

## **Socrates in the classroom develops students' thinking and changes the distribution of power.**

**When students have the opportunity to participate in “Socratic seminars” on a regular basis, a different classroom culture evolves. The students collaborate more and more voices are heard. The students develop their thinking skills in a cooperative and investigative atmosphere. This is shown in a new dissertation in Pedagogy by Ann S Pihlgren at the Stockholm University.**

The Socratic dialogue is a particular way of developing children's, as well as adults', thinking skills through cooperative dialogue where significant human ideas and values are discussed. By participating in Socratic seminars regularly every other week, preschool children and older students develop their thinking skills. The seminars address literature and art work, with questions such as these: is Pippi Longstocking is a good friend, is Jack is stupid or smart when he sells his mother's cow for some beans or are we born good or evil. In the beginning the students have difficulty expressing their thoughts, but with time their ability to express themselves and to examine ideas critically and logically develops.

The study included seven groups of children, five to sixteen years old. The groups were filmed during three years of philosophizing in the classroom and the films were analyzed. The interaction in the classroom was positively influenced, according to Ann S Pihlgren. The teacher dominated less, more students spoke and the students gradually took over the responsibilities of the teacher to promote exploration in the dialogue. The ability to use the Socratic seminar is learned by students and teachers through practice and by testing the rules of the seminar. The students construct a supportive group culture through their silent interaction, where gestures, glances, and body language are used to show not only support or sympathy for each other, but also cooperation with each other when someone attempts to disturb or to provoke the dialogue. The teacher role changes to one of support, ensuring that the analysis is fruitful and that the dialogue is respectful.

Socratic methods have developed independently in various countries. They all describe a set of methodological steps to attain similar objectives. An opening question is answered by all participants and followed by cooperative, critical analysis. Finally, the new ideas are connected to the everyday life experience of the participants.

It seems as if this ritualized structure and the nurturing culture of the seminar provide a safe circle, helping the participants to try new, bold ideas that they might otherwise not have tested, Ann S Pihlgren says. By cooperating when examining the ideas they also seem to learn a way to address problems on their own without teacher intervention.

To work with methods connected to the ancient philosopher Socrates may seem out-of-date in a modern school, but that is absolutely not the case, Ann S Pihlgren states.

The Socratic seminars have been seen as a complement to traditional classroom teaching for hundreds of years. But it is not easy to learn how to stage them to get positive effects. It is especially hard for teachers, who often fall back to their traditional, controlling “teacher” roles. The dissertation offers excellent tools for teachers who want to develop students' thinking and to foster cooperative group dialogue.

**The name of the dissertation:** Socrates in the Classroom. Rationales and Effects of Philosophizing with Children. The dissertation could be downloaded as pdf at <http://www.diva-portal.org/su/theses/abstract.xsql?dbid=7392> .

### **Additional information**

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### **Additional facts**

**Socrates** (470-399 BC) Greek philosopher assumed in his dialogues that human reason has a right to impartially explore all subjects. He left no written work, we know him mostly through Plato's (427-347 BC) dialogues. **Plato** was Socrates disciple and a prominent figure within the idealistic tradition of Western philosophy. Socrates worked through what he called **maieutics**, midwifery. Through **elenchus** (Greek for inquiring, refuting), exploring questioning the questioner will help the participants to give birth to their thoughts. Similar methods was developed and practiced in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Swedish popular educators **Hans Larsson** and **Oscar Olsson**, in Germany in the 1920s by **Leonard Nelson** and in the USA during the later 20<sup>th</sup> century by **Mortimer J Adler**. In Sweden the dialogues were introduced by **Lars Lindström**. The seminars are practiced as a pedagogical method at the **Freinet Academy** in Norrtälje, Sweden [www.mimer.org](http://www.mimer.org).  
The students in the study are **5 to 16 years old** (grade 9).