

Teaching philosophy in compulsory education:

A dive into teachers' experiences and effects

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from qualitative research on teachers' experiences of practising philosophy in Icelandic schools and its effects on their work and students. The research question is: *What are the teachers' experiences of teaching philosophy in compulsory education, and how do these experiences shape their practices and affect their students?* Nine philosophy teachers from South-West Iceland were interviewed from January to June 2021. Findings show both opportunities and challenges of practising philosophy with students. Opportunities consist of students' training in democratic living, reflective thinking, and a better understanding of various subject matters if the tools of philosophy are used. For teachers, the main challenge of doing philosophy is the uncertainty in the classroom when teaching through dialogue.

Keywords

dialogue, philosophy with children, risk, teachers' experiences, unpredictability in education

Introduction

Teachers in Icelandic compulsory schools are required to follow *The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools – with Subject Areas* (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture 2014). School authorities of each school can add subjects such as philosophy to their curriculum, but they do not have to. Philosophy is thus an optional subject and is only taught in a few schools.

The aim of this study is to analyse teachers' experiences of teaching philosophy in compulsory education in Iceland and its effects on their practices and students. This paper reports a qualitative study based on interviews with nine philosophy teachers in Iceland. To clarify my position in this study, I have practised philosophy in compulsory education in Iceland for approximately 20 years, teaching students of 13–16 years of age. During that period, I have often asked myself questions concerning philosophy in education, such as: *What am I doing in the philosophy classes? What is it like to be a philosophy teacher?* Gert Biesta presents a similar notion in an interview with

Steven A Stolz, where he says: 'The real challenge is to think again about what the teacher is, what it means to exist as a teacher, and how teaching can be progressive rather than conservative' (Stolz & Biesta 2018, p. 65).

The interviews presented here focus on the same queries, and the research question is: *What are the teachers' experiences of teaching philosophy in compulsory education, and how do these experiences shape their practices and affect their students?*

This study aims to look for the meaning of philosophy teachings. How do teachers understand their educational tasks? What goes on in their philosophy classes, and what does it mean for them, their students, and education in general? Which concepts are essential and must be taken notice of in order to understand the teaching of philosophy? What does all this mean for the teacher?

When interpreting my interviewees' answers, the theoretical background is sought in the divergent approaches of Philosophy with Children (PwC), emphasising education as a social process, but I have also used Gert Biesta's notion of *risk or unpredictability* in education.

Theoretical framework and review of related literature

In this section, I will review the theories and related literature on which this study is based. First, we look at previous discussions and research on philosophy in the classroom. Then we move to Gert Biesta's notion of risk or unpredictability in education that can be applied when teachers' experiences are analysed. Finally, the concepts of philosophy *for* and philosophy *with* children will be explained.

Impact on teachers, benefits, challenges and obstacles

In their studies of using philosophical approaches in the school, Baumfield (2006, 2017), Green, Condy and Chigona (2012), Zappalà and Smyth (2021), and Lam (2021, 2022) have noticed so-called mirror effects in their research on teachers' experiences. Teachers become learners when facilitating philosophical dialogues and are shown to become more reflective, ask more well-focused open-ended questions, develop their abilities to participate in conversations, listen attentively, and think critically. Teachers and students share interests; the teacher is a learner, and the learner is—without knowing it—a teacher, to borrow a phrase from Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1980). The teachers' tasks include building on ideas from the group, keeping the group calm, and ensuring that everyone is respected despite various arguments and

possibly heated discussions. The philosophy teacher is not 'teaching' but participating with the students, which is difficult (Lim 1995).

According to Green, Condy and Chigona (2012), teachers using inquiry-based methods started to reflect on their thinking and their essay-writing skills because ideas needed to be backed up and improved. When teaching ethics, a likely impact is that teachers would become more thoughtful about moral and ethical thinking, according to Zappalà and Smyth (2021).

There are also various challenges that philosophy teachers have to cope with when facilitating a philosophical dialogue. Haynes and Murriss (2011) have summarised the challenges and obstacles that philosophy teachers may encounter in their teachings. Compulsory school education takes place in an undemocratic environment in the sense that children must be there and have no other option. In such an environment, the philosophy teachers are trying to make the classroom more democratic, encouraging students to actively participate through a non-authoritarian approach and through dialogue where various opinions can be heard.

