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'They often have AHA-moments': how training teachers to philosophize the Dialogos Way with their students can promote life skills and democratic citizenship in education

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an account of a developmental action inquiry research project in which teachers from 13 secondary schools were trained to philosophize the Dialogos way with their 8th-grade students, as part of ongoing curriculum reforms in Norway. In the reforms, and in this paper, the themes of life skills and democratic citizenship are in the focus. The project's guiding question reads: What are the challenges and developmental benefits – with regards to life skills and democratic citizenship – when training teachers to philosophize the Dialogos Way with their students? One of the main challenges was that teachers were assigned to the project by their employer; this made it difficult to unleash the full potential of the Dialogos process, as true philosophizing and dialogue cannot be forced onto someone. Despite this, there were clear developmental benefits that correspond to aspects of the respective themes. The conclusion is that training teachers to philosophize the Dialogos way with their students seems to be a fruitful way to integrate aspects of life skills and democratic citizenship into the national curriculum.

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Life skills; democratic citizenship; action research; philosophical practice; *Philosophising the Dialogos Way*; education

1. Introduction

The policy context of the developmental action inquiry (Torbert 1999) research project explored in this article is the ongoing education curriculum reform in Norway. This reform emphasizes the values and principles of §1 of the Norwegian Education Act and focuses on three interdisciplinary themes: (a) *public health and life skills*, (b) *democracy and citizenship* and (c) *sustainable development*, linking Norwegian education policies to general international policy frameworks (World Health Organization 1999; UNICEF 2003; Council Of Europe 2010). These themes have entered the national curricula of primary, secondary, and upper secondary education (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017), and they are supposed to be taught across subjects throughout the school system from the fall of 2020.

In order to prepare for the implementation of these themes, the primary- and secondary-education department of a middle-sized municipality in Norway joined a larger research project called ROBUST, initiated and lead by the University of

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Stavanger. The focus of this project was *life skills* (in Norwegian *livsmestring*, which literally translated means *life mastery*). As part of the project, the education department of the municipality had 800 students from the 8th-grade attending a *life skills programme* for 1 hour a week over a period of 20 weeks. Another 800 students in the same grade would function as a control group, being taught *philosophy and rhetoric* for 1 hour a week over 20 weeks. The intention with the control group was to cover the topic of *democratic citizenship*, representing another core theme of the reformed curriculum in Norway. The teachers and students assigned to the main research group of the ROBUST project had a psychological orientation and would receive a course directly aimed at addressing the core theme *life skills*. The teachers and students in the DIALOGOS-control group (henceforth the DIALOGOS group), which focused on philosophy and rhetoric, were meant to address the core theme *democratic citizenship*. The classes and their teachers in the municipality were divided randomly between the main research group and the control group.

The DIALOGOS group represented an independent subproject within the overall framework of the ROBUST project. Guro Hansen Helskog, one of the authors of this paper, was invited by the municipality to train the teachers assigned to this group how to facilitate philosophical dialogues and rhetorical exercises with their students, based in the Dialogos approach to pedagogical philosophical practice (see Helskog 2019; Helskog and Ribe 2008, 2009). Originally, Helskog was asked to facilitate a one-day training session. However, teaching teachers to philosophize with their students in only one day is close to impossible, so she asked the municipality to increase the amount of training to at least 2.5 days, beginning with a full day, followed by three 3-h workshops, held five weeks apart over a 5-month period. She also took the opportunity to ask for permission to study the experiences of the participating teachers through a cyclical action learning and research project (to the extent possible within the framework set up by the municipality).¹ Even with the additional workshops, the amount of time available to make these teachers capable of philosophizing with their students for 20 sessions was very limited considering the outcomes hoped for by the municipality. The plan was to have the teachers carry out five philosophy sessions with their classes after each of the workshops; however, whether they actually conducted all 20 sessions remain unclear since there was no follow-up after the fourth workshop as the agreement between the municipality and Helskog was limited to the training workshops only. Still, we find it not only interesting but also important to explore some of the limitations and challenges involved in top-down competence development strategies like the one Helskog became part of.

