

## MEMBERS' BRIEFING PAPER 11.4

### Think big, act small!

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In order for young children to learn a democratic way of life, they need to have the opportunities to practice this way of thinking and acting with peers and adults. Childcare centres, schools and other community settings can provide these important learning opportunities. This was the starting point for the project 'The childcare centre and school as space for democratic practice' (2009-2011), which was lead by Bureau MUTANT and Eduniek in the Netherlands, with research support from Dr Kylie Smith from the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood at the University Melbourne in Australia. The Bernard van Leer Foundation funded the project.

The key aim of this action-training research project was to create spaces where every child, practitioner and manager has a voice and are listened to and young children are taken seriously as citizens in the here and now. Four large childcare providers and two integrated schools in multi-ethnic areas in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and Veghel participated in this project over two years. In the pilot project 25 educators and 6 team coordinators working with 0-4 year olds in day care and with 4- 12 year olds in afterschool care participated. In the current implementation phase (2012) 16 childcare providers are working in about 1400 centres.

Action research was chosen as the methodology as it is a way to change social practices, by systematically reflecting - doing and reflecting again. Practitioners participating in the project were encouraged to reflect critically on their practice and to trust in children's competencies. Practitioners and managers were introduced to the action research cycle in the first year, by taking them step by step through the four phases of the cycle: choosing a topic; planning the change; creating the change together with children and documenting; sharing and reflecting. This was undertaken in action research training sessions held at the sites of the services.

Initial action research questions raised by the practitioners/teachers were: How to stimulate community spirit in a group with young children? How to listen to young children who have limited verbal expression? How to stimulate social responsibility with young children? How to stimulate empathy for diversity among children?

Dr Kylie Smith from the University of Melbourne supervised and evaluated the research section of the project through two surveys at the beginning and the

end of the action research cycle and through significant change stories. Specifically, information was collected on

- What participants learnt about children's active citizenship and tracked the extent to which their attitudes, perceptions and knowledge had changed during the life of the project.
- Changes in participant competence in practicing democratic citizenship with young children and what changes participants made in practice as a result of what they had learnt.
- Project effectiveness in supporting children's democratic citizenship.

The surveys and significant change stories were then analyzed against the competences developed by Bureau MUTANT. The competences are: *Democratic attitude; Democratic knowledge and understanding; Participative leadership; Research attitude*. These competences were reconstructed based on the experiences of the practitioners and based on what skills and knowledge practitioners would need to implement democratic practice.

#### 'Democrats are made not born'

A democratic way of life is not automatically reproducing itself, but needs attention and education. '*Democrats are made, not born*', as John Dewey said (Berding, 2011). Although the primary schools in the Netherlands are obliged by law to integrate democratic citizenship in their curriculum and programmes, attention to the youngest citizens from 0-6 years is hardly seen. Childcare centres are spaces with opportunities to create democratic practice. Early childhood services that pay attention to democratic skills and moral education, fulfill their social function, next to their economic function (opportunity for parents on the labour market) and their educational function (opportunity for children to develop their talents).

#### Pedagogical themes

Five pedagogical themes are used as operationalization of democratic citizenship into the childcare centre's practice: '*learning together on democracy*', '*participation and decision-making*', '*responsibility for the group and community*', '*conflict solving*' and '*respect for diversity*'. These themes fit into the Early Childhood pedagogical framework and curriculum and can be used parallel to the primary school programmes on democratic citizenship.

### Results and impact on children

The results in the project and the evaluation research show that children's sense of responsibility and their autonomy has increased. Creativity and problem solving has also been enhanced. They have also improved their listening skills and their willingness to help each other. Social solidarity is valued. Children feel welcome and respected – they matter. Children also discover that there are positive expectations of them, in relation to themselves and to others.

Practitioners spoke about the changes in children's attitudes:

*'more calm and more attention to each other'*

*'more fun and togetherness'*

*'more joint decision-making and rules together'*

*'Children who helped select the playing materials explained these themselves to the other children'.*

### Results and impact on practitioners

During the action-research project practitioners went through an on-going learning process which allowed them to experience and develop their professional role as *democratic role models and guides, participative leaders and researchers.*

*'Quality needs to be considered as an on-going "process" rather than as something that is achieved or not' (CoRe, 2011, p. 23).*

The data in the evaluation research showed that practitioners became increasingly aware of the importance of creating a calm environment and more space and time for children in order to give them the possibility to discover themselves their own ways to act autonomous, responsible and with solidarity. Practitioners have learnt to understand the importance of using and living democratic values such as equality, the right to participation and respect for diversity on a daily basis. Talking with children instead of talking to children was the leading norm in their new learning process. Providing relevant information and structure to children, showing and giving trust to them and believing in their competence were key elements in this process.

*'when I really show that their voice counts, children gain more confidence on me but also in themselves. From this trust and confidence they grow!'*

*'The really important turnaround is that staff have really experienced (for) themselves that providing frameworks for children is necessary to be able to focus on democracy. Quiet and clarity also create space to fit democracy and child participation into the daily routine.'*

Practitioners have also developed a new understanding of their professional role: sharing 'power' with children and that giving them the possibility to participate doesn't mean losing control.

Practitioners showed a shift in their leadership: from directive to coaching. The participation of children was not experienced as a threat to their role and expertise. They redefined their role as guiding and monitoring the democratic process among children. They increasingly worked as *participative leaders.*

*'Children's participation it's also about the effect of slowing down myself: not giving solutions, but putting questions back to the children. ... exciting! The strength is there! The children are enthusiastic and come up with many ideas. We realize children can handle more than we expected, they can handle conflicts.'*

The data revealed that learning by doing action-research, together with reflection and documentation of the process, is a powerful tool for professional, personal and team development.

### Results and impact on organisations

At the end of the project the evaluation research undertaken by the University of Melbourne showed that 100% of the practitioners indicated that their school or childcare service provided resources for promoting democracy compared to 58.6% at the begin of the project. This was a 41.4% shift. This indicated that the project had also impacted on how the participant's organisations had supported the practitioners to undertake this work.

Structural conditions that support a democratic praxis, were clear outcomes of the project. The project clearly showed that when practitioners are given time, space and knowledge, they have a great capacity to critically reflect on their own understandings of themselves, children and families and create change in practice to increase democracy in the everyday classroom. Through the action research meetings and mentoring as part of the project practitioners reflected on how the project re-energised their passion and social engagement as a result of changes to team communication, increased professional knowledge and skills:

*'There is more cooperation, more enthusiasm, more sharing of experiences, more taking personal responsibility.'*

These findings connect to the policy recommendations in the Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care report (CoRe) (University of East London & University of Gent, 2011). Specifically, this project supported the building of leadership capacity for practitioners by bringing theory and practice (CoRe, 2011, recommendation 8.2.2, p. 50) together in relation to democracy and children's participation.

The project also clearly shows that the role of the coordinator or coach is crucial in order to realize these results. This role includes:

- Indicating a democratic framework / theme
- Coaching, evaluation and monitoring progress
- Planning regular work meetings and encouraging critical questions
- Making time for documentation and reflection; what, why and & when - not quantity
- Transfer to the pedagogic policy: how does the documentation link to what already happens in practice in the organisation?

The strength of the action research project is explained by the practitioners and coordinators as follows: “*There is more cooperation, more enthusiasm, more sharing of experiences, more taking personal responsibility. Practitioners enjoy their work more again*”.

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