

The role of the art of living in early childhood education

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Abstract

The notions of well-being and happiness are widely used today in a range of disciplines, areas of research, educational practice and daily life. However, these terms have to be considered critically, and careful reflection on their meaning is needed in each context where they are used (Soutter, Gilmore & O'Steen 2011). One reflection in the context of education has been conducted in relation to positive psychology as well as philosophical concepts and questions such as how to live a good life, the art of living and especially Schmid's (2000) concept of *Lebenskunst* or 'art of living' (Teschers 2013). Still, the research undertaken to connect these concepts with the area of early childhood education in particular has been rather limited. The current paper is one step to bridge this gap by exploring how the concept of the art of living relates to early childhood education and the notion of well-being as it is used in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996). It is proposed that early childhood educators can support the development of children's abilities to enable them to engage actively in shaping their own lives and developing their own art of living earlier rather than later in their lives. Further, suggestions are made for teaching practice about ways early childhood educators can support young children to become reflective, autonomous and knowledgeable human beings, who are able to take responsibility for their own lives.

Key words: Art of living, philosophy for children, community of inquiry, education for life, wellbeing, good life, early childhood education

Well-being and the good life in early childhood education

Notions of well-being and happiness over the last 20 odd years have seen increased popularity in a range of disciplines, in politics and in popular discussions (Soutter, Gilmore & O'Steen 2011; Mashford-Scott, Church & Tayler 2012). This includes, but is not limited to, national and international policy documents and frameworks in education and the field of early childhood education (Ministry of Education 1996; OECD 2009; UNICEF 2007).

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki*, for example, explicitly embeds well-being in Early Childhood Education (ECE) (Ministry of Education 1996, pp. 46-53). *Te Whāriki* is based on four principles (empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships) from which 'five strands, or essential areas of learning and development' (p. 15) arise. These strands are articulated in terms of the *well-being* of each child, a sense of *belonging* for children and their families, that the *contribution* of each child is valued, *communication* is promoted through the languages and symbols of different cultures, and children's learning is to be facilitated through active *exploration* of their environment.

Besides occupying the dominant position as the first strand, the notion of well-being is also interwoven throughout the curriculum and the other areas of learning and development. Although *Te Whāriki* is intended to be a guiding framework for ECE rather than a prescriptive curriculum, the holistic understanding of the child and their family also includes a broad understanding of well-being that reaches beyond a limited conception of health to incorporate emotional stability and a holistic development, such as supporting children's self-control, self-esteem and relationship building (p. 46). Further, the well-being of children is not seen in isolation but includes their family and community:

Children's learning and development are fostered if the well-being of their family and community is supported; if their family, culture, knowledge and community are respected; and if there is a strong connection and consistency among all the aspects of the child's world. (p. 42)

However, the interpretation of the notion of well-being varies between disciplines (Soutter et al. 2011), as well as within the discipline of education (Mashford-Scott et al. 2012). Mashford-Scott et al. point out that the term 'well-being' is used inconsistently within educational contexts and often refers to a range of dimensions, such as health, emotional and/or mental well-being, socially expected behaviour that indicates well-being, aspects of protection and basic human needs, as well as broader philosophical interpretations such as living a good life. They argue that a holistic approach to a child's well-being 'involves both positive emotions or affect *and* 'fulfilling ways of being' (Thoilliez 2011, p. 347) associated with the development of a positive sense of self and one's relation to others' (p. 236). Similarly, well-being in an early childhood context is, in this article, understood holistically as a combination of an immediate component, including health, positive emotions and a feeling of protection and belonging, *and* a future oriented aspect of a life's trajectory, a sense of purpose and the pursuit of interests and personal development. This is based on a holistic approach to education, as has

been discussed elsewhere (Teschers 2013), that reaches beyond a limited understanding of education to equip students for partaking in a society's economy, to take a more humanistic approach of supporting students to flourish and live the best possible life under the circumstances they are living in. The latter aspect of a life's trajectory and pursuit of interests in an ECE setting, however, does not necessarily have to be experienced on a reflected, conscious level by the child but might be experienced on a subconscious level or incidentally. This takes into account that children only slowly develop the vocabulary and sophisticated ways of expressing their intentions, as is mostly evident in adulthood, but nevertheless often act intentionally by pursuing their interests. The framework for this exploration of well-being and the good life in ECE is an approach towards an education for life concept that builds on Schmid's (2000) philosophy of an art of living and considers each child as a whole and unique human being in a holistic way, as outlined above. The role of Schmid's philosophy will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

