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Fostering multiperspectivity through philosophical dialogue about controversial issues in the classroom

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Abstract

Different worldviews and opinions converge in the classroom, sometimes leading to tensions about controversial topics. Many teachers either avoid such discussions or feel uncertain about handling them. Philosophical dialogue is a way to facilitate discussions, shifting the focus from judgement to in-depth reflection. Generally, teachers aim for students to obtain the ability to grasp multiple perspectives, especially regarding controversial topics. This study examines teachers' perceptions of the impact of philosophical dialogue on teachers' approaches regarding controversial issues and students' multiperspectivity. Through Educational Design Research, we developed a philosophical dialogue method which was tested by Flemish teachers. Data were collected through 78 questionnaires and 10 interviews. During the philosophical dialogue, teachers allow different students' perspectives to surface by adopting a facilitator role, but differ in how far they express favouring one particular perspective. Training and structured philosophical exercises support teachers in this facilitating role. Moreover, teachers reported that philosophical dialogue fosters students' multiperspectivity in a gradual manner.

Key words: multiperspectivity - controversial issues - philosophical dialogue - teacher professional development

1. Introduction

Classrooms represent spaces where different worldviews and opinions meet. From a young age, students encounter controversial subjects such as gender, geopolitical conflict, colonialism or the theory of evolution, in their environment (Kello, 2016). Students of various ages feel motivated to discuss controversial issues (CI) and perceive such moments as one of their most meaningful classroom experiences, however, little time is devoted to in-depth discussions about these issues. (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Without practice, students lack the ability to substantiate their ideas or reflect on their thinking, simply mirroring their social circle's views (Byford, Lennon and Russell, 2009). However, when discussing CI in class, the extensive array of views on society can generate friction, potentially leading to polarisation and posing challenges for a conducive learning environment (de Haan, 2023).

Nonetheless, schools are ideal training grounds for democracy according to deliberative theoreticians (Gutman and Thompson, 2004). Teachers are able to teach young people to talk about different opinions, with the classroom providing greater ideological diversity than is typically encountered in families or hobbies. A central objective of such classroom discussions is to cultivate multiperspectivity or students' capacity for reflection on alternative perspectives (Wansink, Timmer and Bronkhorst, 2023).

Although teachers recognize the value of discussing CI (Byford et al., 2009), many teachers refrain from using its educational potential because they try to navigate conflicting student values and maintain classroom order (Oulton et al., 2004). One promising didactic approach to

support teachers in their stimulation of students' multiperspectivity can be found in the tradition of "Philosophy with Children" (e.g. Lipman, 1988). Here the teacher facilitates classroom discussions that shift the focus from judgements to in-depth questioning (Anthone and Mortier, 2007). The method ensures all students' perspectives are taken seriously, while simultaneously guaranteeing that each of these perspectives is subjected to critical examination in a cultivated safe space (Doornbosch, van Vuuren and de Jong, 2024).

Although there is extensive scholarly literature about how teachers approach CI (Hess, 2005; Kelly, 1986), this study aims to explore how philosophical dialogue can add to the educational potential of CI. To date, little empirical research has been done on the potential of philosophical dialogue in dealing with CI in the classroom. For example, Rombout, Schuitema and Volman (2024) have found that philosophical dialogues concerning value-loaded topics can strengthen students' critical thinking during philosophy class. In this study, we aim to offer a novel contribution to the research area by exploring how secondary school teachers perceive the impact of philosophical dialogue on their approaches with regard to CI and on students' multiperspectivity in Flanders, an educational landscape where currently, philosophical dialogue remains largely unfamiliar for teachers (Galle, 2018).

2. Theoretical framework

What are controversial issues?

CI are matters on which individuals or groups disagree, hold conflicting explanations, and propose solutions based on different values (e.g. Stradling, 1984; Zimmerman and Robertson, 2017). CI may arouse strong emotions or discomfort and are tied to students and teachers' sense of identity (Zembylas and Kambani, 2012). Examples include gender, sexual orientation, racism, geopolitical conflict, electoral politics and extreme parties (Journell, 2011; Kello, 2016). The nature of controversies is highly context-specific both in time and place, shaped by a multitude of factors including school location, school and class demographics, personalities, and historical context (Barton and McCully, 2007). Current events impact what is controversial in the classroom. While vaccination was highly controversial in 2020 during the spread of COVID and its heated public debate, other topics now invite more controversy in the classroom, such as Palestine and Israel (Wansik, Mogutov, Damhuis and Bronkhorst, 2024).

