

Driving a car for the first time:

teachers, caregivers and a child-driven approach

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Drs Jorien Meerdink is a social historian who worked as a teacher and researcher and then, in 1989, founded the Wetenschappelijke Educatieve en Sociaal-Kulturele Projekten (WESP - Scientific, Educational and Socio-cultural Research). She is Project Manager of the Foundation-supported Young Children's Views project that is investigating ways of training teachers and others to find out about young children's opinions and views through interviews based on open questions. The project has developed training materials and a syllabus that provides a methodology, and is now working on a manual that will provide a theoretical basis for this sort of work.



Effectiveness according to children

Usually it is adults who decide what is best for children, as they research effectiveness, and as they provide care, education, and special projects. In our child-driven methodology and, more specifically, in our project 'Young Children's Views', we try to let children judge. We argue in favour of a shift in emphasis: 'effectiveness **according** to children' instead of 'effectiveness **for** children'.

There are many assumptions about, and prejudices against, using children as a source of information about their own situation; and there are many

arguments against interviewing them. Often heard are:

- that children, especially young children, can't express themselves;
- that their life experience is too limited for them to be aware of alternatives and judge their situation; and
- that they are unable to have differentiated opinions, are too self-centred, and live in a world of magic and fantasy.

The result is that adults tend to have one-way communications with children: teaching them things instead of learning from them; and testing and checking their own hypotheses. Also, they use their own agenda and interests. One caregiver stated: 'I don't ask about what the child wants to say, but about what **I** want to hear'.

In the early nineties, childcare institutions in The Netherlands decided that they wanted to work in a client-centred way. To do this, they needed to let 'demand' be judged by children themselves. Various questionnaires for children about their satisfaction were in fact developed, but were never systematically used. WESP therefore developed and implemented a child-driven methodology in cooperation with a large number of children and some childcare facilities. It involved asking children of eight years and older open questions about their opinions and experiences, training caregivers and teachers (the

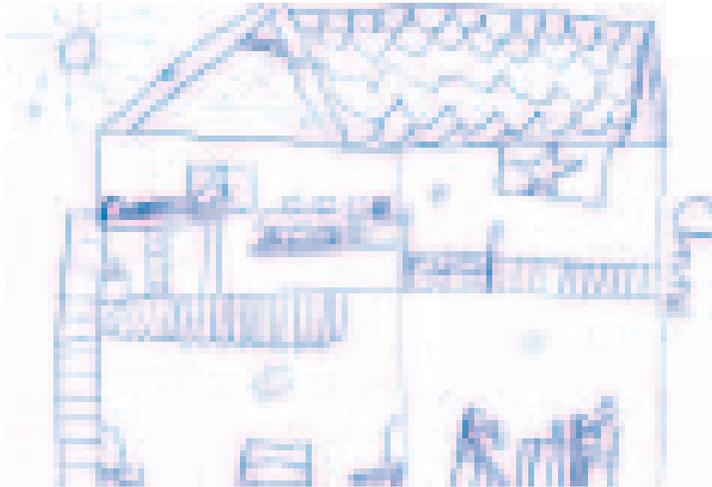
'suppliers') to perform such interviews, and using the acquired information to improve the 'product'. The rationale for using caregivers as interviewers – which proved to be right – is that they would feel more committed to the outcomes. A side effect (if not the main effect), was that the interview experience made them better listeners in their daily communication with children.

The value of the interviews based on open questions was soon revealed: it turned out that children are splendid informants, if taken seriously. They even express clearly defined 'quality criteria' that are often the opposite of what adults think that children find important. This shows that thinking **for** children can be a serious threat to understanding them fully.

Other effects occurred on three levels: the quality of care became more child-centred and anticipated children's needs; the quality of institutions improved in terms of environment, rules, client participation and so on; and the workers themselves took children more seriously, listened to them, kept their promises, gave them more time, and so on.

Young Children's Views

An ambitious project called Young Children's Views is now underway in a small town in The Netherlands. It is coordinated by the town council and the aim is to help disadvantaged children and/or children at risk, by bringing schools and care institutions together, and improving their communication and networks.



