Beyond the Observable. Design Research for a Conversation Guideline

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Abstract
For children, it is difficult to express their subconscious images. For teachers, it is difficult to be sensitive to these images. Both are important if you want to help a pupil with his life philosophical development. Naomi Hoogenberg, designed a conversation guideline, to help both pupils and teachers to talk about the drawings children make. After hearing a story about having to let go someone you love, the children made drawings and subsequently had a conversation with the teacher, using the conversation guideline. The results were promising. Children found words to describe their subconscious images and the questions helped them to develop their own life philosophy.

Key words: Life philosophical development, conversation guideline, subconscious images, drawings, Dialogue School

Introduction
Even though only approximately ten percent of the Dutch population is religiously active, no less than sixty percent of the parents choose a primary school with a religious background (Zondervan, 2012), which we will call private schools, in order to distinguish them from public schools. In everyday practice this means that private schools have many pupils with no religious background or one which is different from that of the school they attend. Therefore, these schools are confronted with a new context for religious education.

One of the major shifts that took place over the past twenty or thirty years is that schools are talking less about religious education and more about life philosophical development. In the Netherlands we use this word to describe how children learn to look at themselves and their surroundings, how they reflect upon this and how they find ways to express themselves and act. The focus is mainly on everything that just cannot be touched or measured, but on everything which is not rational but still is relevant. Issues can be creating an identity, morals and ethics, dealing with life and death, monsters under your bed, imaginary friends and, of course, religion. As such, all religion is life philosophy but not all life philosophy is religion1.

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1 Ina ter Avest, e.a. (2007) presented an extensive background of the Dutch situation. They also use the terms ‘informal religion’, ‘wild devotion’, ‘spirituality’ and ‘sense-making processes’ (page 216)
The question this raises for the teachers in private schools is: how to stimulate the life philosophical development of the growing group of pupils who are not religiously educated in the religion which is the background of the school? Schoemaker (2013; 2014) concludes that there is a specific need for contemporary didactics for guiding children which does not focus on passing on a religious tradition, but on coaching children in developing their own life philosophical identity. To do so, he developed Dialogue School, a didactics which consists of tools for the teacher to help the pupil in this process.

Dialogue School is a so called self-exploring didactics in which children are not only stimulated to develop their own identity, but also learn to act upon this. Thus the diversity of life philosophies in the classroom of the children as well as of the teachers, is highly valued as a rich learning environment. The same happens with the vast amount of very diverse life philosophical influences a child undergoes every day through parents, the street, multimedia, literature, clubs and even the mall (Oosterheert, 2011). Dialogue School is not only a way to help children to assert themselves in this enormous wave of life philosophical influences – how will they find solid ground? – but it sees these influences as the opportunity to create a learning environment in which children can rise above themselves and in which they can experience something that transcends themselves (Schoemaker, 2011). Dialogue School consist of five tasks for the teacher (Schoemaker, 2014, 27-28):

1. The teacher shows the pupils, and makes them aware of, the different life philosophical influences they experience every day.
2. The teacher has the possibility to add some influences of his own.
3. The teacher stimulates the pupils to make choices which influences are relevant to them or not.
4. The teacher stimulates the pupils to make connections between the different relevant influences. Thus the pupil creates its own life philosophy.
5. The teacher stimulates the pupils to find words for their own life philosophy and to find ways to act upon it.

From 2012 - 2015 different sub-studies have taken place to explore different aspects of these five tasks for the teacher. One of these is Naomi Hoogenbergs bachelor research.

If you want to guide a pupil in his own life philosophical development, it is important to know where this child stands in his development, what the zone of his actual development is so that you can also determine the zone of his proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978, Schoemaker, 2010).

In 2014 Schoemaker stated that it is important for teachers to talk with their pupils about their creative work. Often children in these stories or drawings express things that are very important
to them. However, he also stated that it is very difficult to ask the right questions because children do not have a proper language yet to tell the teacher what they intend. The researcher wondered how you can have such a conversation with pupils to help them talk about their own drawings. He assumed that the manner in which this conversation is built would be essential if you want to help children find words to express their life philosophical experiences which they had tried to draw (task 5).²

The question is how such a conversation should be led to help the child find words and to help the teacher to establish the zone of the proximal life philosophical development. The goal was to develop a “conversation guideline” to help the teacher conduct such a conversation. In this research the focus is on designing such a conversation guideline, try out (as a pilot) how it works and adapt it accordingly. The main question is: What would a conversation guideline have to look like, in order to help pupils to find words for their own life philosophical development?

