

Philosophy for Children in action

Iceland

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For the last six years, Foldaborg preschool in Reykjavik, Iceland, has been operating a two year programme for young children up to six years, based on the 'Philosophy for Children' ideas of Dr Matthew Lipman (see page 26). The programme was designed to help young children to exercise and develop their ability to engage in investigations, debates and discussions. Its original point was to provide young children with the means to resolve conflicts amongst themselves; and specific goals included: increasing children's respect for each other, thereby lowering the risk of persecution later on; developing better relations between children; increasing creative and critical thought among them; increasing their understanding of themselves and their own thoughts; and increasing their respect for the opinions of others. This article reports on the introduction of the programme, its operation and development, and some of its outcomes.

Preparing the staff and parents

When we started working with the idea of Philosophy for Children, we decided to use a whole year to prepare the staff because we needed to know more about philosophy and methods of introducing philosophy to children and about working with them in philosophical ways. At the personal level, we also needed to open our own minds and to become more capable of communicating in a philosophical way. Last but not least, we needed to practise leading discussion groups with children. In all of this we worked with a philosopher called Sigurdur Bjornsson who was just as excited as we were. Right from the start we decided that we did not want to depend only on the discussion groups, although these are very important. Instead we wanted to change the whole environment of our daily work in Foldaborg and base it on the philosophical approach. This meant that everyone had to be aware of how to talk with children, how to handle conflicts, how to encourage the children to seek answers

for themselves and how to ensure that everybody respects each other's opinions.

When the preparation time was over, and before starting the work with the children, we introduced the project properly to the parents. They were excited and have remained very enthusiastic throughout. In the beginning I was concerned that they would find it hard to deal with their children asking them the kinds of questions that necessarily arise in the Philosophy for Children approach – for example, questions about reasons and justifications for what they should do and should not do. But I never heard a parent express any negative reactions to the programme or to Philosophy for Children. On the contrary, parents often came to me to say how pleased they were with the progress that their children were making.

The discussion groups with children

Initially, every child from three to six years old participated four times a week for 30 minutes each time, working in groups of between eight and ten children, with a teacher and an observer. We thought it was very important that they stayed in the same groups with the same adults because it would increase their comfort, trust and sense of security. There are certain rules such as raising a hand when they wanted to make a contribution, sitting still, listening to other children, waiting their turn and concentrating; and there are also rules to keep the discussion on course.

Every discussion time starts the same way and ends the same way. The children sit in a circle along with the teacher, and they hold hands and say something like 'Welcome to discussion time' (the actual welcome varies from group to group). Then the teacher introduces the topic for the discussion, usually one drawn from a story called Bullukolla. This was written by Sigurdur Bjornsson for the

project, and it is built up along the lines developed by Matthew Lipman in his series of books for the Philosophy for Children programme in the USA. It tells a story in a way that highlights situations, events, problems and so on, and allows them to be analysed and discussed by children so that they can develop their powers of critical thinking, bringing in their own experiences and ideas as they do so.

The session starts by reading a chapter to the children. Then we ask them if they find anything strange or funny in it and if they have a question to ask. Each question is written on a board on the wall along with the name of the child who 'owns' the question. When everyone has asked the questions they want to, we start to work on each question, trying to get every child to express to the others what is in their mind: what interests them; how it relates to their own experiences; what questions it provokes in them; and so on. As this happens, other children comment on what is said, and, with the help of the teacher, a discussion develops. As well as Bullukolla we also use pictures, plays, things that had happened in the school or in their homes. Each session ends with the teachers helping the children to sum up what they have said.

More recently, the work with three year olds has been dropped because it was felt that they were not benefiting. At the same time, the number of formal discussion groups was reduced to one per week for the four year olds, and two per week for the five/six year olds. The main focus now is on daily informal discussions that are complemented by encouraging children to think in a philosophical way in all of their work. This is in line with what we wanted from the outset: a Philosophy for Children programme that is integrated into the life of the school.

The children have asked many hundreds of questions over the years, including:

Is it possible not to know anything?
Is there something that never changes?
Is it possible to know if one really exists?
What is it that controls us?
What is living?

We get the children to think about the question, to form an opinion and argue their case. The

children can disagree – we are not searching for one particular answer – and they also learn both to accept a valid argument and protest at a weak one, and to accept the right of others to have their own opinions.

Outcomes

The progress of all children is monitored and we have found that they show great progress in areas such as participation in discussions; arguing their case; keeping to the rules; and being more secure in asking their own questions. We have assembled our overall conclusions about the effects of the project on children under the different headings set out below.

The children improve their skills in asking questions

The ability to ask relevant questions is a very important skill in the comprehension of every subject. In a philosophical discussion, children are encouraged to ask questions and are helped to formulate their questions by the teachers and their peers if they have problems. This questioning process appears to be fruitful because by the end of their first year in the programme, the children can express their doubts in direct questions that are much more easily comprehended by their peers. In the beginning it always takes some time to figure out what the children were really asking.

The children state their opinions much more easily

Most of the children put their shyness behind them and become very competent at saying what they think. Some are very shy in the beginning and do not want to participate but get to enjoy the discussions by the end.

The children improve their ability to find reasons

Reasons are the cornerstones of philosophical discussion. In the beginning the children had difficulties in finding reasons but after the philosophical training they improved their ability to support their judgements with reasons.

They disagree with each other

In the philosophical discussion we put emphasis on the interrelations between the children themselves. The idea is to move from child-teacher to child-child discussions. Therefore the children are encouraged to speak directly to the one they agree or disagree

Philosophy for Children

Critical thinking is important if we are to have a reflective citizenry in a democracy. I don't think you would like to have a soggy mass of citizens who just accept what they're told without reflection, you want them to judge what they are told in a critical way, not be uncritical, that's a terrible notion, a non-critical citizenry. But conventional education is not delivering this reflective citizenry.

