

Action research and polyphony: Learning from an Art & Philosophy Lab in a primary school

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Abstract: This article discusses an action research project conducted in an Art & Philosophy Lab for children, aimed at addressing power imbalances in a school and transforming educational practices. The lab derives from criticisms of Dutch educational policy as increasingly focused on control and evidence-based education. The study found that art and Children's philosophy are fruitful in promoting diverse voices and free action, supported by Bakhtin's concept of *polyphony* and Biesta's *subjectification*. The study was conducted in a multicultural primary school in Groningen, Netherlands, which faced systemic pressures and social complexities. The article explores, from an experiential perspective, the fruitfulness of two theoretical contributions in recent Action Research literature: *conversational space* in situations of power imbalances and *wonder-based action research*.

Key words: conversational space, polyphony, subjectification, Children's philosophy, art, wonder lab

Resumen en español: Este artículo analiza un proyecto de investigación-acción llevado a cabo en un laboratorio de arte y filosofía para niños, cuyo objetivo era abordar los desequilibrios de poder en una escuela y transformar las prácticas educativas. El laboratorio surge como respuesta a las críticas hacia la política educativa neerlandesa, cada vez más centrada en el control y en una educación basada en evidencias. El estudio reveló que el arte y la filosofía para niños resultan fructíferos para promover la diversidad de voces y la acción libre, apoyándose en el concepto de polifonía de Bakhtin y en la noción de subjetivación de Biesta. La investigación se realizó en una escuela primaria multicultural de Groninga (Países Bajos) que afrontaba presiones sistémicas y complejidades sociales. El artículo explora, desde una perspectiva vivencial, la utilidad de dos aportaciones teóricas presentes en la literatura reciente sobre investigación-acción: el espacio conversacional en situaciones de desequilibrio de poder y la investigación-acción basada en el asombro.

Palabras clave: espacio conversacional, polifonía, subjetivación, filosofía para niños, arte, laboratorio de asombro.

Figure 1. Children with paper horns waiting to perform.



Figure 2. Creative assignment Draw the inside of your head.



Introduction

This article presents an action research conducted in an Art & Philosophy Lab for children, focusing on unheard voices and transforming practice. Experiences from our involvement in pedagogical endeavours in the arts and lifelong learning align with the often-heard criticism in the Dutch educational discourse that, over the past two decades, educational policy has become increasingly focused on complexity reduction and control. This study aimed to explore a creative alternative to current educational policies. These policies, strongly influenced by organisations such as the OECD, are often justified as ‘evidence-based education’; they promote quantitative evidence, set educational standards, and fund programmes based on their research findings. This has been criticised by significant sections of the international education research community (see Biesta 2010, 2013, 2017; Nussbaum, 2010).

Criticism includes the claim that economic values tend to replace pedagogical values, leading to a results-oriented approach that narrows the curriculum – a policy that Biesta (2013) characterises as a ‘strong grip’. This leaves too little room for ‘free action’ and puts pressure on the core task of education: supporting children in finding their place in a complex world. At the same time, this era calls on us as humans to find new voices: to engage with the world differently than in past centuries, to break entrenched destructive habits and systems, and to embrace alternative perspectives on how the world can be understood and valued. In our research, we therefore wondered whether a creative approach could support children in ex-