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# 18 Human flourishing in developmental education schools

## A Collaborative Project Perspective<sup>†</sup>

Chiel van der Veen & Lynne Wolbert

In the early '80s, various Dutch educational researchers, practitioners, teacher trainers and policy makers got involved in what we came to call a collaborative project. What brought and still brings them together are their critiques of a form of education based on the direct transmission of cultural meanings and rote-like learning, whilst neglecting children's personal sense. From these critiques, a long-term collaboration was begun, leading to an approach to education which promotes "children's meaningful learning and cultural development in an emancipatory way" (van Oers, 2012, p.59). This approach to education is referred to as Developmental Education (van Oers, 2012a). In this chapter, we will reflect on the emergence of the Developmental Education approach in the Netherlands from a project perspective. Firstly, we will distinguish four stages, or phases of projects in describing the foundation and development of Developmental Education. Secondly, we will argue that the Developmental Education project, as both a descriptive and normative conception of good education, promotes the flourishing of teachers and children by creating conditions for children to develop their personalities in a broad sense, acquire agency for participating in cultural activities, and design their own life-projects. Further, teachers in Developmental Education flourish themselves in their project of educating children.

### From shared problem to collaborative project

Developmental Education is an approach for the education of children in pre- and primary school settings (0-12 year olds) and is rooted in Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory. For over three decades, numerous teachers, innovators, researchers, policy makers, etc. have been collaborating in an attempt to develop a

theoretically well-grounded practice for the education of (young) children that would be inherently pedagogical, that is to say an approach that aims to deliberately promote the cultural development of children, acknowledging the responsibilities and normative choices that educators have to make (and want to make) in helping children to become autonomous and critical agents in society. (van Oers, 2012a, p.13)

As for today, a well-organized community is established involving over 300 schools that have implemented the Developmental Education approach, a platform for members organizing conferences, a teacher training center, and more. Tracing back the emergence and development of the Developmental Education approach in the Netherlands, we can undoubtedly see the similarities with the collaborative projects as described in this book. Characteristic of projects is that they embody change on both an individual and societal level, inherently advocating collaboration and promoting human flourishing.

### Phase 1: Shared discontent with the status quo of education in the Netherlands

In educational discourse, there is an ongoing debate on how children's learning and development in the context of formal schooling should be organized. Traditionally, schooling is organized as the transmission of knowledge and skills from teacher to children. Children's personal sense is often neglected. This is considered to be one of the main reasons for children becoming alienated from the practice of schooling (Leontiev, 1981). From the early '70s, several researchers, teachers and educational developers from different institutions in the Netherlands experienced this very problem and shared their discontent with this one-sided focus on transmission. Further, in 1985 the Primary Education Act became effective in which the starting age for compulsory education was lowered from six to five years and separate kindergartens were abolished and integrated into primary schools. Educators involved in the education of the youngest children worried that play would gradually disappear from the curriculum at the cost of formal schooling. It was Frea Janssen-Vos who first

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developed an approach to education for the youngest children which would promote their development in the context of meaningful play activities. Her work supported the legitimacy of the cultural-historical research program as executed at the VU University Amsterdam. Under conditions of shared discontent among educators over this one-sided focus on transmission of knowledge, the integration of kindergartens into primary schools acted as a trigger for the project to emerge.

### Phase 2: Negotiation of aims and direction

In the second phase of the development of this project, people became aware of the problem and attempted to clarify it. They 'projected' the ideal situation to reach and negotiated aims and direction. In the start-up of the Developmental Education project, there was an ongoing debate on how pupils should appropriate cultural tools and to what extent this process of appropriation should be personally meaningful for them. Following the work of Davydov (1977), some people involved in the initial phase of the project argued that children should be provided with high quality cultural tools by the teacher, preferably 'scientific concepts'. Others found this approach too instrumental, giving no room for children to (re)construct these tools. Besides, it was argued that providing children with cultural tools alone runs the risk of neglecting their personal sense (i.e. their motives or needs to use these tools). The latter issue was the very problem from which the Developmental Education project emerged. So it was decided by the majority of those involved in the project that the focus should be on promoting children's cultural development, whilst acknowledging their responsibility, agency, motives and needs.