Teacher approaches

The manner in which teachers address CI varies considerably, depending on the specific topic. Hess (2005) identified four teacher approaches: avoidance, denial, privilege, and balance, based on Kelly's (1986) distinction between exclusive neutrality, exclusive partiality, neutral impartiality, and committed impartiality. Teachers who discuss CI most often opt for the privilege or balance approach (Ljunggren, 2011). However, they also combine different approaches and vary their approach from one moment to another.

Avoidance

The first approach adopted by teachers is to avoid controversy altogether. According to Kelly (1986) teachers may do so to stay *exclusively neutral* and not disclose anything on topics they

want to sidestep. However, by choosing not to address certain topics, teachers implicit designate topics as irrelevant or inappropriate for the classroom setting. Teachers avoid CI due to a lack of perceived necessity or insecurities on how to deal with CI's because of concerns about increasing tensions in the classroom, a belief that some issues are too complex, a lack of expertise about a topic, or a lack of time (Oulton et al., 2004).

Denial

The second approach is denying a topic's controversial character by stating there is only one established answer. Teachers may adopt a steering approach to allow more control over content and student reactions (Byford et al., 2009). For instance, challenging questions are frequently set aside, as answering these questions are not the lessons' principal objective. Kelly (1986) termed this *exclusive partiality*, highlighting how teachers using this approach emphasize only one perspective, trying to convince students of a singular conclusive answer.

Privilege

The third approach involves guiding students towards exploring different perspectives while favouring one 'as the right way' (Hess, 2005). Kelly (1986) argues that teachers can model how to take a position and substantiate claims respectfully, advocating for a practice of '*committed impartiality*'. Teachers disclose their perspective, but emphasize the validity of other perspectives, encouraging them to examine those. Some students find value in knowing the teacher's viewpoint, as it provides clarity and highlights that everyone has opinions and biases.

Kelly (1986) and Journell (2016) prefer this privilege approach for handling CI. Teachers act as 'norm mediators' regarding acceptable language, behavior and ideas (Ljunggren, 2011), guiding discussions towards democratic values, LGBTQIA+ rights, and gender equality for example by condemning xenophobia and misogyny (Journell, 2016). Nieto (1995) justifies giving more weight to certain perspectives rather than equal weight to 'outrageous perspectives'. Teachers can model critical thinking by disclosing their reasoning. This transparency also fosters authenticity, trust, and solidarity (Payne and Journell, 2019).

Nonetheless, privileging certain perspectives may limit genuine discussion (Hand and Levinson, 2012). If more attention is given for the perspective the teacher shares, students may hesitate to express alternative opinions, potentially alienating students with differing perspectives. Additionally, Ljunggren (2011) demonstrates that students perceive teachers as exerting more control in discussions than teachers themselves realize.

Balance

The fourth approach, balance, involves teachers refraining from offering answers or opinions, while encouraging students to explore a variety of perspectives (Hess, 2005). Students are afforded to reach their own conclusions, with a multiplicity of ideas being discussed (Hess and McAvoy, 2015). The role of the teacher focuses on exploring in-depth nuances in opinions, providing multiple sources, reflecting a variety of perspectives or occasionally playing the devil's advocate. Teachers make it clear they do not advocate a particular position and remain *neutrally impartial* (Kelly, 1986). Acting as a chair, teachers foster collaborative inquiry,

allowing all voices to be heard and cultivating both appreciative understanding and empathy for differing views (Hand, 2012). Participants not only gain understanding of opposing views, but also perceive their own views in a more nuanced manner, as underlying assumptions and values are gradually made manifest (Hand and Levinson, 2012).

The feasibility of teacher neutrality remains debated (Geller, 2020; Hess, 2005). Many teachers believe they ought to be neutral in the classroom and that disclosing political opinions constitutes a form of indoctrination (Journell, 2016; McAvoy and Hess, 2013). Nonetheless, true neutrality is unattainable, as teachers unconsciously reveal socio-political convictions (Geller, 2020). Even topic selection may reflect the epistemology of the most dominant group, which is presented as neutral and unproblematic (Kumashiro, 2004). Cotton (2006) also discovered that teachers, despite striving for neutrality, inadvertently reveal their own perspective through questioning and feedback. Furthermore, neutrality can be harmful; as silence on issues like inequity or racism risks perpetuating inequity and racial oppression.