Construction of the conversation guideline

Talking with a pupil about his drawing to discover his life philosophical development is not like the common educational conversation every teacher has on a daily basis. This conversation is meant to understand the child in such a way that you can look through his eyes at his drawing and to see his subconscious images, the pictures in his head (De Schepper, 2004).

By combining questions about facts – What did you draw? What were you thinking of while drawing? – with questions about feelings – What did you feel? How does this make you feel? – the child gets a lot of space to find his own words for expressing what it meant when he was drawing (Travesier & Corveleyn, 1998).

By asking the pupil in different ways and from different perspectives about his subconscious images (Schoth, 2004), these images emerge and thus we can see what the child sees, how it experiences the world around him, what he or she thinks and feels. These feelings are very important because the mood someone is in when starting to draw, will tell a lot about the final drawing itself (Moser, n.d.). Finding words, describing situations and feelings and valuing these, is the start of developing a life philosophy (Van den Berg, Ter Avest & Kompels, 2013).

The actual reality is not always enough for children to find their words, so it is important to stimulate fantasy, especially with younger children. Asking the child how the story is related to

² Also see the video that was made of this research https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgwpHMsfOrY (English subtitles)
its drawing, activates the creative thinking. The child will be challenged to reflect and explore different perspectives.

Another important notion that was used to construct the conversation guideline is that a conversation can have three different levels: a factual level, an emotional level and an existential level (Smit, 2006). You can stimulate the conversation to a certain level by asking specific questions. As a simplification of this insight, Schoemaker (2007) formulated three questions that can be used when talking to a child about an existing piece of art:

- What do you see?
- How does this work make you feel?
- What do you recognise in this work that relates to your own personal life?

The first question will almost automatically lead to an answer on the factual level. The second question will almost automatically lead to an emotional level. The third question will not automatically lead toward an existential level in the conversation, but it opens the door.

Based on these principles – the three levels of a conversation, the need for fantasy, the need for a narrative and the need for different perspectives – the conversation guideline was designed. Figure 1 shows the design of the conversation guideline.
**Conversation Guideline, focussed on the life philosophical development of a child**

**Instructions**
This conversation guideline is designed to gain insight in the subconscious images of a child. The process starts with the teacher introducing a story or a theme. Next the child is asked to make a drawing.

It is not always necessary to use these questions in the given order. It is up to the teacher to decide when to use which question. Try not to use “why” questions to avoid the feeling of having to defend yourself. The manner in which you want to ask follow up questions is also up to the teacher. The most effective follow up questions will be about dreams, fantasy, ideal future, who am I or images of God. Always keep in mind that this conversation is meant to be in the best interest of the child. The child is always more important then what the teacher wants to know. There is no such thing as a wrong answer.

**Questions**

What did you draw? Can you tell me?
  - Is the drawing finished?
  - How does this make you feel?

Did the drawing turn out as you saw it in your head?

Can you imagine a story related to this drawing?
  - What were the different characters in your drawing doing before you drew them?
  - What will they be doing next?
  - How will the story end?
  - What do you think God could do in this story or drawing?

Do you think your story could come from a book?
  - If so, what would the cover be like?
  - What would be the title of the book?
  - What would be the title of this drawing?

Do you think you could have left out something in your drawing and still tell the same story?

What do you recognise in this story from your own life?
  - Who are you in this picture?
  - Who would you like to be?
  - If you are not in the picture, would it be possible to draw yourself in this picture?
  - Is this who you want to be?
  - Do you think the children in your class will see you in the same way?
  - Is this how you see yourself?

What feelings do you get from looking at this drawing?
  (the teacher shows different emoticons)
  - Which emoticon fits best to your drawing?
  - Can you explain?
  - Which emoticon fits the least?
  - Which emoticon fits best to yourself?
  - Which emoticon fits the least?

If you could change something in your drawing, what would you like to change?
  - What would be the first thing you would want to add?
  - Is there something in your own life you would want to change?
  - How would you like to do that?
  - Is this a dream?
  - How do you see your future?

