This volume contains the contributions for an international meeting of pedagogues in Religious Education in Europe. These pedagogues came together on 4 to 7 April, 2011 for a conference entitled *Powerful Learning Environments & Theologizing and Philosophizing with Children* at the Protestant Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands. The program included two main, intriguing questions:

What do we mean by the concept of a powerful learning environment?

What is the meaning of powerful learning environments for the practices of theologizing and philosophizing with children?

These questions were at first discussed in presentations dealing with the following topics:

The didactic preconditions and elements for teaching Religious Education from the perspective of a powerful learning environment

Examples of “good” subject materials – stories, artefacts, textbooks, films and so on – to stimulate philosophizing and theologizing with children

Secondly, the concept and the meaning of powerful learning environments for theologizing and philosophizing with children in the practices of school and church were discussed on 7 April during the open conference day. A hundred and thirty interested people, experts and practitioners from the Netherlands and Belgium not only attended two inspiring performances about the state of the art of philosophizing and theologizing with children in Europe, but also visited various workshops afterwards.

The collected contributions in this volume provide a meaningful insight into an inspiring conference and invite anyone who is interested in children’s theology to continue thinking about the two central questions of the conference.

ISBN 978-3-86219-492-6
Henk Kuindersma (Ed.)

Powerful Learning Environments and Theologizing and Philosophizing with Children
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# Introduction

## Child Theology: a Second International Conference

This volume contains the contributions to *Conference of Powerful Learning Environments & Theologizing and Philosophizing with Children*. This conference was the second international meeting of pedagogues of Religious Education (RE) in Europe who are interested in child theology and child philosophy. The conference took place on 4 – 7 April, 2011 at the Protestant Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands.

The first international conference of pedagogues of RE was held in September 2009 in Loccum, Germany. The focus of that first meeting was on the research that addressed how we can reflect on the engagement of children in theological and philosophical conversations and how to understand the processes of theologizing and philosophizing with children. A third interesting area was also discussed, namely how to stimulate a culture of teaching which places children’s fundamental questions at the centre of religious pedagogical actions.

The contributions to the conference at the Religious Pedagogical Institute (RPI) in Loccum in 2009 were published in a volume entitled *Symmetrical Communication. Philosophy and Theology in Classrooms across Europe*. The participants at the conference in Loccum shared perspectives on learning processes, and dealt with each other’s questions regarding the value and the meaning of the views of children. It appeared crucial to understand that against the background of different societies, subject orientation in RE goes hand in hand with democratic learning in theological and philosophical conversations with children.

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1 Friedhelm Kraft, Hanna Roose, Gerhard Büttner (Eds.), *Symmetrical communication and Philosophy and Theology in Classrooms across Europe*, RPI Loccum 2011.
Another inspiring meeting with expert discussions on RE and child theology throughout Europe was held in 2011 in Kampen\(^2\) with the leading title:

*Powerful Learning Environments & Theologizing and Philosophizing with Children.* The conference focused on two main questions:

- what do we mean by the concept of a powerful learning environment?
- what is the meaning of powerful learning environments for the practices of theologizing and philosophizing with children?

The conference as a whole at the PThU in Kampen consisted of two parts:

- an expert conference
- an open conference day.

*The expert conference*

During the expert conference, twenty-five participants discussed:

- the didactic preconditions and elements for teaching RE from the perspective of a powerful learning environment
- examples of 'good' subject materials – stories, artefacts, textbooks, films and so on – to stimulate philosophizing and theologizing with children.

Examples of successful theologizing and philosophizing with children were shown in transcripts or on videos. Special interest in the sessions was given to 'subject learning' and the interaction among the children as well the interaction among children and teachers.

\(^2\) The third International Conference is planned in April 2013 in Trondheim, Norway under the title Children’s voices - theological, philosophical and spiritual perspectives.
The open conference

The open conference on 7 April, which was also held at PThU Kampen, attracted a surprising number of interested people. A hundred and thirty colleagues of RE from the Netherlands and Belgium attended a presentation of the state of the art in philosophizing and theologizing with children in Europe - lecturers in teacher training, representatives of education boards, teachers in primary education and youth workers in the church.

The open conference day offered these visitors:

1. an orientation regarding theologizing and philosophizing with children and subsequent perspectives on new developments
2. examples, good practices, theologizing and philosophizing with children in workshops.

Contributions

Below the reader can find a brief introduction to the various contributions at the expert conference and the open conference day.

a. The expert conference

Presentations:

Johan Valstar provided a clarification of the concept “Powerful Learning Environment”. He also made a significant advancement in answering the key question: how can we develop a powerful learning environment? Johan Valstar himself chooses the model of elementarization by Nipkow and
Schweitzer as a helpful 'instrument' which he supplements with the element of 'incentive'.

Evert Jonker outlined what a powerful learning environment might look like. The teacher must take into account the concepts of time and space. Children live in the present. The language game is very important in this regard. In Religious Education we see a mix of everyday language and religious language. The teacher must therefore always switch – leap - from one language game to the other.

According to Evert Jonker, both the child and the teacher are part of the learning environment. The teacher's task is to encourage people in narrative identity and in responsiveness to the mystery of life and Christian faith.

