

Public space as medium for self-government? A note on the call for public space in education today.

Nancy Vansieleghe
Department of education
Ghent University
Belgium
nancy.vansieleghe@ugent.be

The starting point of this paper is the emerge of conceptions like self-government, self-management, self-reflection, self-regulation together with an emphasis on dialogue and philosophy in education¹. For example, consider the current attention for Philosophy for Children and Philosophical Consultancy. The discussion about philosophy and education seems no longer to be about the question if we support philosophy in education, but about the way it can be implemented in education. By choosing for Philosophy for Children in the discussion about philosophy in education, it seems that there is for the first time 'real' interest for the intersubjective relation in education. In this paper I will problematize this new interest: namely that our attention for philosophy and dialogue is an effect and an instrument of a specific regime. A regime that needs a medium to orientate our thinking and acting. First, however, we will start with a brief sketch of the theory and practice of Philosophy for Children and what has become attractive about it. In the second part, I will portray how our attention for Philosophy for Children and the philosophical dialogue are a part of a specific configuration of the self. For this portrayal we will draw on the work of Jean Luc Nancy. In the last part we will argue how our portrayal of the self-governing subject has thrown us back in public.

Philosophy for Children announces herself as a philosophical dialogue or a philosophical community of inquiry: an agreement in action. A community where the voice of the child is important and where there is space and time to think for oneself and *with* others and not *for* others (Kennedy, 1999). Furthermore, the ideas behind this philosophical movement concern a definite dispense with the hierarchical relation between the teacher and the pupil and include a plea for a less powerful, manipulative and deficiency- or problem-oriented approach of education. The attitude that the teacher as well as the pupil has to adopt is an attitude of 'not knowing' or a 'Socratic attitude'. A by forehand arranged curriculum that is based on developmental psychological stages and prescribes how cultural products have to be passed, has been replaced by a curriculum that starts from the children themselves by taking into account their opinions and intentions, by validating their experiences, interests and capacities. Philosophy for Children is assumed to stand for an alternative question based curriculum that recognises and addresses the child as an active human being. Philosophy for Children is not only about another perspective of the relation between the pupil and the teacher, it is also about

¹ Here we refer to the current discourse in primary school in Flanders, .

another way of looking at oneself. This means that children also have to reflect on their own thinking and acting. After all, Philosophy for Children supposes an educational approach that doesn't prepare the child for their integration in an existing society, rather, it helps to explicitate their meaningful, critical and creative contribution to society. This means that children have to be challenged to think about existential questions. Besides, the pupils are expected to take responsibility for who they are and how they are related to nature, friends, ethnic minorities, women, Furthermore, the philosophical dialogue is not limited to education or to children. Recently, there are also voices that argue that the philosophical dialogue releases us from what we always have taken for granted and that it gives us the opportunity to look at our lives in another way: a more existential way. So today, not only the child is seen as an existential being, everybody is willing to govern himself.

Although, it seems obvious that everybody is enthusiast about this movement in education and society in general, it is precisely this casualness that has perplexed and astonished me. What intrigued was the question: who are we, we who are willing to ask existential questions and who find it obvious that we are problematizing concepts as the child, diversity, dialogue, philosophy, self-reflection, intersubjectivity and responsibility in education. Furthermore, I want to put the question: is it at all possible to call for public space in education? This question intrigued not because I suppose that this mission is impossible, or because I want to save the public space, but precisely because public space is not *some-thing* that can be made or restored. Therefore my working hypothesis inspired by Jean Luc Nancy, sounds as follow: if education focuses on the restoration or reorientation of the public space, does this not mean the end of public space (and of education)? If education limits itself to being in service of existential matters, does this not leave precisely these questions behind that (trans)form our selves and are therefore e-ducational and ex-istential?

In the light of the increasing attention that is paid to Philosophy with Children, my aim is to draw a picture that portrays the call for public space as a strategic configuration that interpellates us in a particular way. In the line of Masschelein and Simons, I suppose that the discourse about public space that is based on a whole arsenal of techniques and strategies, installs a specific strategic configuration – a configuration that regulates what in the current educational context is visible and expressible and especially how we relates us to ourselves and others. With this portray, we do not want to judge the subject that we are, but in stead of this, we want to create space so that other subject forms can come: side by side.

Nancy Vansielegem is doctoral-assistent at the Department of Educational Sciences at the University of Ghent in Belgium. In 2006 she obtained her doctorate with a dissertation on 'Dialogue as limited-experience. An analysis of Philosophy with Children as educational project'. Her supervisors are Prof. Dr. Marc Spoelders and Prof. Dr. Jan Masschelein.