Instrumentalism in education is an obstacle because it focuses on measurement and the effects that philosophy may have on students' performance. Teachers may have to justify philosophical practice in the classroom by arguing that philosophy will, for example, make students more skilled in thinking, reasoning, and so forth.

Philosophy teachers must also be prepared for the unexpected, as thoughts and questions raised in class are not known in advance. Specific topics that students prefer to discuss may upset fellow students and trigger teachers' censorious reactions. Teachers may have difficulty asking philosophical questions, and become frustrated when dialogue does not progress linearly. Moral relativism and assumptions to the effect that philosophy has no right or wrong answers may also become an issue.

In their research with pre-service teachers in South Africa, Green, Condy and Chigona (2012) identified some challenges that teachers face when using the community of inquiry approach. They pointed out that teachers had to teach no matter the situation, and it was important for them to be flexible. Class and classroom size would not allow the students to sit in a circle, making it more difficult for them to address each other directly in the dialogue. In large classes, active listening and attention are difficult to manage. Difficulties with language barriers were another challenge in some groups. They created misunderstandings and were time-consuming to address.

Wonder, puzzlement, and the desire for a reasonable answer may also create tension, which involves uncertainty for teachers (Baumfield 2017).

The publications mentioned above on benefits, challenges, and obstacles leave us with questions concerning the practical implications in the classroom when philosophy is practised. Some of these implications are addressed by the interviewees in this study.

Philosophy practice, an unpredictable endeavour, and the 'risk' of education

Fundamentally, education is a dialogic process. Sharing thoughts and ideas and engaging in dialogue are educational activities in which one cannot foresee what will occur. Biesta (2013) uses the notion of *beautiful risk* to shed light on the importance and value of unpredictability in education. The risk has nothing to do with students' or teachers' possible failure or lack of scientifically-based evidence. The risk in education refers to the inevitable unpredictability of the dialogue between human beings, where the outcome can never be secured. Students, as human beings, are alive, and how they behave, act and think cannot be wholly foreseeable. The outcome of the educational process cannot be guaranteed, and education in this context is therefore more like lighting a fire than filling a vessel. This risk in education should be seen as something positive that contributes to making education worthwhile. If the risk is taken out of education, there is a chance that education is taken out altogether (Biesta 2013).

Philosophy as an inquiry-based learning approach is a matter of active, reflective thinking on students' behalf. It takes time to think, and students' ways of thinking can be unpredictable, as will be shown in the next section where Philosophy for/with Children is discussed.

There is pressure from policymakers, politicians, and organisations to push education into safer and more predictable spaces, with foreseeable results and predefined aims that can be more easily measured (Biesta 2013; Harðarson 2017). The times we live in may be impatient, as Biesta (2013) affirms, and this impatience pushes education in the direction mentioned above, where time is limited. Teachers are in a hurry, having to fulfil all the educational goals and aims that have been set, as seen in this article's findings chapter. Philosophical dialogue, known for its unpredictability and embracing the risk of education, would not thrive in such an atmosphere. It should be acknowledged that education is not a fixed mechanism that teachers can have at their disposal before they start educating their students.

There may be tendencies for a technocratic model in education embracing predefined aims and objectives that can be attained. Still, Philosophy for/with Children must involve the risk mentioned above and the unpredictability of education to be worth the name of philosophy.

Philosophy for/with children

The Philosophy for Children programme was presented by Matthew Lipman in the early 1970s. What Lipman had in mind with the idea of bringing philosophy into the classroom was to make students more thoughtful, reasonable, and able to engage in dialogue. He saw philosophy's capacity to bring about improvement in thinking (Lipman 2003). Good thinking, according to Lipman, is accurate, consistent, coherent, critical, creative and caring (Lipman 2003).

Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan (1980) noticed that students taking philosophy courses in schools were taught 'about' philosophy, but what Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan had in mind was to actually 'do' philosophy. They referred to the early days of philosophy, when philosophy was not for specialists but for the general public, as can be seen in Plato's dialogues, in which Socrates set an example of philosophising in the streets of Athens. By doing philosophy, students get the chance to be philosophers who take on the task of thinking and discussing philosophical issues with their fellow students. Doing philosophy in the classroom is an inquiry, whereby the classroom is converted into a community of inquiry where students engage in philosophical dialogue (Fisher 2013; Lipman 2003). In the community of philosophical inquiry, building on one another's ideas, challenging reasons, attentive listening, and helping each other to better understanding are essential. The group must follow where the dialogue leads (Lipman 2003), which may create uncertainty. The facilitators of the dialogue may often wonder about where the discussion is heading. This uncertainty of the philosophical inquiry has to be accepted. Lipman called his method Philosophy for Children (P4C).

