



'I think she's learnt how to sort of let the class speak': Children's perspectives on Philosophy for Children as participatory pedagogy



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ABSTRACT

This small scale interpretive study explores children's perspectives on the extent to which Philosophy for Children (P4C) is a participatory pedagogy. The paper is based on a conceptualisation which views participation as embedded in everyday interactions between children and adults. A theoretical rationale is then provided enabling a consideration of participation from the perspective of pedagogy through the central positioning of dialogue. A class of twenty two nine and ten year old children engaged in weekly, teacher facilitated P4C sessions over a three month period. Seven children from the class were individually interviewed. A cross case thematic analysis of transcripts was employed and this paper examines one thematic network constructed on the global theme of talking rights. Findings suggest that the children viewed P4C as offering opportunity to exercise the right to express opinion. The children also appeared to acknowledge the reciprocal nature of these rights as they accepted responsibility to receive the opinions of others. There was indication that they used the opinions of others to scrutinise their own perspectives. The children's comments suggest they benefited from the support of peers and teacher as they worked out how to respond to one another in dialogue. They also indicated the need to develop some specific skills to enable their participation in whole class dialogue and viewed ground rules and facilitation strategies as helpful. Finally, despite some small group dominance and negativity towards peers requiring obvious teacher support, the findings suggest that the children noticed changes to the pattern and control of talk over the course of weekly P4C sessions. The shifts noted by the children are interpreted here as reflecting some negotiation of epistemic authority within the P4C sessions. Some sensitive social and political issues raised by the findings highlight the need to attend to the quality of relationships between children and the importance of practitioner reflexivity.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Focus

This paper considers Philosophy for Children's (P4C's) democratic potential. It draws on the perspectives of nine and ten year children who engaged in teacher facilitated, weekly P4C sessions over a three month period in a primary class in Scotland. The paper explores the question: to what extent do children experience P4C as a participatory pedagogy?

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Assumptions about children's active role in the construction of meaning and knowledge underpin this paper, influencing its theoretical positioning and political intentions. These are reflected in the focus and methodology. The perspectives of children are examined here as they are considered experts of their own experience (Dockett & Perry, 2007). The paper contributes to existing literature on the democratic potential of P4C by exploring children's rather than adults' perspectives.

Terms such as participation and democracy are contested in education (Bae, 2009; Burgh & Yorshansky, 2011). Before examining the practice of P4C and its democratic potential, the ways in which these are understood within this paper will be discussed in relation to thinking and learning.

1.2. *Children's participation: 'voice', dialogue and pedagogy*

Within the UK, the participative imperative of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in education has led to an emphasis on consultation practices designed to elicit pupil 'voice' (Thomson, 2008). Thomson (2013) argues that 'voice' can be understood on three levels: literal (the talk and perspective of the speaker), metaphorical (the qualities and feelings expressed by the speaker), and political (the right to express a view or to have that view represented). The development of consultation practices in education suggests an emphasis on political 'voice'.

Pupil 'voice' as representation is politically problematic. The singular term 'voice' implies a united pupil view ignoring children's diversity (Thomson, 2013). Selecting some 'voices' as representative may lead to silencing others (Fielding, 2004). Research suggests that it is those pupils directly involved in decision making processes who derive personal benefit such as increased self-esteem or social status (Mager & Nowak, 2012).

There are also epistemological difficulties with political 'voice' as representation. The assumption of one-off consultation exercises is that 'voice' is 'consistent, authentic and pure' ignoring the contextualised and transient nature of expression (Thomson, 2013 p.23).

Bae (2009) argues that children's participation rights are risked when reduced to formal processes. Participation should rather be conceptualised as a relational and fluid process 'where different intentions are met with respect, and there is room for changing one's mind' (p. 396). This perspective is shared by others within the children's rights literature arguing for a shift in emphasis from political 'voice' towards relational, dialogical practices (Fattore & Turnbull, 2005; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Manion, 2007). Thomson (2013) contends that democratically stronger forms of 'voice' are characterised by 'dialogue, reciprocity, recognition and respect' (p.21)

A dialogical or relational perspective in education tries to embed participation within the daily life of the school (Bae, 2009). Bae acknowledges that many of the competing agendas operating in schools are a barrier to such practice. She suggests however that 'moments of democracy' in everyday interactions are achievable (p. 396).

This is interesting as it allows us to ask whether the core business of teaching and learning might incorporate dialogue in ways which call these 'moments' into being. This requires attention to pedagogy (Bae, 2012). Transmission teaching creates clear role division between teacher and pupil and lacks reciprocity (Alexander, 2004). The teacher listens *for* understandings congruent with what has been taught rather than listening *to* the child (Haynes, 2009). Murriss (2013) contends that this can amount to epistemic injustice. She argues that testimonial injustice is committed when children's voices are controlled by teachers who deny their credibility as active knowers. If children's confidence in their own sense making is undermined, then this becomes hermeneutic injustice.

This paper contends that pedagogic approaches which privilege classroom dialogue offer participatory potential as they are built upon reciprocal relationship and so reduce the teacher's control of knowledge. Lansdown, Jimerson, & Shahroozi (2014) suggest that the development of child-centred pedagogies can enable children's participative rights to be recognised within education. The view taken in the current paper is that some child-centred pedagogy rests on individualistic assumptions and as such cannot support relational approaches to participation (Bleazby, 2006). Theoretical consideration is therefore important here and the next section will consider this in more detail.

1.3. *Dialogic theorisation*

Mercer & Littleton (2007) argue from a Vygotskian perspective that constructing knowledge involves intermental processes. Dialogue is thus a social form of thinking. As children explore ideas through talk, they actively support their own and others' learning. Through encouraging exploratory talk as part of the teaching process, the teacher gives children meaning making credibility. This requires teachers to recognise classrooms as collective domains and teaching as a relational process (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Kutnick & Colwell, 2010).

Growing interest in the educational application of the work of Bakhtin, has led to recognition of the importance of diversity within the context of collaborative learning (Ball & Freedman, 2004). Those writing within this area suggest that Vygotskian theorisation emphasises the importance of fusing perspectives as the endpoint of dialogue (Matusov, 2011; Wegerif, 2011). Language is thus seen as a tool to support the development of cultural truths or norms. While this involves collective thinking, the fusion of meanings shuts down difference between individuals. It leads to an apprenticeship model of learning which is a one- directional process led by the more skilled other (Wegerif, 2011).

Wegerif (2011) and Matusov (2011) drawing on Bakhtin, argue that meaning exists in the ongoing negotiations between individuals in dialogue. This implies that truth is provisional. The aim of dialogue is not to reach a convergence of self and other in intersubjective agreement. Rather, dialogue opens a space between participants, in which differences are held

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