Philosophy with children
– Moral argumentation and the role of pictures

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to outline the disposition and results of a short-time pilot study (Backman, 2009) of pupils’ ability to express ethical arguments and of the role of pictures in ethical argumentation. There were 18 pupils, in the ages 7-8 years, that participated in the study, which was carried out in a school in the northern part of Sweden. In this paper, we begin by giving a short description of some relevant statements in the Swedish national curriculum and put this in relation to some previous research on philosophical inquiry with children. Then we continue by describing some of the project’s influences from philosophical practice and theoretical groundwork. After this, some methodological concerns and ethical considerations are referred. Finally, some results of the study are described and shortly discussed.

Introduction

In Swedish school curricula (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006), the notions of ‘reason’, ‘critical examination’ and ‘critical valuation’ are emphasized. The following is described in the ”Goals to strive towards”:

“The school should strive to ensure that all pupils:[…]

• acquire good knowledge in school subjects and subject areas,

to develop themselves and prepare for the future, […]

• learn to listen, discuss, reason and use their knowledge as a tool to

– formulate and test assumptions as well as solve problems,

– reflect over experiences and

– critically examine and value statements and relationships and

• acquire sufficient knowledge and experience to be able to make well
considered choices over further education and vocational orientation.” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006, p. 9-10)

To understand what is required from the pupils for them to be able to “critically examine and value statements and relationships”, we would have to understand the notion of ‘critical thinking’. Kurfiss (1988) defines this notion as:

"an investigation whose purpose is to explore a situation, phenomenon, question, or problem to arrive at a hypothesis or conclusion about it that integrates all available information and that can therefore be convincingly justified.” (Kurfiss, 1988, p. 2)

Note that the notion of justification arrives in the end of the definition as a key concept. Similarly, Inch et al. (2006) claims that:

"A person who has thought critically about an issue will not settle for the apparent or obvious solution but will suspend judgment while seeking out all relevant arguments, facts, and reasons that promote good decision making.” (Inch, et al., 2006, p. 5)

The concepts of reason and argument seem thus to be relevant for the process of thinking critically. Note that both of these claims presented by Kurfiss (1988) and Inch, et al. (2006) about critical thinking include, directly in the first case and indirectly in the second, the concept of justification.

In philosophical inquiry, to justify ones judgments and opinions are very relevant. Every participant is required to explain, and be very precise about explaining, ones
opinions and arguments for these, and also to require arguments from the other participants. Malmhester and Ohlsson (1999) describe a research project that has been carried out in two schools in Stockholm, Sweden, during the years 1989-1994. Within this project, frequent education in philosophy has been conducted with texts by Matthew Lipman as a point of departure. After one year, the experimental group had a greater ability to listen to the arguments of others and required arguments from others to a greater extent than a control group.

It is, however, important to notice that the requirement of justification and clarification of judgments and arguments does not undermine the relevance of tolerance and respect in the philosophical dialogues. According to Malmhetsner and Ohlsson (1999), two overall aims for the Swedish school are that the children shall be fostered to have tolerance in regard to dissidence and that they shall be imparted the ability of thinking critically and independently. Moreover, Malmhester and Ohlsson hold that these two goals are difficult to unite, but that they (almost exclusively) can be united in philosophical dialogues.

In this paper, we pay attention to the argumentation abilities of young children, and hence also to critical thinking skills. The aim is to outline the disposition and results of a short-time pilot study (Backman, 2009) of pupils’ ability to express ethical arguments and of the role of pictures in moral argumentation. The study was carried out in a school in the northern part of Sweden. There were 18 pupils in the ages of 7-8 years that participated in the study. In the following sections, we outline in short the study and its point of departure – an ongoing project at Södra teatern in Stockholm, Sweden. Then we continue by describing some of the project’s influences from philosophical practice.
and theoretical groundwork. After this, some methodological concerns and ethical considerations are referred. Finally, some results of the study are described and shortly discussed.

