

The Netherlands

Learning to let go

Based on an interview with Jorien Meerdink, Director of Wetenschappelijke Educatieve en Sociaal-culturele Projecten

Wetenschappelijke Educatieve en Sociaal-culturele Projecten ('scientific educational and socio-cultural projects' – WESP) is a Dutch NGO established in 1989 by Jorien Meerdink. WESP believes that services should not only respond to the needs of children, but that children themselves should participate in the decision-making process. WESP developed the 'vraaggericht werken' approach (which in the context of working with children loosely translates as 'child-driven work') in which carers are trained to work with children in ways that allow them to co-determine what services do and how they deliver. WESP provides training and support to institutions to achieve this. This article focuses on one particular school – Vragenderwijs ('asking as you go') – as an example.

Child-directed learning

The term 'children's participation' is open to interpretation. Many schools claim they use a children's participation approach because they let children participate in making decisions about outings and play activities. WESP's vision of children's participation is that children, including young children, should be able to co-direct everything that affects them. This goes beyond involving children in the services that adults decide to provide – it means that the services themselves should be co-determined by the children.

This does not mean that the responsibility lies entirely with the children. The teaching staff have a professional responsibility, and this must be upheld. All schools are subject to national educational standards, and the teachers must ensure that the children fulfill these requirements. In WESP's vision, within these parameters, the children are able to learn at their own pace and at their own level, in ways that they prefer.

The Vragenderwijs School – an example of the child-driven approach

WESP mostly trains and supports staff in existing schools. In one case – the Vragenderwijs School – WESP established a school from scratch, entirely in consultation with the children. The children co-decided what facilities there would be, and they chose what and how to learn. When the school first started, there was no furniture, there were no books, pens or paper. Even the teaching staff were temporary because the WESP team wanted to hear from the children themselves who should work there. Some of these staff members were uncomfortable at first because they were not used to working in an empty room with no teaching equipment. Instead of having proper classrooms and the materials they felt they needed to teach, they were expected to ask the children what they needed and wanted. The teachers settled down soon, however, because the children quickly began to tell them what they needed. On the first day they bought pens, paper, play materials, and books. Within days the children and teachers had created a dynamic learning environment. This happened so quickly that the teachers were able to 'let go' of regular teaching practices, and trust the children that they would make the right decisions. This was a useful lesson. Teachers tend to want to have everything ready for children in advance, but this can lead to a situation where children are no longer stimulated to come up with their own ideas and become passive users.

On the opening day of the school, the children did as they pleased. A messy situation ensued. The staff then started asking the children questions such as "How does this make you feel? Can we make it better?" One of the older children suggested, "We have to come together at the end of every day and make a plan for the next day." A 6-year old said,



Children can choose to learn through means that they feel comfortable with

"That's good, but not at the end of the day because you're tired. We have to talk at the beginning of the day." They then suggested to hold a *kring* ('circle') session, first thing every morning. Each day now starts with the *kring*, in which issues are discussed, agreements made, and decisions taken. Also, since there were no schedules at first, teachers came in at different times, and children sometimes missed lessons. After complaints by the children, the teaching staff asked, "How can you know when there is something interesting on?" On the children's initiative, schedules were developed.

Joint activities

Vragenderwijs believes that childrearing and education are joint activities between the school and parents. The parents and the school draw up a plan together to update each other on the children's progress. The close contact with the parents allows the school to learn how the children are doing outside the school. The staff are often told that many of the children feel more at ease now. Some children

had been unhappy at their previous schools, some had even stopped going to school, and others had been expelled. These children now look forward to going to school.

When asked, the older children at Vragenderwijs, who can compare this school to 'regular' schools, said they prefer Vragenderwijs. They can choose what they want to do, and they can choose to learn in ways and means that they feel comfortable with. This helps them to confidently tackle the subjects that they find interesting or difficult. Many children who were insecure about their capabilities, either because they did not perform well or because their high intelligence made them dysfunctional, flourish at Vragenderwijs School because the basis of their learning is doing what they are good at.

WESP trains teachers in the philosophy that children learn better if they are stimulated rather than forced to learn. It explains that different children will learn different things at different times. Parents as well as teachers, however, do have to get used to this approach, and they have to learn to trust the children and to let them direct their own learning programme.

Can all schools successfully adopt the child-driven approach?

Although a number of schools have adopted the child-driven work approach successfully, some schools failed to implement it. These tend to be schools where the approach was enforced by the principal, or where the teachers did not feel comfortable asking the children their opinions. If teachers do not support the approach, then children will not be asked the right questions in the right way. At the same time, teachers cannot be expected to listen to the children when the principal does not listen to the teachers. The starting point of the approach is an ability and a willingness to make changes based on children's opinions. Without it, real participation will not be possible. WESP emphasises that where the approach has not worked, it has never been because of the children. There has never been a situation where the children were not able to take this on – the problem has always been with the organisation.