Phosphazening with children – from reflections towards practice

In the thinking pertinent to pre-school and early school education, more and more ground is gained by constructivist argumentation; nevertheless, as D. Klus-Stańska (2009: 47) has it, in occurs mainly on the level of rhetoric and time-formed aims. Contrary to the behaviourist concept, constructivism assumes active participation of individuals who, instead of assimilating ‘ready-made’ knowledge prepared for them, will face an issue, which will induce them not only to formulate questions and to look for solutions by themselves, but also to co-operate with others, to learn from them, to attribute meanings and in the end – to reconstruct the knowledge already possessed through new experience. An example of learning moulded according to that concept is phosphazening with children.

The idea of phosphazening with children appeared as a reaction to the phenomenon observed among kids and young people who exhibited inability to think, and due to the inefficiency of the traditional school which does not rely on pupils’ or students’ intellectual potential, but rather thwarts their inborn and natural interest in the world. The most known syllabus of philosophy for kids appeared in the USA in 1969, and its author was Matthew Lipman, who set the following question: can we phosphazize with kids who are at least six years old in a reasonable and useful way, and if so, how should such activities be arranged from the didactic viewpoint? (Freese 2008: 104). According to M. Lipman, phosphazening lessons should follow the pattern: 1) kids sit down in a circle so that they may see one another; 2) then, an appropriate text is being read; 3) the kids ask questions induced in them by the text they have just heard;
4) a discussion takes place, which comes into exist by making references to an interlocutor’s statements, by attentive listening to someone else’s and formulation of one’s own arguments; 5) a summary, which does not settle any issue, but spurs the participants on to continue their reflections. The syllabus is supplemented by fictional texts, also compiled by M. Lipman, which constitute the basis for philosophical discussions. The syllabus is known in a few dozen or so countries worldwide. In Poland, it has been modified by Anna Pobojewska, who deems it to be a method of didactic activities and labels it a workshop of philosophical inquiries.

According to experts, the method of philosophizing is good also for kids younger than six. Kids aged 4 or 5 are ready for such methods, which is corroborated by their questions addressed at adults. Most of them are philosophical questions, viz. are aimed at finding a meaning and at understanding a piece of reality which is often pertinent to issues fanthomed out by philosophers over the centuries.

Nowadays, in view of substantiated, successful research, there is no doubt that the kids said can philosophize. Refuted were various psychological, pedagogical and philosophical reproaches of those who used to be sceptical about this matter (Martens 1996: 40).

Refuted was also J. Piaget’s opinion according to which philosophizing would be good only for kids of 11, because only this stage of intellectual development is sufficient to perform formal operations. More recent studies have proved that children younger than 11 (as J. Piaget has it) are endowed with fundamental competence in logical thinking. In everyday tasks performed spontaneously, kids aged 5 or even younger exhibited higher competence in thinking than in experimental conditions in which mental errors resulted rather from the lack of logic, not from having failed to understand the task and/or weakness of memory (Freese 2008: 56–57; Donaldson 1976). Although the way of thinking of children is considered ‘naïve’, it can impress us with ingeniousness, an unconventional approach to solving problems and the courage of statements. A mythical aura, typical of children’s way of thinking, has been appreciated lately, and acknowledged as a way of interpreting the reality.

Refuted was as well the assumption that philosophy is a science too complex for kids to deal with. At the initial stage of philosophizing, the objective is to stimulate a creative approach to problem solving, reflections on the surrounding world as well as improving and training an efficient
way of thinking. “Philosophizing with kids should be fun: we should spin daring fantasies and consider what would happen if they came true, discover relations and associations, play with thoughts and words, find new possibilities and try to carry out new ideas”, writes E. Zoller (2009: 13). Therefore, philosophizing is in no case taking away one’s childhood, leisure time, but on the contrary, it is a reaction to a child’s need of investigating and researching into the world’s mysteries, which is reflected in so many questions asked by kids, starting with why?.