Brian Gates presented his long-term research into the use of religious references. In the beginning of his career he studied children's references. In his study he came to the conclusion that children are by nature theologians. Religious references are part of their being. They spontaneously think about religion; however, they need to be supplied with experiences and themes to think about. Recently he undertook further research with the children who had grown up in the meantime. One of the first conclusions of this follow-up research was that the religious language in which children are raised is often retained. His question, however, is this: will the new generation still encounter religious references in the United Kingdom (UK)?

Elisabet Haakedal discussed the results of her research into the religious development of Sofie (13-15 years), a secondary school pupil. Her research question is whether a textbook plays a significant role in the establishment of a religious learning environment. Haakedal concluded that the textbook in the Norwegian context is very important. It provides a means of communication between student and teacher. The textbook in question
proved to be a good tool for Religious Education: education that guides individuals in their spiritual quests.

_Dana Hanesova_ provided an introduction to Slovak Religious Education. Theologizing with children is still in its infancy. Slovak teachers, however, are developing a different view of their pupils. Children are no longer seen as passive objects but as active subjects. This new way of looking at children can aid Slovakian Religious Education to implement the activity of theologizing with children. By using a trial-and-error method, Dana Hanasova herself is looking for opportunities to theologize with children.

_Sturla Sagsberg_ studied the 'concept' child. His thesis is that only through a renewed understanding of the role of the child is 'child theology' possible. Only if the child is considered as a subject with its own voice, is children's theology and theologizing with children possible.

**b. The open conference day**

Presentations:

_Elisabeth E. Schwarz and Katharina Kammeyer_ explained in a creative, joint presentation "the basics" of philosophizing and theologizing with children. Theologizing and philosophizing with children is 'open ended'. Children, according to many studies, find philosophical and theological conversations fun. Why? They do not have the same constraints as adults do and are in a process of development. What is more, they are not on their own. They are well supported in their discussions of questions and content. In other words, 'theological' impulses at the right time will help them to discover meanings.
Gerhard Büttner gave an inspiring presentation about how stories have a dual role in the educational process - stories make one think and stories help one to understand the world and oneself better. But stories are also "playthings for the soul." Children and adolescents can use stories to organize their identity better. Büttner gives examples of these aspects of using stories in learning environments.

Workshops:

Anton Vandeursen started with the thesis: for centuries, people have been looking for answers to many questions. Who are we? How should we live? What is this world, and what does it all mean for my life? The big questions of philosophy are questions of all men of all times and ages, hence, of children as well. Children ask themselves and the world a variety of questions. Philosophizing together gives them the opportunity to look at their answers and to examine and test their existing knowledge. The participants in the workshop experienced how this can be done.

Friedhelm Kraft & Hanna Roose spoke about the 'adventure' of Christology that invites us to discover a mystery with the children. More specifically, to discover Jesus as the Christ and the mystery of God. Working on this secret is a trip to a vast, open country. In the Christological journey to the land of faith, one develops an interpretation of life and relationships. This process is not so much about accepting faith and making statements of confession. Rather it is a conversation about the question: "Who is Jesus for me? What is his significance for us today?"

Pieter Vos began his workshop with an introduction to the ethics of virtue and the theological significance and pedagogical relevance of these ethics. The participants then discussed the conditions for and implementation of an
ethical educational practice. How can virtues be practiced in the formal and informal curriculum? How can a virtue be the focus in a powerful learning environment? What role does 'philosophizing' play in that process? And what does this mean for the role of the teacher?

Henk Kuindersma’s workshop comprised the use of songs and poems in theologizing with children, which are practices from Dutch schools. Participants did the same tasks as the children and discussed their experiences in direct contact with the experiences of the children. Poetic language often expresses in a few words the essence of religious themes and meanings, which is an important motive for working with songs and poems. In addition, children enjoy to sing and children also enjoy poems. Children have their own songs and poems and children create their own poems and songs.

Henk Kuindersma
1. The Quest for Powerful Learning Environments.

Children’s Theology & Elementarization

This contribution is similar to the panels of a triptych divided into three sections intended to be appreciated together. The middle panel: (2) *The Elementarization model* is typically the largest. It is flanked by two wing panels: (1) *The quest* and (3) *Domain-specific considerations*.

1.1. The Quest

Powerful Learning Environments

When we look back at the past decade, we may establish the fact that the Child theological approach has developed into a leading paradigm at a surprisingly rapid rate. Initially, exploration was mostly geared towards scientific reflection of (1) experimental educational practices, and (2) the nature, the content and the added value of children’s theological conversations.\(^3\) Meanwhile we are able to identify and develop first thoughts into a more far-reaching concept in which (3) the subject Child’s theological learning environment is the focus. This metaphorical description denotes the more comprehensively arranged educational context wherein students actively follow variable learning pathways. The corresponding perspective of *powerful learning environments* (abbreviation: *PLEs*) was first explicitly coined during the second International Children’s Theological Conference (2011) held in Kampen, Netherlands. The particular PLE

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\(^3\) cf. Henning Schluss, 2008.