



This paper is taken from

*Human Rights and Citizenship Education
Proceedings of the eleventh Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2009

edited by Peter Cunningham, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 978-0-9562789-6-8

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Lindahl, I. (2009) Children's Philosophical Explorations Concerning Ethical Issues, in Ross, A. (ed) Human Rights and Citizenship Education. London: CiCe, pp 229 - 236

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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Children's Philosophical Explorations Concerning Ethical Issues

Ingrid Lindahl
University of Malmö (Sweden)

Abstract

Who will decide, those who are younger or older? Should one always tell the truth? How do people come to an agreement? These questions are the object of preschool children's philosophical explorations in this study. The aim of the study is to describe and interpret what takes place in dialogues among children and between children and educators in dealing with these ethical issues. A post-modern perspective forms the basis of this study. Everything can be considered from other angles, and something new and unexpected might occur. The child is seen as a competent citizen in the sense of being expert on his or her own life, and having opinions that are worth listening to. The study indicates that it is important that the question being considered is one that matters to the children, and that children listen to the Other's meaning in a mutual process of deconstruction. The acts of the educator characterized by a sensitive ear, tolerance and a critical mind is named "situational sensibility".

Introduction

When children go to preschool, they want to play, meet friends and get answers to questions they are posing about things in the world around them. They wonder who they are, the meaning of words, what sinks or floats, why the grass is green, how far they can jump and so on. But how sensitive are educators towards all of the wondering and the questions of preschool children? Do they grasp what children seek or are they occupied with other things? This project focuses on children's questions and their mutual wondering. What children wonder about is a matter of ethical dilemmas concerning the questions Who will decide, those who are younger or older? Should one always tell the truth? How do people come to an agreement?

The study is part of a larger project about the natural-scientific and philosophical explorations of preschool children. It takes place in a primary school but involves mainly preschool children between the ages of six and seven; seventy children took part during the two years of the project. The children work with different problems in smaller groups of five to seven participants. In the children's solving of problems, and in their playing and storytelling, dilemmas emerge that are consistent with the natural-scientific phenomena, as do philosophical questions that may turn into issues of mutual deliberation and discussion (Lindahl, 2007).

The aim of this study is to describe and interpret what takes place in dialogues among children and between children and educators in dealing with the ethical issues mentioned above. What are the issues in the mutual wondering? How do children treat each other's arguments and ideas? What is the significance of the pedagogue in the exploration? The dialogues were digitally filmed and then transcribed and analyzed against the backdrop of the theoretical framework presented below. The method of research, in reference to the project as a whole, is based on participation-oriented research. I call it "construction of knowledge through participation". The research approach builds on a democratic base with the ambition of dissolving the theory/practice dichotomy. In various descriptions of this research approach, it stands out as a democratic method with a clear "perspective from underneath" (Holmstrand & Härnsten & Beach, 2001). Recognition that everyone is valued equally and trust in one's participatory ability to develop knowledge through dialogue are emphasized in this approach.

I met with the three participating educators regularly over a two-year period. We produced six hours of digital film, and the documentation of the children and the educators became the basis for common deliberations and reflections. In the following, I present the "results" from different philosophical dialogues with children, in which the ethical questions mentioned above were explored.

Theoretical framework

The project connects to what Rinaldi (2006) calls "the pedagogy of listening and welcoming", developed by Reggio Emilia. It is a way of thought that can be related to the philosophies of Levinas and Derrida. The former stresses ethics as respect for the difference of the Other. For example, we cannot force our own understanding on the Other; respect concerns the right to be different. Dahlberg (2003) states that

