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Children's natural curiosity – the basis for the Children's International Press Centre: Engaged participation from the home and the classroom to the world around

By Elise Sijthoff



Introduction

Children's vibrant curiosity about the world around them becomes evident – in their exploring fingers and rapt gaze – even before they can speak. Once the words begin to come, questions and observations tumble out at a tempo that adults find hard to keep pace with.

Children's natural curiosity – the basis for the Children's International Press Centre:
Engaged participation from the home and the classroom to the world around

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Young children are keen on asking for news – ‘Does Grandma’s new puppy still make puddles on the carpet?’ – as well as eager to share news (‘Our neighbour now walks with a stick’), and often do both at the same time: ‘Why does he walk with a stick? Do many people walk with a stick? Will I walk with a stick one day? Will you? When? Why?’ Adults find it difficult to deal with this stream of ‘news-with-a-very-small-n’ at the same time that they try to protect children from much News-with-a capital-N that appears on television – scenes of bombing, the ravages of natural disasters, starving children in a famine area, reports about maltreated children... The two kinds of news can compete with each other, as when the parent is following the national news on the radio or television in the form (for example) of a new law that has major implications, at the same time that the child pleads, ‘Please don’t listen to that boring stuff, listen – I made a paper aeroplane in school!’ Young children then are engaged with the ‘news’ within their immediate surroundings, whereas adults see this as trivial and ‘childish’ when juxtaposed with ‘News’ of the world and the nation. How can ‘news’ and ‘News’ engage with each other? How can children gradually integrate the two as they gain in years and experience? How can they participate in their local world as well as in the wide world beyond, through such integration? This stream of questions is similar to the flow of queries that children direct to their significant adults, and are the questions that the Children’s International Press Centre addresses.

The Children’s International Press Centre

This unusual Press Centre came into being after the Presidency of the European Union moved – as it does every half year between Member States – to the Netherlands, in January 2016. An Amsterdam-based publisher on children’s rights saw that the Presidency office was located at a historical site in the heart of the city and yet did not reach out in any way to the children in the many schools that were within an easy walk of the site. Surely this was an opportunity for children to engage more closely with decisions that were being made, especially decisions that would affect young citizens like themselves both in the Netherlands and across the European Union?

A class of 11- and 12-year-old children in the final year of a primary school that was located in the lively centre of Amsterdam were mobilised with the active cooperation of their class teacher. The teacher had herself observed with dismay – on her return to work after some years of parental leave – that the educational system had shifted towards a preoccupation with standardised assessment and she was determined instead to continue her focus on each child’s flourishing. Rather than see the emergent Press Centre as an unwanted distraction for her pupils who would soon face the school leaving exams, she felt that the Press Centre would help them maintain the necessary broad orientation and engagement with the world beyond the exam curriculum.

One morning about a month after the Presidency office had opened in Amsterdam, this group of 11 and 12-year olds walked along with the activist publisher and their teacher (as well as some other supportive adults) to the Presidency office where they were only allowed access to the visitors’ centre with the limited information that this provided. (See the press release below.) However, via the publisher who accompanied them, the children received

an encouraging message in the form of a video clip from a woman Member of the European Parliament who told them that she would like to be the first 'children friendly' MEP and asked them to formulate their priorities for MEPs more generally. The children did indeed do this in the months that followed, as will be described later.

But first – and immediately after their walk to the Presidency office in Amsterdam – two of the 12-year olds climbed into a car with the publisher and their teacher and headed for Brussels, to represent their classmates when an office room was selected in the Residence Palace (where many international press agencies are located) to house the Children's International Press Centre. The children weighed the pros and cons of various offices, for example size of office against high rent, and gave their advice in favour of a smaller room that would cost less. During this process, they regularly produced news bulletins for their classmates at home, also by interviewing adult press correspondents and requesting 'tips.' Questions from the children mostly evoked friendly responses, and adults seemed disarmed and 'humanised' by such contact.

Lessons for engaged participation immediately became clear: children of this age are very comfortable behind a microphone, when they have a clear picture of whom they are addressing – in this case their classmates – and when they are supported by trusted adults, here their teacher and the publisher. These two 12-year olds effortlessly adopted techniques that they had seen television journalists use and adapted these techniques to their own purpose and style. Working alongside a familiar friend of the same age or paired with a familiar age mate was a significant part of the process.

