

ROOM FOR POLYPHONY (2021)

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The dissertation *Room for Polyphony* reports on an action research study investigating how an art & philosophy lab ('Sparklab') can contribute to more room for 'free action' at a multicultural primary school by offering opportunities for a polyphony in which three 'free' voices can be distinguished that are linked to the notion of subjectification.

The rationale for this study is a much-heard criticism in the field of education, namely that over the past two decades the balance has shifted towards a strong degree of complexity reduction and control, an attitude that is referred to in this study as 'fixed grip'. The reason given for this development in current educational policy is that much research focuses on evidence-based education so that predefined 'yields' can be generated. According to the many critics, this result-oriented approach facilitates a specific kind of normalization, which leads to a narrowing of the curriculum and a deprofessionalization of teachers and leaves too little room for personal development and the arts. In other words, there is arguably too little room for children's own voices, and teachers often inadvertently become the mouthpieces of the educational policy.

In this study, which is concerned with free action, we sought to create room for subjectification, a specific interpretation of personal development. The underlying assumption is that children should be offered more than just a place in the existing world. As 'newcomers' they must be given space to discover their own- and other people's- otherness and their unrealized potential, thus allowing them to set the world in motion in their own way and experience the consequences of their actions.

In this context, every child is metaphorically seen as a 'choir of voices'; full of seen and unseen perspectives and positions. As such, it exists in relation to a globalized world that is often experienced as complex, or in other words: highly polyphonous. It challenges humans to relate to the unanswerable, the unpredictable and the absurd.

Philosopher of education Gert Biesta conceptualized the notion of subjectification (Biesta, 2013, 2017, 2018) as a special strand of formation of the person. Herein, the quality of the authentic voice is considered particularly important. It is however not about what or who you are but about *how* you exist. We examined in more detail two notions that strongly inform this concept, namely 'action' and 'unicity'. Subjectification is based on Arendt's notion of 'action': the human is a 'beginner' by birth, a free actor bringing something new into the world and undergoing the consequences of other people's responses to this. It is also based on Levinas' concept of 'unicity', which Biesta links to irreplaceability or accountability. Both concepts are concerned with an orientation towards freedom, one that is concerned with the way in which the subject relates to plurality in the world.

Plurality can be made into an actual experience by understanding this concept as a polyphony, inspired by the definition of Bakhtin, who describes it as a multitude of independent and unmuffled voices

and consciousnesses (Bakhtin, 1984, 2019). This makes diversity between and within people discernible as a choir of voices that come forward under different circumstances.

This link between polyphony and subjectification, with freedom as both raw material and yield, allows us to inductively and deductively identify three ‘voices’ that each give expression to this in a different way. By complementing freedom with the concepts of action and unicity as starting points, we can identify an authentic, a creative and a responsible voice. These voices relate to three different qualities in our thinking, our speech and our actions. Combined, they are referred to as a ‘world-oriented polyphony’.

The quality of the authentic voice is described as raw, partially unformed, spontaneous, passionate and unpredictable. This voice represents as it were the first sprouting of an autonomous movement as it is brought into the world.

The quality of the creative voice is seen in this context as a manifestation of ‘action’ (Arendt, 1958), i.e. a free action through which the ‘unpredictable new’ is brought into the world. This voice is heard wherever new, often disparate connections are made between ideas, events, actions and/or objects through associative thinking patterns and evocative expressions.

The quality of the responsible voice is seen as a manifestation of accountability and receptivity. This voice is characterized by an interest in, a care for and a relationship with the other. We focus on how the subject brings expression to their own voices in interaction with their environment.

Contrasting with these free voices, we can also identify two ‘unfree voices’: the representative voice, which speaks on behalf of the rational order (Lingis, 1994) and the socially disciplined voice, which echoes the voices of authority figures (Christophe, 2006).

In this study, art and philosophy for children are seen by their very nature as polyphonic domains that, when combined in an interdisciplinary process, can play a role in the manifestation and expression of these three free voices. Art is seen in light of a situational aesthetics as a quality of being and togetherness. Children are invited to engage in specific ways of looking, experiencing, thinking and acting. They are invited to experience the unanswerable, the unforeseen and the absurd aspects of the world, allowing for transformation “of mood and mind” (Caris, 2016). This experience is created by engaging heightened perception, imagination, or a tilted perspective such that awareness of one’s position in the world can change and remain dynamic.

In this study, philosophy for children is seen as a playground for ‘experiential thinking’ and thinking experiences. In this context, thinking and experiencing are linked in a variety of ways. In ‘thinking about thinking’, thinking becomes aware of itself in a thinking experience. ‘Experiential thinking’ is seen as a reflection on the consequences of a continuous interaction with the world (Vansielegheem & Kennedy, 2011), whereby image and word, action and reflection are all linked. The emphasis lies on a playful approach to philosophizing, the ability to marvel at the variety of perspectives in self and others and the ambiguity of a topic as expressed in dialogue.

The art & philosophy lab is emphatically aimed at serving as a source of inspiration for the art education field by showing how art can be seen in the light of subjectification. It shows the liberating

disruptive power of art and children's philosophy, i.e how breaking through habitual thinking, experiencing and action can allow the subject to manifest (Caris, 2016).