

**ACTION RESEARCH ON "RECIPROCITY IN LEARNING TO BELIEVE"
The Intertwinement of Theory, Method and Praxis**

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THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

The action research project we present in this contribution takes as its starting point the **theoretical** pedagogical and theological **insight** that the relationship between parents and their children should be interpreted as a bridge via which faith or religious identity formation can be stimulated in regard to the next generation. Two factors are important for successful processes of bridging: firstly, the meaningfulness of faith for the parents themselves, and secondly the way in which parents speak about their own faith, their experiences and convictions, with their children or youngsters.

These insights are important, due to the fact that the transfer of a religious tradition, particular religious subject matter and specific religious practices pursued in earlier days is no longer obvious in highly individualized and secularized societies. Societies in which this transfer is no longer automatically realized by denominational institutions, that is for example by schools and churches. Today, adolescents do not 'naturally' follow in the footsteps of their parents when becoming a member of a church or when membership or engagement with another religious community is at stake. Although a lot of the adolescents typify themselves as non-churchmembers (and in this sense the secularization rate is indeed high), this does not mean (as a lot of research already has shown) that they should be characterized as 'non believers'. On the contrary, there is a tremendous sense of and longing for religiosity among adolescents (cf. Alma & Janssen, 2000).

The relationship between parents and their children is mostly characterized now as 'reciprocity in learning to believe'. In conversations and dialogues both interlocutors can learn from each other about faith, or more broader defined about issues of worldview or worldviews. These dynamic processes can enhance the exchange of the meaning of faith at both sides. So, in stead of interpreting the relation between the generations as one of transfer, that is the linear handing over of religious subject-matter, convictions and practices from the older generation to the younger one, these intergenerational relations are characterized as mutual, that is reciprocal learning processes. Processes that are transformative in nature in stead of aiming

of the transmission or transfer of particular subject matter at stake.

Although the conversations on the subject of faith between parents and their children usually take place casually during dinner and doing the dishes, for this action research project, however, the church setting was chosen. Notwithstanding the fact that a lot of youngsters in the end do not make a decision for becoming an active and engaged church member, church education as the environment where they can talk about faith with each other and with a pastor, was chosen as the context for this research project. In this case the target group was extended with the parents of the adolescents. The fundamental research question was: *How and under which conditions can reciprocal learning to believe be enhanced for 16/17 year-olds and their parents?*

The theoretical part of the research that deals with the concept of 'reciprocal learning how to believe', is divided into two parts one dealing with 'reciprocal learning' and the second one dealing with 'believing'.

Following John Dewey's pragmatic theory of knowing (Dewey: 1859-1952), **the process of reciprocal learning** is coined as transactional experience, as a process of intersubjectivity. Along this lines, the classical epistemology embodied in the Cartesian subject-object split of *res cogito* and *res extensa* which creates a dualism between a person and the world, and between people themselves, can be overcome.

With the notion 'experience' Dewey focuses on the interaction - Dewey later called it transaction - between a living organism and its environment. A relation also characterized as one of doing and undergoing. In case the organism is a human being and the environment is a cultivated one, that is the intended effect of human actions and acting, we have to do we human experience. The notion 'intersubjectivity' is introduced here to criticize the paradigm of consciousness or subjectivity in which the other (alter) is only introduced after the foundationalist *a priori* existence of a transcendental ego or subject. With the paradigm shift from consciousness to intersubjectivity, ontogenesis and sociogenesis are characterized as two sides of the same coin. Anthropologically, communicatively and social philosophically speaking, subjectivity or personal identity realizes itself only within a meaningful impregnated matrix of intersubjectively given that is preformed relations. In line with Habermas' view the relational side of interaction/transaction is expressed with the term 'intersubjectivity', were with 'communication' the structural aspects are stressed (cf. Biesta et al., 1997).

Dewey's pedagogical view can be summarized as 'creating an experience' or as the process of 'making something in common'. Creating the possibilities for gaining an experience in participation, cooperation and communication with peers and significant others. It has to do with the coordination of the social and the individual components. Learning as an intersubjective and reciprocal process by definition aims at the increase of reflective experiences as an ongoing and open process. The temporally outcomes are communication,

reorganization of behavior, meaning finding as well as meaning construction, the renewal of the actual possibilities of a person/persons. So, a qualitative development of action patterns of the learners is at stake here. All modi of human experience are or can be involved: affective-emotional, social-political, expressive, moral, religious, attitudinal, and cognitive.

Three distinctive criteria can be distinguished here for the design and evaluation of learning processes: the initial situation as the starting point and as change component in the learning process; cooperation as the logical implication of the intertwining of ontogenesis and sociogenesis; openness towards the future, that is creating possibilities for new or renewed experiences (cf. Dewey, 1938).