pedagogy must always begin with ethics: “Pedagogy can be seen as a relationship, as a network of obligations, as a radical dialogue with the Other” (Dahlberg, 2003:13). We cannot depend on knowledge as something universal, unchangeable and absolute, nor can we direct education and upbringing towards general ideals. There are no simple answers or solutions to how to teach children democracy. Didactic books of “tips and ideas” concern generalized children, not the specific children in front of us here and now. The need for a formula is understandable say Kvernebeck and Strand (2004). There is a need to have a firm grasp of reality and also a need for educational security. The formulas are normative, give instructions on how to act, and lend feelings of control and confidence. However, a post-modern perspective requires going beyond the search for easy solutions that are workable and generalizable to similar contexts. It requires us to stop and listen to the children, to meet “the Other”. If I am ready to meet the Other, as Levinas (1969/2005) describes, as “the absolute new” without prefabricated categories, a new freedom also emerges for me. As I understand Levinas, this freedom gives us an opportunity to question our own conceptions and opens us up to something new. “The Other” is another freedom, Kemp (1992) points out; that is, it is a reality over which I have no power. In this meeting, the new appears beyond all universalism that has marked Western philosophical tradition. Seen in this light, upbringing and education are dismissed in connection to general ideals of what is right and true. The child is seen as a competent citizen in the sense of being an expert on his or her own life, with opinions worth listening to. An effort is made to meet the specific children who are present here and now in this social, political and ethical context.

Children are not philosophers, but they philosophize

Creating in art and form has an obvious place in preschool activity. Children are not looked upon as artists, but they create in art and form. Today, children’s creativity in all its forms is considered as a language and can therefore be related to learning and meaning-construction. In a similar way, one could discuss children’s philosophizing. Children are not philosophers, but they philosophize in the sense that they pose the big questions about the nature of reality and how we should live our lives. This is evident, among other things, in children’s play. An exploring, playing, story-telling and philosophizing child is, in effect, a “child with a hundred languages” in whom everything comes together and cannot be separated or dichotomized. The world is provided with meaning and significance through our ways of communicating, our language and our ways of expression (Lindahl, 2007).

Philosophical and post-modern openness

Philosophy starts in wonderment and ends in wonderment – deep wonderment, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1999) points out. To wonder together could be a way to participate and be a part of something meaningful, here and now. To wonder together in the philosophical dialogue should not be seen as an equalizing of differences in the Other, rather the other way around. Like the deconstructive dialogue of Derrida (Derrida 1976), the philosophical dialogue is markedly open in the face of the Other’s otherness. Derrida talks about a shift of meaning – “*differance*” – which occurs in deconstructive dialogues characterized by the openness towards the Other’s otherness we find in Levinas. The purpose is not to come to an agreement; more interesting are the differences that occur, possibly creating something new which goes beyond ingrained opinions about how things can be understood.

The mutual wondering that takes place when children philosophize with each other or with adults is created in relation to the Other. In this perspective, the view of the Other takes centre stage as it is crucial for the dialogue to lead to “*differance*” or stop at the re-creation of already determined, completed, “correct” answers to all questions.

One often-mentioned aspect of philosophizing with children is that it develops a greater equality between child and teacher than is the case with any other subject (Malmhøster & Olsson, 1999). Here is a context in which no one knows the “correct” answer. The questions posed or spotted by the children are taken seriously, and their proposed answers could well compare to those of their peers or even adults. This description could resemble the post-modern openness to scrutiny of everything we take for granted. Everything can be considered from new perspectives where we might find something new and unexpected.

“Philosophy for Children” was developed in New Jersey, USA, by the American philosophers and pedagogues Matthew Lipman, Gareth Matthew and Ann Sharp. In the tradition of “Philosophy for Children”, the talking group is called a “community of inquiry”, an exploring community because it is understood that – like the conversations held at the Agora of Athens by Socrates, his disciples and the sophists – the arguments leading to a common formulation of judgement and ideas is delivered by separate individuals in the group, that is, in a social context. Learning is not only seen as an individual achievement, but as a collective one; knowledge is a common creation (Lipman, 1984; Lipman, Sharp,

1982; Matthew, 1999). “Philosophy for children” uses its own, specially crafted stories. The first philosophical stories were written during the 1970s in the United States by Lipman.