These lessons were further underlined when, in the months that followed, the class of 11-year olds formulated their priorities as the woman MEP had asked them to do. They divided into small groups that emphasised, for example, the need to welcome refugee children or the imperative to be protected from drug dealers who moved around the city centre on scooters. They made relevant video clips for the woman MEP, addressing her by name and giving short crisp presentations in the manner of newsroom reporters. They spoke to her in English rather than their native Dutch, thereby entering into a conversation that was European and not national.

A group from the class, accompanied by the publisher, went again to Brussels some months later to attend the launch of an international report on the health behaviour of school-aged children and to interview some of the experts at the event. When reading through the report, one boy was concerned at the findings about maltreatment of children and he investigated the subject further. He and a classmate were later invited by the Mayor of Amsterdam to meet the national task force against child abuse.

These two children returned yet again to Brussels in November 2016, to represent the Children's International Press Centre at an event 'Building the European Parliament, For Children, With Children,' organised by Eurochild and the Universal Education Foundation in advance of International Children's Day, to draw attention to the right of children to be consulted on all issues that concern them, in accordance with the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child. Two other children also represented the Children's

International Press Centre, as 'child mayors' from two Dutch towns, one, an 11-year-old girl who opposed cyber bullying and another girl of similar age who had drawn up an action plan to include refugee children in town activities. During the event in the European Parliament, these four children interviewed Dutch MEPs and later joined 11 older children – selected by Eurochild from eight countries – in a workshop about children's participation and budgets to support children friendly versions of relevant Parliamentary materials. The four Dutch children were able to use English to take part in the workshop and they enjoyed discussions with their peers from elsewhere in Europe. They were glad to meet the woman MEP who had encouraged their initial efforts and who was now hosting the workshop. They also spoke with other MEPs keenly involved with the European Parliament Intergroup on children's rights. At the end of the day, they were very clear about which people they had met that day had 'really' listened to them. Their confidence in using English was greatly strengthened. (See the photo at the end.)

Many people commented on the 'professional' manner in which the four children interviewed both children and adults present, at the same time that their energy and spontaneity characterised them essentially as children. They worked in pairs and had such a good time that on their way out they continued interviewing people whom they came across, even on the steps leading away from Parliament. They reluctantly put away their microphones when it was time to take the train home, back to school the next day and to everyday life far from the corridors of power. Their parents, who had attended an orientation workshop about the Parliament event in Amsterdam a few days earlier, were waiting to receive them and to hear their excited stories (and one father had accompanied the party as a ready assistant to the young reporters).

The methodology developed by the Children's International Press Centre is embedded in children's daily lives, and is not reserved only for special appearances at the political institutions that make important decisions for much of Europe. The anchoring of the Press Centre in day-to-day realities will be described next.

Grounded in the everyday lives of children

When children return to their classroom with thrilling reports about a visit to the European Parliament, interviews with MEPs, discussions with peers from other European countries and efforts to make the European Parliament more responsive to all children within the European Union, this is – however unusual – just one example of the stories that children bring to their classrooms and their classmates every morning.

When the teacher enters the room (or if she or he is already there, waiting for the bell to ring and mark the beginning of the 'school day'), she or he feels it a duty to put a stop to the animated noisy chatter and to insist on silence so that the 'real' work of progressing further with the curriculum can begin, in preparation for the next round of standardised assessment. There is no room to acknowledge that the 'news' that children bring with them every day is part of their natural and ongoing learning, and to weave this news into their formal education. In any case, a teacher would be hard pressed to respond individually to 30 children, each one of whom is bursting with news.

The Children’s International Press Centre provides methodologies that help teachers to integrate children’s questions and news into their learning. A ‘Landscape’ presents the daily world of children as connected with the wider world where powerful politicians take decisions that affect citizens’ lives – including children’s lives – as well as the worlds where specialised expertise is brought to bear and knowledge is generated. To bring all this together, the Landscape is divided into four quadrants:



- The lower left quadrant is the child’s home, inhabited by his or her family and located in a particular neighbourhood.
- The lower right quadrant depicts the school, and zooms in on the classroom that a particular teacher presides over.

Since these two quadrants are next to each other, it is easy for children to visualise how every morning they move from their homes to their school, and then return at the end of the school day.

The other two quadrants, situated above the first two, help children understand how their everyday lives are linked to local and national decision-making, and to specialised knowledge and expertise.

- The upper left quadrant presents imposing buildings that could be City Hall, or the National Parliament, or the European Parliament, depending on the context.
- The upper right quadrant consists of other buildings that include universities, think tanks, health centres and related locations of experts and specialists.