Dewey's theory of knowing and his theory of education find a normative perspective in the concept of democracy, that is "more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). The three mutual connected criteria are freedom, equality and responsibility. Freedom and equality balance one another, and responsibility keeps open the possibility for continuous change. This normativity can mainly be seen in the expression of the pedagogical demand for consistency in end and means. The pedagogical end has already to be present in the used means.

Although Dewey had an interest in the subject-matter of religion from the very start of his academic career, and wrote a couple of articles dealing explicitly with religion, he only wrote a very small systematic book on this matter under the title *A Common Faith* (Dewey, 1934), when he was already seventy-five years of age.

Due to his anti-transcendentalist and anti-revelationist stance towards religion he was quite often severely attacked in religious circles and by people dealing with religious education both in the US and in the Netherlands (cf. Miedema, 1995). Dewey's intersubjectivist turn stressing the production/construction of knowledge about minds, objects and God in social practices, gives possibilities for reclaiming the epistemic and scientific status of religious beliefs under the banners of radical empiricism. Dewey's statement that all experiences are real experiences, is fully in line with James' view that things be definable in terms drawn from experience, and bear witness to an open-ended pragmatism and ethical activism (cf. West, 1993).

Nowadays non-revelationist developments in theology as for example process theology (Whitehead, 1954), Pannenberg's (Pannenberg, 1983) and Kuitert's (Kuitert, 1992) theological anthropology show striking similarities with Dewey's position. A new space appears in which modern or postmodern theology and Deweyan thinking can cooperate, in such a way that reciprocal learning understood as transactional experience and believe can be combined. Religious identity formation or faith of adolescents is understandable as a dynamic, intersubjective and continuous process in which tradition, community and parents are or can be part of the preformed cultural environment with which the adolescent interacts/transacts. It is this space that has

been explored in the action research project carried out with the 16/17-year-olds and their parents.

So far, the theoretical part has yielded a transactional view on learning, on believe and on learning-to-believe. The concept of 'experience' - and experience is by definition transactional - is the heuristic concept by which living and learning can adequately be understood and interpreted. It forms the core nucleus of Dewey's pragmatic philosophy and pedagogy of action and acting.

THE ACTUAL ACTION RESEARCH

The **empirical part** of the action research takes also its starting point in Dewey's pragmatic theory of knowing, his view on intersubjectivity, on communication, and last but not least in his view on democracy.

The 'classical' linear view on science, scientific research and experiment is no longer sufficient to bring about the relationship between theory and empirics. The first consequence is a non-linear, dynamical view on research, between knowledge/reflection and action/acting. Due to this understanding there is a continuous going back and forth of action and reflection. Only by decision this continuation can be stopped, comes temporarily to an end. The non-dualistic stance includes the view that there is not an essential difference between every day reflection, insight or knowledge and scientifically produced reflection, insights or knowledge. It includes as well the view that the relationships between all actors - being it research participants and researchers, should be given form and content within a hermeneutical setting, that is as subject-subject relations (cf. Biesta, 1992).

So, methodologically speaking there is a conceptual consistency between the theoretical part on living and learning interpreted via the notion of 'experience', and the methodological part. That is the reason that the choice for action research is not an incidental one but follows consistently from the theoretical starting point.

Action research itself can also adequately understood in terms of experience. Then the transactional relationship between all research participants is at stake. So, forming at the methodological level - and this distinction is an analytical and not an ontological one - the equivalent of the 'reciprocity of learning' between adolescents and parents or teachers and students. Also the more distantiated reflection after the action research process, in which the (academic) action researcher has taken part as well, can be coined as a transactional relationship. It is an experience, forming with the other gained experiences the stock of experiences at hand.

In historical reconstructions, action research characterized by processes of learning, action and change is quite often traced back to Dewey's 1929 book *The Sources of A Science of Education* (cf. Miedema & Biesta, 1989). Just to show the accuracy of this reconstruction, we point to his view stated in that book. For Dewey the results of a science of education are only sources to be used through the medium of the mind of educa-

tors, to make educational functions more intelligent. Scientific inquiry need to be related to the autonomous educational practices and concrete educational experiences which provide the data and subject matter that form the problems of inquiry and also the final test of the value of the conclusions of such research.

And to quote finally from the 'General Conclusion':

"But there is no way to discover what is 'more truly educational' except by the continuation of the educational act itself. The discovery is never made; it is always making. (...) Education is by its nature an endless circle or spiral. It is an activity which includes science [i.e. the science of education, the authors] within itself. In its very process it sets more problems to be further studies, which then react into the educative process to change it still further, and thus demand more thought, more science, and so on, in everlasting sequence" (Dewey, 1984, pp. 39-40).