The philosophical dialogue in the classroom aims at developing, through systematic training, children’s reasoning and their ability to argue questions of an existential and knowledge-theoretical nature, and to reflect on concrete and abstract notions and on their own meta-cognitive thinking. According to Brüning (1996), the philosophical dialogue is a “rational dialogue”, endeavouring to solve a philosophical problem. But in order to make philosophical dialogue precisely philosophical, the importance of keeping to a certain formulated structure of discussion – also called the Socratic method – is emphasized. Initially, an event – maybe a story, expressing dilemmas or notions – will be explored. That is followed by a pause for thought, the choice of questions, discussion, and pause for thought, meta-discussion (Malmhøster & Olsson, 1999). This project includes philosophical dialogue as a possibility; it presents a suggestion to the educator, who is free to choose when coming to that assessment. Unexpected ideas and excursions into fantasy are also welcomed here.

“Situational sensibility”

The actual questions and ideas that will be subject to further exploration and the decisions as to whether the children need further “food for thought” (the notion drawn from Morehouse, 1992) is connected to the pedagogue’s ability to interpret the situation, what I will call “*situational sensibility*”. In contrast to Lipman (1984), we have no worries that the exploring communality will be lost because of talk about personal and occasional interests if the structure is not strictly adhered to. In addition, McColl (1994) criticizes too strict an adherence to rules in a philosophical dialogue. She indicates that the logic of dialogue cannot be the driving force in the exploratory process, but rather the dialogue’s verbal and non-verbal aspects are. Listening to and taking seriously the Other’s thoughts becomes, in this study, inconsistent with a rigid structure in the ways these dialogues run.

Variations of dialogue can be discerned in looking at the “Philosophy for Children” movement. Facts, values and interpretations are different things; the conversation group interprets a text, principally from a value and interpretational point of view. This gives the participants an opportunity to test their values and make arguments for them. A philosophical dialogue, however, starts with a line of questions and can lead anywhere if the course of thought is deemed relevant. Often, the dialogue can entail analysis of a concept. The text is supposed to create openings for wider discussion and thus for further associations. Above all, it is the conceptions and values of the participants that become evident in the philosophical dialogue (Lindström, 2000; Roth, 2004). In my view these dialogues can be connected to what Dahlberg (2003) designates as a “radical dialogue”, which is built on contestation and opening to the Other without a fixed goal to be reached. As the philosophical dialogues here occur between children and between children and an educator, I choose to talk about philosophy *with* children, rather than philosophy *for* children. This is to emphasize the “equality” of the dialogue.

Philosophy with children could imply reaching a deeper understanding of the basic question of philosophy through profound reflection on one’s own experiences within or outside of preschool activities. Philosophical dialogues can be tied to all school subjects, aiming at deepening reflection and subsequently one’s own understanding of the subject (Lindström, 2000; Malmhøster & Olsson, 1999).

The philosophical dialogues in this study don’t follow the established structures of the Socratic methodology. An attempt is made to view the dialogues from the deconstructive dialogues of Derrida and – in my interpretation – must be marked by openness towards the Other’s otherness and “situational sensitivity”.

In the following presentation, I focus on dialogues dealing with fairness, telling the truth, and children’s rights. The selected dialogues are all based on dilemmas, initiated by the children as well as by the educator from different everyday situations.

Who will decide, those who are younger or older?

The seven-year-old children will, at the beginning of term, become mentors for the new six-year-olds. They have gone through what they will show the new children in the school, and they have discussed with the educators the different things they can do together during these first days of the term. The following dialogue results from a comment by an older child, Ann-Marie, who said she didn’t enjoy the activity because she doesn’t think the things they did were fun. According to Ann-Marie this is due to having to let the guests decide. The educator finds this to be a good opportunity to explore fairness and influence in school.

Martin, Ann-Marie, Elias and Emma sit on the floor together with the educator, who turns to Martin.