The art of living in ECE

Schmid (2000), in his approach to an art of living, takes an individual focus and emphasises the importance of personal taste. For him, living a good or *beautiful* life means to live a life according to one's own self-reflected norms, values and beliefs. He defines the art of living as taking up responsibility for one's own life and actively shaping one's own self and one's life in an attempt to make a beautiful life out of it, as has been discussed in more detail elsewhere (Teschers 2010). This individualistic approach, however, can be seen as problematic from an ethical perspective and at odds with social-constructivist theories. Therefore, it needs to be pointed out that Schmid acknowledges that most, if not all, human beings are part of a social environment and have to consider the people around themselves in their decision-making and planning of a beautiful life. As has been discussed elsewhere (Teschers in press), Schmid developed an ethical model that builds on the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* (prudence and practical wisdom), which, so Schmid argues, enables each individual engaged in the art of living to transform basic egoism into a form of enlightened self-interest that leads towards a care for others, society, humanity in general, and ultimately a care for our planet and living environment. To develop an art of living and a beautiful life, therefore, does not mean to live a selfish life in disregard of others. Such action could ultimately lead to a conflicting situation that does not allow living a beautiful life at all, due to restrictions placed upon the individual by society, such as exclusion or imprisonment. It does rather mean: to care for oneself; care for the people one has contact with; care for

society; and to care for one's living environment, as all these aspects impact on one's ability to live a life one considers a good and beautiful one.

In his notion of a beautiful life, Schmid emphasises the aspect of *art* in his understanding of the art of living, and he sees each individual engaged in the art of living to become the artist of his or her own life. Although this artful connotation does relate quite well to certain aspects and theories of ECE, such as Deleuzean (Sellers 2013) or Regio Emilio (Danko-McGhee & Slutsky 2007) approaches, Schmid (2000) also points out the importance of other skills and faculties, such as self-reflection, critical thinking, practical wisdom and *Bildung*, in the meaning of well-rounded knowledge acquisition as well as self-formation. Education can play a vital role to help children and students to develop these faculties, skills and relevant knowledge areas that allow them to engage in the art of living and reflect on their own life. It has been argued in previous work (Teschers 2013) that education should aim towards a holistic end of empowering students to live a life that they consider beautiful and the best life possible under the circumstances they are living in. If this end of education is taken seriously, considerations for incorporating learning opportunities for these important aspects of developing an art of living need to be taken into account by educators in all fields, including early childhood education, primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Looking back to these relevant skills and faculties, the aspects of practical wisdom and *Bildung* might pose a challenge for ECE settings and might seem more suitable for later development stages, like secondary or tertiary education. However, a closer review of the knowledge areas that Schmid considers relevant for the development of one's own art of living indicates that significant steps can be taken in ECE to prepare young children for this endeavour early in their lives. The hope is that opening their minds and exposing young children early to certain topics, in an age appropriate way, will allow them to develop their own art of living and to strive towards a good and beautiful life earlier rather than later. Three examples of how this can be incorporated in ECE practice will be discussed.

Schmid (2000) considers all aspects of a human being's life-cycle as relevant for the art of living. However, he identifies a number of main knowledge areas that should be addressed in educational contexts to support the development of the students' own art of living: *the human being as individual; the social human being; difficulties and burdens of human life; striving for fulfilment and meaning in life; religions, beliefs and human cultures; and personal life-style and global perspectives* (for more details see Teschers 2013). Although one could question whether these topic areas are indeed comprehensive of the human life-cycle, it can be assumed that each of these areas is certainly relevant for considerations

of how to live a good and beautiful life. However, some of these topic areas are better suited for ECE settings than others, and a more detailed exploration of each topic is needed to see if and how they can be addressed with young children. For the argument in this article, three areas will be looked at in more detail to show the connection between the art of living and ECE.