There is also a well-known approach called Philosophy with Children (PwC). There is a slight difference between these approaches, but PwC has grown out of P4C. The difference between P4C and PwC is, according to Lipman:

Philosophy *with* children has grown up as a small offshoot of Philosophy for Children, in the sense that philosophy with children utilizes discussion of philosophical ideas, but not through specially written children's stories. Philosophy *with* children aims to develop children as

young philosophers. Philosophy *for* children aims to help children utilize philosophy so as to improve their learning of all the subjects in the curriculum. (Lipman 2017, p. 4)

Criticism of Lipman's programme has been made concerning his great emphasis on the philosophical novel when doing philosophy in the classroom. It is believed by many philosophers that it is not necessary to use philosophical novels when doing philosophy with children (Brenifier & Mole 2008; Cam 2006; Haynes & Murriss 2011).

Since Lipman set forth his approach, there has been certain progress in the discourse on philosophy in schools. When doing PwC, not only the philosophical novel is used to stimulate children to think and discuss philosophically. Novels and stories – other than those specially written for philosophy classes – exercises, questions, statements, movies, pictures and picture books can all serve in PwC classes to start a philosophical inquiry. Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss explain the reason for the difference of wording of P4C and PwC:

When Murriss developed her own approach to P4C using picturebooks, Lipman requested for the sake of clarity in 1992 that she did not use 'Philosophy for Children' or 'P4C'. Since then she has used the phrase Philosophy with Children (PwC), which has also been taken up by others as it expresses the democratic and collaborative nature of the practice: philosophy adults do *with*, not *for* children. (Haynes & Murriss 2011, p. 300)

Despite Lipman's request, not all philosophers use P4C to refer only to Lipman's programme. Philip Cam (2017) uses P4C broadly, including all the approaches influenced by Matthew Lipman. So, it should be kept in mind that a clear distinction between P4C and PwC is not always obvious. Philosophy for/with children can be found in various versions. Despite differences in methods, materials and aims, they all have in common the engagement of children in philosophical dialogue, emphasising the importance of reflective thinking.

The whole idea of doing philosophy in schools may seem questionable. What is the educational value of philosophy, and how do we know that school time is well used for philosophical dialogues? Notwithstanding, intellectual skills such as collaboration, reasoning and deliberation with others, as well as the ability to work on solutions to challenging issues, must be supported in schools. Philosophy is a school subject that gives students opportunities to develop the skills they need to be

thoughtful, decision-making beings (Kuhn, Zillmer & Khait 2013). Lone and Burroughs (2016) affirm the positive effect on young people:

Philosophy encourages students to question the assumptions that underlie our thinking and behavior. Further, philosophy supports the development of strong critical thinking and analytic reasoning skills in young students. (p. 6)

In the community of philosophical inquiry, students learn together (Lipman 2003). Such a community has a democratic educative intention whereby students can communicate with each other in an atmosphere of plurality (Echeverria & Hannam 2017). Democracy appears not only in students' participation but also in the teacher's or the facilitator's role in the dialogue. The facilitator should be a community member who regulates the dialogue, asking for reasons and clarifications, distributing students' turns for talking fairly, and showing concern for the argument and students' views (Kennedy & Kennedy 2011).

Method and data

For the present study, qualitative research using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2019, 2022) was conducted through semi-structured individual interviews with nine teachers in lower secondary schools in Iceland. The interviews were conducted between January to June 2021, and they lasted from 55 to 75 minutes. Reflexive thematic analysis is a method to identify themes within data and involves critical reflection of the researcher. It can be done in an inductive way, where the themes are linked to the data in a 'bottom-up way', or in a deductive or theoretical 'top-down way', which is more analyst-driven. In this research, an inductive analysis was used.