**Influences from practice and theoretical groundwork**

For ten years in a row, a main project at Södra teatern has been a practice on the subject of philosophy with children, with inspiration from e.g. Matthew Lipman (2003) and Malmhester and Ohlsson (1999). Several groups of youths in the age of nine to eighteen years have regularly met to discuss philosophical thoughts and problems, which in a democratic manner are settled for discussion by the participants. Girls as well as boys have participated in the philosophical dialogues. This philosophical practice at Södra teatern has been very successful in that the amount of participants and groups has increased during the years.

The study (Backman, 2009) has been carried out with inspiration from the practice at Södra teatern, as well as from the work by for example Lipman (2003), Haglund and Persson (2004), Haglund (2001), Børresen and Malmhester (2004), Juuso (2007), Costello (2000) and Malmhester and Ohlsson (1999). Moreover, the study was influenced by theoretical groundwork from several philosophical disciplines, such as ethics (Singer, 1994; Tännö, 2000), argumentation analysis (Björnsson, Kihlbom, Tersman, & Ullholm, 1994), logical thinking (Mårtensson, 1995; Prawitz, 2001) and semantics (Martinich, 2008; Naess, 1992).

**Methodological concerns, evaluation and ethical considerations**

The study was disposed so that argumentation skills of the pupils were first evaluated in a short pre-study, thereafter the pupils were involved in the five weeks
process of philosophical practice, and finally their argumentation skills were evaluated again in a short post-study. Some of the pupils’ argumentation skills were evaluated through an evaluation matrix, constructed by Backman (2009) for this purpose. In the evaluation matrix both a quantitative aspect and some qualitative aspects of argumentation were evaluated. The quantitative aspect of whether or not the children expressed a judgment and one or more arguments for it were considered. Also, several qualitative aspects, such as clarity of expression and relevance of the arguments, were evaluated. This matrix was developed with inspiration from Björnsson’s et al. (1994) theory of argumentation analysis.

In general, the philosophical practice was customized to be appropriate for a regular school class, with very little experience of philosophical dialogue. A consequence of this was that the methods for philosophical discussion were customized and thus modified to fit into a regular school class environment. The dialogues were for instance shortened but occurred more frequently (often two or three times a week), the groups included a different amount of pupils from time to time (occasionally only five and sometimes up to eighteen), and the forms of expression were more varied, in order to fit a large group of pupils in a lower age.

During the study, the children’s means for expression were several, for instance writing, speaking and painting. Philosophizing was thus not only conducted by verbal communication. This might be an important aspect to consider in regard to the actual method of conducting the dialogue as well as for further research.

Also, different sorts of means for initiating a dialogue were applied, for instance written ethical and logical stories, verbal stories, logical riddles, question games and
paintings. During five weeks of philosophical work in the class the children were able to become acquainted with the notions of, for instance, “right”, “wrong”, “ought” “argument”, “why” and “because”, through verbal dialogue and discussion as well as through individual writing exercises.

An example of the ethical considerations that were relevant to the study was the consideration of the pupils’ secrecy. No pupil’s real name emerges in the report of the study (Backman, 2009), and neither does Backman mention in what municipality the study was carried out. Another example is the consideration of informed consent. In addition to the information that was presented to the pupils, parents (or other guardians) were informed and were given the opportunity to decline the children’s participation in the study.

**Results**

In the very short period of five weeks, Backman (2009) has seen quite significant changes in the children’s ability to make, and argue for, ethical judgments in writing. The study was initiated by examining argumentative abilities of the pupils, focusing on the ability of expressing an ethical judgment and an argument for this ethical judgment in writing. In the final part of the study, the same abilities were examined in very similar circumstances, and the increase of expressed arguments in writing was significant. There was also an increase of expressed ethical judgments in writing. In the beginning of the study there were pupils that did not express any judgment, and merely a few pupils wrote an argument. In the final part of the study, every pupil wrote a judgment and nearly every pupil expressed an argument.
One interpretation of this data is that the children developed their moral concepts of reason and argument. The children were, as I mentioned above, during the study’s five weeks time, able to be acquainted with the notions of “argument”, “why?” and “because”, which are concepts very relevant to Swedish school (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006). Hence, the increase in written arguments might indicate an increased ability in understanding this kind of concepts.

