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Philosophizing as a Way of Promoting Cognitive Independence of Children in Early School Education

KEYWORDS

philosophizing with children, cognitive independence, early school education

ABSTRACT

The text focuses on philosophizing, which is understood as a process and a path leading to knowledge. We support the thesis that philosophical education of children of younger school age has a preparatory character and serves to develop certain cognitive attitudes and social behaviours. We present the results of the studies carried out among third grade students of a primary school in Łódź. The inspiration for this change (didactic intervention) was Matthew Lipman's program: Philosophy for Children, and the concept of the Workshop on Philosophical Research by Aldona Pobojewska. The process of philosophizing among early education pupils was investigated, and the aim was to identify and describe children's experiences acquired during the classes based on this method of learning. The results show that the philosophical considerations of children are one of the activities that support intellectual independence. The conclusions promote the use of this method while working with early school-age children.

Introduction

Despite many attempts that have been made, successive transformations of modern school follow the old pattern of the transmission model of education with the instrumental style of teachers' work. The need to change education in the context of contemporary challenges is becoming more and more urgent (Balachowicz 2017). In the age of liquid modernity – the era of flickering meanings, time is moving increasingly faster and traditional models of understanding and behaviour are losing their validity. *It is because this world is extremely difficult to capture; it is flickering and volatile. Periods of its changes are shorter than the time of the research carried out according to traditional methodological procedures. The world is becoming through a change; the world is a change. (…) Our age is the time of constant intensive actions, great events and fast life. The pulse of events, achievements and failures is getting faster. People live in the permanent "shock of the future"…*(Melosik, Szkudlarek 1998: 11-12; 9).

There is a breakdown of old authorities, and everyone has to make decisions on their own, in unfamiliar conditions and without any patterns of behaviour. We neither have adequate models that explain the huge scope of variety, nor do we have direction indicators to support us in our choices and actions (Plóciennik 2020). The dynamically changing contemporary world requires schools to trigger and develop the qualities of an innovative human being, i. e. a person with heuristic and emancipation competences in the creative exploration and transformation of the world. Such a person should ask questions, be capable of thinking, reveal ambiguity, and be able to make choices (Kozielecki 2004). The prerequisite for such education is respecting the autonomous model of child-adult relationships, which makes it possible to notice the image of a competent child who builds his/her own intellectual potential and cognitive abilities, and who constantly explores and discovers the world (Szczepska-Pustkowska 2011).

One of the promising tendencies in education supporting the above-mentioned features is the application of humanities. *And this is not about transmitting new information (…). Knowledge of facts is necessary, but it is not enough if one wants to find their way in today's world. Apart from such knowledge, or above all, we need attitudes and skills that make up our intellectual and moral self-reliance. It is precisely for their formation that the humanities are needed (….). A privileged place among them is occupied by philosophy* (Pobojewska 2019: 53).

An additional reason for undertaking research on children's philosophizing includes scientific reports from the field of clinical and developmental psychology. Their promising results make it possible to perceive philosophizing as an opportunity to support students in the difficult times of the pandemic. The results presented in literature are connected with the introduction of philosophizing activities into educational

practice, including online classes, during which children were encouraged to undertake and share reflections on moral issues and personal values in a safe space in which they could think independently. The classes were found to foster, among other things, greater intellectual and emotional autonomy of the children (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al. 2021).

Theoretical contexts, i. e. why is it good to philosophize with children…

While analysing literature on philosophical education, we can see a fracture based on a more or less conscious choice related to the adoption of a particular concept of philosophy. While most philosophers identify philosophy with knowledge, i. e. the collection of recognised and historically established results of individual and collective reflection, others emphasise the process of philosophizing, i.e. the path which leads to knowledge. And it is this latter approach which shifts the focus onto philosophizing understood as an activity undertaken by a human being that legitimises and constitutes our actions carried out with children and described in this text. Justification for such a choice is also provided by Aldona Pobojewska (2019) according to whom two main phases should be distinguished in the strategy of philosophical education: an introductory, competence phase oriented towards shaping the qualifications necessary to deal with this discipline, and a content-related phase oriented towards making students familiar with classical philosophical issues and solutions suggested by the tradition. Therefore, the introductory phase is not the propaedeutics of philosophy, but the formation of a certain type of cognitive attitudes and social behaviour.