So from a historical as well as systematical point of view there is Deweyan consistency between theory and action research here.¹

The action research project methodologically follows the *model of exemplary action research* as it has been used in the Netherlands during the last decades by several action researchers (e.g. Coenen, 1989; Van der Zande, 1990). The notion 'exemplary action research' can have a double meaning. It may first mean that the actors can work out one concrete problem or issue. The experience gained in this way may be used in an other situation in an adapted form suitable for that particular context. In the second meaning of the term the research method as such may be usable in an other setting. So, learning, acting and change processes can be yielded that might be useful in other situations.

In this methodological research format three phases are distinguished, respectively the theme phase, the crystallization phase, and the exemplary phase. In the *theme phase* all actors investigate the research questions and the theme of the research together, and fill it with common sense knowledge. In the *crystallization phase* the added issues are analyzed and systematized by the researcher. Then the co-actors decide together about the topics they hold as exemplary for the leading theme of the research, that is the exemplar. Finally, in the *exemplary phase* the co-actors research the chosen topics in such a way that what the participants learn can be perceived as exemplary for the way people deal with questions of faith. The action research project has been conducted in a three-actor model. The three actors are respectively the adolescents, the parents and the researcher. Their co-operation whilst researching and learning, leads to the fulfillment of the double aim of action research, that is the expansion of the possibilities of action competencies of the co-actors, and the increase of the scientific knowledge of the researcher.

Action research on "reciprocity in learning to believe" is seen as learning processes in separate and mixed groups of

parents and adolescents. Groups in which the learning processes are open and non-teleological, so with no fixed aims. The effects on the group *in toto* or on the individuals are and should not be predictable before hand. Only at hindsight explanations can tried to be given. The co-operation between parents and adolescents and with the researcher is an open learning process for all parties engaged. Such a learning process results in new meanings and new possibilities for action. The quality criterion for this co-operation is *reciprocal adequacy* (cf. Coenen, 1989, pp. 335-338). For the researcher it means sufficient and relevant scientific insight in regard with the issue of 'reciprocity in learning to believe', and for youngsters and their parents the broadening of possibilities for action in respect with 'learning to believe'.

The action research project should to meet the above mentioned criteria freedom, equality, and responsibility, and aims in form and content at increase of consciousness, democratization and emancipation as empowerment.

The researcher has explicitly stated the direction in religious education in a church setting, which she is holding valuable: a change from routine-like behavior of actors in regard with learning-to-believe in the direction of active, autonomous and reflective decision-making at the side of the actors and in a reciprocal manner. Actors and researcher should be able to work together in this direction and be willing to do so.

How this factual will take form and content is precisely the challenge of this cooperative and collaborative action research project. Two checks are important here. First, the *check of the problem*. Actors and researcher agree about the insight that the transfer view on believes no longer is sufficient, and new concepts should be developed. Second the *check of the theme*. All participants agree that reciprocal learning-to-believe might be a fruitful direction to take both for actors and researcher.

Regarding these checks it was learned from a pilot study that the initial contact with the participants had to be monitored more carefully. This is the rationale for the strategy that the parents and the adolescents were interviewed first. These conversations also offer the possibility to give information about the aims and the design of the research. Such information may stimulate the motivation of the participants. It was important too while the initiative for this action research project came from the researcher. It was based on her experience in church work and her theoretical understanding as a theologian of the problematic situation of 'believe-education' in a church setting. The interviews have been compiled to group portraits of the parents and the children. The portraits function as an introduction of the co-actors in this research to the reader.

The researcher organized *in toto* nine sessions with parents and adolescents. During the first two sessions the parents and adolescents were separated. The third session was a joint one, and the fourth again a separate one. In the fifth and sixth session, when the exemplary samples of reciprocal learning to believe were on the agenda, all participants again came

together. All sessions were videotaped, and the conversations during the sessions in smaller groups were put on audiocassette. These recordings were transcribed in protocols. The written outcome of assignments made during the sessions was collected. The researcher also kept a diary in which all considerations; procedures and processes were noted. The data from this material were used in writing the research report in the form of a doctoral dissertation (see for all the details Lanser, 2000).

THE INTERTWINEMENT: PROCESSES AND RESULTS

The **praxis part** of the action research is immediately related to the theoretical as well as to the methodological part. It forms a necessary chain with the two other parts. So, characteristic for this project is the intertwining of these three parts. The transactional or intersubjective mode of the conversations forms the hard core of the sessions, and is in this way constitutive for this action research project.