1.1. Guiding question and structure of the paper

With the outlines of a developmental action inquiry research project, the philosophy and rhetoric training was carried out with the DIALOGOS group in 2018–2019. Feedback from the participants was actively used to adjust and develop the actions in the project while it was being carried out. Though the intention of the project was to address the core topic *democracy and citizenship*, Helskog's initial assumption was that philosophizing in line with the Dialogos approach (Helskog 2019) would also indirectly address the theme of *life skills*. Maybe, and this was a further assumption, it would even do so in a better way than in the main psychology-oriented research group. The guiding research question of this

paper can therefore be formulated as follows: *What are the challenges and developmental benefits – with regards to life skills and democratic citizenship – when training teachers in facilitating philosophical dialogues and philosophizing The Dialogos Way together with their students?*

With this question, one can see that our research interest of the DIALOGOS project as such was neither problem-based nor based in a theoretical knowledge gap, but rather intervention- and practice-based. In the section which follows, we outline the approaches represented in the central concepts of our guiding research question, before presenting the DIALOGOS intervention and research approach. Then follows a presentation of our findings and a subsequent discussion related to the conceptual framework. The conclusion is that training teachers in philosophizing the Dialogos Way with their students may provide a fruitful way to integrate aspects of life skills and democratic citizenship in education not only in Norway, but across the world.

2. Key approaches, central concepts and their philosophical roots

The approach at the centre of this paper is the so-called ‘Dialogos’ approach to pedagogical philosophical practice in education (see Helskog 2019) while the central concepts are the international policy themes of *life skills* and *democratic citizenship*. These are very briefly outlined below with an equally brief discussion of their philosophical roots (which are basically the same for the Dialogos approach as for the policy concepts).

2.1. Philosophising the Dialogos Way

The Dialogos approach was initially developed by Guro Hansen Helskog as a way of facilitating wisdom-oriented pedagogy from the mid-1990s onwards (Helskog 2006, 2019; Helskog and Ribe 2008, 2009). As illustrated in her book *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education. Between Critical Thinking and Spiritual contemplation* (2019), the approach embraces other seemingly opposing approaches in the field of philosophical practice (see also Weiss 2015). Philosophical practices are all oriented towards developing wisdom of some kind. However, notions of wisdom differ, thus the ways of philosophising differ too.² The core of the Dialogos approach is open phenomenological, hermeneutical and critical-analytical inquiry of the phenomena involved in the art of living wisely. A Dialogos process involves working on philosophical ideas and concepts from logical, ethical, emotional, experiential, existential as well as relational and spiritual starting points and perspectives. Socratic dialogues, guided imageries, pro-con argumentation, philosophical walks, mind-body exercises as well as text- and emotion-based interpretative dialogues are among the approaches included. Hence, philosophizing *the Dialogos way* is a form of pedagogical philosophical practice aimed at nurturing our inner lives and relationships by searching for wisdom together from different angles.

When the Dialogos approach is practised in a classroom, the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator who guides through questions rather than answers. Instead of thinking in terms of learning outcomes and aims, the teacher acknowledges that he or she can not fully predict what the outcome of a long-term Dialogos process will be. He or she can only hope that the process will result in the development of certain skills and insights. However, the actual work needs to be done by the student him or herself, as participation

in dialogue cannot be forced upon anyone. As the saying goes: You can lead the horse to the water, but you cannot make it drink. The role of the students or participants is in this respect to act as 'wisdom searchers' who openly, reflectively and dialogically explore topics from multiple perspectives in togetherness with their classmates, with the teacher as a questioning guide. The process itself is open in the sense that no one can predict detailed outcomes and easily measurable results in advance. Moreover, different participants are likely to experience different outcomes for themselves.

2.2. Life skills

The WHO defines *life skills* as the ability for adaptive and positive behaviours that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (see World Health Organisation, 1999), while UNICEF defines them as a behaviour development approach designed to create a balance of three areas: *knowledge, attitude, and skills* (see UNICEF 2003). The Council of Europe (CoE) launched a report (Poole 2005) and a manual for teachers (Ives 2005) in 2005, the first of which defined *life skills* as involving analyses, communication, cooperation, interaction and self-awareness in order to aid individuals in communicating and understanding their own knowledge, attitudes and values. Thus, 12 core elements seem to be commonly accepted among the three organizations as essential to *life skills*. These include *communication, interpersonal relations, empathy, self-awareness, problem-solving, decision-making, creativity, critical thinking, stress management, assertiveness resilience and coping with emotions* (see World Health Organisation 1999; UNICEF 2003; Poole 2005).

2.3. Democratic citizenship

When it comes to the wider context for the topic of democratic citizenship, the Council of Europe's *Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education* from 2010 is pivotal (see Council of Europe 2010). Here, education for democratic citizenship is understood as practices and activities which aim to empower students to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity, and to play an active part in democratic life. An essential element of all education for democratic citizenship is claimed to be the promotion of social cohesion and intercultural dialogue and the valuing of diversity and equality (see *ibidem*). Developing knowledge, personal and social skills and understanding that reduce conflict by valuing differences between people and building mutual respect for human dignity and shared values is essential, as is enhancing dialogue and promoting non-violence in the resolution of problems and disputes. According to the charter, which is signed by the 47 member states, education for democratic citizenship should be exercised with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law.