Philosophical dialogue to approach controversial issues

Both the balance and privilege approach require dialogic teaching, centralizing a space for exploration (Boyd and Markarian, 2015) rather than presenting a ready-made truth (Bakhtin, 1984). Various dialogical didactic approaches can be used to teach and deal with CI, including deliberations (Samuelsson, 2016), role play (Hersted, 2017), debate (Gurin et al., 2013) and philosophical dialogue, each fostering different competences. For example, philosophical dialogue, a specific form of dialogic teaching, emphasizes students collaborating to develop a shared understanding, while a debate focuses more on competition (Vansieleghem and Kennedy, 2011). However, unlike other dialogue methods, critical thinking and valid argumentation are also a central part of philosophical dialogue. (Anthone and Mortier 2007, Gurin et al., 2013).

A philosophical dialogue based on 'Philosophy with Children and Youngsters' (Lipman, 1988) represents a structured discussion method that contrasts with conventional knowledge-based lessons (Skrefsrud, 2024). The method helps students examine their premises in group by articulating the values and opinions guiding their lives. The discussion is centred on fostering heightened awareness of how opinions can withstand scrutiny after joint examination of the underlying arguments. Philosophical dialogue uses open-ended questions that challenge commonly accepted answers, "thereby opening knowledge to thinking" (Lefstein, 2010:188). Philosophical dialogue aligns closely with the balance approach by Hess (2005).

Sharp (2007) and Lipman (2003) propose the transformation of traditional classrooms into "communities of inquiry" to foster a philosophical dialogue. This community functions as a safe place where students can "try on" ideas and engage with their peers about the implications, assumptions, and consequences of their views. Students can articulate their beliefs, step back to understand others' positions, listen, and build on the ideas of the community (Giordmaina, 2005). The goal is not seeking consensus, but to reveal the complexities and foundations of different arguments (Martí, 2018) and questioning the coherence and relevance of the students' arguments and the (hidden) premises or consequences of their statements (De Schrijver and Cornelissen, 2022). The teacher acts as a non-judgmental facilitator (Kizel, 2016) fostering an

environment that encourages critical exploration of diverse opinions and elucidates underlying values. This role differs from the “traditional” teacher, as it assumes a non-hierarchical power structure between students and teacher, requiring an acclimatisation on the part of the teacher (Jensen, 2023). Adopting such a ‘Socratic stance’ can help teachers set aside biases to a more open attitude. However, as a facilitator, the teacher is never fully neutral (Kizel, 2016), because in addition to clarifying positions, dialogue also pursues ethical objectives, such as protecting minority voices.

A challenge in discussing CI is moral and epistemological relativism, where students make statements such as “all values are of equal worth” or “nothing is true or false” (Kelly, 1986). Unchecked moral relativism conflicts with teaching for social justice on issues like classism, racism, sexism, as treating all claims equally may get students hurt during dialogue (Kubota, 2014). These statements can halt the dialogue, thus teachers must clarify that not all contributions hold equal value by creating a clear discussion framework such as human rights. This allows the teacher to indicate which statements are not acceptable (Lafrarchi et al., 2024). The epistemological view aligning with philosophical dialogue is evaluativism (Kuhn, 1991), which acknowledges the subjective dimension of knowledge but stresses inquiry methods to co-construct meaning and rationally assess viewpoints, considering some judgements more defensible than others (Al-Adeimi and Baumann 2023). In every philosophical dialogue it remains a point of attention to critically examine misinformation and disinformation by, for instance, asking for sources or evidence and reflect on the validity of arguments (Cornelissen et al., 2024).

The central role of multiperspectivity

As a facilitator in philosophical dialogue, the teacher replaces judgement with in-depth questions to encourage critical analysis. Especially with CI, a key goal for most teachers is developing students’ ability to employ multiple perspectives (Wansik et al., 2023). Multiperspectivity involves identifying, reconstructing, and coordinating diverse perspectives that are relevant to the understanding of a topic or problem (Bermudez, 2015). Thinking from a plurality of perspectives and engaging in dialogue are prerequisites for sound judgment (Sharp, 2007). Bridges (1997) outlines conditions for the encouragement of multiperspectivity in controversial discussions. Participants should not only express opinions but also be open to understanding and appreciating different views, be willing to listen, learn, and adapt their views, while focusing on deepening their knowledge and judgement.

