

FROM A STORY TO A CONVERSATION AND FROM PHILOSOPHY WITH CHILDREN TO COMMENCEMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING

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Through wondering at the world and wish for knowledge one inevitably decides for love of knowledge; thus – through all the »whys« leading us from a child's cradle to the man's grave, he thus manages to master the eternal path of philosophy.

(Anita Lukanc, 2001)

Wondering . . . , Disappearing with age

The nature of a small child is directed towards research. A child often gazes at something and wonders. He/She feels enthusiastic about the world. By means of research he/she discovers and gets acquainted with him/herself and others. A philosopher Bloch (Kotnik, 1996) starts from wondering and asking questions, stating that all small children are philosophers. He explains that original wondering of a five- or six-year-old and his questions can be formulated and incorporated into philosophical questions. But he notices that the philosophical nature disappears with age. We know ourselves that soon after starting school children stop wondering and asking questions. So where do we as teachers go wrong? What do we do in a wrong way?

Marjan Šimenc sees the reason in adults who are unable to cope with a heap of unusual children's questions. First he explains that no extraordinary intelligence is needed to think them over, only the readiness to use one's own common sense and openness for the questions that have been asked.

Matthews (Naji, 2003) suggests that we should listen to the child and thus get acquainted with his experience of the world that he is talking about. Having our attention, he/she will feel safe and at the same time

encouraged in the sense that he/she is doing the right thing, so he/she will continue the research.

In the school practice there is usually little time for this kind of approach; however, this is an important field for a child's emotional, intellectual and also spiritual development.

So, how should we intentionally awaken a child's philosophical curiosity and preserve it? How should we encourage critical thinking?

In the eastern philosophical tradition there exists the anglo-saxon course focusing attention on teaching philosophy with the aim of independent thinking. Practically it is implemented in the philosophy for children and philosophy with children (Kotnik, 1996).

The programmes derive from a child's wondering, his/her experiencing the world and his/her imagination. They respond to a child's need of knowledge and research. They listen to a child and offer him/her an opportunity to search, discover, realize, explain, confirm his/her interpretations, or they encourage him to choose new more constructive arguments.

The approaches belong to the programme for early implementation of philosophy with children and at the same time they are the answer to the above questions.

The origin of the philosophy with children

The programme Philosophy for Children (shortened to P4C) appeared in the 1960's in the USA. Its author Matthews Lipman - together with his colleagues at the Institute for the promotion of philosophy for children - enriched the programme on the theoretical and practical levels in order to encourage children for independent and critical thinking and to develop higher cognitive levels. So nowadays we can speak about a systematic programme, addressed to children of six to eighteen years of age, including seven textbooks and teacher's manuals.

The programme Philosophy with children was developed from the structured Lipman's programme. Matthews, the author of this approach, started to implement the above mentioned topics on the basis of his daughter's questions, asked in a philosophic way. Matthews knew Lipman's principle well since its very beginning, but he did not wholly agree with his schematic approach to philosophy, so he formed the programme Philosophy with Children (shortened to PwC). The author as opposed to

Lipman does not require specially written philosophical stories, but he considers his discussion of philosophical ideas.

Matthews sees in children a treasury of imagination and phantasy, representing their reality; however, for their independence the reality is needed, possessed to a much vaster extent by adults. He suggests that adults and children should enrich each other by their experience and thus help each other (Naji, 2003).

Matthews speaks about »making« philosophy with children. He also wrote a number of philosophically enriched stories for children.

The aim of the concept of philosophy with children is to develop children and turn them into young philosophers (Lipman, in Naji, 2003). Marjana Ivanjko (2005) states that abroad philosophy with children also represents a kind of a formal movement of adults, who are interested in children's ideas about the world, themselves and the like.

Both programmes derive from a child's needs and characteristics. They lead them from here to the community of research, passing gradually from the conversation to the dialogue and discussion.

If we teach children to observe their thinking, it will be easier for them to plan their future thinking. (Katarina Zahraštnik, 2001)

Methodology

I will present a practical example of a lesson of philosophy with children which I carried out with the pupils of the fourth form in the Primary School Šmarje pri Jelšah, aged nine or ten, in the schoolyear 2005/2006.

The process followed a steady procedure: first we shared important events which happened to us. This was followed by listening to an ancient story from the collection of Hana Doskočil: Diogenes in a barrel (mostly translations of Greek myths). We retold the story together. The pupils wrote their questions and findings on a sheet of paper. They chose the most interesting ones to continue the conversation. The conversation followed. When we began with our lessons, they still needed additional questions, later they took over the initiative and the leading to the conversation themselves. Towards the end of the lesson they wrote their findings and their possible implementation in everyday life on the back of the sheet of paper.

An example of a philosophy lesson with children

Monday, 9 January, 2006, at 7.00

DIOGENES IN A BARREL

The summary of the story

In the town of Corinthus there lived Diogenes, who was a learned and wise man. The majority of people believed he was a queer person, because he only had four things: a coat, a stick, a haversack and an earthen jug. When he saw a child drinking well water from his hands, he threw away his jug as well. Even Alexander the Great himself visited him and wondered at his wisdom. Once Diogenes was kidnapped by the robbers and sold as a slave. A wealthy merchant paid a good price for him and the queer man from Corinthus became a good teacher to all his sons who never turned into envious weeklings.