The first topic for discussion is the *social aspects of human beings and societies*. It could be argued that learning the basic rules of society and of people living together in families and communities is one of the core learning areas for young children, especially in ECE settings. This is reflected, for example, in the principles of *family and community*, and *relationships*, as well as in the strand of *belonging* in the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum *Te Whāriki*. Learning that, in a community or society, certain resources (toys, crayons, books, attention of others, etc.) need to be shared and that the desires of others affect one's own options and possibilities is part of daily experiences for children in most ECE centres. Exploring the ideas of sharing, compromise and the perspective of others in a guided and conscious way, rather than by 'bumping' against the boundaries of other children or restrictions placed by teachers, can go a long way in preparing the young mind for tolerance and the considerations of the perspectives of others, and how these impact on one's own life and vice versa. One way of exploring this and other topics presented here could be in form of a community of philosophical inquiry. The aim, however, would not be to explore all implications on a highly sophisticated level but to raise awareness about the limitations, responsibilities, as well as benefits that accompany living in a family, community and society.

A second topic that can be integrated well in ECE is the area of *religions, beliefs and human cultures*. Many early childhood centres in New Zealand and in many other countries are already affected by migration and other aspects of globalisation. It is not unusual for children of various nationalities, religious backgrounds, race or cultures to come together and interact in the same group in an early childhood centre. The topic of multiculturalism and otherness can therefore regularly be addressed in daily practice or in specific projects, which again is also in line with the strands of *communication* and *exploration* in *Te Whāriki*. The participation in cultural practice, such as dance, art, clothing, foods, as well as national and/or religious holidays is only one example of how awareness for and knowledge of diversity can be raised and can potentially lead to increased respect and understanding, or at least tolerance and acceptance, of otherness.

Thirdly, the issue of *global perspectives* ties in, on the one hand, with notions of globalisation and migration, but also, on the other hand, with aspects of sustainability and our local and global environment. Raising awareness in the early years about

resource cycles (i.e. the origin of resources and the potential ways of recycling and reuse) and the finiteness of global resources can be a good preparation for considering aspects of global perspectives later on in primary or secondary education. Again, parallels can be found with aspects of *Te Whāriki*, such as in the strand of *communication* in terms of migration and cultural awareness, as well as in the strand of *exploration* of the child's environment that allows for considerations of sustainability and global responsibility. Again, all of these aspects need to be approached in an age-appropriate way.

As has been argued elsewhere (D'Olimpio & Teschers 2016), one way of addressing these and similar topics in a critical but considered way in ECE, primary and secondary education has been presented by advocates of Philosophy for Children (P4C) in the form of community of philosophical inquiry practice (Kennedy 2006; Millett & Tapper 2013). The following section will explore existing connections made between the art of living and philosophy for children in relation to ECE.

Community of philosophical inquiry to support the development of an art of living

The method of collaborative philosophical inquiry (CPI), sometimes also called 'community of philosophical inquiry' (CoI) or similar, is well-developed and has been central to P4C approaches since the 1970s (Kennedy 2006; Millett & Tapper 2012). A CoI is an open, facilitated conversation that encourages participants to reflect upon ideas in a safe and democratic environment. A characteristic of CoIs is the different ways of thinking that are present in these conversations (D'Olimpio & Teschers 2016). Kennedy (2006) points out that *critical* as well as *creative* thinking is supported in these conversations. Both are relevant for the argument made here as critical reflection is fundamental for the development of an art of living and creativity is important in order to envision alternative ways of living a good and beautiful life, for example. Critical thinking, according to Kennedy, emphasises reason as most important to justify our beliefs and ideas, whereas '[c]reative thinking often involves seeing the larger picture intuitively, and proceeds by imaginative leaps, hunches and connections' (p. 3). He continues further that '[h]igh quality early childhood settings ... provide an ideal structure for the formation of [a] community of inquiry' (p. 3). Kennedy argues that children from a very young age show the ability for logic and rudimentary critical thinking abilities. They do lack the vocabulary and experience to articulate their thinking in ways adults do, but the underlying logical functions of reasoning and drawing conclusions can be observed and have been argued to exist in children for many years (Chomsky 1980; Bower 1989, as cited in Kennedy 2006). This supports the

argument made here that the above mentioned relevant knowledge areas, skills and faculties for developing an art of living can be addressed and foundations laid in ECE settings.