### Phase 3: Developmental Education community

In the third phase, there was a clear conception of the problem at stake and from this problem, a project was launched to change the current educational practice. This project was officially named Developmental Education (in Dutch: Ontwikkelingsgericht Onderwijs). Educators from different practices became involved, and collaboratively they aimed to change educational practices. A community was established, allocating different roles (researcher, developer, teacher) to the people involved in the Developmental Education project. Further, this community promotes and facilitates collaboration between the different roles. Collaboratively, the Developmental Education community aims to change educational practices towards a practice that inherently promotes the flourishing of children and teachers involved.

### Phase 4: Steps towards institutionalization

As for today, Developmental Education has become partially mainstreamed and institutionalized. Over the years, a specific language has been developed to communicate about a conception of good education that follows from the Developmental Education approach. Such concepts as 'the zone of proximal development', 'play-based curriculum' and 'meaningful learning' have become part of the language of the wider, Dutch educational community. In several institutes for primary teacher education, students can specialize in the Developmental Education approach. However, to some extent Developmental Education remains in a project state. Many schools in the Netherlands still focus on the one-sided transmission of knowledge and skills, there is an ongoing debate about the aims and function of education in Dutch society, and the majority of people involved in education still conceive of Developmental Education as a socio-constructivist approach to education in which children can do whatever they please.

## Developmental Education and flourishing

In (educational) philosophy, there is a renewed interest in Aristotelian virtue ethics. In neo-Aristotelian theory the concept of human flourishing plays a central role. Educational philosophers argue that children should flourish in life and that therefore flourishing should be the ultimate aim of education. To flourish means to have actualized your potential, to do the best in life *you* can (e.g. Rasmussen, 1999). In theories of human flourishing there is often a notion of development implied; to flourish is a process, an activity, a *praxis* (Hurka, 1999). Following Aristotle, a third important aspect of the concept of human flourishing is that it combines both objective and subjective goods (De Ruyter, 2007). We should thus aim for children to live a good life, also in a moral sense; engaging in

objective goods, but to also have the feeling they live a good life in a 'happy' sense; enjoying what they are doing. Humans only flourish if they themselves feel or know that they do (De Ruyter, 2007).

Several aspects of the projective method, as explained by Kravtsov and Kravtsova (chapter 1), and several aspects of Developmental Education, connect with the idea of flourishing. The focus of Developmental Education is indeed to develop children's personalities in a broad sense and conceives of the child's education as something that is more than knowledge transmission alone, namely becoming 'well-equipped' for the project that is the child's own life. In the 'Golden Key' program this idea is well described as "every child having acquired his own golden key from and to the whole world" (p. 39). As such, Developmental Education schools promote children's flourishing and help them to come into the world as unique, singular beings (Biesta, 2011). Secondly, the notion of (never-ending) development is ubiquitous in activity theory, since the framework of Developmental Educational is built around promoting the development of the individual child to be autonomous, critical members of society, and as such helps children to be able to design their own life-projects. Vygotsky's notion of the "unity of affect and intellect" (p. 37), meaning that the content of education has to be connected to the interests of children and must not have an alien character, goes well with the Aristotelian notion that flourishing combines living a good life and feeling happy about what you do.

### Reciprocal flourishing

Kravtsov and Kravtsova explain in their chapter how the projective method is a developing process for all participants. The major difference between the projective method and all others is "that the developing work is aimed not at the individual child or group of children but at the whole environment and all spheres of children's and adults' life" (p. 34). Perhaps this is the most important point we can make about human flourishing as an aim of Developmental Education. In Developmental Education the multilevel, multidirectional, multi-environmental approach to human flourishing is of high importance. In the same way as all participants get involved in various collaborative projects, striving for flourishing also influences all parties concerned. And it works both ways. In Developmental Education, the teacher creates and is part of the environment of the pupil, trying to create the best possible environment to flourish, but at the same time the pupil is part of the environment of the teacher and with his behavior contributes to the conditions for the teacher to flourish. The same applies to all other subjects involved in Developmental Education.

### Conclusion

In this reflection, we have described the emergence and development of the Developmental Education approach in the Netherlands from a project perspective. Using the concept of collaborative project, we were able to distinguish the different phases in the development of this project. Tracing back the emergence of the Developmental Education project, we could see how it embodies change and collaboration. Furthermore, we have argued that the aim of Developmental Education can be interpreted as promoting the flourishing of children and teachers. Finally, using collaborative project as unit of analysis has contributed to our understanding of collaboration, change and flourishing within the Developmental Education project. As a normative conception of good education, the Developmental Education approach aims to promote the flourishing of children and teachers involved and, thereby, to change not only the individual child or teacher but their whole environment.

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