After listening to the story the pupils wrote the following questions on their sheets of paper:

Why did Diogenes throw away his jug?

Did Diogenes like children?

What did Diogenes become?

Why did Diogenes live in a barrel?

Did Diogenes need a house?

Did Diogenes become happy as a teacher?

Was Diogenes happy?

The starting point for further thinking was the question that most of the pupils chose:

Was Diogenes happy?

He was happy, because he only had a few things.

He knew what he needed, he lived with the nature.

Did Diogenes become happy as a teacher?

He was a good teacher.

Everybody wondered at him, he was different, because he could teach children according to his common sense.

He did not spoil children.

Teacher: What does it mean to be spoiled? Who is spoiled (additional question)?

A person who has everything is spoiled.

The one who wants to have everything.

Parents are also spoiled, because they want everything at once.

It is very difficult to get rid of bad habits.

Children need proper upbringing in order not to be spoiled.

Teacher: How should they be brought up (additional question)?

By being strict.

By not buying them everything.

The first human should have been well-bread.

Good breeding is transferred from one generation to another.

Only a part of the conversation has been noted. The pupils went on answering and looking for better answers to the questions. Matthews believes (Naji, 2003) that all questions have answers, but it is not inevitable to find the best ones today; we may find them tomorrow or some other time.

The pupils ended the lesson with the thought, that one can be happy without being rich. A few questions were left to be answered next time.

The teacher's reflexion to the statements

The question which served as a starting point for the conversation, was related to Diogenes' happiness from the point of view of a human being or a teacher. The reason for his happiness was ascribed to his modesty, behaviour and life with the nature. They believed that he was happy teaching, because he was a good, reasonable and wise teacher who did not spoil the pupils. Then I asked questions about the meaning of the word spoiled and elicited thinking about spoiled people. Who is like that? In their answers being spoiled is interpreted as the need to satisfy many wishes instantly, implying the possibility of addiction. They see the prevention in good breeding. Giving an additional answer, they stated that good breeding is strict and transferred from one generation to the next one. The final thought is a kind of a summary of the story and the consideration of the lesson.

The findings

Philosophy lessons with children are an opportunity for pupils' wondering and research of stories, their thoughts and words. The story is also an impulse to think; namely, the children did not know where the thoughts would lead them and where they would stop. They kept thinking and searching for better solutions without insecurity or fear of having said something wrong. When the problems were demanding and exceeded their cognitive capabilities, they used imagination.

At the beginning of our meetings we were faced with talkativeness and naughtiness of some pupils. During the lessons these pupils were spontaneously integrated into the process itself, becoming extraordinarily active in the debate about a certain question or topic. Therefore, this was also an occasion to teach tolerance.

Having performed lessons of philosophy with children for a year, I found out the following on the basis of observation and analysis:

- they improved their rhetorical capabilities which presents itself in their self-confident expressing of thoughts;
- they are more precise at asking questions, more critical and realistic, which can also be noticed in the more constructive search for solutions;
- they possess a richer vocabulary as they use different words in conversation;
- they are more persistent;
- the development of imagination is noticeable.

At the end of the schoolyear the pupils used dialogue with ancient stories, demanding arguments for and against and new solutions. They also used discussion.

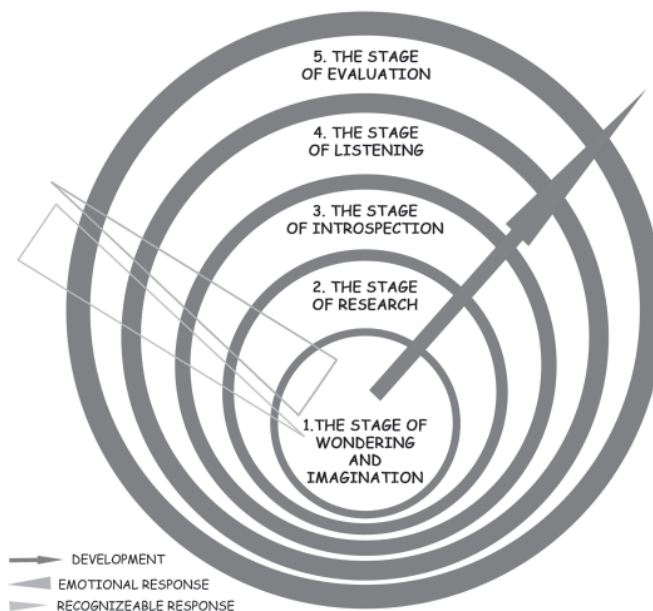
During my observation of the pupil's activity I perceived a certain graduality in the development of thinking processes, which could be shown by concentric circles – they will be presented later on.