Purposive sampling was used to select the nine participants. The population of Iceland was 394,200 in July 2023 (Statistics Iceland 2023) and philosophy teachers in the school system are rather few. Hence the pool of teachers from which the selection could be made was somewhat limited; nevertheless, teacher gender and diversity of schools and student groups were kept in mind during the selection process. All of the teachers are experienced and have taught from three to more than 20 years in compulsory education, to students aged 9 to 16 years. Some also have experience teaching philosophy in kindergarten, primary, and upper secondary education. Their academic backgrounds vary, being mostly in philosophy, arts, religious studies, Icelandic language, and literature. Those who do not hold a philosophy degree

(BA/MA) have attended short courses and seminars on philosophy with children. All the participants have been given pseudonyms and are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Research participants

Pseudonym	Age at interview	Gender	Degree in philosophy (BA/MA)
David	61	M	Yes
Elisabeth	42	F	No
John	47	M	Yes
Linda	51	F	Yes
Margaret	53	F	No
Mary	55	F	No
Michael	64	M	Yes
Susan	49	F	Yes
Thomas	55	M	No

An interview guide with questions and themes was used when interviewing the teachers. Flexibility was kept in mind while interviewing, as flexibility is essential when conducting semi-structured interviews, given that participants can develop crucial ideas during the discussions that the researcher did not think of while preparing the interview guide (Braun & Clarke 2013).

There were three main interview themes: (a) the philosopher in the classroom, including the experience of the philosophy teachers, the philosophy classes, teaching materials and classroom organisation; (b) The school system and the schools' education policies in relation to philosophy teachings; (c) Philosophy as a subject: How do the teachers understand the concept 'philosophy'? At the end of each interview, the teachers were allowed to add something if they wanted.

The interviews were recorded and typewritten verbatim. Subsequently, the data was analysed in six steps (Braun & Clarke 2006): (1) Familiarisation with the data by listening closely to the recordings and reading and rereading the transcripts several times; (2) Generating codes that identified points of interest; (3) Coding and collating the data, sorting and combining codes to form overarching themes; (4) Reviewing the themes; (5) Defining and naming the themes; and (6) Writing up the themes with quotes from the interviews.

Ethical issues

All participants were informed about the research, along with why and how it would be carried out. They gave their fully informed oral consent for participation and were informed of their right to decide to quit whenever they wanted. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. They were also informed that, after the results had been published, all research material, such as recordings and interview notes, would be destroyed.

Findings

Three overarching themes were generated from the data: (1) Dialogue, including the subthemes (1a) Democratic value of philosophical dialogue, (1b) Reflective thinking, and (1c) Philosophy and the school system; (2) Time, with the subtheme (2a) the importance of freedom and flexibility; (3) Mood, including the subthemes (3a) trust and (3b) interest. These themes and subthemes are discussed in the following sections.

Dialogue

All the interviewees teach philosophy through dialogue. Dialogue as an overarching theme refers to democracy and democratic values, where different opinions meet and are discussed. Students may try to reach a consensus and agreement, but the interviewees regard the dialogic process as more important than the dialogue results. In the dialogue, reflective thinking is at the forefront, where students share ideas and thoughts and get to practice their thinking skills. Dialogue is a tool for the students to challenge and correct each other's thoughts and ideas. Through dialogue, students can dig deeper and better understand various subjects, such as literature and social studies. It is even possible to teach languages through dialogue.

Dialogue is not a mere chat or a conversation but an inquiry (Lipman 2003), and it takes time and competencies on behalf of the teachers to facilitate dialogue. That may be one reason why philosophy is not widely taught in Icelandic schools.

Democratic value of philosophical dialogue

The concept 'democracy' came up in most of the interviews. Focused dialogue is the basis for democracy, says David, who uses the phrase 'democratic upbringing' when discussing the influences of philosophy on students. In a democracy, cooperation and respect for others are essential, and teaching students collaboration and respect is an important educational aim.

David: The students need to experience participation in democratic dialogue, i.e. we are not quarrelling. We are having a dialogue. They often think that if two students disagree, they must be quarrelling.

What is important and what students learn from philosophy is to disagree with each other without being angry, says Michael, in other words, to control their temper. To begin with, students may be upset when a serious disagreement arises, but as time passes, they learn how to react with maturity and accept that everybody does not have to agree on everything. Margaret expresses the same notion and says that philosophical dialogue's role is to improve communication. Students should focus their attention on the topic discussed but not on the individuals themselves.