2.4. Philosophical roots

The thematic roots of DIALOGOS as well as those of *life skills* and *democratic citizenship* can be traced back to a core theme of Ancient philosophy, namely: The art of living (see Hadot 1995: 268f). This art was mainly about learning to live a good and just life in society, which

involved the progress towards wisdom in general and the development of specific virtues, virtues which are not so different from the *life skills* and skills needed for democratic citizenship described above (see *ibidem*: 220). This development and learning process was called *paideia*, the origin of ‘pedagogy’, but today it is often translated as *self-formation* (see *ibidem*: 102). When Plato argued that only philosophers over 50 were capable of ruling the state, he was mainly referring to the need for proper education and human maturity, i.e. the accumulation of sufficient *wisdom* (see Plato, 2017: book VII). And when Aristotle equated the virtues needed in politics and the virtues involved in real friendship, it was also a matter of what we today call *life skills education* and education for *democratic citizenship* (see Aristotle 1999: book VIII). A major difference, of course, is that the ideas of democracy and the art of living in the ancient world were developed with a few free men and boys in mind, while today it is meant to involve everyone, regardless of gender and social status. However, with regards to both the art of living and democratic participation, limited as it was, the learning activity, so to speak, was the practice of *philosophizing*. And philosophizing here can be understood as investigating general aspects of the human condition, like freedom, love, responsibility, etc. (see i.e. Teichmann and Evans, 1999, 1; Helskog 2019; Weiss 2017).

This brings us to the next section in which we present the DIALOGOS intervention as an action inquiry research process.

3. The intervention as a developmental action inquiry research process

The field of action research is broad and diverse (Helskog 2014). For instance, in his global-scale review of participatory action research in the mid-1990s, Fals Borda found at least 32 schools associated with the idea of *participation* in social, economic and political research (Swantz 2008). However, according to Reason and Bradbury (2008), action research is a family of practices of living inquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing. It is, they argue, not so much a methodology as an orientation to inquiry. This orientation seeks to create participative communities in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are essential. Typically, communities and/or researchers engage in more or less systematic cycles of action and reflection. In action phases, practices are tested and evidence is gathered. In reflection phases, practices are evaluated and new plans are made. This was also the case in the DIALOGOS intervention process.

As such, the intervention process and the research process cannot be separated in the action-reflection phases of the project. The final design and content of the intervention- and action research process are presented in Table 1, each exercise drawn from the Dialogos books (see Helskog and Ribe 2008 and 2009):

It was a challenge that the participation of the teachers in the training was not voluntary, and in certain forms of action research this is problematic. Especially in participative action research one would want teachers to be positive and active collaborators taking part in the formation of all parts of the project. But as Torbert (1999) points out, communities and organizations cannot transform directly into a community of inquiry. It needs to evolve through what he calls an experiments’ stage through continual, existential, relational searching for how to act and interpret and envision action. Three themes are essential in the action inquiry process: 1) self-development 2) together with

Table 1. The DIALOGOS intervention and action inquiry process.

