



Philosophising with children even in the clinic!

“The earlier you philosophise, the longer you remain wise”

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“What is a friend?”, “What do you need to be happy?” and “Where does time live?”

There are no straightforward answers to these questions. Philosophising means taking these questions and concepts seriously and enabling children and adolescents to get together and embark on a search for answers. Our pupils frequently pose existential questions (about the meaning of life) during the course of an illness and search for orientation.

Philosophy provides them with an opportunity to be astounded, express doubts and question everything. They reflect on their own emotions, thoughts and values, possess the courage to express their own opinions and become open for the viewpoints of others. Philosophising provides support in coping with their developmental tasks, strengthens social competence and trains creative and logical thinking. This is seen as an educational principle for which no specialised philosophical knowledge is necessary.

The objective of this workshop was to animate participants to philosophise with their pupils. The focus was the communal study of a philosophical unit and the presentation of practical examples from everyday school life. A film provided an insight into philosophising with very young children. The teachers were additionally provided with theoretical foundations and material to enable them to plan a philosophy unit for themselves. The possibilities and limits of philosophy in the clinic were discussed.

1. Structure of a philosophical unit

1.1 Preparation Selection of children's questions

It is advisable to start off by viewing the world through the perspective of a child and collect their questions. Anything to do with their own selves, cooperation with others and the world itself is suitable as a philosophical topic, but additionally concepts going beyond our personal experiences (such as death, God, the soul, etc.). Examples of questions posed by children and adolescents:

- Why am I like I am?
- Do you always have to tell the truth?
- What would it be like if nothing existed?
- Do animals have a soul?
- What is normal?
- What is the difference between friendship and love?



A selection of questions collected in a “treasure chest” would be suitable in the clinic if the children themselves do not offer any suggestions. In selecting the children’s questions, the teacher must take care to distinguish between questions related to knowledge, theology and philosophy.

A philosophical question

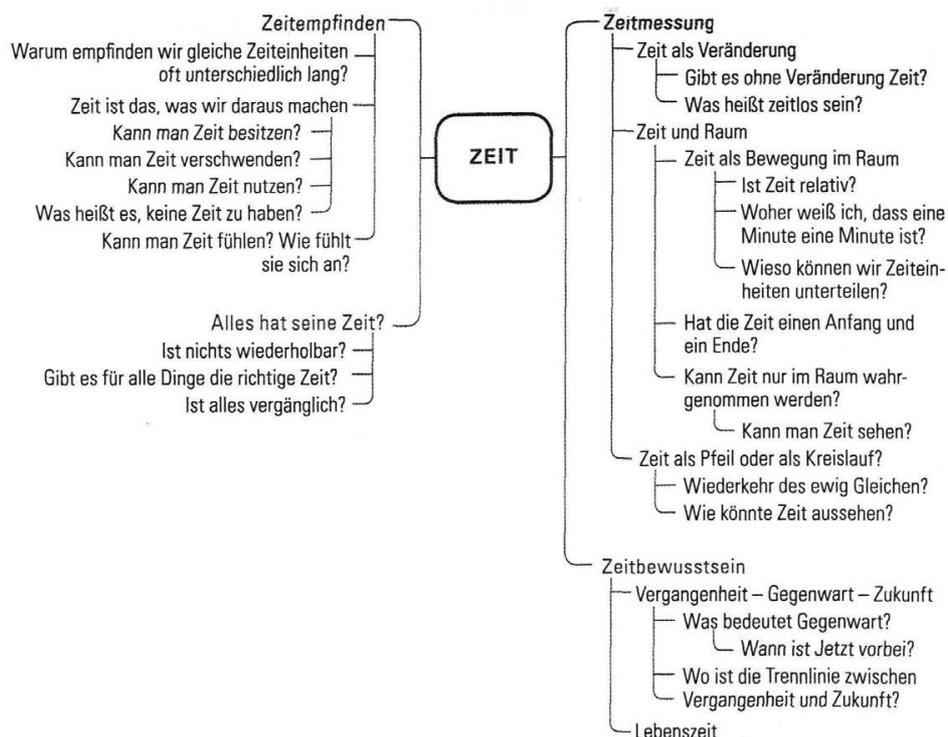
- is open and formulated generally, (Do animals have a soul?)
- is oriented towards infinity and searches for meaning and the sense of a particular phenomenon or object (What is a lie? what is happiness?) and
- has a connection with our living world and demands personal analysis (Are humans really free? Are human beings good?)

This type of question does not demand an answer, but always requires discussion.

Compilation of a thought map (mind map)

A philosophical unit cannot be prepared to follow any particular conceptual learning objective, but in order to moderate a philosophical discussion, a certain degree of competence within a certain subject area is necessary. The compilation of a mind map devoted to the topic of discussion has proved to be helpful and this should be placed at the focal point of attention. This permits individual reflection on the subject matter to be clearly developed, represented and also linked with the overriding question. This permits the teacher to provide impulses to the course of the discussion.