Dr Matthew Lipman

Are young children really capable of making any kind of profound contribution to areas such as the conceptualisation and evaluation of early childhood development (ECD) programmes? Do they have the powers of investigation, perception, reflection and analysis that seem necessary? Can their obvious creativity be employed usefully? Dr Matthew Lipman believes that the answer to questions like these is 'Yes!' and, for the last 25 years, he has been showing how these capacities and powers can be developed.

He takes the view that education should produce individuals who are intellectually flexible, resourceful and judicious, and who have the concepts and thinking skills that could be identified as being most likely to develop a democratic citizenry. If it is to do so, it must start with young children. Lipman therefore produced the 'Philosophy for Children' programme, designed to help children from preschool age upwards to engage in critical enquiry, and creative and caring thinking. The programme emphasises the excitement of discovery, reflection and analysis through helping the children to create what he calls 'a community of enquiry' that allows children to explore and better understand their world, other people, and themselves.

The programme is based on age-specific sets of stories about everyday happenings in the lives of children. Storylines raise philosophical questions in the children's

with. After a while, this kind of communication happens frequently and the children start to settle their disagreements by themselves.

They start being able to correct themselves

One of the main characteristics of critical thinking is that it corrects itself. In the beginning of the training the teacher often has to point out the disagreements and contradictions but as the children become more used to the process they start to correct themselves. Frequently, children raise their hands and say that they have changed their mind and, after a time, they can even say why. Often, the reason is that they have listened carefully to their peers.

They become more tolerant and involved in the discussion, and their concentration as they listen to their peers became much better

To start with, many children lack tolerance and are easily carried away from the subject. They don't know what the discussion is about and express views that are not related to the subject. Very often they raise their hand to say something but have forgotten what it was by the time it is their turn to speak. Later they can concentrate better and follow the discussion more easily; and they listen more carefully to each other and wait longer to express their own views.

They become more ready to help each other in the discussion

One of the ethical aspects of discussion is the readiness to help others to express their views and find reasons for them. This is a focus in the discussions and children develop the desire to help each other. Their help might be in the form of interpreting an idea that was unclear, finding reasons for an opinion or finding examples that throw light on the opinions of others. In this process the children learn the joy of helping others and also learn to accept the help of others.

Discussion become a tool for conflict resolution

Both staff and parents report that the children become much more ready to give reasons for their opinions or wants; and seem more able to use discussions to settle differences with other children.

Differences in participation between boys and girls decreases

A very interesting factor is that the difference in the participation between boys and girls almost disappears. In the beginning the boys are much more active than the girls but by the end the girls have caught up.

The only area where the young children made little or no progress is in generalising: they don't seem able to do that by themselves so the teachers do it at the end of some discussions to teach them how.

The views of the parents

From the beginning we were anxious that the parents were with us, so we also discussed with them what changes they had observed in their children. Generally parents felt that their children talked with them in a different way. Many explained further:

He speaks about everything that frightens him or that he finds beautiful; he talks about everything between heaven and earth.

He is better able to talk about things and argue his case, and he demands the same from others.

She doesn't like answers like 'maybe' or 'possibly', she wants clear answers and reasons for everything.

The influence of the programme

The nearby elementary school to which these children go after their time at Foldaborg preschool notices significant differences in the ways in which they think and talk. This will obviously be influencing its view of who children are and what they can do. More broadly, the Foldaborg preschool programme has influenced many preschools across Iceland, and has already been introduced in several of them. This is helped by the fact that universities have started to teach future teachers how to work with Philosophy for Children.

Conclusions

Introducing the Philosophy for Children programme was difficult in the beginning because staff members were handling situations that were new to both them and the children. But progress was obvious after a very short time and that has been a constant reward and stimulus. The responses from the parents has also been very rewarding; most of them are very excited about the project. The wider influence of the programme is also gratifying, especially since it has reached university level and is impacting on teacher training. Nowadays, Philosophy for Children is becoming a very natural, important part of the curriculum and – as the pioneer in Iceland – Foldaborg preschool is well known for this work, both by parents as they select schools for their children, and by professionals. Also, since my time with the project in Foldaborg I have given many lectures introducing Philosophy for Children, and this has helped to ensure that it is taken up by other preschools.

*This feature has been updated by the author from an original article first published in *Early Childhood Matters* 94 February 2000. That edition covered 'Listening to Children' and it can be viewed and downloaded from our website www.bernardvanleer.org, and single hard copies can also be ordered.*

normal language, and in the ways that children might talk about issues and ideas. The first step is to share a story with a class of children by reading it aloud. The teacher then asks for comments and questions and the children choose an aspect of the story that is relevant to them and that they are really interested in talking about. The heart of the work is then a discussion between the children that the teacher helps them to generate and sustain by asking questions and seeking answers among themselves.

The discussion may naturally meander, so the teacher has to keep it within the 'norms of philosophical enquiry'. In effect, these are rules and guidelines and, especially with young children, it is useful to explain the need for these rules and guidelines, to have them spelled out and to show children how they keep within them – or not. These rules/guidelines include keeping to the topic under discussion, questioning assumptions, giving reasons for opinions and ideas, relating their ideas to those of other children, and so on. At the end of the session, a statement is produced about where the children have reached in their enquiry, and the teacher may then follow up the discussion with complementary activities.

For the teacher, the work is supported by a manual that contains suggestions for dealing with the kinds of questions that might be raised, and exercises that help children to explore the questions that interest them. The programme is flexible: for example, the stories can be rewritten – or new stories can be produced – to suit local cultural and physical realities; and the manual serves as a guide, not as an instruction book. It is also a long term programme: results are cumulative.

For more information see section 'Further reading' (page 38).