Workshop 1	<p>Exercises on the differences between empirical questions, psychological questions and philosophical questions.</p> <p>Exercises on argumentation and reasoning based on the topic of good and evil.</p> <p>Text- and experiential-based philosophical dialogue on the question 'What does it mean to be brave?'</p> <p>Exercise on criteria and perspectives based on the topic 'What is a good deed?', also including personal examples.</p> <p>At the end of the workshop: Teachers writing meta-reflection notes.</p>
Between workshops 1 & 2: Teachers trying out exercises from workshop 1 with their students over a period of 5 weeks.	
Workshop 2	<p>At the beginning of the workshop: Teachers writing meta-reflection notes about their work with the students.</p> <p>Working philosophically with words for feelings in order to develop increased emotional awareness.</p> <p>Working on the difference between debate and dialogue through philosophising upon personal experience with the question 'What does it imply to be in dialogue?' as a point of departure. Work to develop skills of self-reflection, interpretation and analysis.</p> <p>Elaboration on the difference between debate and dialogue based on the question: 'Should we follow desire or duty?'</p> <p>Making arguments for each different view, make a speech where the arguments are used, free debate where participants argue from the opposite perspective with the aim of trying out different stances.</p> <p>Comparing experiences: What is the difference between a debate and a dialogue? Working simultaneously with the development of analytical understanding and self-reflection.</p> <p>Should – should not? Text-based exercise on the choice of attitudes and actions. Work to develop self-reflection, foresight and prudence.</p>
Between workshops 2 & 3: Teachers trying out exercises from workshop 2 with their students over a period of 5 weeks.	
Workshop 3	<p>At the beginning of the workshop: Teachers writing meta-reflection notes about the previous workshop and their subsequent work with the students.</p> <p>Rhetoric: Preparing a speech and finding arguments for and against possibilities for having contact over distance. Evaluating the outcome by means of the main categories of rhetoric (Logos, ethos and pathos).</p> <p>Philosophical dialogue: What is truth? Goal: Discover that reality is always more than we can perceive (Preventing fundamentalistic and absolutistic thinking).</p> <p>Discover how the criteria we use influence and channel what we see (Preventing fundamentalistic and absolutistic thinking).</p> <p>Ethical dilemmas: Realizing and reflecting about the fact that sometimes humans end up in situations which require almost impossible choices.</p> <p>What does it mean to follow a rule?</p> <p>Philosophising upon experience, problematizing answers.</p>
Between workshop 3 & 4: Teachers trying out exercises from workshop 3 with their students over a period of 5 weeks.	
Workshop 4 (Weiss joined Helskog as a co-facilitator)	<p>Focusing exercise (to find concentration).</p> <p>Reading and reflecting upon the text <i>Forgiveness, gratitude and the art of holding on to the good</i> from Dialogos.</p> <p>Posing questions about the text, formulating and sharing of personal experiences and philosophising.</p> <p>Suggesting and problematizing answers.</p> <p>At the end of the workshop: Teachers writing meta-reflection notes about their experiences of the workshops and about their work with their students.</p>
After workshop 4: Teachers trying out exercises from workshop 4 with their students over a period of 5 weeks.	

others 3) in the timely service of third parties' futures (see *ibidem*: 191). Regarding the first of these, Torbert argues that a person must undergo deep self-development before he becomes capable of relationally valid action. This includes not only disciplining and freeing emotions and behaviour, but also freeing oneself for higher thought capable of seeing the mystery in each moment, and tracing patterns of intuition, feeling and behaviour as they occur. Regarding the second, Torbert points to the importance of

finding friends willing to take roles of support and challenge for the sake of mutual development. Regarding the third, he states that the earliest personal steps on the path towards action science unavoidably have social consequences.

The DIALOGOS group – in terms of a project on its own – involved continuous critical self-reflection and thus self-development by Helskog in the initial action phases, inviting teachers to do the same throughout the process. By inviting Michael Noah Weiss into the project as a co-facilitator and co-researcher in the last phase of the project, Helskog secured an interactive second-person view that would provide mutual development for them both. She designed and facilitated the first three action research cycles with the teachers, while Weiss joined in the last cycle and contributed to the process of analyzing and discussing the data that emerged from the action learning and research process. For the purpose of writing this paper, he was given the lead in analyzing the data in order to provide a more ‘objective’ third person view and voice in the research, providing balance of voices which would not have been possible if Helskog had analysed the data and written the research report alone. We were both well aware that the project would have social consequences when the teachers from the 13 schools took what they learned in the DIALOGOS project with them into their teaching practice together with their 800 students. What actually happened in the classrooms, and whether and to what extent teachers taught other teachers as part of the project, was not directly investigated by us. With one exception, the only empirical evidence we have that teachers actually did what the municipality wanted them to (namely to philosophize with their students), is their own self-reports in the meta-reflection notes analysed in the next section of this paper. The exception was a teacher who gave us in-depth observation notes about the dialogues in her classroom with the students between every session. Moreover, after the 4th and last workshop, she invited us to observe her work with the students, and later to facilitate a dialogue with her 8th grade students. However, data from these sessions are not analyzed as part of this article due to space limitations.

Still, the project attempts to represent a form of research not done *on* people, nor *for* people but *with* people (see Reason and Bradbury 2008) – in this case *with* the participating teachers. Furthermore, if one assumes that in action research processes ‘communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers’ (ibid.: 1), then it is the notion of ‘communities of inquiry’ that is important here. It represents a concept not only central to action research, but also well established in the discipline of philosophical practice (see i.e. Weiss 2015: 215f, Helskog 2019). There it signifies the term *philosophical dialogue*, as a process of investigation, carried out by the dialogue participants together with the dialogue facilitator. Inquiring into a topic, a question or a phenomenon together in a group is, therefore, not only a key feature of action research but it is at the centre of philosophical practice too. As Torbert puts it, ‘Developmental action inquiry understands all human action as a blending of action and reflection, the ultimate challenge at all levels of organizing being to develop a clear awareness of how they actually blend and how they optimally blend in this time and place, so that one can intervene now’ (Torbert 1999, 204). This was indeed also a challenge for us as facilitators and researchers in this project.