Recognizing that philosophizing is gaining knowledge or a journey that can only be taken personally requires development of special competences that combine a wide variety of skills and attitudes. These include cognitive curiosity and inquisitiveness; the ability to notice, define and redefine problems; the ability to formulate interesting questions; the readiness to use different types of thinking (especially divergent thinking); the art of participating in dialogue in the spirit of tolerance and cooperation, including attentive listening, recognition of the cognitive value of arguments, precise formulation of judgments and their justification; the awareness of one's own ignorance; but also the belief in one's own abilities and intellectual and moral independence (Pobojewska 2019).

The indicated skills and attitudes may not be the most desirable in the contemporary school which is dominated by the classical model of education rooted in the behaviourist theory of learning, but they meet the needs of the modern world which requires independence and readiness to search. The ability to ask questions is becoming

one of the most important competences of a modern man. According to Neil Postman (2001), all the knowledge we have is the result of asking questions, and the ability to ask questions is a person's most important intellectual tool. Krzysztof Szmidt (2006) connects this ability with the category of questioning thinking in which he locates the ability to notice problems and problem situations, the ability to formulate problem questions, and the ability to redefine problems.

How to do this – outline of the method

The presented concept of philosophizing with children is implemented through activities inspired by Matthew Lipman's[1] "Philosophy for Children" (P4C) and its version modified by Aldona Pobojewska[2] in the form of workshops on philosophical inquiry (WPI). They are based on two epistemological aspects: the intersubjective nature of acquired knowledge and the concepts of cognition that are closely related to action. Added to this are psychological assumptions focused around the learner's potential and its stimulation, and methodological assumptions centered on the idea of mutual reinforcement of reflective thinking and intellectual dialogue so that the workshop group becomes a philosophizing group based on the group's potential (Plóciennik: 2020). Lipman's concept emphasizes the value of an emerging community focused on the shared interest of solving an intellectual problem. The community becomes involved in a philosophical inquiry that undergoes certain procedures. "There must be certain preconditions, such as the willingness to justify, children's respect for other children and teachers, and the absence of indoctrination (Lipman et al. 1996:55)".

Robert Piłat, the first promoter of P4C in Poland, describes it as follows:

> *In Lipman's class, participants sit in a circle, read the text to be discussed, ask and carefully write down questions, and then face them in such a way that the first person expresses their view with justification, while the next person says whether they agree, also with appropriate justification. (…) If the atmosphere in the group is good, the conversation will develop and enrich: the next person entering the conversation will already have two points of reference for their agreement or disagreement, and each subsequent person will have more and more of them* (Piłat 2021).

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[1] Professor Matthew Lipman (1922 – 2010) from Montclair State College, NJ, USA, is the author of the project called Philosophy for Children. At first, the project was carried out in few American schools, but later it became an international educational undertaking which is being carried out in several dozen countries of the world.

[2] Professor Aldona Pobojewska, an academic teacher at the Department of Contemporary Philosophy at the University of Łódź and president of the Association of Philosophical Education PHRONESIS which promotes the idea of philosophizing with children.

The essence of philosophical education understood in this way is giving children a field of exploration, creating the circumstances that trigger their cognitive curiosity through asking even very strange questions, and giving them time for intellectual activity, dialogue, as well as for changing and establishing their own views (Bonar, Buła 2019).

The teacher's contribution is quite different from the traditionally understood role of a teacher. He or she takes the role of a progressivist teacher who stimulates the intellectual potential of the pupils and creates conditions to support the developmental cognitive change of the child. Such a teacher accepts students and believes in their intellectual potential. Moreover, he/she carries out dialogue with everyone, including the students, and he/she presents a non-directive attitude allowing others to present their points of view and giving them the right to make mistakes.

Methodology of the research project

"The concept of philosophizing with children became a theoretical inspiration for us to conduct empirical qualitative research that would make it possible for us to understand and interpret facts, phenomena and pedagogical processes" (Palka 2018: 49). The subject of the research includes the course of the philosophizing process among early school education students, while the research aim was to identify and describe the children's experiences acquired during the philosophical inquiry workshops.

The research objectives formed the basis for the research problem: To what extent did the students' philosophical inquiries trigger their cognitive independence? (Did they facilitate asking questions? Did they develop the ability to listen and understand others; to critically analyse ideas; to persist in autonomous discussion?)