The Netherlands: my house
Anne

Included in this work is the creation of a tool, a 'listening method', through which the voices of children aged four to eight can be heard, and problem situations spotted and prevented. This is being developed by WESP. The project consists of:

- carrying out a literature study on what is known about verbal communication with children;
- developing a prototype tool for interviewing four to eight year old children about their school experiences;
- developing a child oriented interview training;
- training four teachers and caregivers;
- interviewing 25 young school children, about half of whom belong to the target group;
- reporting on what children liked and did not like, as well as on the agenda and interests of children; and
- developing a listening model for use in education.

The project is ambitious in the sense that there is hardly any existing expertise on interviewing young children. Another challenge is developing a system that makes the best use of the information given by the child, and transmitting that information from school to caregivers and *vice versa*.

We are currently in the middle of the interview training, and many conclusions can already be drawn. One interesting one is that children are very, very cooperative during the interviews and actually help the insecure trainees!

That first car drive

After reading the syllabus and the questionnaire, the trainees found themselves in an awkward position. They had to think about all this new information – which included leading questions, closed and open questions, questions from the agenda and interests of the child – while simultaneously using the tape recorder, **and** the questionnaire, **and** trying to cope with tools that were obtrusive because they were being used for the first time. The normal had become abnormal, so of course they reacted. Trainees said:

If I had to ask the way to the railway station, I wouldn't know how.

I don't want to lose my natural way of speaking with children because of this training.

Analysing their first interview they were still indignant. They found it confrontational to interview a child without knowing anything about that child beforehand while using a questionnaire made by someone else, and being required to pursue what the child has said, rather than what they wanted to know.

I realised that I had to empty myself of all prior knowledge in order to make a new way of listening possible. It felt terrible.

All trainees concluded that it is hard to ask open questions and avoid 'helping' or 'leading' questions. Facts are easier to ask about than feelings but elicit

much less information: children may tell complete stories in response to a question such as 'How did it feel?'.

They also concluded that they are clearly diffident about asking questions on the home situation or other difficult matters. This is not because children aren't open on the subject or aren't willing to talk about emotions. If interviewers take the initiative, children give as many 'keys' to their private situations as to their school ones. Instead, it is because the trainees themselves feel impertinent and blocked; they don't know what to do with the information and are afraid to burden the child too much. So, although the questionnaire contains as many questions about the home situation as about the 'safer' school one, interviewers hardly asked about parents or problems at home in their first interviews.

After the second interview the trainees decided to put away the questionnaire and let themselves be guided by the children. Making real contact turned out to be the best basis for acquiring information. Meanwhile, however, the trainees were so busy with themselves that they had a hard time paying attention to, or even looking at, the child. One trainee (a very experienced communications trainer), felt that he couldn't really get in touch with the children because he felt trapped in the constraints of having to do a technically good interview and to behave as required:

Perhaps there is something lacking in my communication with children in general. I have lost that sense of wonder that I feel when I see nature. Perhaps if I can regain that feeling with a child, then I can start making real contact again.

He and the trainer agreed that one of the preconditions for that is to put out of his head, not only the formal interview questionnaire, but also all the other implicit agendas he has when talking with children. These agendas range from a diagnosis of learning problems to advice about these.



The Netherlands: *you adults made this table too high for us*

Two trainees had been rather overwhelmed by the child's desire to play. They participated actively in the games but then couldn't make the switch back to the interview. One of them discovered that playing a memory game with realistic photo cards produced quite a few stories on the shown subjects. Another interviewer had 'panicked' when the child asked him to play a game, and had answered that he didn't like games. The child accepted this, gave him a small role in drawing a picture, played mostly by himself and, in the meantime, gave the interviewer a lot of information. The group concluded that children can talk usefully, even while they are playing.

Compared to the caregivers, the teachers had particular difficulties because they initially found it hard to participate in the uncertain process of learning by experience. This was because they were used to standardised learning programmes, and to determining pupil's starting levels before commencing lessons. At first they said:

You should have checked what we already knew and could do, instead of putting everything up for discussion and making us feel that we knew nothing.

But after the second interview, they were already concluding that it was refreshing to have no prior information about the children:

Otherwise I could not have questioned him in such an unprejudiced way.

I now realise that I'm usually inclined to listen to what I think I hear. It's good letting go of my own terms of reference and, for example, openly asking the child's opinion on the matter rather than simply checking whether I'm right or explaining my conclusions.