Pedagogical objections to philosophizing with kids were put forward thousands years ago, by Plato, in Book VII of The Republic, in which he states that pupils trained in discussions may adopt various evasive ways to prove the falsehood, whereas a philosophical debate might be for them an opportunity for presenting eristic devices rather than a way leading to find the truth. Nowadays, the syllabus of philosophy for kids also has some opponents (Zubelewicz 2001). All warnings should be taken into consideration and make teachers – who conduct the activities with kids – more aware, so that philosophical discussions which are assumed to favour children’s development should not prove counterproductive. However, those who have been practicing activities of philosophizing with kids for years do not share such fears. On the contrary, they state that due to the participation in philosophical discussions, children learn how to be tolerant of different beliefs, how to regard opposite viewpoints while evaluating an issue, and how to conduct an in-depth analysis of a given case. They discern the significance of moral issues, and develop critical and creative practical attitudes, which is indispensable at today’s stage of rapid transformations in order that children can make good choices and control their life in a conscious way (Czaja-Chudyba 2009).

It is quite difficult to evaluate progress in philosophizing. B. Heesen (1996: 57) makes a distinction between the evaluation on the level of a pupil and on the level of a lesson unit. Heesen warns against evaluating kids basing upon their activity in a discussion, viz. how many times they take the floor, because some kids often speak a lot, but without thinking, whereas ‘taciturn kids’ speak rarely, but sometimes their voice can exert an appreciable influence upon the course of investigations. The following criteria are recommended to be applied in the case of kids aged approx. 8: 1) taking one’s own view; 2) defence of one’s standpoint; 3) reception of critical remarks formulated by class-mates; 4) finding a solution of
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a problem; 5) presentation of an original idea. “An evaluation made basing on such criteria allows to find out what a pupil is best at” – writes Heesen (1996: 58). “Not each single skill is developed to the same extent in every kid. So, it would be worth checking which skill has been successfully developed in a kid over a one year’s time”.

In the case of smaller kids, other criteria should be adopted, and the recommended set is the list compiled by Curtis (1996: 51–56).

Practical philosophizing with children

The method of holding philosophical conversations depends on whether they are held with one or more children. Thus, two methods of philosophizing can be distinguished:

– Informal – a proposal of such a kind of philosophizing appears spontaneously in different everyday situations. It can be put forward either by children who are fascinated by the world and ask their relatives about the existence of various phenomena, or by adults, who make use of various circumstances to develop a reflexive and creative attitude in a kid;

– Formal – organized for a group of kids who are assumed to meet in order to philosophize. Such conversations depart from the aforesaid scheme, because their venue, term and subject are fixed. The person who holds such activities is properly qualified and has a syllabus to be followed.

E. Zoller (2009: 12) recommends that the following three tools should be used for philosophical talks with kids:

– Eyes – to perceive precisely; E. Zoller makes a symbolic reference to the eyes, but the problem is a comprehensive, multi-aspectual perception of the reality. Perception does not mean philosophizing, yet it is useful, because it supplies preliminary, fundamental information to constitute the base for ratiocination. If perception is imprecise, even if it should be followed by correct ratiocination, the result will not be correct. Through various exercises, kids should sharpen their sense of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. In order that perception could be more comprehensive, kids should also train internal perception, for example, which impressions and moods are generated by an object being seen, what would the body say if it were given the floor, etc.
Reason – to secure correct ratiocination; a good way of helping kids arrange their way of thinking and learn creative thinking is the so-called Socratic dialogue, which consists in using adequate questions to start with a single case which we try to generalize later on, then draw conclusions, and eventually return to the case said. The basic technique helpful in holding such a type of dialogue is comparison without evaluation. “When we apply comparisons, we will be taught to perceive more accurately and in a more diversified way (valid also for inner images, thoughts and feelings!), to think and speak more accurately and critically, to make decisions being more aware, and to act by selecting from the possibilities aplenty” – those are arguments of Zoller (2009: 107). The technique of comparisons without evaluation is utilized in basic methods of philosophizing, viz. upon challenging and investigating with questions, specifying ideas and while justifying and arguing for or against something.

Hands – in order to ‘get the hang’ of a matter; the conclusions kids will eventually reach due to a philosophic view of a problem should orient them towards their own way of living and to help them make correct choices pertinent to personal matters. Owing to a philosophical reflection, a kid will find it easier to answer the following questions: who am I, what do I know and can do, what is good, bad for me, etc. As K. Jaspers states, a large number of psychotherapeutic techniques are based not only on medicine, but also on philosophy.