However, dialogue focused on exploring multiple perspectives must remain critical in nature (Bermudez, 2015). The absence of a singular, definitive answer does not preclude the possibility of factual inaccuracies. Reasonable argumentation is necessary in order to protect against invalid arguments, disinformation and manipulative rhetoric (Rapanta, Vrikki and Evagorou, 2021). Thus, argumentation represents a fundamental aspect of the dialogue. Argumentation is viewed as a verbal, social and critical activity, with the goal to justify a viewpoint (van Eemeren et al., 1995).

Exploring different perspectives on a CI requires a dialogue space that is both safe and allows critical analysis. A safe classroom climate is built through strong teacher-student relationships,

transparent classroom norms and procedures, and effective facilitation (Sætra, 2022). While guidelines help maintain safety in heated discussions, students and teachers must co-create this environment (Hess, 2002). The concept of a safe space is debated due to inherent tensions: can it be open to anti-feminist, anti-democratic or anti-religious statements while ensuring safety for all (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019)? In response to this dilemma, Callan (2016) distinguishes ‘intellectual safety’—shunning challenging perspectives—from ‘dignity safety’—being open to ideas perceived offensive or morally wrong while respecting all humans and actively including minority students. Dignity safety is related to the concept of a ‘brave space’ wherein you can be uncomfortable while seeking a new understanding (Arao, Brian and Clemens, 2023).

3. Research design and method

The philosophical dialogue method was developed using an Educational Design Research approach (2022-2024), characterized by an iterative process in which educational interventions are designed, tested, and adapted through systematic research (McKenney and Reeves, 2021). A needs analysis, based on group interviews with 21 teachers, provided the framework for the initial prototype of a philosophical teaching method—a booklet—containing philosophical exercises, philosophical questions and dialogue tips. This prototype was tested on a small scale with teachers (n=7) whose feedback in interviews resulted in further refinements of the design criteria. The final version of the method was generated as a set of dialogue cards with redesigned structured philosophical exercises and a comprehensive manual.

Named “*CitizenshipReflex*” (in Dutch: “*BurgerschapsReflex*”), the method was widely disseminated across the Flemish educational landscape—the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium—through training sessions and workshops. Approximately 200 teachers attended a training and over 110 received the dialogue cards and manual. Of these, 78 completed an online questionnaire. Participants taught a variety of subjects, including social sciences, ethics, religion, languages, and science. In the questionnaire, teachers were invited to indicate their interest in participating in an additional interview, resulting in 10 video-recorded semi-structured interviews with teachers who tested the philosophical dialogue method and followed the training. In the results, quotes are from survey respondents, except for interview quotes who are indicated with a letter. The interview sample was predominantly female, with one male teacher. This aligns with the findings of Notably, Ozturk and Kus (2019) who found that male teachers are more inclined to address CI, though female teachers generally view teaching such topics more positively.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) was executed on the verbatim transcribed interviews and responses to open-ended questionnaire questions from the final philosophical dialogue method try-out, and only to those instances in the corpus that were identified as relevant for the research questions. We used a deductive coding approach, guided by the research questions and Hess's model. Thematic analysis followed these five steps: (1) initial data exploration to generate ideas, listed in a code matrix gathering each respondents' codes; (2) development of initial codes based on the theoretical framework; (3) iterative refinement of codes, merging or splitting as needed; (4) organization of codes by research question, summarized in a code tree; and (5) analysis writing based on the codes, illustrated by data. The

code tree consists of main codes such as ‘topics of controversies’, ‘approaches: (1) avoidance (2) denial (3) privilege and (4) balance’, ‘short structured exercises’, ‘professional development’, ‘sequence of the dialogue’, ‘multiperspectivity: (1) gradual, (2) variety, (3) visibility, (4) experiences, conditions: (1) dignity safe space, (2) clear rules dialogue. We applied reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasizes researchers’ critical interpretation and encourages multiple coders for richer interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Additionally, some descriptive questionnaire data complemented these exploratory interview findings.

4. Developed philosophical dialogue method

To support teachers in facilitating classroom dialogue on CI, the philosophical dialogue method “*CitizenshipReflex*” was developed iteratively with teacher input. A brief overview of the method is essential for interpreting study results. This method consists of a set of dialogue cards with philosophical questions (see Figure 1a), short structured philosophical exercises (see Figure 1b), a manual for the facilitator, and a professionalization training. The main themes are justice—covering discrimination, racism, (de)colonization, war, peace, democracy and ethics—and *identity*, encompassing cultural, sexual, and religious identity. The philosophical exercises, drawing on established generic reflection exercises like thought experiments, role-playing, and ‘PMI, Plus Minus Interesting’ scenarios (Saarsar, 2017), prompt to elicit diverse perspectives in the classroom and to facilitate the critical examination of underlying arguments and worldviews through dialogue (De Schrijver and Cornelissen, 2022). Each philosophical question and exercise encourages students to present and collectively analyze their arguments. The philosophical dialogue method is aligned with ‘dignity safe spaces’ (Callan, 2016), exploring new insights while maintaining respect for all students.