Central to a community of philosophical inquiry, according to Millett and Tapper (2012), 'are the ideas of *reflection* and *respectful dialogue*' (p. 552). The ability of the child to reflect upon their own ideas (self-reflection) as well as the ideas of others is also central to Schmid's concept of the art of living where he highlights the importance of respecting other human beings in their own right, which is part of having a respectful dialogue with others. Further, Millett and Tapper (2012) list a number of qualities that are strengthened in young children through CoI practice in early childhood settings which, I claim, are all relevant for the later development of their own art of living: (i) CoI stimulates creative and critical thinking; (ii) it develops listening and speaking skills; (iii) it supports social and emotional development; (iv) it furthers patience, understanding and empathy for others; and (v) it supports the development of a personal value base in young children that is reflected upon and not simply adopted uncritically. The aspects of self-reflection, critical thinking and the development a personal value base are most important in the context of the art of living. Also, parallels to *Te Whāriki* can again be observed: the strand of *communication* arguably resonates with points (ii) and (iii) above; point (iii) and (iv) also relate to the strands of *belonging* and the principle of *relationships*; and point (v) arguably resonates with the strands of *contribution* and *exploration*. However, all potential benefits of CoI practice listed here seem to support at least two of the main *Te Whāriki* principles: *empowerment* and *holistic development*.

Therefore, employing CoI practices in ECE settings not only lays a foundation and opens the children's minds for relevant areas of reflection, but can also support the development of significant faculties such as critical thinking, (self-) reflection, and consideration of and respect for others. This said, ECE teachers require support and guidance in the knowledge areas and skills needed to effectively implement CoI practice, including developing the art of living, in their daily classroom practice. A start will be made in the next section, looking at support structures for teachers and the potential of centre-wide approaches to implementing P4C and an educational approach to the art of living.

Teachers' support and a whole centre approach

It has been argued so far that the practice of community of philosophical inquiry can be a useful tool to support the development of a young person's own art of living from an early age on, and that relevant knowledge areas, skills and faculties for an art of living

can be incorporated into ECE. However, steps need to be taken to enable the implementation of an environment that supports the later development of a beautiful life for young children. Schmid (2000) argues, for example, that teachers of the art of living need to be engaged in their own development and striving towards a beautiful life in order to be able to engage with students in authentic discussions and to be able to guide students through the challenges of shaping their own lives according to their self-reflected norms and values. Teachers need to engage in self-reflection while striving for *Bildung* and the development of prudence and practical wisdom. They also need to be knowledgeable in a wide range of topics to be able to address many of the relevant areas of the human life-cycle in discussion with their students, as discussed above and elsewhere (D'Olimpio & Teschers 2016). Schmid (2000), although not explicitly stating it, seems to focus on secondary and tertiary education when arguing these points. Although one could argue that some aspects of the key areas Schmid mentions are relevant for teacher education in general, it seems hardly feasible to include areas such as philosophy, economy, law, ecology, politics, psychology, sociology, and more, which Schmid claims are needed for art of living teachers, in significant detail in ECE teacher education on top of providing fundamental pedagogical understanding in all other relevant areas of ECE and care. It would be worthwhile to consider specialised art of living teachers in secondary and tertiary education; for ECE environments, however, it might be more prudent to focus on CoI teaching practice as a pedagogical tool in addition to current content of ECE teacher education. Further, it might be beneficial for children and teachers alike if an environment is created that supports the development of an own art of living for each person connected to the centre – staff, children, and potentially parents and the wider community. This would support the main requirement Schmid asks of art of living teachers, and strongly recommends for all teachers, which is to pursue their own art of living development through taking responsibility for their own lives and trying to shape them into beautiful ones. Therefore, each ECE teacher who is engaged in the art of living will consequently develop a certain level of reflection and gain knowledge in the areas Schmid considers as most important to be addressed in educational settings. He or she will be able to pose questions and make use of opportunities that arise in daily practice to address questions with the children that are important to them at the time. Due to the stage of development of young children, a broad approach and exposure on a frequent basis with important life questions by most or all staff seems more prudent than a specialised in-depth discussion with a dedicated art of living teacher on rare or pre-scheduled occasions. The latter approach seems more suitable for older students who are more likely to continue a self-reflective thinking process on topics discussed during art of