Mary wants her students to have a voice and to be able to speak out. John agrees. Philosophy is a way for students to have a voice, to have opinions, and to prepare for active participation in a democratic society. He mentions an example of one of his philosophy classes where some students, influenced by free and critical discussions, decided to be more socially active. They formed a group of feminist activists taking on the challenge of promoting the importance of gender equality on a broader level outside the classroom.

Reflective thinking

All the teachers agree about the democratic role of philosophy in the classroom. Their emphases are slightly different, however. Susan, Linda and Thomas did not discuss the democratic side of philosophical practice in the same way as others did. Their emphasis was more on philosophy's role as a way of encouraging students to think reflectively, as philosophy is not only about talking, it is about thinking and thinking together.

Margaret: Doing philosophy is to think together. I find it very important to think together about something important and to discover something, look into something together ... work with the process of thinking ...

According to Susan, the classes should help students to think for themselves, as well as to listen actively, take notice of various sides of different issues, and work on their creative and critical thinking. When asked about the purpose of the philosophy teacher and the aim of the classes, Susan and Linda answer as follows:

Susan: To activate the thought ... to activate critical thinking of individuals in a society. To reflect on who we are, how we fit in, how society affects us, and how possibly we can affect our environment ...

Linda: The aim of the classes is to help students to be better at talking together, listening and realising how they think, and training better-thinking skills.

Thomas' students are usually happy if they can think for themselves in classes. The philosophy classes are a forum where creativity is essential, and students can experiment with their thoughts and ideas. Thomas wants his students to find out how philosophy can strengthen their character as free, responsible and thinking beings with something important to say.

Philosophy and the school system

The Icelandic school system is conservative and unphilosophical, says David. There is pressure from so many groups and factors telling teachers what to do and how to teach, such as the National Curriculum Guide, educational policies, politicians, parents, school boards, authors of teaching materials, and the Directorate of Education. Philosophy is different from other school subjects.

David: When teaching mathematics, we have clear orders about what we are supposed to teach. There are books we use and specific material we are supposed to go through.

Thomas: ... after all ... I think philosophy is not just an academic discipline, it is a question of worldview, a way of looking at things, and it is something you have to adapt to ...

Students can deepen their understanding of other school subjects through philosophical questions and dialogue. It is possible to study everything using the tools of philosophy, say Elisabeth, Linda, Susan and Mary. The process of the dialogue is more important than the outcome. If you, as a teacher, can get the students into thinking actively about the subject you are teaching, you have succeeded, says Thomas.

For students who have difficulty reading and writing, philosophical dialogue is an excellent way to learn, says David, and Margaret agrees.

David: ... oral expression ... is suitable for many students who have dyslexia and have a hard time when writing. Such students start to flourish in philosophy classes. Even though they cannot write, they have a lot to say.

Margaret teaches students with special educational needs and support. She adds that philosophy can serve as a way for her students to gain better self-knowledge and strengthen their self-image. In the philosophy classes, they get the chance to reflect, and sometimes they can reflect on their situations.

For John, precise lesson plan for each philosophy class is not needed, though some general outlines of what should be done, flexibility, and the willingness to follow the argument wherever it leads the group are essential. Elisabeth agrees and says planning one week at a time suits her best, instead of planning weeks or months ahead.

Elisabeth's students are multinational. Many of her students do not understand Icelandic well. She finds it a challenge, and often unrest appears in the classroom. But teaching through dialogue may possibly be a way to teach the language.

For the philosophy teacher, Margaret says, it is necessary to be free from a strict grading system. It is hard to grade students for participation in philosophical dialogue and be responsible for keeping the discussion going simultaneously. Michael expresses the same concerns about the difficulty of grading philosophical dialogue fairly while trying to get it going. In all groups, you find individuals who do not talk much and how is it possible to know what they are thinking?

Not all interviewees are required to grade their students precisely, however in some schools, they are. In other schools, their students are 'passed' or 'failed'. David is one of the teachers obliged to grade his philosophy students. In order to grade students properly, he sometimes asks a fellow teacher to help him take notes while the dialogue is ongoing, noting who participates and how they do so. When grading for philosophical dialogue, Thomas notes that it often turns out to be grading for behaviour and disciplinary issues, rather than philosophy: Are you paying attention, are you listening, are you disturbing, and so forth?

Thomas: I find it unrealistic ... to judge how attentively you listen in the class. To decide whether you can listen well enough to get an A.

