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Conversations with children to identify educational needs

Goal(s)/question(s)/problem(s)

Presently, many primary education schools in the Netherlands are in the middle of implementing a new way of dealing with diversity (HGW), which tries to avoid the labeling of deficiencies, but emphasizes the cooperation between all parties involved (parents, teachers, students) to encourage student learning. The teacher is supposed to first identify the educational needs of all students and then cluster them. Conversations with children is recommended as one of the ways in which educational needs can be identified (Pameijer, Van Beukering & De Lange, 2009). The present study focuses on the experience of teachers in conducting these conversations. Our research question is: What role do conversations with children play in identifying the educational needs of students.

Procedure and/or instruments

Our study was part of a trajectory in which HGW was implemented via communities of practice in 8 cooperating schools. Around eighty teachers gathered in fourteen subgroups of similar grades to discuss their experiences in implementing HGW. From an expert from the university (with which these schools were connected) they received instruction in conversation techniques. Next, the teachers conducted interviews in their own practice, and exchanged their findings with fellows. Each time that the learning community gathered, one of the participants wrote down the group's reflections. These reflections were used as data for our study. Our next data source consisted of open interviews with 14 teachers, that were conducted three months after the teachers experimented with the conversations. The teachers were selected by using stratified random sampling in which all schools and all subgroups were represented. We asked teachers which role the conversations played in identifying educational needs of students.

Findings and interpretations

After having conducted the interviews, we found Watzlawick's (1983) distinction between "content aspects" and "relationship aspect" useful in making sense of the interviews. Many teachers agreed that conversations with children were useful in strengthening the pedagogical relationship with children. They had the feeling that children appreciated the fact they were listened to. Even if the information the children gave was not new to the teacher, some felt that the opportunity to share things with the teacher was important for the students. As for the content of the interviews, the experience of teachers was mixed. Especially teachers of younger children stressed that their students did not have an adequate understanding of their needs. The value of the content aspect of the conversation seemed to increase with the age of students. Conversations with children, in the eyes of teachers, seems to enhance the ownership of children of their own learning process.

Relevance for practice and/or policy

Conversations with children seems to be one of the ways in the ownership of students of their learning process can be encouraged. The results of the study will be used in adapting the curriculum of the teacher training institution, to which the participating schools are connected.

Interactivity of the session

At the beginning of our presentation, we will ask the audience's opinion on the question whether the needs of all students should be investigated by teachers (by using conversations), or whether concentration on special educational needs suffices. Further, we'll address the issue whether privacy during conversations is necessary. Finally we'll discuss whether it would be desirable if teachers are assigned time to work with individual students.

References

Pameijer, N, Van Beukering, T., & De Lange, S. (2009). *Handelingsgericht werken: een handreiking voor het schoolteam*. Leuven/Den Haag: Acco.

Watzlawick, P, Beavin, J.H. & Jackson, D.J. (1983). *De pragmatische aspecten van de menselijke communicatie*. Deventer: Van Loghum Slaterus