living classes.

Despite the argument made here for a broader instead of a specialised approach to support an art of living development in ECE classrooms, teachers will need to be supported to be able to address relevant topics in their daily practice with children, and especially in how to use CoIs as a tool. Therefore, early childhood teacher education needs to incorporate community of inquiry knowledge and practice. Further, it would be beneficial for children as much as for teachers themselves if engagement with philosophical ideas and questions—and guidance in both CoI and art of living teaching—were to be part of teacher education at all levels. However, it needs to be admitted that these suggestions are rather sweeping and unspecific. More work is needed to refine the content and aspects that would be most helpful for ECE teachers in their practice incorporating CoIs and art of living content. The discussion above and the relevant areas of skills and knowledge indicated by Schmid and others can only provide a limited guideline at this point.

Still, a final suggestion that shall be made here to support the development of students' and teachers' art of living in ECE environments is, based on Schmid's (2000) recommendation for schools, to incorporate a whole-centre approach. This would mean that all centre staff, including janitors, gardeners, centre manager and administrators, are part of the teaching and learning culture. Support structures could then be put into place for all staff to develop their own art of living. This could be done, for example, by supplying relevant books and articles, providing all-staff workshops around the topic, and incorporating the concept of the art of living in the centre framework and policies. All aspects of life within the centre, beginning with the curriculum but also including daily practices, centre routines, staff policies, arrangement of garden and outdoor areas, as well as indoor areas and classrooms, could be reviewed with the intention of creating an environment that allows children and staff to develop their own art of living and live a good and beautiful life. This would align well with a holistic educational understanding that considers each student (and teacher and other centre staff) as a whole human being in connection with others and part of a community of learners, which, again, is not far removed from the holistic approach that is expressed in the principles and strands of the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum *Te Whāriki*.

Conclusion

It has been argued here that the philosophical concept of the art of living, although a life-long process and arguably more significant in adolescence and adult life, can and should be supported in ECE settings. Philosophy for children, and especially the

practice of community of inquiry, have been discussed as suitable to further this goal. To support ECE teachers, it has been proposed that CoI training as well as exposure to philosophical ideas and questioning should be incorporated in (ECE) teacher education. Finally, following Schmid's discussion, a whole-centre approach is suggested that supports the development of an art of living for children, teachers and other staff alike. The dispositions created in the early years can be fundamental for the later development of relevant knowledge and skills that are necessary to develop an own art of living and strive towards a good and beautiful life. The assumption that is made here is that early exposure to certain areas of life-knowledge (Schmid 2000; Teschers 2013) and the early development of faculties, such as (self-) reflection, critical thinking, and tolerance and respect for others, can support the development of an own art of living earlier in life, rather than later. This would raise the likelihood of a person living a life that he or she considers good and beautiful and it aims to support young people to find meaning and direction in life based on their own reflected values, instead of blindly following the direction prescribed by society, one's parents, or economy and industry. What is proposed here is a holistic educational approach to early childhood education that not only sees the child as a whole in the here and now, but also considers each child's life-cycle in a holistic future-oriented way towards empowering our young generation to live good and beautiful lives. It has been argued that early childhood education can provide a foundation that supports the development of such an art of living.

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