[Place here Figure 1: Examples dialogue cards CitizenshipReflex: With students in dialogue about sensitive topics, 2023, (c) Exploratio; Odisee University of Applied Sciences]

5. Results

The data revealed key findings on teachers’ perceptions of philosophical dialogue’s impact on their approach to CI (RQ1) and students’ multiperspectivity (RQ2). In general, the teachers in the study referred to different topics as controversial, such as gender and LGBTQIA+, racism, migration and war.

Teacher approaches to CI when using the philosophical dialogue method

Avoidance and denial

As participating teachers were already inclined toward a dialogic classroom approach, few referred to avoidance or denial as a strategy. Nevertheless, the topic itself appeared to play a role. Some teachers tend to avoid topics such as LGBTQIA+ and geopolitical conflict, particularly when they are part of communities directly connected to the issue. Most teachers chose a rather ‘safe’ topic to test the philosophical dialogue method.

“If there is a conversation about for example Israel and Palestine, I wouldn't know what to answer, because I don't know enough about it. It won't be easy. So I wouldn't choose it because it doesn't suit me. Which is a shame, because I should be able to do it.” - E

The ‘safety’ of topics for teachers pertains not only to their level of knowledge on the subject but also the potential for value-based conflicts to arise during classroom discussions. Philosophical dialogue itself also often lies outside teachers’ comfort zones. Choosing safer topics to acclimate to this method is a common deliberate strategy. Moreover, one teacher reported using the method in individual conversations with students for some topics. When individual students present arguments that could provoke controversy, she tends to avoid classroom-wide discussions and instead opt for a more tutor-style approach.

Privilege

Four interviewed teachers indicated a tendency to adopt the privilege approach when facilitating dialogue. Notably, teachers in the survey also refer to shifting between the privilege and balance approaches during discussions. While some explicitly framed their own viewpoints as favorable, others shared them without signaling a clear preference, both influencing the direction of the dialogue. Teachers shared their perspectives for various reasons, with one primary rationale being the use of their privileged role to challenge the majority perspective in the classroom. For instance, one teacher anticipated socially desirable responses on a particular topic and leveraged her own perspective —imbued with a degree of authority—to encourage students to broaden their thinking.

“In the exercise “agree - doubt - disagree”, I projected the proposition “We are all racists”. Until then, I refrained from taking a position, but with this statement I decided to take a position myself. My students looked surprised when I moved to the “agree” field. I started a conversation about prejudice.”

Teachers also employed the privilege approach when they deemed additional information or context necessary to help students form well-reasoned opinions. In addition, teachers indicated that sharing one's own opinion on a CI helped augment the perceived authenticity of the teacher, especially if students ask for the teachers’ perspective themselves. Importantly, teachers’ objective in employing these strategies is to leverage the privilege approach to sustain an open dialogue that embraces a multiplicity of perspectives and arguments.

Balance

During the testing of the philosophical dialogue cards, six teachers used the balance approach, while the other four teachers combined it with a privilege approach, switching between the two. Teachers indicated that maintaining a non-judgemental stance during facilitation encourages students to engage in critical thinking and explore alternative perspectives. Teachers adopting a balance approach may ask a ‘what if’ question to stimulate different perspectives, while teachers with a privilege approach will also bring statements from their own perspective into the dialogue.

They also observed that structured philosophical exercises and targeted philosophical questions effectively prompt students to explore their thoughts more deeply.

"It is not useful for students and in the end for me to clearly denounce my opinion. I let them do the talking and let them come up with arguments that come from their own, that's much more relevant to them. Then you actually shape these students a little bit and they do it themselves".

- A

Adopting a Socratic stance—where the facilitator withholds judgment while posing critical questions based on evaluativist criteria (Kuhn, 1991)—prompted teachers to a surprising observation: students themselves took responsibility for refining generalizations and confronting prejudices.

"The moment a student lumped a group together [in his reasoning] and I wasn't allowed to say anything myself, but then other students responded to that and tried to make him realize that he was with prejudice. In the end, the boy remained with ambiguous thoughts. This led to a constructive conversation with the entire class group."