The main tool for including the participants in this investigation was so-called meta-reflections, which were made both orally, in terms of open dialogues, and in the form of

written notes. Initially, the idea was to involve the teachers in the research process by asking them to write reflective notes about the workshops and the philosophy sessions with their students. However, as became clear in the course of the project, not all the teachers were in favour of written reflections, so oral meta-reflections were also included. The meta-reflections in written form were anonymous in order to ensure honest feedback. Since each workshop was supposed to train and prepare the teachers to hold five dialogue sessions (1 h each) after each workshop, Helskog decided to ask the teachers to share their experiences, ideas and objections in the beginning of the subsequent workshop. Thus, except for the first training workshop, where written feedback was given at the end, all workshops started with such a meta-reflection. This feedback by the participants revealed where they were in their development, and in this way the programme could be adjusted, (re-)arranged and developed accordingly. The trainer had a broad idea of what she was going to do in each workshop. However, since this was an action inquiry project, she continually made changes to the programme according to the feedback and the reflections of the participating teachers.

In the following section, we present the participating teachers' experiences and reflections on this action research process in a summative way. For that purpose, the data is roughly organized into two broad categories:

- (1) Beneficial developmental aspects
- (2) Challenging aspects

4. Teachers' reflections throughout the DIALOGOS project

About 20 teachers participated in this programme, with the number varying slightly from workshop to workshop. Most of the teachers had no previous experience of philosophizing with students: their normal subjects were mathematics, natural science, Norwegian, English, social studies and/or religion and ethics. In the following, we will present their reflections without much comment from our side; we chose to let the teachers speak for themselves.

4.1. Reflections from the 1st workshop

The meta-reflections of the first workshop were organized around the following questions:

1st workshop

(a) Was it a good workshop?

- Yes, because ...

- No, because ...

(b) How did you feel during the workshop?

(c) What do you think about the dialogue?

(d) What did you learn?

a. 'Was it a good workshop? Yes, because ...': From 31 received responses, half of them were about philosophizing with students. Most of them confirmed that the teachers received many *'good models how we can do this in class'* as one participant stated, and how to *'challenge students in their self-formation and understanding, both subject-related and social'*, as another pointed out. The other half of the responses related to the dialogical approach of the DIALOGOS programme, which was appreciated by many for its reflective character, its multiperspectivity and its type of questioning. *'A good and edifying session'* as one teacher put it.

a. 'Was it a good workshop? No, because ...': From 19 responses received, six teachers raised concerns that the workshop's content could be *'challenging to impart to students in the 8th grade'* and that it could have been *'more directly aligned with the teaching in classes'*. Interestingly, the same participants emphasized that they did not participate voluntarily in this programme, but that their employer sent them.

b. 'How did you feel during the workshop?': From 12 responses received some stated that they were *'often positively surprised'* with exciting themes', and that they liked *'to be challenged to question opinions, eventually change and reformulate them'* and *'to see issues from different angles ... in order to become prudent.'* In this respect, some also felt *'confident that this will trigger the students.'* Seven mentioned challenges in terms of tiredness since the workshop was 7 hours long.

c. 'What do you think about the dialogue?': The 12 responses received were generally very positive. The dialogical approach was appreciated, for example: *'Dialogue is good because one gets new perspectives and it is good that one relates to what has been said before, when it's one's turn to talk'*, or *'dialogue as we have done it today is a positive thing to bring into the students' everyday school life'*. No negative aspects were mentioned.

d. 'What have you learned?': From 11 responses received half of them were related to the work with the students and how to *'model conversations in the classroom so that there will be more 'meat on the bone''*, as one teacher formulated it. The other half was about benefits that could be called personal learning outcomes, for example, *'to have learned to see things from different perspectives and to pose good questions to start a conversation'*, or *'to have learned to go out from a lesson without having the answers to what we have talked about.'*

While some of the teachers had expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that they were signed up for the philosophy and rhetoric project by the municipality and their school leaders without having the option of not participating, this changed somewhat after the first workshop.

2nd & 3rd workshop

The meta-reflections in the second and third workshops. were organized around the following questions:

- (a) How did you as teacher experience the philosophy sessions 1–5/6-10?
- (b) Describe briefly how you prepared for these sessions.
- (c) How did the students respond to the sessions?

The next section provides some of the teachers' responses as they reflected on their own experiences and those of their students.

4.2. Reflections from the first facilitation period

2nd workshop – a. ‘How did you as teacher experience the philosophy sessions 1–5?’