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*Figure 1. Conversation guideline.*
Method

To try out the conversation guideline, a second grade class (age 7 – 8 years) of the Protestant Koningin Julianaschool in Apeldoorn was selected. In this class were 21 children in the age of 7 - 8 years old. In two lessons a story was told. In the first lesson it was the biblical story of the last supper. ‘Farewell’ was chosen as a theme in this story. The second story was the childrens book ‘Kikker en het vogeltje’ (Frog and the Birdsong) by Max Velthuijs, a story with the same theme. The children were asked to make a drawing of both stories.

Five pupils were randomly chosen but they had a choice if they wanted to participate or not. All pupils agreed. The researcher had a long talk with each of these five pupils separately about their drawing, using the conversation guideline. The goal of each conversation was to find out what dimensions of the life philosophical development of the children could be recognized. To label the different dimensions, the researcher used the three dimensions used by Verus, the national board for Protestant education for life philosophy and religious education (Boersma & Van den Bos, 2012):

1. Expressing existential experiences
2. Having awareness of and experience with transcendence
3. Having knowledge of and involvement with the world in which we live and of which we are a part

The drawings were the start and focus of the conversation and therefore were placed on a table between the researcher and the pupil. With each child, two conversations were held, one for each drawing. This choice was made because the children had never before had a similar conversation about the life philosophical dimensions of their drawings. The expectation was that the second conversation would be better. The conversations were recorded and afterwards they were written down word by word. Next the written conversations were analysed to see which of these three dimensions were named by the children.

At the end of the second conversation, the children were also asked how they liked having a conversation like this with the conversation guideline. How did they experience these conversations, which were the difficult or nice questions and would they like to have these kind of conversations more often, talking with the teacher about their drawing or other piece of art?

Results

A. Helping pupils to find words for their own life philosophy
To gain an understanding of the life philosophical development of a pupil, it is important to help the child find words for the images in his head. The conversation guideline is supposed to be helpful in this process. The ten conversations with pupils were analysed, using the three dimensions of life philosophical development:

- expressing existential experiences,
- having awareness of and experience with transcendence and
- having knowledge of and involvement with the world in which we live and of which we are a part (Boersma & Van den Bos, 2012).

The focus was mainly on labelling the phrases of the children with one of these three dimensions. In general, it can be stated that the stories the pupils told, all had a connection with all three of these dimensions. To give an impression we noted a few examples to illustrate each dimension.

1. Expressing existential experiences
Following the theme of farewell, the children easily talked about their experiences. Making the drawings brought out a lot of emotions which sometimes blocked the children in continuing with their drawing. Using the conversation guideline, it showed how children deal with these emotions by telling how beautiful they think it is in heaven.

Pupil A: Grandma now is with God in heaven. That is where she lives now. I hope she has the company of her mother and father. This I hope for her sake, but I don’t know for sure. If something like this happens to my mom and dad, I would want to be with them in their little star. Then I would also hope that, for me, a new life would start. A star like that is bigger than the earth, so grandma has almost the whole earth to herself. Maybe she has some friends with her.

The way the pupils look at themselves and how they see themselves was also often a topic in the different conversations. The way they describe this shows how intense they try to deal with these questions. Most of the time they talk about their basic emotions, but some of them can express how this feels or how it looks.

Pupil E: Well you know, often I am just happy and satisfied, I know a song about butterflies in my tummy. Like this, and then my mouth looks like this (he raises the corners of his mouth). Sometimes that is how I feel, then it is tickling very much in my tummy.

2. Having awareness of and experience with transcendence
In the conversations in response to the biblical story, it emerged that, in the eyes of the pupils, someone who dies, goes to heaven the moment they die. Three out of five pupils shared these ideas. In the conversations in response to the story of ‘Kikker en vogeltje’(Frog and the Birdsong), the little bird went, according to the children, straight to heaven, but, according to
three of the pupils, he came back to earth. These pupils told of the clear images they had in this respect.

Pupil E: How the story ends? He is just a little sad.
The researcher: And why is he a little sad?
Pupil E: Because he wants to come back to us, to his mom and dad, and my sister.
The researcher: Do you think this could happen?
Pupil E: Uh, no.

The researcher: That is not so bad. Do you think God could do something in this story or with regard to this drawing?
Pupil C: That would be difficult, but I think he could take the bird to heaven and bring it back to the earth.
The researcher: How would he do that, do you think?
Pupil C: He would send angels and they come to get the bird and take him with them and later, when the bird is all beautiful again, like it is now, they can guide him back down.