Training in philosophical dialogue skills gave teachers greater confidence in facilitating discussions and formulating in-depth questions. They valued the opportunity to exchange strategies and share experiences related to controversial issues, finding empowerment in discussing common challenges with colleagues from other schools.

In addition, starting with shorter, structured dialogue exercises increased their confidence in adopting the balance role. Exercises such as PMI (Plus Minus Interesting) helped students develop more nuanced arguments. By prompting students to consider both moral opposites and then step outside that binary distinction to make an 'interesting' observation, this exercise encouraged a reflective approach to discussions. Such exercises are perceived to offer guidance for teachers, enabling them to practice and refine their skills, and preparing them for engaging in a more open-ended philosophical dialogue exploring one big question.

When using the balance approach, most teachers structured their lessons to include a knowledge-based lesson before the philosophical dialogue, ensuring students had foundational knowledge-based on the topic. Teachers felt this approach made the subsequent dialogue more grounded in factual content. Thus, preceding a philosophical dialogue with a knowledge lesson or having a knowledge-based lesson planned afterwards about the discussed topic, is a common strategy for teachers to deal with the open-endedness of philosophical dialogue.

'If my students don't have enough background beforehand, they will just go along with the most outspoken student.' - M

Conversely, teachers who initiated the lesson with a philosophical dialogue were able to identify prevalent misconceptions in their classrooms and pinpoint areas where additional knowledge was needed.

“I try to have input from students when we start a topic: what do they know? Where is misinformation or painful points where we must talk about. It helps me to know what they are not aware of yet or I find things they need [to know].” - C

Overall, teachers viewed the balance approach as both promising and challenging. Survey data (Figure 2a) revealed that a substantial portion of teachers struggled to maintain a Socratic stance when they disagreed with a student’s position (7% strongly agree, 37% agree, 17% neutral, 35% disagree, 1% strongly disagree). While striving for a more neutral stance as facilitator, teachers question whether “true” neutrality is achievable, as facilitation does not occur in a social vacuum where their values can be entirely concealed. For example, students are often adept at perceiving their teachers’ attitudes and interpreting their body language.

Dialogue to stimulate students’ multiperspectivity

Gradual multiperspectivity

Teachers reported that the philosophical dialogue method, with questions and structured exercises, has the capacity to stimulate students’ multiperspectivity. The majority stated that the method enables students to express their opinions, support them with arguments, and listen to alternative perspectives. As shown in Figure 2b, the vast majority of teachers in the survey agreed that “the method stimulates students’ multiple perspectives” (13% strongly agree, 72% agree, 14% neutral, 1% disagree, 0% strongly disagree). Furthermore, the structured exercises also provided opportunities for students to possibly reconsider their own opinions.

“The students began to reflect and think more deeply, which suddenly led many students to change groups [i.e., shift their viewpoint on a statement]. They were also able to argue their choice more effectively afterwards.”

[Place Figure 2a/b here. Distribution of teachers’ survey responses on students’ multiperspectivity and teachers’ moderator role]

Teachers view the development of multiperspectivity as a gradual process unfolding in distinct stages. Philosophical dialogue offers an opportunity for subtle nuances, adjustments or more supporting arguments for existing viewpoints. Initially, students are encouraged to explore and articulate their own perspectives through argumentation. Subsequently, students are expected to consider the perspectives of others—both inside and outside the classroom—through argumentation. Students can ‘visit’ others’ viewpoints and thought processes without necessarily adopting or agreeing with them.

“I think repetition [of philosophical dialogue] is important. [...] But I think I shouldn't have the illusion that having one conversation like that will suddenly change everything or something. The nice feedback that I received from students was that they think more attention should be given to this kind of conversation. It helps people become aware of how others think. It doesn't necessarily matter what exactly they think, but being aware of it is the most important thing. When you become aware of your own thoughts, you also become more open to the thoughts of others.” - F

Through argumentation, students ‘*change their view by putting oneself in the perspective of another student*’ based on insights gained from the dialogue. Engagement in collective inquiry helps them recognize and deal with various perspectives, deepening mutual understanding. Teachers often perceive students' motivation to explore the different perspectives together, with attention to a common ground as a successful outcome of the dialogue.

“The conversation about gender-neutral toilets evolved into a discussion about headscarves and identity. The Muslim girls were able to clearly explain why it is difficult for them to be in the same room as boys and have to put on their headscarves, for example. I was surprised by how they collaboratively sought a solution that everyone could feel comfortable with. They decided on having three separate toilets.”