From 16 responses received eight contained positive feedback. Typical answers were: *‘I experienced the students to be very engaged and that they liked much of what we did’* or *‘good hours where we could talk about a lot and used examples from the world of the students.’* Others faced more challenging situations like *‘I didn’t really manage to explain to them why we are doing this and what they can use it for’*, or *‘The students can’t see why we are doing this, and they feel that this is forced onto them.’* Apart from subject-related challenges, the lack of time was an issue for several, either because the hours were too short or because there was no extra time provided to hold the sessions.

2nd workshop – b. ‘Describe briefly how you prepared for these sessions’: Since the responses consisted only of descriptions and no challenges or benefits were mentioned, they are not further explicated here.

2nd workshop – c. ‘How did the students respond to the sessions?’: 16 answers were received. Half of the responses expressed the students’ engagement and interest, and *‘that it was fun to have a slightly different lesson’*. Interestingly, and in contrast to the responses on the first question, only two challenges were raised. One regarded how to involve all students in the dialogue, on the one hand, and to keep them focused on the other, while another teacher said that his or her students *‘have trouble seeing the benefit of this,’*

4.3. Reflections from the second facilitation period

3rd workshop – a. ‘How did you as teacher experience the philosophy sessions 6–10?’

16 responses were received with the positive aspects clearly outweighing the challenges. *‘The sessions were surprisingly good,’* or *‘the students are looking forward to the philosophy hours because of the conversations and the topics which are out of the ordinary’* were typical answers. Several also sensed a development in these sessions, for example: *‘I see improvement with the students, they have better and more substantiated answers, they go deeper into the questions,’* or *‘the students learned several new words and became aware of their feelings.’* The challenges raised by a few were about students’ ability to keep a dialogue going or the difficulty making them talk at all. One teacher stated that the students *‘have surprisingly little fantasy.’*

3rd workshop – b. ‘Describe briefly how you prepared for these sessions’: For the same reasons as the second workshop, this point is not further explicated.

3rd workshop – c. ‘How did the students respond to the sessions?’ Many benefits were mentioned, for example: *‘I am impressed about how they already philosophize about questions which even I think are difficult. [...] It’s getting better every time,’* or *‘the students especially like exercises where they have to take a standpoint and justify their opinion’*. One participant even wrote that *‘some students flower greatly in free-thinking.’* From 14 answers received only five mentioned challenges. These teachers found it hard to actively engage the students in a dialogue (i.e. make them talk) and keep the conversation going. One teacher argued that the reason for this is because *‘The students*

themselves don't understand the purpose of having philosophy, since they don't get any assessment.'

4.4 . Reflections from the 4th workshop

In the last workshop, Michael Noah Weiss was invited as a co-facilitator. He and Guro Hansen Helskog planned the session together, hoping to further equip teachers with ideas and model facilitation approaches that they could try out with their students in dialogues sessions 16–20. These are the questions they were asked to reflect upon afterwards:

4th workshop

- (a) When you look back at the workshops and your own process of learning and self-formation so far, what is it that still sticks with you, generally?
- (b) What would you put forward as the *one* most important concrete experience you, as a teacher, have had during these weeks?
- (c) What do you think is the most important learning outcome for your students so far in the project?

a. 'When you look back at the workshops and your own process of learning and self-formation so far, what is it that still sticks with you, generally?': The 15 responses given can be summarized in terms of an *'extended and strengthened tool-box'*, and *'a better vocabulary to talk about feelings, thoughts and other aspects of human life'*. Further, the ability *'to dig deeper into fundamental issues,'* and *'to talk about difficult topics in the classroom,'* but also *'to participate in a community of meaning together with others.'* Some pointed out that they can now better *'prepare in order to strengthen a philosophizing community in the class'* and *'support the individual student to visualize his or her reflections throughout the years at high school,'* but also *'to get them out of their comfort zone.'* One teacher claimed that the students now *'often have aha-moments.'*

b. 'What would you put forward as the one most important concrete experience, you as a teacher have had during these weeks?': Interestingly, in most of the 15 received responses, no concrete experiences were illustrated. Rather, certain benefits were described in general terms. Many of them stressed the students' improved ability to reflect, to see things from different perspectives, to express feelings and to be able to put things into words. One teacher said that the outcome of the philosophical dialogues became visible *'when quiet, shy students came out of their shell and dared to argue for a standpoint in the group.'* Also, difficult topics like anxiety about death could be discussed in these sessions, which was *'challenging and heavy, but important, exciting and edifying.'*

c. 'What do you think is the most important learning outcome for your students so far in the project?': 15 responses were received. Here again the increased ability to reflect, to see from different angles was pointed out several times, but also *'to listen to others' arguments,'* *'to get to know each other better'* or a *'better classroom community'* were reported. One teacher explicitly defined the learning outcome from the philosophy sessions as a *'tool to deal with certain situations in life in an appropriate way.'*