1. Educator: *Decide... yes, what do you think the guests could decide?*
2. Martin: *They can't decide everything, but they can decide a lot.*
3. Educator: *Why do you think they could decide a bit more?*
4. Emma: *They are the guests. Think if we said we were going to the swing and they wouldn't like that ...*
5. Martin: *And they would have to do it, how fun would that be?*
6. Emma: *The guest is also the youngest.*
7. Educator: *Is it the youngest who should decide?*
8. Emma: *It was like that at that theatre, the youngest was the one who decided. (Emma is making a reference to a story the children worked on.)*
9. Educator: *Why is it that the youngest should decide?*
10. Martin: *The youngest, mums and dads should listen more to the baby than to the child because the baby is so very little.*
11. Emma: *But the baby can't talk!*
12. Martin: *But, anyway, you should ...*
13. Elias: *Talk in the ga-ga language, you mean?*
14. Martin: *Yes.*
15. Educator: *Do you mean you should listen more to the baby than to the children?*
16. Martin: *Because the child is bigger, he could wrestle the baby down.*
17. Educator: *So, you listen to the one who is small?*

Martin nods, Emma and Ann-Marie also nod after a time.

18. Ann-Marie: *Listen, is that the guests should decide, they are youngest and they are guests.*
19. Educator: *What if they had been older???*
20. Martin: *In that case, they would have decided less.*
21. Elias: *Instead of more ...*
22. Emma: *If the guests would be grown-ups, they wouldn't play with the children.*
23. Martin: *In that case, they would hardly have decided anything.*
24. Elias: *Then they would have worked all day.*
25. Martin: *Then they would have decided as little as an eye.*
26. Elias: *No, as little as a nostril.*

Commentary

The research question I pose here is what happens in dialogue between the children and between the children and the educator. With what right do I comment on and interpret someone else's idea in the context of the philosophical perspective described above? My choice and attempt to solve that dilemma consists of suggesting different possibilities of interpretation which are "negotiable". Through the presentation of complete conversations, the reader has an opportunity to follow the process and form his/her own opinion.

This is my interpretation of what goes on in the conversation:

The initial question from the educator is caught by Martin and Emma, who, without hesitation, backs the "guests", that is, the Other's right of determination. Levinas (1993) regards the meeting with the Other as a responsibility towards the Other's right to be, that is, to be an Other. The otherness of the "guests" consists, among other things, of their being younger, which becomes an ethical/philosophical question for the children to explore. Adults have a special responsibility to those who are smaller or younger, Martin (10) says. Emma (11) and Elias (12) challenge the idea of the small child's ability to stand up for his or her rights as the child has not yet developed speech. The educator (15, 17) catches the notion of the adult's responsibility to the small child. Martin, Emma and Ann-Marie concur with the thought that adults should take responsibility for and listen to the little one, even though it is a baby. The conversation continues and becomes something that appears to be an ethical standpoint, which amounts to there being a relationship between age and influence/power. The children accept the idea of setting their own needs aside and letting the guests decide because they are younger.

I consider the questions of the educator to be very sensitive to the children's thoughts in that they are met with great respect. Her attitude is a good illustration of what we here term "situational sensitivity". Her

questions are conceived in the meeting with the children and not a ready-made blueprint, as called for in "Philosophy with Children". She wonders together with the children. It is sincere and therefore the questions appear authentic, without a hidden agenda – for example, without the objective of obtaining a certain answer. Here, an objection to my interpretation can be made. The flexibility and sensibility I understand lies behind the acts of the pedagogue could also be regarded as her interpreting what the children are saying and asking them questions in a way that direct the children's thoughts in a certain way. Thus, one might argue that the children are led to reason in the way they do. My primary impression from the films as well as the text is, nevertheless, that she is following and supporting the children in their thoughts, which of course is my subjective interpretation.

The dialogue concludes with the expression of the children's fantasies when Martin (24) says that if the guests were grown-ups, "they would have decided as little as an eye" and Elias (25) gets "infected" by Martin when he says "No, as little as a nostril". The playful and fantastical and the urge to take a line of reasoning to its extreme has been described by Lipman as a sign of children's philosophizing.

One important reason for children to explore a certain question usually is that they own the question. Here, the question appears to be urgently important to the children. It was Ann-Marie, one of the children, who initiated the conversation after perceiving certain problems in greeting guests.

How do people come to an agreement?

The children, working in smaller groups with their "research projects" are told to name their group. This group below has decided to name themselves "the Stars".