In the organisation of the research project, the researchers used didactic intervention on a small scale, defined as "the intentional creation of didactic conditions that cannot be found in public education, in order to analyse learning processes in situations that were not predicted or suggested by institutions" (Klus-Stańska 2010: 132). They are based on the action paradigm; on the belief that the purpose of the research is "to create a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and personal and social action, so that the research directly contributes to the well-being of individuals, as well as communities and ecosystems in which they live" (Golębniak 2013:58). The research, carried out in the winter term of the school year 2021/2022 with 18 third-grade pupils from a primary school in Łódź, used a natural learning environment. The authors tried to create conditions that allowed for free dialogue during the research. The basic qualitative data collection procedures were used, such as observation and audio recording. The research designed in this way required the researcher to act as an

interpretatively engaged observer-as-participant (Angrosino 2007). The analyses made were compared to the electronically recorded statements of the students.

Selected research results

In order to create the typical workshop conditions for independent learning, the children were invited to do an introductory icebreaker exercise during which they talked in pairs about their most joyful experience. The aim of the exercise was to arouse the children's interest in the issue of emotions, to create the opportunity for the first conversations preparing them for further dialogue, and to activate their divergent thinking and imagination. In addition, working in pairs made it possible for them to become familiar with the situation and to overcome shyness.

A literary text read by the teacher was used as a direct inspiration for the inquiry. The letter referred to the complex world of emotions experienced by a boy:

> (…) *There was Peter, a little boy who was cheerful and willing to bring joy to others. He lived not in Africa or America, but in Poland. In a town neither big nor small. Just right. But what was not just right was that in his town people were sad and passed each other in the street without saying a word..... Peter's town was not cheerful; no one laughed there, people dressed in grey and, truth be told, it rained every day.*
> *- Mum, why is it so gloomy here? – Peter once asked his mother.*[3]

Collecting questions

The text provided a pretext and inspiration for questions formulated by the children. The students were asked to write down any questions that came to their mind after they heard the story. In this way, the stage of collecting questions started. The objective of the stage was to develop the children's questioning thinking and elicit issues that were important to the children. The questions that were formulated focused around two categories that emerged from the analysis of the collected material: sadness and joy. They required going beyond one's own horizon of knowledge, as well as capturing and expressing the unknown in language with the help of familiar terms (Pobojewska 2018/2019: 17).

> *What is sadness? What is sadness for if it does not make our lives more pleasant? Can animals feel it? Does sadness help? Why does sadness exist at all? Is sadness big or small? What causes*

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[3] The character of the short story: "How Peter found the first domino brick" from the collection of materials for teachers working with children: "Domino Effect. First Steps in the World of Emotions".

sadness? Where does sadness come from? What does it mean to be sad? What is your sadness about? Is sadness necessary? Do you feel loneliness when you are sad? Is sadness the same as loneliness? Is sadness the same as anger? Is sadness always sad? When are we sad? Why are people so often sad for no reason?

What is joy? Is it possible to be joyful all your life? Is joy tangible? Is joy visible? Is joy the best part of life? Is joy one of the best emotions in life? Where does joy come from? Who invented the name joy? What is joy like? When did it originate? Is joy necessary? What is joy for? Do all people want to be joyful? Is joy always joyful? Does joy feel sadness? When you are happy, do you cry? Does joy help at all? What is your joy about ? Why aren't people joyful all the time? Why do almost all the questions start with wh- words?

There were questions among them that were considered authentic, i. e. questions growing out of curiosity; questions indicating difficulties in understanding the environment; questions aimed at revealing the meanings and significance of the reality; questions that verbalise what the student knows on a given subject and what he/she would still like to know; questions that are not about facts, but about explaining a state of affairs; questions that are related to the natural world and people (but not the personal sphere). The appearance of such questions demonstrates a focus of attention and reflection on a fragment of reality. It reflects a sense of uncertainty in one's own knowledge. Through wonder, the awareness of this gap in understanding is captured. The need to understand and the willingness to act to satisfy it determine the effort to clarify the dilemma that has arisen. The next step is establishing the boundary between what we know and what our knowledge does not include. Even the simplest question does not grow out of a cognitive "void", but out of knowledge; out of the discovery of a gap in one's cognition. Only after grasping the problem does the child, using his or her linguistic proficiency, formulate a question (Pobojewska 2014). Among the questions formulated by the children there were „why?" questions which J. Piaget (2010) found especially important, and which he divided into three groups: questions related to causal explanation, questions related to motivation, and questions related to justification. According to the researcher, the emergence of such types of questions co-occurs with significant changes in the process of cognition.