Just briefly about the theme and crystallization phase and about the development in process of the first seven sessions in co-operation with the co-actors. The first two sessions per group formed the theme phase. During these sessions the participants examined the generative theme 'reciprocal learning to believe' and filed the topic with their knowledge and experiences. These conversations were put on videotape and analyzed in between the sessions. The analysis fostered the researcher's understanding of the development in the process of the series of conversations. During the crystallization phase it was the researcher's job to try and discover a certain pattern in the conversations.

The analysis showed the same problem for both groups: the dilemma between individuation and participation. In light of this findings the exemplary research aim for the last two sessions were formulated as learning a vision and a practice in which individuation and participation are related to each other. This theme was used to systematize the themes of the conversation of the first sessions. An overview of these themes was given to the participants together with an explanation. The group of adolescents chose as an exemplary theme "Friend, also images of God?" the parents showed a preference for the topic "Images of God". These issues became the two themes for the conversation on the fifth and sixth session when the two groups got together.

Just a few words about the last two joint exemplary sessions of parents and adolescents. The theme chosen by the adolescents was examined through a bibliodrama of the story of Jonathan and David (1 Samuel 20). By the end of the session both adolescents and parents concluded that loyalty and trust are the most important conditions for relationships. They added, that they who can show loyalty and trust, can be images of God. During the last session the parents' theme was central. In a first round all were able to decide for an 'image of god' from a number of written cards. In small groups they explained their choice. In a second round they were allowed to make another choice and again they explained each other why this image was an

important supplement to the first one they had chosen. The outcome of this session was a diverse and colorful image of God. Both parents and adolescents found it enriching and inspiring to hear from each other what they thought about the core of religion, God.

So far about the learning processes of parents and adolescents. Finally a few words about the learning process of the researcher, i.e. relating the outcomes to the theoretical insights we presented in the first section of this contribution. Insight is gained on three related patterns in the learning process of the actors: the developing relation between individuation and participation (here the tension between transmission and transformation is central), the changes of the adolescents (they become conscious of their own belief and experience greater trust in their own communicative competence regarding issues of belief and faith), and the changes of the parents that is their understanding of the importance of friendship and their discovery to take their children serious. It appears in the first pattern that the development of loyalty and trust play an important role. They turn out to be a condition for and an action quality of the relation between individuation and participation. Therefore they function as a condition and quality of intersubjectivity, and are core concepts of belief too.

Analyzing the data it was found that the relations are connected with the content of developing faith. The development takes place in dynamic xenogamy of reflection and action. The changes in the group of young people and the group of parents were analyzed in terms of their communication patterns. The effects of the communication were that the participants developed different meanings for the same concept. So, leading to a differentiation in the initial given meanings. The awareness of differentiation leads to the conclusion that a learning and change process has taken place. Doing research together on the tradition of belief has been a reciprocal learning process. But it becomes clear that not only the parents and children have changed in such a reciprocal process - intra-personal and also their relationship, i.e. inter-personal - but that also *tradition* (traditional concepts with their specific connotation) may be renewed or changed. That's why we propose the term '**transformativity in learning to believe**' in stead of 'reciprocity in learning to believe'.

This action research also shows that concepts like 'loyalty' and 'trust' play an important role on the level of understanding as well as in the content of the conversations. It can be concluded that educators of learning processes have to have faith in intersubjectivity and that learning to believe can lead to subjectivation and pluralization of believe.

With these findings the research question "How can reciprocal learning between 16/17 year olds and their parents be improved?" can be answered as follows: a) by using the transactional experience of believe as an instrument of heuristics in the design and development of the processes of learning to belief; b) by using the example of the sessions in this action research in a contextually adjusted way; and c) by co-operating

in a process of research of tradition. The conditions under which the reciprocal learning of 16/17 year-olds and their parents can be improved, have been found in the modification of Dewey's pedagogical directions, i.e. i) trust intersubjectivity; ii) show respect for one's own and other one's subjectivity; and iii) seeing the tradition of faith as stories with still open meanings, open for renewal, adaptation, and new connotations.

Note

1. Following the Deweyan conceptualization, it is possible to connect and elaborate on it by introducing the conception of a non-linear dynamical philosophy of science of for example Lorenz, Mandelbrot, or Prigogine and Stengers. In this non-linear dynamics the thinking of cause-and-effect is replaced by an open system-model. In such a model complex factors develop through processes. The smallest unit in the complex process is called a 'fractal'. In line with this conceptualization the processing procedure 'transactional experience of faith' can be understood as 'fractal' of all learning processes related to the very issue of believing (see Lanser-van der Velde, 2000).

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