1. Educator: *How did you do when you decided on a name for the group?*
2. Emil: *Everybody chose a picture they took of their own and then we let the others choose the fourth picture..*
3. Educator: *Did you agree all the time?*
4. Alva: *No, we didn't agree when we chose the name. We talked about "the Experts", "the Military", "the Star Group". Then we chose "the Stars", the others said "Superstar".*
5. Emil: *We were not totally in agreement, but we decided together anyway that "the Stars" would be it.*
6. Alva: *You could prefer something else in the beginning, but after hearing the others... well, OK, I changed my mind.*
7. Maja: *Yes, that's exactly how it was, totally OK.*
8. Emil: *I think the girls stuck together. But, OK.*

Alva and Emil nod towards the educator, who now wonders how the children got on with just one camera when they went out to catch the light.

1. Educator: *How did you manage with just one camera?*
2. Emil: First, *I took one picture.*
3. Ann-Marie: *I took two.*
4. Alva: *I took two.*
5. Emil: then *I took one more.*
6. Educator: *So you took turns to photograph?*
7. Emil: *Exactly, that's how you have to do it when you got just one camera.*
8. Ann-Marie: *Afterwards, you see more in the picture than you see through the camera.*
9. Maja: *Yes, that the sky was pink, that we didn't see outdoors, but in the picture you saw.*
10. Alva: *It was like a pink glimmer on the clouds – look!!!*

The children lean over the table and look at the picture

Commentary

The children show that it is possible to agree and that it is OK to abandon suggestions of their own. Initially, the children listened to each other's suggestions, but precisely why "the tars" came out on top isn't clear, based on the answers. Alva (6) says "You could prefer something else in the beginning, but after hearing the others ... well, OK, I changed my mind." The children agree with Alva. Emil (8) comments that it was probably the girls who stuck together but that it was OK. The children are then

asked how they solved the problem of having just one camera for the group to “share”. Both from the text and the film, I perceive that the children didn’t regard the problem as a big one or even important to discuss. What appears to be important is what came out in the photographs. Ann-Marie (8) says “Afterwards, you see more in the picture than you see through the camera”. In my view it is the content, that is, what the pictures show, that is foremost in the children’s minds, and agreeing on a name and how to cooperate around the camera becomes secondary.

The pedagogue follows the initiative of the children and looks at the pictures. In doing so, the pedagogue also shows an example of “situational sensitivity” as she lets go of the thought of how to agree. By now the wondering of the children is centred on something else, something more pressing.

Should one always tell the truth?

The background to this dialogue is a story that the educator reads. It tells of children coming into a conflict with their mother; they want to watch a musical parade but their mother wants to take them to church. The children decide to hide their mother’s petticoat. Marcus, Emma, Alva, Ann-Marie and Martin, all seven years old, participate.

1. Educator: *Well, what do you say about this?*
2. Martin: *They shouldn’t have hidden the petticoat.*
3. Educator: *Do you think it’s OK not to tell the truth?*
4. Emma: *You have to tell the truth.*
5. Martin: *You have to tell the truth, otherwise you’ll get ten minutes penalty. I was seven years old and then I had to do seven minutes of penalty in my room.*
6. Educator: *But, do you always have to tell the truth?*
7. Alva: *I don’t think so. If you have a secret, if I and Ann-Marie have a secret, that we will play. And if Emma wants to play and asks at school, and then she calls me when she comes home. Then I say that I play with Ann-Marie. I think it’s a bit stupid, because I didn’t tell at school that I would play with Ann-Marie.*
8. Martin: *You could make an April’s fool.*
9. Emma: *Think if you said that there’s been a burglary in your house, hi, hi*
10. Marcus: *I don’t use to tell the truth if anyone is mean to me.*
11. Martin: *No, exactly; at first Erik was really mean to me but then I wanted to play with him, anyway. And I wanted him to be kind to me so I let him take part.*
12. Alva: *Tell it straight! The children sat sulking on the bed, they could have gone to the parade; there is Sunday school every Sunday.*
13. Educator: *You mean they should have said so to their mother? You said tell it straight?*
14. Alva: *I would like them to do that or otherwise, they should say OK. Why don’t we go to the Sunday school and just let the mother get her petticoat because it’s the only one she’s got.*
15. Emma: *If I didn’t come to the parade, I would have sneaked out to buy crisps, sweets and Coke.*
16. Alva: *I know, they could have let the mother get her petticoat and everything would have been easier. Then they would have gone to church and Sunday school and spent half the time there, like one, two minutes and maybe they then went to the parade and spent maybe like four hours.*