How does a child put these four quadrants together? Let us take the earlier example of the 12-year-old boy who travelled to Brussels to attend the launch of a report on the health behaviour of school-aged children. This report was produced in the upper right quadrant of the Landscape, by experts and specialists. The 11-year old encountered this through the Press Centre's activity within his class (lower right quadrant). His interest in what the report said about the mistreatment of children led ultimately to an invitation from the Mayor to meet the national taskforce against child abuse (upper left quadrant). Some of the debates in which he has now become involved concern home environments in which children may be vulnerable to maltreatment (lower left quadrant).

Various groups of children – within the class where the pilot activity of the Press Centre took place, as described above – used the Landscape to understand how the different problems that they identified as priorities for MEPs (such as refugee children or drug dealing near schools) should be addressed. The process might instead begin with a problem identified in the home quadrant: 'Our neighbour's brother died suddenly. His son used to play in our football team. How will he come to our neighbourhood sports club without his father to drive him? His mother doesn't like driving and our neighbour doesn't have a car.' Can the problem be solved in the school quadrant, by finding a parent prepared to drive the bereaved boy to football training, even temporarily? Should the problem be taken to the specialists' quadrant, for example to an association of sports coaches who can advise on football teams closer to the boy's home? Or is the next stop City Hall, with inquiries about special funds available for children in difficult circumstances?

MEPs and mayors – or experts and specialists – are not generally found in children's everyday environments, but other important adults are. The Press Centre encourages every child in a class to fill out for herself or himself a version of the Landscape, where the bottom two quadrants of the home and the school are enlarged. Children work on this in groups, in consultation with their parents at home (and a copy of this individual landscape should be pinned up somewhere in each child's room). Who are the significant adults in my life? Whom do I rely on for different forms of support? To whom do we look to for various kinds of help at school? Can we put together a little catalogue of the adults who look out for each one of us, and use this catalogue to allow these adults to help others of us and each other? Perhaps I can sit in when your mother explains maths homework to you, and maybe several of us can take a lift with my uncle to attend the exciting event in the next town...?

These catalogues take the attractive form of the cover page of a 'glossy,' with a large photo of the adult concerned and headlines about what she or he can offer to children in the class. These glossy catalogues can also cover the adults at City Hall whose jobs enable them to support children from all over the city in specific ways and similarly for various specialists within the same radius. The international catalogue corresponds to the 'Forbes 500,' this time covering Who Does What for Children? around the world.

This methodology of compiling children's daily 'news' can begin early on, in a day-care centre for example, where video clips from each child's family can be projected onto a digital white board or – if such a board is lacking – an ever-changing collage of current poster sized photos can be pinned up prominently. As children grow older, and as their

purview extends to the national and international level, they can use a suitable 'news app' to create their own blend of news stories, and then relate this to local happenings and to the details of their own lives.

Conclusion

The Children's International Press Centre is coming to the end of its first exciting year. The class with whom the pilot efforts were undertaken has now moved on to different high schools. In one high school, a new pilot attempt is underway to use the same techniques with young people in their late teens. The plan is for the Press Centre to work with one school in each country that it can reach out to. In these ways, the story of the Press Centre will continue... so keep watching this space!



PressRelease!



February 7, 2016!

On Monday morning, 8 February, at 10 am, 32 pupils from Grade 8 of the White Elephant School – accompanied by their teacher Marjo van Wittmarschen - will walk from their school gym to the Marine-terrein in Amsterdam where the offices of the Dutch Presidency of the European Commission are now located. These children would like to know whether politicians are ready to take into account the life worlds of children. In preparation for this, the pupils have noted each other's special talents and have taken stock of whether all of them have enough trusted adults in their immediate environment to provide support when needed or desired.



By establishing a press centre for children at the Marine-terrein in Amsterdam and in the centre of Brussels, we hope in the coming months to gain insights into the specific talents of various politicians and the priorities that they highlight in their work.





Author

Elise Sijthoff is the activist publisher mentioned in the story and the founder of Fysio Educatief which she describes as a very small publishing house with a huge mission oriented towards children's rights. She also hosts the WISHES network – Working together Internationally for Social development and Health in Every School and family – and in this role she has been invited to organise pre-conferences on children and young people as active citizens at the Second and Third European Conferences on Health Literacy held in Aarhus and Brussels respectively in 2014 and 2015. The Children's International Press Centre is her newest venture.