Classroom space matters a lot, and all the interviewees agree on the importance of how the students sit in the classroom. It is essential that students sit in a circle so they can see each other's faces when having a dialogue. In some classes, students sit at tables, while in others they do not.

Time

Time issues came up in the interviews with all participants. The majority thought it necessary to be less preoccupied with time, and that reducing time pressure is essential for philosophy classes. They agreed that, in their schools, little time is given to crucial competencies such as reflective thinking, questioning and dialogue, which are key competencies in philosophy. Instead, teachers are too busy trying to reach set goals and getting through a certain amount of teaching material. 'To finish' was a phrase used by some interviewees: 'to finish' in the sense of getting things done instead of emphasising the processes of reflection and communication. Time is a significant factor that shows us the difference between philosophy and other subjects. When the teachers participating in this study have philosophy classes, they do not experience time pressure, pressure to finish, or the need to go through a certain amount of teaching material. However, they realise it is not well accepted if they want to use philosophical methods such as philosophical dialogue in other subjects. In many subjects, such as language and maths, teachers must adhere to specific plans and keep to a schedule. It is only sometimes considered appropriate to philosophise and take enough time to inquire and reflect. But when teaching subjects such as literature and social studies, philosophical inquiry and dialogue—which are time-consuming—may be even more educative for the students. According to most interviewees, slowing things down in the classroom and making students more thoughtful were very important.

The importance of freedom and flexibility

According to David, one of the reasons why philosophy has not gained popularity in more Icelandic schools is the time pressure put on teachers. Time pressure and philosophy do not fit well together.

David: In my school, teachers are very busy reaching all the goals and aims that have been set, and the freedom that is needed for philosophy is missing.

It depends on the students how long it takes to understand what is going on in the philosophy classes, says David. Mastering philosophical dialogue is a challenging task and may take time.

Susan: What is most difficult for students is to have a dialogue, be ready to talk to and respect each other, and be respectful to the dialogue itself.

Michael agrees, and says it sometimes takes the students a long time to fully realise what is and has been going on in the philosophy classes.

Michael: ... often the students do not understand how deep the question is until it has been discussed for some time ...

According to Thomas, it is essential for teachers to be patient and not allow time pressure to affect their work.

Thomas: Teachers must have patience and let the time work with them ... I think I can affirm that even though nothing seems to be going on educationally, a whole lot is actually going on.

Thomas uses the term 'voyage of adventure' when describing his philosophy classes, because no one knows where a class is heading or how it will end.

Flexibility and freedom appear essential in this educational process. When the interviewees talk about teachers' freedom, they refer to their permission to change or deviate from strict syllabuses when they think it better serves students' needs and interests. Something may come up in the classroom, such as an exciting topic, question or opinion that is important to take further. According to Margaret, teaching philosophy does not consist of something that must be finished and measured. Even though teachers teach according to syllabuses, it is important to be able and willing to be flexible and make changes as the lessons proceed.

Linda emphasises the importance of student-centred learning, where the teacher takes note of students' interests and needs at all times. In such an approach, one group can be doing something different even though all are studying the same subject. Teachers have to bear in mind that each group of students is unique and must be treated as such.

Some of the interviewees teach students who need special educational support. Margaret is one of them. She says that the school administration is much more likely

to allow and approve of philosophical dialogue in classes with these students than in other classes. The reason, she says, has to do with different expectations. Less is expected of students who need special educational support, which provides the teacher with more freedom in relation to how and what is done in these classes. Mary, who teaches literature, agrees. In her group of students who need special educational support, she often seizes the opportunity to start a philosophical dialogue, which is usually not done with other student groups. When asked why she does not use philosophical dialogue more often in her teaching, she explains that there is too much pressure to get things going. More time is needed. Philosophical dialogue takes time, and if a dialogue is started in one group rather than in others, the groups will be doing different things and probably not be able to go through the same amount of teaching material.

Mary: It is so time-consuming ... that is the problem, but it would be wonderful if we could do more philosophy, especially in the literature classes. But we have a strict time frame and a schedule we have to follow ... and that reduces the possibility of using the method of dialogue, because it is time-consuming ...

When asked where the pressure to follow these time frames and schedules comes from, she says it usually comes from fellow teachers. It would make cooperation with other teachers difficult if one turned the classes into philosophy classes and started to have a dialogue about the topics. At the same time, students in the classes taught by other teachers continue with their textbooks, writing essays, taking exams, and so forth.