Analysing the conversations, it also shows that pupils A and C used more religious images (God, angels, heaven) in response to the non-religious story of Frog than in response to the biblical story of the last supper.

3. Having knowledge of and involvement with the world in which we live and of which we are a part

In these conversations it showed that reality and fantasy were very much mixed. To the pupils in second grade this was all just one reality (Ricoeur, 1991). These leaps between their fantasy and the real world help them to interpret and explain things in their daily lives. This showed in the conversations in response to the biblical story as well as in the story of Frog and the Birdsong.

Pupil A: Yes, that is why I thought it would make me feel good if the little bird had a home because otherwise he would not have a home, like a homeless guy, and that is why I thought little bird would have a home of its own where he could sleep.
Pupil C: Yes, I would like to live as it was in the beginning, you see, because of the one snake who made it so that everybody could die and get ill and I would not really want that.

B. Reflections on the conversation guideline

To reflect on the conversation guideline itself, the researcher asked the opinion of the children, but she also took her own notes immediately after each of the conversations. Reflecting on her own notes, it showed that all of the five pupils could clearly state the differences between the drawing they had in their head and the final drawing. The questions about the story of the drawing were difficult for some of the pupils. By referring to the book they had used, or by using a dummy (a book without any printing) the pupils could relate to their own experiences
and continue the conversation on a deeper level. It helped them to recognize situations in the story so that they could link these to their own experiences.

Because the children were not used to having a conversation like this, some of the pupils had the urge to respond to questions saying ‘I don’t know’. By continuing to ask these questions, their thoughts were stimulated and the stories emerged.

Another aspect of using the conversation guideline that stood out is the duration of the conversations. Usually the attention span of children in this age group is only ten minutes (Algra & Dolfsma-Troost, 2008), while all of these conversations took between 20 and 30 minutes without any problems with their attention.

After the second conversation, the researcher asked each of the five pupils what they thought of these conversations. All of the pupils did like to have these kind of conversations about their own drawings. They would like to have them more often.

The researcher: Would you like to have this kind of conversation more often?
Pupil C: Yes
The researcher: Then what would you like to talk about?
Pupil C: More about my own life.

Conclusions

What would a conversation guideline have to look like, to help pupils to find words for their own life philosophical development?

Analysis of the conversations shows that the conversation guideline as such works. The three dimensions of the life philosophical development – existential experiences, transcendence and the world – emerged in a natural manner during these conversations.

When talking with children, it is noted that they respond from their own subconscious images. Here they find the words to describe what is keeping them occupied. Young children, like the second grade pupils in this research, mix reality with fantasy. Having a conversation, preferably about something tangible like the drawings, helps them to let their subconscious images out. Doing this, it is possible to come very close to the path of life philosophical development and it appears that children have very clear images of God, heaven and life after death. They can also make a connection between these images and their own lives. This means that we can conclude that the questions in the conversation guideline were good questions to help the children find words.
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The only problem seems to be for teachers to find the time to have a conversation like this, which may last as long as 30 minutes, with each of his/her pupils.

Discussion

As noted, this research is based on the bachelor thesis of Naomi Hoogenberg. She designed, tested and analysed the conversation guideline all by herself. This research shows that the conversation guideline worked in this specific context. Different teachers used the conversation guideline since. They noticed that different questions could be left out or had to be adjusted to the specific child. A clear image did however not submerge yet. In the video, we decided to reduce the amount of questions to the following four:

1. What did you draw?
2. Have you succeeded in drawing what you wanted to draw?
3. What kind of feelings did you have while drawing this?
4. What is your relation with the drawing?

All other questions are presented as options for further questioning.

To explore the validity of the conversation guideline as such, further research is required. The aim of this research was to find a way to help children find words for their life philosophy, but also to help teachers to discover the actual zone of the life philosophical development of the children. This pilot is too small to show that a conversation guideline like this is the way to visualize the life philosophical development of pupils. Further research will be necessary. It did, however, become clear that the conversation guideline challenges children to express their subconscious images and that they actually like this process. They felt that they were taken seriously and liked to talk about what they had drawn. Thus, the conversation guideline is an excellent instrument to be used. It helps teachers to be sensitive toward children and the world they live in, including their fantasies.

References


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