone has equal opportunities to participate. The enquiry within the full circle of an entire class of children is mostly dominated by some 'big mouths', but by using smaller circles and groups everyone still gets their turn. The involvement of children in the enquiries is high.

The dialogical form and the development of dialogue are prominent in several aspects of philosophizing. At a young age, children already have dialogical attitudes and skills, such as asking one another questions, listening to one another, and these attitudes and skills develop more and more as they get older.

Children mainly express their own opinions, their contribution to the enquiry is authentic and they contribute independently from one another. The four- and five-year-olds sometimes watch each other first, but from group 3 (age 6) onwards they are admirably involved. This even develops further.

Children give reasons for their opinions, and they do so more and more spontaneously as they get older. Even if they find it hard to think of new reasons, when they have to defend their point of view.

Differences of opinion are present during philosophizing and they are valued. Now and then, it can be annoying when someone else disagrees with you. Obviously that does not feel comfortable, but in their reactions that discomfort – as children get older – is less and less observable.

Is philosophizing democratic? 'Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't', said one of the children. 'When we're talking, some children think they're totally right and that others should agree with them. I've sometimes done that, I get annoyed with myself, because it's just wrong, everyone should have their own opinion.' His classmate is also even-handed: 'Yes and no, because one time you see it one way and you don't see it other people's way. Then you're so busy thinking about your own opinion, you can't be wrong. But another time you can be, because together, you always sort it out'.



philosophy for democracy in depth phase

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which contribution does philosophizing with children have on the development of democratic skills and attitudes?

In the first phase of the research we found that Philosophy with children is – in most of the examined aspects - a democratic practice. We have researched this on the basis of the assumption that democratic practices in education can contribute to the development of democratic citizenship competencies of children. Does philosophizing with children indeed contribute to the development of democratic skills and attitudes? In this context we will focus on those skills and attitudes that are related to dialogue, judiciousness and diversity.

The research outline is based on the curriculum theory of Goodlad (and others). The assumption in this theory is that a curriculum is active in six levels. The first two levels, the ideal and the formal curriculum consist of a study on P4C theory and on the material that is used in the classroom. The second two levels, the interpreted and the operational curriculum, concern the teachers: how do they interpret Philosophy with Children, and what do they do? The last two levels, the experienced and the effected curriculum concern the children: what do they do in the Philosophy sessions, and what learning processes can be identified to contribute to democratic development?

The research is still under construction. This presentation therefore, especially deals with the methodological questions that appear in this research.

Challenges

In this part of the research there are two challenges. The first is to operationalize relevant skills and attitudes in the fields of dialogue, judiciousness and diversity. International literature on citizenship and philosophy with children give enough indication to this. The second challenge is to find and develop reliable and valid research instruments to examine all six levels of the curriculum. Instruments that also show the mutual relations between the different aspects as they appear in the six levels. There is a story to be told, the story of the P4D Curriculum from theory, through materials, by teachers to learning processes from children. This story can not only be told downwards, from level 1 (theory) and 2 (material) by 3 and 4 (the teacher) to 5 and 6 (the children). Effects and influences are not going in one direction, they are also going backward: children influence the acts and beliefs of teachers, teachers influence the developers of materials (do they?), and probably there is crosswise influence. Theorists and developers of materials should care about the needs of children.



the curriculum research model

level curriculum

1 the ideal curriculum

description

The objectives and starting points of Philosophy with children (in relation to the development of democratic skills and attitudes)

research instruments and discussion

The Lipman (IAPC) approach seems to be the most appropriate to develop democratic skills and attitudes. Literature search and analyses of works of Lipman c.s. and secondary literature on the Lipman and IAPC approach

2 the formal curriculum

These are the materials (handbooks, worked out themes, etc.) that the schools use. A new programme has been developed: Filosoferen doe je zo (You do philosophizing like this).

Methodically the programme is based on the Lipman approach. Analyses of the programme and comparison with analyses on level 1.

3 the interpreted curriculum

How do teachers interpret the curriculum? Which objectives do they strive for? How do they define their own role in philosophical enquiry?

Interviews with 15 teachers (3 out of every 5 research schools); questionnaire in 5 school teams. On this point it is not only interesting to analyse how teachers' interpretations relate to level 1 and 2, but also how the school context (mission, profile) influences the views of the teachers and how they integrate children's acts in their views.

4 the operationalized curriculum

What does the teacher really do in the enquiries?

Registration of 15 philosophical enquiries analyses based on earlier typology by Marie France Daniel. It is interesting to see how these relate to their views. The top issue here is the relation with the acts of the children (level 5)

5 the experienced curriculum

What do the children do? And what are their experiences?

Registration of 15 philosophical enquiries. How can we analyse the interventions of children? Questionnaire and interviews

6 the effectuated curriculum

What have children learned? In this research this means: which democratic skills and attitudes did children develop due to participating in philosophical enquiries?

Questionnaires and interviews aren't very satisfying in this level. Can we obtain reliable and valid data in other ways?