According to John, philosophy teachings should be creative, and the teacher must have the freedom to be creative. Margaret also mentions creativity, and that teachers should be ready and willing to learn with their students in their creative work.

Mood

All interviewees except one talked directly about mood when describing their classes, often using the Icelandic word 'stemning'. There is always a certain mood in the classroom. Mood can change occasionally, from one class to another and even within the same class. Mood indicates how one is faring (Heidegger 1962) and affects students and teachers. The mood in the classroom greatly influences how well or poorly the lessons go. According to the majority of the interviewees, mood matters a lot in philosophy classes, much more than in other subjects they teach. This is because

of the emphasis on active communication, cooperation and dialogue, which is inevitable in philosophy classes but less important in many other classes. The philosophy teachers who teach through dialogue have fewer tools—such as workbooks, textbooks, assignments and so forth—to safeguard their courses in the event of a poor atmosphere in the classroom.

Trust

According to Susan, mood depends greatly on how well the students trust each other and their interest in the discussed topic.

Susan: ... if there are many complex individuals, the dialogue gets harder to control ... It does not mean that the students do not like the class and do not want to have a dialogue. More often, student conflict must be solved before we can start a dialogue.

Thomas explains that is essential in philosophy classes to build trust among participants, and between participants and the teachers.

Thomas: ... if some particular issue interests students, we must incorporate it into the dialogue. It comes from them. But we know students can bring up all kinds of issues, and some are not appropriate ... and even though it is democratic and empowering, it may be inappropriate for some reasons, and you need to ... I do not think there is any simple answer to this.

The teacher's permission to allow students to express their thoughts and opinions freely affects the mood in the class in various ways. All kinds of reactions from fellow students may appear. If the dialogue is supposed to be fruitful, students must trust each other and realise that thought experiments are essential for the inquiry that is taking place in the classroom.

How will students react to each other's opinions? Will they feel angry, frustrated, hurt, compassionate, and so forth? Thomas mentions 'teachers' fear of losing control' as part of their uncertainty regarding students' reactions to each other.

Lack of trust within her group often meant that Mary changed her dialogic philosophy classes to something else, such as courses on the history of ideas, where students worked on written assignments.

Mary: I found all kinds of assignments I gave them during a specific period. They worked on questions from one of the web pages hosted by the University of Iceland. They worked on logical problems and fallacies, along with some written assignments. I also gave some lectures on philosophy, telling them how philosophy can be done.

For Michael, cooperation is crucial when philosophy is taught in the form of a dialogue. In the dialogue, students must be able to challenge each other's thoughts and ideas respectfully and help each other to be better thinkers.

Michael: It is compatibility that is necessary. They are all thinking together and trying to find answers to questions; there are not specific individuals playing the role of a superstar. They feel the importance of being together in the process.

Interest

Interest is a concept that often came up in the interviews. The interviewees who spoke about students' interests agreed that it is crucial, but it can be hard to find out what actually interests students. Some topics may interest some students, all of them or none, and students' interests affect the mood in the classroom. Students are not always willing to do philosophy.

Linda: I have had a lot of negative reactions and negative expectations, and when meeting the groups, I have faced closed doors: 'We know how boring it is. We are not going to let you in.' It has been a challenge.

Here, Linda refers to one of her classes where students lacked interest and motivation for philosophy. She had to reflect on how she could motivate these students to give her classes a chance. She tried several topics but reflected that 'what the teacher brings to the classroom is a kind of a lottery'.

John, Michael and David agree that it is essential to find out what interests students and make their interests a topic for philosophical inquiry. Michael gives examples of students' interests brought to the classroom, such as Harry Potter, dinosaurs and aliens.

Michael: I started to discuss books with my students. I think we discussed a Harry Potter book, which I had already read with my children ... One of my students was interested in aliens ...

David: I have read folklore and news from newspapers, and sometimes we watch videos and discuss questions from the students.

The actual topic—*what* is taken up for discussion—is not the most important factor in philosophy classes. What is of importance in philosophy classes is, first and foremost, the dialogue and the process of a philosophical inquiry. That is one of the differences between philosophy and many other school subjects. ‘The aim is to think together,’ says Michael.

Philosophy classes can go in various directions, and much depends on the students in the group, their interest and participation. Susan notes that students’ interests are the teachers’ most significant challenge, adding that philosophy differs from teaching languages. She also teaches Danish and notes there are more concrete assignments in her Danish classes, which is totally different from what is done in philosophy. She believes that it is much easier for students to disturb others in philosophy classes than in Danish lessons.