Teachers highlighted the added value of making exercises physical in the classroom. Importantly, students’ multiperspectivity is supported when different voices are visibly represented, e.g., on a line. Additionally, discussions of the philosophical questions are held in a circle without tables, reinforcing the equality of the speakers. Representing diverse voices visibly and allowing time for reflection further supports multiperspectivity, reducing peer pressure.

“At first, there was group behaviour, where they were hesitant to take opposing views. Over time, they started daring to take different positions.”

Multiple roads to multiperspectivity

In order to obtain multiperspectivity, the applicability of philosophical dialogue varies by student population. In particular, teachers in vocational education, lower grades in secondary education, or special needs education altered elements of the dialogue to better suit their students. Scaffolding and concrete examples that resonated with the students’ interests were added. Philosophical dialogue can also be complemented with testimonies, field trips, or encounters with unfamiliar groups, promoting a deeper understanding of multiple perspectives. Vocational teachers emphasized the relevance of philosophical dialogue in fostering multiperspectivity, while also highlighting the need to balance abstract reasoning with practical, real-world connections.

“If I work too much with ‘the mind’, or become too abstract, focusing on purely thinking, my vocational students lose engagement. So, I break down the philosophical exercises into smaller steps or I find a relevant video to make it more concrete. If it’s only reasoning without certain stimuli, I am a teacher from a different planet. I have to ‘massage’ them into the topic, triggering them and building a bridge to help them think about more abstract questions.” - M

Dignity safe classrooms

To ensure multiperspectivity on CI, all teachers emphasize the necessity of ‘dignity safety’ (Callan, 2016), allowing open discussion while ensuring respect for all participants. Key strategies to ensure a dignity safe classroom, without compromising intellectual safety include establishing explicit classroom and school rules before dialogue begins. Defining boundaries in

advance—such as consequences for discriminatory remarks— creates respect and promotes reflective thinking.

“When it's about racism, for example, I just can't have racist statements being made that I then don't nuance. But I try not to say ‘you can't say things like that’, but I try to ask ‘why do you think that way?’ and ‘Have you never experienced something positive or something like that?’.”

- C

Furthermore, it is essential to establish a foundation of trust, both between the teacher and students, and among the students themselves. Consequently, a considerable number of teachers delay introducing philosophical dialogues on CI until sufficient trust has been built among students. However, one teacher suggests that *‘using the material can further create a positive class climate’*. Since students' arguments are often grounded in their personal experiences, these dialogues enable teachers and peers to gain valuable insights into students' backgrounds and life experiences.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Despite recognizing the importance of addressing CI, many teachers struggle with how to deal with CI's in the classroom (Byford et al., 2009). This study explores how philosophical dialogue can equip teachers for this challenge, focusing on (1) teachers' approaches to CI during philosophical dialogue (2) and the perceived impact on students' multiperspectivity.

Firstly, this study explores teachers' approaches to address CI during philosophical dialogue. The widely cited study by Hess (2005) identifies four approaches: avoidance, denial, privilege, and balance. While six interviewed teachers held a balance approach, four teachers navigated between a balance and privilege approach. The privilege approach—where teachers share their opinions—diverges from the balance approach where the teacher refrains from sharing their views. To maintain a balance approach, teachers can adopt the Socratic stance and focus on asking critical questions or play the devil's advocate instead of sharing personal views (Anthone and Mortier, 2007). Teachers report that maintaining a balance approach throughout a dialogue session is challenging and requires more training. For some teachers, switching between a privilege and balance approach during the philosophical dialogue is an intermediate step to move gradually towards a balance approach. This intermediate step provides the teachers with the necessary comfort to learn and apply the philosophical dialogue method and adopt the Socratic stance. Furthermore, this study highlights benefits - such as modeling positionality and showing authenticity - of employing a privilege approach, which can either precede or follow a philosophical dialogue where the balance approach is central.

Previous research has shown that many teachers feel uneasy with the open character of a traditional philosophical dialogue (Jensen, 2023). Our findings show that training in philosophical dialogue techniques in combination with structured philosophical exercises helps ease discomfort with the balance role, yet more training could help teachers in strengthening their philosophical dialogue techniques (Cornelissen and De Schrijver, 2022). Philosophizing which is perceived to reduce teacher 'power' contrasts with traditional monologic teaching (Jensen, 2023). Transitioning between these modes is challenging (Schaffalitzky, 2024) yet

essential, as philosophical dialogue is always embedded in a broader lesson context or aimed at building competences (Abrimi et al., 2015). Combining dialogue with authentic instruction and mentorship fosters critical thinking more effectively than separate, singular strategies. Our findings indicate that the sequence of strategies seemingly influences dialogue outcomes: beginning with instruction fosters information-based discussion, while opening with dialogue shows students' unfiltered perspectives and uncovers misconceptions. A following lesson can then specifically address misconceptions or lack of information on the topic.