Mind map on the topic of time (taken from Zeitler: “Siehst du die Welt auch so wie ich?“, p.50)





Repetition of rules for discussion

The leader of the discussion gives the word to participants through throwing them a wuschel (fluffy ball) which is easy to throw and catch. Only the person holding this ball is allowed to speak and must throw the ball back to the leader of discussion. This is the only rule given to the group; all other rules of how the discussion is led are jointly worked out and/or repeated by the members of the group. Decoration of the room/bed and utilisation of rituals. Rituals provide the children with a framework and security and communicate the impression of having participated in something very special.

In the daily structure within the clinic, the establishment of fixed times which harmonise with doctors' visits, treatment times and visiting hours is particularly important to avoid all interruptions where possible. If a separate classroom is available, a circle of chairs or cushions can be set up round a central picture on the floor associated with the topic of discussion. If the pupil is not allowed to get out of bed, a square of material can be laid on the bed and decorated with appropriate objects of significance for the child such as a feather, a stone or a picture. A certain piece of music, singing bowls, perfumes, wreathes of flowers or fantasy journeys can be incorporated into the initial and concluding rituals.

1.2 Approach

This should lead into the subject matter, trigger off personal concern or irritation, must be openly presented and provide the opportunity for questions.

In the workshop, an alarm clock at the centre of the circle provided the connection with the topic of "time". Participants were then asked to estimate the duration of a minute with their eyes closed.

Other possibilities include:

- thought experiments
- images and cartoons
- aphorisms and poems
- fantasy journeys
- surveys
- interviews
- role play
- illustrated books
- stories
- puzzles and games
- films etc. ...

1.3 Philosophical discussion

In a philosophical discussion, participants are not aiming to search for the correct answer, but question assumed knowledge, gain new insights and find orientation.



Teacher's role

The teacher is equally searching and questioning, but she does not convey knowledge or participate with content-related contributions to the discussion. She does not evaluate and assesses the children's concepts, but moderates the discussion and ensures adherence to the rules. Occasionally, she will deepen the level of discussion through additional questions, formulate summaries in her own words, provide further impulses and encourage differentiation through further questions:

- Do the others see this the same way?
- What does that mean?
- How can you justify that?
- How can we find out if this is true?
- Have I understood you correctly?
- Can you give a suitable example?

The teacher will always demonstrate an appreciative attitude.

1.4 Evaluation of discussion

Reflection highlights the individual responsibility for the progress of the discussion. This has nothing to do with the evaluation of each individual participant, but more the development of a definitive opinion of what constitutes a philosophical discussion and a philosophical discussion culture.

Lightning round

Here each participant summarises his or her most important aspects of the discussion. The results can be recorded on a poster.

Thumb language

The members of the group indicate through simple thumb language (thumbs up, thumbs down or horizontal) their individual evaluation, for example of the following criteria:

- Did you listen to the others?
- Did you make your own personal contribution to the discussion?
- Was it possible to feel comfortable within the group?
- Did the discussion become profound?
- Have I learned anything new?
- Was it interesting?

There is also the possibility of distributing questionnaires with rating scales.

1.5 Further creative activities

During the topic of "time" for example, pupils could subsequently draw time disposers or time dispensers or make time vouchers which could be given as presents.



Additional ideas:

- creative writing
- painting/drawing/handicrafts

1.6 Framework requirements

Philosophical discussion is suitable for all persons from the age of 4 upwards. A group size of between 3 – 12 participants has proved to be favourable. All that is necessary is a circle of chairs or cushions in a quiet room. Generally speaking, 45 to 90 minutes should be planned for each session (including accompanying activities). Participation should only be on an optional basis.

2. Limits of philosophising in a clinic setting

2.1 Individual tuition

A philosophical discussion is nourished by a variety of experiences and thoughts expressed by participants. If the teacher enters into discussion as a partner on equal footing to augment the discussion material, he swiftly encounters a conflict of roles as he should actually play the part of moderating the discussion.

2.2 Group tuition

Due to the constant fluctuation of the composition of the group, progressively structured lessons and follow-up work are not possible. Philosophising requires a certain degree of trust which cannot always develop at a sufficient speed in the case of patients.

2.3 Psychological and physical state of pupils

On certain days, patients will not be able to concentrate on philosophical topics due to severe pain, nausea or extreme fatigue. Psychological problems can also present an obstacle to concentration on a particular philosophical topic.

2.4 Cooperation with the medical and psycho-social team

Pupils will occasionally touch on topics in philosophical discussion which they have also talked over with psychologists and doctors. It is vital to liaise with the medical and psycho-social team on topics which are also being covered during therapy.

2.5 Organisational aspects

If tuition has to be given in the patient's room, the discussion can be subject to interruptions. The teacher should therefore plan sessions in consideration of doctor's visits, visiting hours and mealtimes.



3. Training opportunities

3.1 Training course "Philosophising with children"

The academy "Kinder philosophieren" in Munich offers practical training, helpful tools and everything else required for philosophical discussion with children and adolescents. Training courses are structured in four two-day modules and are available as advanced training courses and also as in-house training. Participants completing the course will receive a certificate qualifying them to lead philosophical discussion.