Thomas agrees with the others that what interests students—and why—is often yet to be discovered. The teacher often allows the students to influence what is done in the philosophy classes more than in many other courses, he says. After the topic has been brought to the classroom, no one knows where the students will take it. The teachers’ attitude is essential: to be ready and willing to allow students to express their thoughts freely. This may affect the classes and sometimes take them in unforeseen directions.

Discussion and conclusion

At the beginning of this article, the following question was raised: What are the teachers’ experiences of teaching philosophy in compulsory education, and how do these experiences shape their practices and affect their students? Below, this question will be answered by discussing the school system’s role, the educational value of philosophy classes, and the challenges teachers face.

Firstly, according to the interviewees, slowing things down in the classroom was considered necessary. The teachers confirmed Biesta’s (2013) notion, discussed earlier, about time pressure and impatience pushing education toward the direction of instrumentalism. They experience pressure, time pressure, and pressure about what is done in the classroom from their fellow teachers, school traditions and school authorities. These are some of the factors that make the school environment unphilosophical. Teachers experience that time pressure restricts their work on

competencies like reflective thinking, questioning and dialogue, which are the main components of philosophy for/with children. It may take time to master philosophical dialogue, and patience is needed. The interviewees agreed that students' thinking processes were more important than going through a certain amount of teaching material. In this regard, they often experienced tension with the traditional school structure.

Teachers' freedom and flexibility were also mentioned, and the respondents noted that they should have more freedom to deviate from strict lesson plans or syllabuses, looking out more often for students' interests. They should also be permitted to decide how to grade for the philosophy courses. Haynes and Murriss (2011) mention the focus on measurement and grading when teaching philosophy as an obstacle for philosophy with children, and some of the interviewees are in accord. Not all respondents are obliged to grade their philosophy students, but some criticise the grading process for not giving an accurate picture of students' success.

Secondly, when reflecting on philosophy's contribution to teaching and education and how they impact on students' lives, the respondents mention three main components:

- Philosophy promotes a democratic way of thinking and living. Essential skills for active participation in a democratic society are practised in philosophical dialogue, such as active listening, tolerance towards different opinions, and freedom of expression.
- Students are trained to think reflectively, which may help them to address various societal issues and their life positions.
- When philosophical questioning and dialogue is applied to other school subjects, it may increase a student's understanding of the subject in question.

According to the respondents, students needing special educational support benefit when teachers use philosophical approaches and tools to teach various subjects. All three of these components follow Lipman's theory of Philosophy for Children and later versions of doing philosophy with children.

Thirdly, when looking at the challenges of doing philosophy with students, the primary challenge teachers experience is the uncertainty of teaching through dialogue. They are faced with questions such as: Does the topic interest the students? Where will the dialogue lead the group? How is the cooperation between students? How will the students react to each other's opinions? What about trust and respect in

the group? What about the teacher's ability to control the group and facilitate the dialogue professionally? Teachers may fear losing control of the dialogue. Haynes and Murriss (2011) mention the importance of teachers being prepared for what may emerge unexpectedly in the classroom. Biesta (2013) used the term 'risk' when referring to the unpredictability teachers face, and the respondents confirmed this in the interviews.

The above-mentioned factors affect the mood in the classroom. Mood is a concept that repeatedly came up in the interviews, and affects the philosophy teachings and how the teachers experience their work. An important lesson can be learned from this research: to pay more attention to mood when philosophical teaching is organised. Teachers may expect all kinds of moods. It may be worth exploring to what extent Heidegger's (1962) insight about the possibility of mastering a mood by a counter mood through knowledge and will is applicable to the teaching of philosophy.

To be a philosophy teacher, one has to accept and enjoy the risk, uncertainty and unpredictability of education as an inevitable part of one's daily tasks in the classroom. Unpredictability applies more-or-less to all education. Still, as my findings show, this unpredictability, or the *beautiful risk* Biesta talks about, is an inevitable part of philosophy classes taught through dialogue. The dialogic process, and the unpredictable direction it can take, are essential parts of philosophy in the classroom. The emphasis is on the process of students sharing thoughts and opinions, and reacting to their fellow students, without necessarily looking for a conclusion.

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