Commentary

Martin (5) answers the question of whether one always should tell the truth with a joke. The educator repeats the question by turning it around (3): “Do you think it’s OK not to tell the truth?” Telling the truth is held up against “solidarity” towards a friend, Alva (7), where fairness and the respect of the Other and view the world from the Other’s perspective are valued to take precedence. Martin (8) jokes again, and Emma (9) tags along. This makes Marcus (10) say “I don’t use to tell the truth if anyone is mean to me”. So far in this dialogue, telling the truth appears to be something the children relate to according to what relationships are involved. When the educator challenges the children, Alva and Emma toss and turn and test different possibilities. It’s Alva (16) who comes up with a solution that I interpret as a compromise between the different suggestions. In the conversation, differences in thoughts have been met and from

these emerge something new that in this context becomes an amalgamation of the differences to one unity.

Concluding remarks

A common feature in these dialogues seems to be the children's contemplations on the ethical dilemmas that are put before them in terms of the relationship towards the Other. Children have the ability to explore/philosophize over ethical problems and dilemmas, but first and foremost they do this when the question matters to them, as particularly seen in the first dialogue. Here, one ethical dilemma is an urgently important issue to explore and it is conceived from personal experience. The dialogues show how the children regard the Other, transparent and responsible. They have turned the problem in and out in a common deconstruction. Various differences of thought are being met and from there, something new emerges. What can be seen as the "new" here? As I see it, the "new" is the relation between power (who should decide, those who are younger or older?) and age in the first dialogue. This could of course be problematized due to the questions of the pedagogue, and it could be asked whether these could be conceived as supporting the thoughts of the children or as, instead, driving them towards "the new". The second dialogue is resolved by something else capturing the children's interest. The third dialogue refers to a story as well as the children's own experiences. Opinions about whether to always tell the truth could vary. Also here, the children show how they think in terms of context and responsibility towards the Other, who could be an important friend, for example.

The role of the educator is apparently an important aspect in dialogues. It is the educator who listens to and catches the questions of the children and gives them room to philosophize. As I see it, the acts of the educator are characterized by a sensitive ear, tolerance and a critical mind, which I call "situational sensitivity". The dialogues are also characterized by what Dahlberg (2003) calls a "radical dialogue", which is built on contestation and openness to the Other and the Other's otherness.

Rinaldi (2001) argues that the preschool could be perceived as a place where, first and foremost, values are transmitted, discussed and constructed. The term "education" is therefore closely correlated to the concept of values, where "to educate" also means – and in certain respects primarily means – to educate each individual and each culture in order to make these values intrinsic, visible, conscious and shareable (a.a.s.38). Certain basic values are emphasized in the activities of Reggio Emilia: the value of subjectivity, which they view in terms of wholeness and integrity; the value of participation or participation as a value; and the value of democracy, which is embedded in the concept of participation (a.a.s.39). Arendt (1977) argues that subjectivity is not a psychological condition, but a social and political one. Thus, she places subjectivity in the act itself. We come into existence through our acts in a certain context, that is, together with others. In this perspective, democracy is something we learn through practice. Nevertheless, the acts are only possible where there is plurality, where other people can act simultaneously, and which comprises the ethical and democratic.

Dialogue is of central and absolute importance, not in the exchange but as a process of transformation where one may lose the absolute possibility of controlling the final result. Ultimately, dialogue is a way to see things in other ways; such dialogue is built on contestation and openness to the Other without any fixed goal to be reached (Rinaldi, 2006).

A possible interpretation could be that when the children philosophize and deconstruct as this study illustrates, they wonder together and, also, disagree and agree in the course of wondering. This can also be perceived as contributing to the strengthening of democratic values.

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