Choosing the problem and taking up dialogue

In the course of the activity, the pupils chose one of the questions they had formulated, which they found the most interesting and which became the starting point for a reflection related to the pursuit of knowledge and for a dialogue.

This question was: *Where does joy come from?*

Asking an authentic question not only completes one complex thought process, but also initiates another. It provides the inspiration to start reasoning, i. e. using one's intellect to search for an answer to an unfamiliar problem question (Pobojewska 2014). It takes the form of a dialogue understood as a joint search for the truth and recognising the diversity and equality of multiple points of view. Such dialogue is based on the authenticity of one's views, respect and trust in the interlocutor, and it is open to further questions (Pobojewska 2019).

Where does joy come from?
D. 1:   *Well, it was from the heart; joy is in the heart.*
D. 2:   *But that's how it is in fairy tales.*
D. 3:   *I disagree; it cannot come from the heart because the heart is for beating and distributing blood throughout the body. It is simply just an organ.*
D. 1:   *For you yes and for me no; I disagree.*
D. 5:   *Me too.*
D. 6:   *And so do I.*
D. 5:   *But it's not about the heart as an organ in your body; it's just such a feeling, a sensation.*
D. 3:   *But the heart actually is an organ.*
D. 7:   *Well, it is not really an organ.*
D. 8:   *There is no other side to the heart.*
D. 3:   *The organ is red; it has veins, it looks a bit like a chicken (children's laughter) and it distributes blond all over your body.*
D. 9:   *How come you can see a chicken in it?*
D. 3:   *Well, I do see a chicken.*
D. 10: *I agree; there is such a heart as ... described; there is such an organ which pumps blond, but there is also another heart, like the one we sometimes draw, and it is a symbol of love and joy. A heart is not a maker of joy, but a kind of a recipient.*

The above exchange of ideas by the participants in the dialogue demonstrates their concentration of attention, sticking to the topic, referring to the thoughts of others, and critical analysis of the emerging views. It reveals the pupils' knowledge from different sources and demonstrates their ability to process it. It brings out ambiguities and doubts related to the problem under discussion, and the breakdown of the original vision of the reality. It shows the efficiency and striving for precision in formulating one's own original ideas and their justifications. It is the evidence for the abandonment of an unreflective, passive attitude in cognition. As we can see, the youngest students are sensitive to contradictions, the comicality of an imagined situation, creative and, at the same time, alert to the inner approval of the issue under consideration.

Teacher: *What if we try to find joy elsewhere…*

The teacher's involvement is to direct the students' attention to new lines of thought, new threads and, in consequence, to sustain the students' intellectual activity. The open form of the question makes it interesting and provokes reflection on the issue raised, as it highlights its complicated nature.

D. 1: *Well..., it comes from various plays, e.g. with the dog or, for example, joy comes from when you go to see someone and you can't wait; you are also joyful then.*

D. 9: *When someone tells a joke.*

D. 11: *When my dad surprised me.*

D. 5: *I disagree, because joy comes from inside; from excitement, but I can't describe it.*

D. 1: *Excitement is when you are going somewhere and you can't wait; like when I was going to visit my friend.*

D. 6: *And I felt joy when I couldn't wait to do many things in one day.*

D. 7: *I also found joy in my heart.*

D. 8: *Joy is like lava which comes out of a volcano and erupts...; such joy comes out of me like that.*

D. 7: *But it is also an inner feeling and you feel it with your heart.*

D. 8: *I burst with something and I feel like jumping and singing.*

D. 1: *And I only smile inside.*

D. 4: *But I cannot do this, because when I am so joyful I cannot hold it inside.*

D. 5: *Joy is such a good feeling.*

D. 4: *But…, that would be strange if everyone smiled and had no other emotions.*

D. 6: *Sometimes you need to be sad.*

D. 2: *Like, for example… sometimes you can feel better when you're sad.*

D. 4: *If there was no sadness, joy would not be good.*

D. 1: *I agree, because without sadness there would be like this: Oh, I got an F, that's great.*

D. 12: *Or I fell off a skyscraper. Oh, wow! (with joy).*

D. 6: *If we were joyful every day, it would be strange and boring.*

Teacher: *And where does sadness come from; think whether it comes from the inside or from the outside?*