Interviewing in a school situation

The interview experiences made it clear that it is hard to interview children at school. There is hardly any suitable space – either the principal or teachers have to move – or there is too much noise and too many distractions. There is also the problem of time. In a school for special education for children at risk, the (only) teacher would have had to give the entire school time off in order to be able to conduct an interview during school time. This was solved by allowing her to conduct interviews after school hours.

There are other differences between interviewing children in a school setting and doing so in a formal care setting. Parents are willing to cooperate and children are unlikely to refuse in care settings so there is a higher refusal rate in schools.

Another is that teachers are less used to having one-to-one conversations with children than caregivers are, and also find it harder to ask questions about difficult subjects, specifically those relating to parents and the situation at home. Also, teachers tend to be satisfied with the first answer a child gives and then

move on to another subject instead of probing deeper. Yet a child's first answer will very often be just the beginning of a whole story.

Finally, teachers concluded that they tend to teach while interviewing: they check whether the children have learned anything from what they have just talked about, rather than checking whether they, the interviewers, have understood completely. We will be continuing with our analysis of interview attitudes and techniques.

The reactions

All the children reacted positively to the interviews. They found them interesting, liked the individual attention, and felt they had something to say. As a reward for their cooperation, they could choose a small present from a basket and these were appreciated. The interviewers were surprised and happy that the children were able to sit and talk for such a long time (varying from 20 minutes to over an hour). They concluded that:

Perhaps we underestimate children; perhaps we are too focused on what is problematic and negative.

The children gave a lot of information in response to open questions about how they experience their environment. They gave consistent information and realistic and differentiated judgements on their schoolmates or teachers. As they talked, fantasy and

magic may have featured too but these did not prevent us hearing about the realities of their lives.

What children said to us

The trainees we worked with often overestimated the importance of teachers in children's environments: the most important people in the lives of children in schools are actually their peers. In the training we asked them what question they would ask a child who had both a male and a female teacher, and who said 'The last time I had fun in the classroom was when I played a fun game with Martin.' (Martin was the child's friend). The trainees came up with:

What game was that?

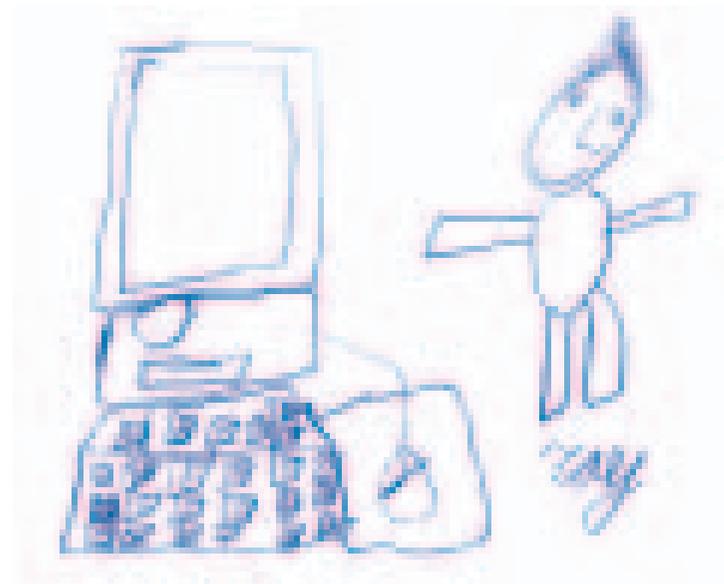
What was fun about it?

Was this when your male or your female teacher was teaching?

The key word that the trainer wanted to hear was 'Martin' but the trainees couldn't produce this. Peers are important both in a positive and a negative way. Children often get most of their support from other children; not from caregivers, teachers or parents. At the same time, however, they often need to be protected from their classmates by their teachers. It turned out that being bullied is the number one cause of

emotions that all children express in the interviews. It is the subject they talk about most, and most emotionally.

It is too early to draw any general conclusions at this stage of the project and it is hard to say whether interviews can be a suitable listening mechanism within the current structure and organisation of education. What can already definitely be concluded, however, is that the possibilities and need for working in a child-driven way are obvious, and that the interview is an interesting technique to consider as part of common and daily communication. ○



The Netherlands: computers are this simple
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