5. Discussion

The DIALOGOS developmental action inquiry project was a control group intervention in the larger mainstream quantitative research project ROBUST. The ROBUST researchers would compare the outcomes of the life skill-oriented ROBUST intervention with our DIALOGOS philosophizing control group intervention. However, at no point in the training with the DIALOGOS teachers were the respective life skills or democratic citizenship skills explained or described as 'learning targets' or the like, since those who participated in this programme were meant to be the control group and not the test group of the ROBUST project. In other words, the development of these skills would be side-effects of the Dialogos process. Did we actually see such skills developed through the programme? Or, as posed in the guiding question, What were the challenges and developmental benefits – with regards to life skills and democratic citizenship – when training teachers in facilitating philosophical dialogues and philosophizing together with their students?

One of the main challenges both for the teachers and for Helskog as a facilitator in the first three sessions was the resistance some teachers experienced because they were obliged by the municipality to take part in the project. This is a paradox, since the content, structure and facilitation forms of the training emphasize free thinking and open dialogue, which is essentially democratic. Hence, there was a tension between the rather undemocratic structures of the ROBUST research project design, which the municipality assigned teachers to through rather bureaucratic and undemocratic procedures, and the free thinking promoted through the philosophical dialogues. This tension is reflected in the meta-reflection notes of some participants, who described challenges faced by themselves as well as their students. However, in general, one can see progress throughout the DIALOGOS process, as one would expect in a developmental action inquiry process (Torbert 1999). While several raised concerns in the first workshop about their ability to facilitate dialogues with students, the great majority felt confident about this after the last workshop. In this sense, one of the main purposes of the programme was fulfilled, namely: to train teachers to philosophize with their classes.

The meta-reflection notes also revealed that dialogical philosophizing represented a new didactical approach for both teachers and students. The absence of exams and pre-defined learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and competences made some students question the approach. Here the respective teachers' attitudes have to be taken into account, since the most negative feedback came from students whose teachers were also sceptical about the project, which is rather interesting. It seems that the teachers' (positive or negative) attitudes are reflected in students' attitudes.

However, after several sessions, most of the teachers not only confirmed that their students had got used to this new approach, but that they also started to see the value of it – and that most of them enjoyed the philosophizing for its own sake. In this respect, one can speak of learning for its own sake, which appears to be quite different from what some students and teachers seem to have learned to understand by the term *learning*. For some, learning seems to be associated with testing and assessment, and not something that also has to do with, for instance, flourishing human relationships, empathic communication and the ability to see things from different perspectives. The latter themes can be linked to several of the skills and attitudes involved in life skills as outlined by World Health Organisation (1999):

- communication (i.e.: *'a better vocabulary when it is about feelings, thoughts and other aspects of human life'*, or *'to talk about difficult topics in the classroom'*, *'to listen to others' arguments'*, to name but a few);
- interpersonal skills (i.e. *'to participate in a community of meaning together with others'*, or *'better classroom community'*);
- self-awareness (i.e. the students *'became aware of their feelings'*, or *'to dig deeper into fundamental issues'*);
- assertiveness (i.e. *'the students especially like exercises where they have to take a standpoint and justify their opinion'*, or *'quiet, shy students came out of their shell and dared to argument for a standpoint in the group'*)
- creative and reflective thinking (i.e. *'I am impressed about how they already philosophize about questions which even I think are difficult,'* or *'some students flower greatly in free-thinking'*)

The themes can also be linked to some of the core aspects of democratic citizenship, as defined in the CoE's *Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education* (Council of Europe 2010). For example:

- to empower students to value diversity and equality (i.e. *'the students especially like exercises where they have to take a standpoint and justify their opinion'*, *'when quiet, shy students came out of their shell and dared to argue for a standpoint in the group'*, *'to see issues from different angles ... in order to become prudent'* or *'to have learned to see things from different perspectives'*)
- the promotion of social cohesion (i.e. *'to get to know each other better'*, *'better classroom community'* or *'to participate in a community of meaning together with others'*)
- build mutual respect for human dignity (i.e. *'a better vocabulary when it is about feelings, thoughts and other aspects of human life'*)
- enhancing dialogue and promoting non-violence in the resolution of problems and disputes (i.e. *'Dialogue is good because one gets new perspectives and it is good to relate to what has been said before when it's your turn to talk'*, *'dialogue as we have done it today is a positive thing to bring into the students' everyday school life'*, *'I see improvement with the students, they have better and more substantiated answers, they go deeper into the questions'*)