In this schoolyear all »last year's« pupils are attending the club – with the exception of a girl whose absence is justified; another girl joined us and she is already taking an active part. They still read and listen to stories, the conversation grows into a dialogue and discussion. At the beginning of the lesson they determine the leader who is in charge of good conversation: he/she grants permission to speak, asks questions and provokes with his/her assertions. The role of the leader is a demanding one, but it gives the pupil more freedom. I remain the reader of the story and more and more only the observer.

Every second month the pupils discuss a philosophical story »live« in a children's programme Magic chest on the local radio station Štajerski val (Styrian wave). The participants of the discussion are not acquainted with the story in advance, therefore the procedure of »making philosophy« is similar to the one in the class, only the role of the leader belongs to me. The pupils relax in the debate, they ask interesting questions, find incredible answers and conclude with their own thought. I find that the radio discussion is more demanding in comparison to the situation in class, being that it is public and subject to criticism, the discussion is more concise and constructive due to the time limit and the need to conclude sensibly. The pupils are much more concentrated as compared to the discussion in class.

On the basis of a year-long planned observation during the lesson, the pupils' written sources and some theoretical findings according to Bettelheim (1999), Lipman (1980) and Matthews (in Naji, 2003) I want to present the process of thinking, experiencing and feelings, which was aroused during the lessons of philosophy with children with the majority of the pupils, by using a picture of concentric circles.

Picture 1: Presentation of the process of thinking, experiencing and feelings in stages in the form of concentric circles



1. *The stage of wondering and imagination*

While listening to the story, a pupil experiences the feelings of comfort. He/she feels comfortable and free. The story heard arouses his/her imagination and encourages wondering.

2. *The stage of research*

Due to the feeling of freedom the need to research and ask questions arises. Given the proper encouragement, a pupil him/herself searches for the answers to the questions that have been asked. He/She explains the ones that do not supercede his/her understanding of the world and the people; for more demanding questions imagination is used. Unusual questions encourage the pupil to think.

3. *The stage of introspection*

A pupil pays attention to his/her thoughts and thinking which shows in sensible questions and good answers.

4. *The stage of listening*

A pupil is self-confident and infatuated with his/her thoughts. He/she focuses his attention on other pupils, their statements and questions. He/she looks for arguments for his/her own assertions and arguments to express disagreement with another pupil's assertion. A sort of a dialogue is being formed.

5. *The stage of evaluation*

A pupil focuses attention on the whole group, judges, supports assertions with arguments and searches for new solutions. The communication broadens. An initial discussion can be noticed.

A pupil developed - from a mostly emotional response in the 1st *stage of wondering and imagination* to a more and more recognizable response in the 5th *stage of evaluation*, where he/she recognizes an encouragement to research and construct new solutions in a good evaluation.

At this stage a pupil in certain cases already shows criticalness, but I cannot speak about critical thinking - I presume that within the concentric circles a field with the beginnings of critical thinking has been created.

A pupil is now ready to take the role of a discussion leader.

The emotional and cognitive response have been presented with two triangles in picture 1, pointed to two opposite directions. The arrow shows the development which always spreads from grade 1 outwards.

6. *The stage of Lipman's philosophy for children*

It is also the first step or the beginning, offered by Lipman by means of his approach to philosophy for children. It does not only open the questions and encouragement to thinking, it also has a lot of didactical and methodical material which can be used as aid, so that the skills of critical thinking can be tackled in a systematic and also a very pleasant way. But as Šimenc says (the same source), the teaching of thinking within the philosophy with children is a side product of thinking. The point is still the thinking about the questions that pupils are interested in.

As Lipman's programme Philosophy for children is offered as one of the optional subjects at our primary schools, I see an opportunity to develop the beginnings of critical thinking with pupils on the basis of Lipman's stories, tasks attached, games and of course the constructive dialogue.

Of course, I do not insist that philosophy with children is a prep school for the big school of philosophy for children and good critical thinking. But I feel that the graduality of the procedure itself gives good and provable results.

The procedure presented by concentric circles is thus a transfer from the story to conversation, from the philosophy with children to the beginnings of critical thinking and the philosophy for children.

The process of transfer between circles is individual for each pupil. It is based on the interest for stories and the motivation for research, whereas the group can be an encouragement for transfer.

Conclusion

It would be shameful not to expose a child to philosophy, as philosophy completes the internal nature of a human being. This is not like teaching him to play the violin. It means teaching him to use his own internal voices.

Anne Margaret Sharp (Lukanc, 2000)

The programmes for early work with philosophy offer the pupils to use their own internal voice. At the same time the transfer of methods of work implemented in philosophy for children and philosophy with children can be noticed, as pupils also ask questions in other subjects, they are creative and use dialogue. So they use their own thinking to practice philosophy as an activity, thus affecting the process of education in a long run.

With teachers who have met with early implementation of philosophy, the transfer of methods and ways of work to other subjects can be noticed;

they practice teaching according to the method of discussion, they encourage pupils to search for solutions themselves, they allow different paths towards the goal and the like, wanting to encourage pupils to think independently.

Thus, by using the programmes for early implementation of philosophy we are gradually changing the existing practical methodology of the teaching process.

But it all begins with a simple story and with listening to young philosophers, who still know what is good, useful and correct.

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