Moreover, there are interesting cases in which the children expressed judgments that were very similar to each other’s in the beginning of the study and more diverged in the end. One example that illustrates this point is when the whole class listened to a story (one in the beginning of the study and one similar in the end) about two characters that faced an ethical problem about whether the story’s main character ought to tell the truth or lie. In the beginning of the study every pupil stated that the character ought to tell the truth (and merely a few expressed arguments therefore), while in the end of the study some pupils stated the opposite. This might indicate a development towards a greater deal of independence in regard to each other. Another consideration that was raised as a consequence of the study regards the pupil’s conceptualizing of ethical issues. In some conversations about the notion of justice it became clear that the children interpreted the term very differently. This is not very surprising, but important to pay further attention to.

Another interesting result from the study regards the role of pictures in the pupils’ moral argumentation. The pupils’ pictures were classified in three categories regarding what role the pictures seemed to be able to have in regard to the pupils’ moral argumentation. The categories were: a supportive category, an explanatory category and an argumentative category. The supportive category regards the role that pictures can
have in relation to a person’s verbal expression. An elucidatory example of this is that an often very quiet pupil increased her verbal argumentation when she took her starting point in a painting, which she had painted herself. The pupils had been given the task of drawing a fair allocation of an imagined pizza between some children with different characteristics in an imagined situation. With this starting point this pupil increased her amount of verbal expression regarding the judgments and argumentation.

The explanatory category regards the relationship between a painting and a text. An elucidatory example regards an exercise that the pupils carried out with a point of departure in a story, which contained several ethical issues, that was first read out loud to the pupils and that later was brought up for dialogue before the pupils were supposed to do the exercise. In short, the story was about a pig and a family, who had saved the pig from a certain death. However, when the pig grows older, he becomes too big-sized to fit into the family’s apartment, and they consider killing their dear friend. Finally, the pig runs away to freedom and decides never to return. The family’s and the pig’s choices were considered and discussed in the philosophical dialogue. After dealing with issues like these in the dialogue, the pupils were presented the exercise of drawing a picture, writing a judgment and writing an argument for that judgment, where the judgment were supposed to regard some action that was related to the story. One pupil drew a picture of a pink pig that stands on green ground and looks up at an apple tree. Above the picture the pupil wrote the following moral judgment: “He should stay [our translation]”. If the reader merely has the text and not the picture of the pig, he or she would not understand who the text is about. The picture thus seems to have an explanatory function in relation to the text.
The final category, the argumentative, can be elucidated through the following example. One pupil wrote: “I think that it was bad that [he] was going to kill the pig [our translation]”. In the painting, a man stands with a giant hammer raised over a pig. The man has great fangs and looks very angry. The pig stands beneath the man with the hammer and looks very sad, with tears dripping, forming a small pool. It seems as if the picture points at some morally relevant features of the moral status of the man’s action. This might indicate that a picture can have the function of strengthening an ethical judgment.

However, these are merely preliminary results, and further research would have to be made in this research area to further investigate pupils’ reasoning.

**Concluding remarks**

As we described in the introduction, critical abilities are highly relevant to Swedish school curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006), and for schools all around the world. The results in the described pilot study can be interpreted as indicating a development in the pupils’ moral and semantic-logical concepts. However, this is merely an indication, and only the beginning of a complex but important area of research. We hold that investigating these issues in more depth is of great importance. This holds also for how to conduct dialogues in terms of how to use different resources for communicating, for instance by drawings, and what implications this can have on pupils’ moral argumentation. Moreover, further investigations on the actual process of development seem needed.

References


Swedish National Agency for Education (2006) *Curriculum for the compulsory school system, the pre-school class and the leisure-time centre Lpo 94*.