Since these attitudes and skills never were explicated in the workshop, the development of these skills were implicit side-effects of 'philosophizing the Dialogos Way'. Based on these side-effects however, we have come to the conclusion that the activity of philosophizing and doing philosophical dialogues with students seems to hold valuable potential with respect *both* to life skills and democratic citizenship, skills which have obviously been fostered throughout the project. Helskog's initial hypothesis seems thus confirmed. To philosophical practitioners, this might not come as a surprise, since the thematic roots of DIALOGOS as well as of life skills and democratic citizenship can be traced back to the common theme of Ancient philosophy, namely: The art of living (see Hadot 1995: 268f). As pointed out in the introduction, this art involved progress towards wisdom and the development of specific virtues not so different from life skills and the skills needed for democratic citizenship (see *ibidem*: 220).

The main challenge for some of the teachers and their students appears to be the openness of the dialogical approach, and thus the unpredictability of it. The 'success' of a DIALOGOS process is highly dependent on the willingness of participants to fully

engage in the dialogues. It cannot be forced onto someone. Therefore, one cannot predict whether certain skills and attitudes will in fact be learned or not. This seems to depend largely on the motivation, the will and the engagement of both the participating students and the facilitating teachers. And here we arrive at a key assumption, one made by the ancient philosophers such as Socrates or Plato, namely that Virtue (that is phronesis or practical wisdom) cannot be taught but only be learned (see Gallagher 1992: 198f; Weiss 2018). In other words, there were doubtlessly certain self-formation processes triggered and fostered by means of this project – and this can be seen as one of the projects developmental benefits.

Even though this article appears to provide evidence of the usefulness of philosophical practice in developing certain life skills and democratic citizenship skills, and even if it is possible to understand these as ‘predefined learning targets and outcomes’, neither philosophical dialogue nor action research processes are ‘methods’ with clear input and output measures. They are ways of being with others in democratic (sic!), unpredictable and open-ended ways. Through the process, one can *hope* that life skills and human flourishing are enhanced as well. This points to the challenge when training teachers in facilitating philosophical dialogues addressed, for instance, by the philosophical practitioner Gerd Achenbach, who pointed out that philosophy, by its very nature, transcends any norms and given conventions (see Achenbach 1995). That seems to be particularly the case when trying to interpret the activity of philosophizing by means of a traditional understanding of teaching and learning based on predefined learning targets and outcomes.

This might be a lesson with wider implications at a time when life skills and democratic citizenship are about to be integrated into the primary and secondary curricula in Norway. Such skills are not simply competences that can be acquired by means of teaching, rather they fundamentally depend on the *attitudes of life* of the students and of their teachers. And that attitude – in reference to Viktor Frankl’s *will to meaning* – depends on what Guro Hansen Helskog calls *will to wisdom* (see Helskog 2019, 30–31) and the courage to *communicate heart to heart* (Helskog 2019:105ff). If this will is in place, the chances appear to be good that training teachers in facilitating philosophical dialogues will come to fruition.

6. Concluding remark

The action research project as *developmental action inquiry* (Torbert 1999) presented and reflected on in this paper focused on training teachers to philosophize *the Dialogos Way* with their students. The research question, which guided the subsequent analysis read: *What are the challenges and developmental benefits – with regards to life skills and democratic citizenship – when training teachers in facilitating philosophical dialogues and philosophizing together with their students?* One of the main challenges of this project was that participation was not voluntary, as true philosophizing cannot be forced onto someone, as the teachers’ meta-reflection notes have shown. That made it difficult to unleash the full potential of the programme. However, there were clear developmental benefits for both the teachers and their students, especially with regards to the key topics of life skills and democratic citizenship, and we assume the outcome would have been even more positive if the participants had been able to

choose whether to be part of the programme or not. Nevertheless, at the end of the project the great majority of both teachers and the students could take something away with them with regards to self-formation, and respective developmental progress is clearly visible in the submitted meta-reflection notes. In general terms, this project – that is training teachers in philosophizing with their students – indicates fruitful future potential when it comes to the integration of life skills and democratic citizenship into the national curriculum.

Notes

1. Before the first workshop with the teachers, Helskog asked the municipality for permission to research the process. They agreed and the project was reported to and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).
2. This is clearly depicted in Weiss' anthology 'The Socratic Handbook' (2015) in which more than 30 authors present a variety of philosophical practice approaches.

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