Experts in philosophizing of children underline that we should not rush to answer kids’ questions, but first we should read out the intention that has driven them to put forward such a question, because an asking child often wants to get more attention and contact with an adult than to gain a reliable reply. A desirable method is answering a question with a question. It turns out that kids themselves look for an answer to the problem under analysis and use creative thinking. An example of such a strategy can be a conversation between a granny and her grandson:

Grandson: Why do all people have navels?
Granny: Well, why?
Grandson: To know where the centre is. (Zoller 2009: 17)

It does not matter whether a kid’s explanation is of importance from the academic viewpoint; more important is that the kid has lent a meaning to an issue, which is the point. As time goes by, the kid will discover the truth. “In philosophical discussions the most important thing is” – as Zoller
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has it (2009: 68) – “neither arriving at factual knowledge nor going through a syllabus, but discovering the sense of what is going on around us”. If a kid is provided with a ready, exhaustive reply, they may be falsely impressed that all mysteries and secrets have already been revealed, there are no more of them left to be discovered, and adults must have full knowledge of the world. Therefore, E. Zoller (2009: 47) gives the following advice: “Get rid of the belief that you must know all. Instead of ‘force-feeding’ a child ready pieces of information, show them how to get at sources of knowledge”, and postulates that the youngest kids should be exposed to answers abundant in poetry and gentleness. For example, if a kid asks you: What does a star mean?, you can formulate the following answer: You know, stars are like your eyes – they shine and look at the surrounding world. But they do so only at night. Such kids exhibit only a temporary, changeable interest, and their poor concentration prevents them from focusing upon long disquisitions so popular among some adults.

In the introduction to Philosophy of kids. Information on the syllabus (1996), we can read: “There is no point in teaching kids philosophy in the academic sense. Like in the case of reading and writing, kids can deal with philosophy as with something they rather do, not know. They should genuinely philosophize and improve their way of thinking”. An inspiration for starting a philosophical dialogue with small kids may be an appropriate text, drawing figures, or playing with one’s imagination.

H.-L. Freese (2008: 148) underlines that a text must be understandable to a kid, this is to say, concise, diversified, succinct, full, witty and full of fantasy. The smallest kids prefer most texts on other kids, animals or adventures. M. Dagiel (2005: 95) pays attention to a great power of versified works: “poetry reveals and triggers emotions, opens up and shows new possibilities for words to exist and to be arranged, new potential of a language due to polyphony and multilayered structures of poetic messages. The reception of a poem is not restricted to one possibility: there is a literal (actual), contemplative and symbolic reception […] There is no unauthorized realization of a poem; neither is there any universal key for all texts”.

Kids find it easier to reveal their thoughts and perception of the world while drawing. In a figure, children present what they have not expressed because they are lacking in adequate words. This attribute of kids can be utilized by starting a friendly philosophical chat with them while they are
drawing. Also Edward de Bono (1998: 288), who applied this method among kids aged 4 and 5, points to the drawing method as one which is simple and at the same time valuable for shaping the skill of thinking. The work a kid has drawn need not be artistically perfect, but is rather a scheme to illustrate the kid’s view on an issue. An adult, while looking at a figure, can always ask the child some additional questions about details. It is also important that kids who have illustrated an issue in a drawing will have a stronger sense of success than if they should express it by words. A drawing constitutes the basis for talks between a kid and an adult.

The attention of two persons who look jointly at a drawing will focus on a specific topic. Each of them can have different views on a question, and their respective opinions can be exchanged, too.

Recently, in reaction to the demand for knowledge concerning the development of the child’s way of thinking, many works on this subject have been published. Apart from research papers, also some articles appeared which treat of extremely instructive talks between adults and kids; kids can surprise us with their wordings, unconventionality and perceptiveness. (Tischner 2010; Janda 2008). People who have tried to perform philosophical investigations with children declare that “they are en extremely fascinating experience, worth any and all effort and continuation” (Buła 2004), they keep up the natural craving for knowledge among kids, improve their skill of unassisted thinking, and favour the intellectual, social and personal development of a kid.

References

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