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3.2 Additional study course at the Munich School of Philosophy

The additional study course »Philosophising with children« will no longer be offered from the winter semester 2010/11.

4. Content of philosophical unit at the workshop

Participants were initially informed about the essential rules for philosophical discussion.

- The wuschel discussion ball simplifies discussion procedure.
- Only the person holding the ball is allowed to speak.
- The ball is always returned to the moderating teacher.
- Discussion progresses with respect for others.

For this unit, an open opportunity for settling on a topic for philosophical discussion was deliberately planned. The leader of discussion placed a clock on a piece of material at the centre of the circle to focus attention on the topic of time. This was followed by an exercise. All participants stood up and closed their eyes.

Starting with the order "now", they were instructed to sit down when they thought one minute had passed. The teacher recorded the times: the "minutes" as experienced by the participants ranged from 27 to 97 seconds. In the ensuing discussion, individuals were asked to explain their strategy for defining a minute. Next, each participant was asked to formulate a philosophical question on the topic of time. Suggestions included the following:



- What is time?
- Why does time pass at different speeds?
- How much time do I (we) still have left?
- Do we need time?
- Does wasted time exist?

The questions were collected on a flip chart, briefly explained and numbered. Participants now had to close their eyes and were permitted to indicate two topics in which they were particularly interested.

The question "Does wasted time exist?" received the majority of votes. This question was read out once more and then a singing bowl was struck to allow the question to sink in. The singing bowl was struck once more to open the active philosophical discussion.

It didn't take long for all participants to become involved in an active and serious exchange of opinions. The role of the discussion leader entailed in listening precisely, posing further questions, summarising, leading the discussion back to the question and monitoring adherence to discussion rules. He did not make a content-related contribution to the discussion and did not evaluate the individual contributions. Towards the end of the philosophising session, an hourglass was turned over to remind participants that discussion on the topic would culminate when the sand had run through the hourglass.

Each participant was then permitted to specify a particular new or important thought from discussion. At the end of the session, participants showed their personal evaluation of the philosophical discussion with the aid of simple thumb language.

Exhibited and utilised literature

Illustrated books

Bauer, Jutta: Opas Engel, Carlsen Verlag, 2001

Cave, Kathryn: Irgendwie anders, Oetinger Verlag, 1994

Ende, Michael: Das Traumfresserchen, Thienemann Verlag, 1978

Erlbruch, Wolf: Die große Frage, Hammer Verlag, 2009

Erlbruch, Wolf: Ente, Tod und Tulpe, Kunstmann Verlag, 2007

Feth, Monika: Der Gedankensammler, Sauerländer Verlag, 2006

Heine, Helme: Freunde, Middelhauve Verlag, 1982

Lionni, Leo: Swimmy, Middelhauve Verlag, 1983

McKee, David: Du hast angefangen! Nein, du!, Sauerländer Verlag, 1998

Olten, Manuela: Wahre Freunde, Bajazzo Verlag, 2007

Opel-Götz, Susanne: Ab heute sind wir cool, Oetinger Verlag, 2007

Usatschow, Andrej: Geschichte ohne Anfang und Ende, Nordsüd Verlag, 2008

Varley, Susan: Leb wohl lieber Dachs, Betz Verlag, 1984



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Children's literature

Akademie Kinder philosophieren (Hrsg.): Ich bin ich, oder?, Heinrich Vogel Verlag, 2008

Law Stephen: Philosophie:- Abenteuer Denken, Arena Verlag, 2007

Lobel, Arnold: Das große Buch von Frosch und Kröte, dtv junior Verlag, 2006

Nicholls, Sally: Wie man unsterblich wird, Hanser Verlag, 2008

Oberthür, Rainer: Neles Buch der großen Fragen, Kösel Verlag, 2008

Schulz-Reiss: Nachgefragt: Philosophie, Loewe Verlag, 2005

Philosophising with children

Akademie Kinder philosophieren im Bildungswerk der Bayerischen Wirtschaft e.V.: Skripte der Fortbildungsreihe Kinder philosophieren 2009/2010

Brokemper, Peter: Glück, ein Projektbuch, Verlag an der Ruhr, 2009

Brüning, Barbara: Philosophieren in der Grundschule, Cornelsen Verlag, 2001

Rude/Simbeck/Witt-Kruse/Zeitler: Praxisleitfaden Kinder philosophieren für Kindertageseinrichtungen und Schulen, München 2007

Zeitler, Katharina: Siehst du die Welt auch so wie ich?, Herder Verlag, 2010

Zoller Morf, Eva: Selber denken macht schlau, Zytglogge Verlag, 2010

Film

Akademie Kinder philosophieren im Bildungswerk der Bayerischen Wirtschaft e.V.: Wer früher philosophiert, ist länger weise

„Alle Menschen streben von Natur aus nach Wissen.

Das Staunen ist der Anfang der Philosophie.“

Aristoteles, Metaphysik, Buch 1