Thus, a key point raised in this study is the distinction between what happens during the dialogue and before or after it. Facilitating philosophical dialogue aligns best with a balance approach, prioritizing students' perspectives. However, a balance approach does not equate to full neutrality, as this is unfeasible. Teachers inevitably express values through teaching style (Veugelers, 2000). And striving for neutrality may also inadvertently lead to overlooking dominant perspectives or fail to address injustices (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). Before or after the dialogue, the privilege approach can be used for several reasons such as leveling the playing field between teachers and students and supporting vulnerable students (Journell, 2020). Especially in classrooms where students share homogenous views, teachers sharing their opinions can counter dominant narratives and foster authenticity.

However, this approach risks being perceived as a disguised form of instruction (Hand, 2012), especially if the teacher's opinions consistently outweigh students' views (Sprod, 2001). Teacher disclosure, within a privilege approach, can either enhance or hinder student thinking, depending on whether it affirms students' right to their views (Journell, 2016). Overall, teachers' approaches to CI are highly contextual and may include a combination of approaches (Hess and McAvoy, 2015). Critical reflection on these choices is therefore essential for teachers and students (Kubota, 2014).

Secondly, teachers report that philosophical dialogue encourages students to explore and reflect on a range of viewpoints. While teachers succeed in students positioning themselves, exploring the arguments deeply remains more challenging. Multiperspectivity develops gradually, requiring structured exercises. Some teachers prioritize consensus to enhance classroom cohesion, but true multiperspectivity requires space for pluralism, disagreement and complexities (Martí, 2018). Once a safe classroom climate is established, the philosophical dialogue method can serve to amplify underrepresented voices. For example, the use of techniques that alternate speaking turns may foster frequent contributors to make space for others while motivating quieter students to participate (Skrefsrud, 2024).

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, our data focuses on teachers who were willing to try the philosophical dialogue method. Consequently, there is a paucity of data on teachers who are less inclined to adopt this method to deal with CI. Secondly, findings rely on teacher perceptions and future research should explore whether students perceive an effect of philosophical dialogue on their multiperspectivity, because research has shown that students perceive discussions differently than teachers (Ljunggren, 2011). In addition, a larger sample size with a pre-post design with observations could provide important insights. Third, this research is limited by its focus on how teachers address 'planned' controversies, though

preparation for anticipated controversies may aid teachers in handling unexpected ones (Cassar, Oosterheert and Meijer, 2023).

A fourth limitation is that the role of emotions is not addressed in the present study. Teachers report uncertainty in managing strong emotional responses to CI. Training in philosophical dialogue could include more understanding of the role and place of emotions during a philosophical dialogue and strategies for dealing with emotional responses. In a philosophical dialogue, the classroom becomes a ‘community of inquiry’ where emotions are acknowledged and researched without fueling them (Anthonie and Mortier, 2007). Emotions should not be ignored and instead can be discussed in a more panoptic manner (Lipman, 1988). Research suggests that teachers who approach CI openly, and lead CI away from individual opinions and emotions, are more effective in mitigating the impact of students’ social background on their political efficacy (Kjøstvedt et al., 2024). However, addressing the emotional dimension of CI is necessary to prepare teachers to create a dignity safe environment, transcending a rational and “technicist pedagogy” and attending to the relation of social identities and emotions (Barton and McCully, 2007; Zembylas and Kambani, 2012).

Further research could explore the impact of teacher collaboration on CI, as relying on individual teachers to cover all CI may be unrealistic. Collective reflection and knowledge exchange among staff can enhance professional standards, though institutional policies may sometimes hinder such efforts (Geller, 2020).

While promising, philosophical dialogue is not presented as a universal or the single solution but as one of the approaches to address CI in the classroom. It may be more accurate to suggest that multiple roads to multiperspectivity exist. Ultimately, to prepare students for societal roles, it is crucial to equip them with the ability to collaboratively think about CI. By eliciting students’ multiperspectivity, challenging assumptions, and comprehension of alternative perspectives, philosophical dialogue represents a stepping stone for emancipatory education.

7. References

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