D. 12: *When someone from your family dies.*

D. 2: *My mum felt sadness from the heart when I was born, or when I had a heart disease and I recovered.*

D. 3: *And my parents felt sadness when I was not breathing for a few minutes after I was born; and they were praying.*

D. 4: *I, for example, felt sadness when my grandma contracted the coronavirus.*

D. 5: *Sadness comes from both sources, hmm, but it does not come from anywhere; rather, you feel it and sadness is not good, I guess.*

D. 6: *Sometimes you do not even know why you are sad.*

Teacher: *What do you think: is it possible not to know why you are sad?*

D. 2: *You have to have a reason to feel sad.*

D. 7: *We do not have to feel sad, because it is the brain that decides if we are to feel sad or not.*

The students' exchange of ideas illustrates the high degree of involvement of the participants and their willingness to speak up. It demonstrates cognitive curiosity and the willingness to make a shared effort to carry out the dialogue. It shows courage in presenting one's opinion, but also readiness to actively listen to others. It allows one to go beyond one's own perspective, and to get to know different ways of defining the issue under discussion. It demonstrates the children's ability to participate in an autonomous discussion.

The students who participate in the dialogue, on the one hand, play with meanings and create artistic metaphors, and, on the other hand, take what they are talking about very seriously and look for the most accurate verbal expression of what they are thinking about. The words they are familiar with cease to be obvious and understandable, precisely because they are not detached from the meanings given by others.

Definitions and redefinitions are produced in the community of learners. The teacher does not participate in the substantive layer of the dialogue and does not present his or her opinion, knowing that he/she has an advantage due to the asymmetry of the teacher-student relationship. The teacher allows the students to confront the problem independently and, as a result, he/she supports the students' cognitive autonomy.

Conclusion

The suggested activities and the path followed by the students in the course of philosophizing foster the development of specific qualifications that support the art of thinking and dialogue[4]. They support the development of children's independence, as well as intellectual and interpersonal maturity. They develop the ability to listen carefully, argue logically and teach tolerance for different views. By confronting the views of others, they create the conditions to modify their own vision of the world. They meet children's needs, such as the need to be intellectually active, to understand the world and to express themselves. They encourage the formulation of questions, developing one of the most important strategies for building the students' personal knowledge.

Searching for a solution on one's own and following the path towards an answer with a group allows the student to experience and realize both the difficulties and joys

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[4] The dialogic strategy is also appreciated by J. Bruner who calls it "soft technology" of good teaching which is a great tool to use in a classroom: a technology which focuses on solving scientific problems and not ready-made learning and "answers". Such approach includes "the art of asking brave questions" and the "art of caring for good questions and keeping them alive". Good questions are those which include problems, overturn obvious or canon truths, and force us to focus on inconsistencies (J. Bruner 2006: 176).

involved in the process. It develops intellectual autonomy and teaches independent learning about and coping with the world. It can also be expected that knowledge gained in such a mode will be relatively durable:

> (…) *interiorization of the truth about the world rarely takes place through knowledge given to the individual in a ready-made form from outside, by an "intermediary", but it usually occurs through individual effort; in this case – methodical thinking* (Pobojewska 2014: 117).

Although philosophy has a dysfunctional, autotelic nature, and philosophical thinking attempts to understand something for the sake of understanding, without caring about any application of the knowledge gained, recent research results emphasize the practical and positive consequences of philosophy which are especially important in the difficult time of the pandemic.

Philosophical education at the early school level is also an indispensable introduction and preparation for philosophical education in the erudite dimension, equipping one with the necessary tools for understanding it. The conviction that philosophical inquiry can be one of the important alternatives for early school education requires, according to Szczepska- Pustkowska (2009), an attitude of openness and respect for the child, his or her thinking and attempts at spontaneous philosophizing, as well as openness towards the discussion on the place of philosophy at school.

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