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Examination of elementary teacher candidates' perception of the concept of philosophy through metaphor analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of elementary teacher candidates with regards to philosophy. For this purpose, metaphors have been utilized as qualitative data collection tools. Metaphors developed by 67 teacher candidates have been subjected to content analysis and separated into 11 categories. Teacher candidates consider philosophy to be important in our lives. Together with this, metaphors developed by teachers demonstrate that there are problems in the perception of the concept of “philosophy”. Emphasis should be put on philosophy education in primary education and teacher education.

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1. Introduction

According to Aristoteles, humans are born with the desire to learn. The indicators of this desire are the child's constant questioning of the world into, which they are born, attempt to make sense of what is going on, and observation of its environment with astonishment and curiosity. However, in time children give up asking questions, submit to habits, and lose their curiosity. Thus, the minds that naturally philosophize, are replaced with minds that do not think and criticize, become a spectator of life and similar to each other, and do not put forward opinions. However, the age we live in requires individuals to investigate, have different perspectives, have critical approaches, be open to other opinions, be creative, determine problems and have a solution producing philosophical approach. The aspiration for wisdom, in other words philosophy, has been defined in many ways by philosophers such as attempting to find the meaning of life, the art of thinking, getting to know oneself, wisdom of life, efforts to change the world or the activity of asking questions. These definitions provide hints for the significance of philosophy in our lives. Despite this, why isn't philosophy where it belongs, in our lives? Why do people give up on such an activity that liberates their mind? Of course we have to search for the answers of these questions in our education system. As a matter of fact, an education setting that does not encourage the learner to ask questions, provide the opportunity for them to express their opinions freely, and provide the opportunity to think in a justified manner and in depth shall deprive children of philosophical thinking.

Philosophical education is based on quest and questioning and it is necessary to commence such an education at an early age. As this is an understanding that needs to be acquired by all teachers in general, philosophy education

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lessons must certainly be provided in institutions educating teachers. As Nietzsche said, educators must first educate themselves (Direk, 2002,p.9).

The first and most important thing that philosophy shall provide the teacher is to develop his/her world of thinking. This is because; humans look at life and the world from the circumstances they are in. This shall enable us to comprehend life and the world in an extensive and in-depth manner and thus, not to frequently make mistakes and shall provide us a general comprehension specific to philosophy (quoted from Russell, Tozlu 2003,p.71). Together with this, in addition to having the teacher teach subjects in a comprehensive, lively, and interesting manner, it shall also assist them in teaching them in association with each other and with a certain integrity (Tozlu,2003,p.70).

It can be said that philosophy education has an important role in training teachers. It is necessary for teacher candidates, especially elementary teacher candidates, who address children aged between 7-12, have their students acquire the skill of philosophical thinking. Therefore, the perception of philosophy of candidates is of significance.

1.1. Objective and significance of the study

The objective of this study is to determine the perception of elementary teacher candidates on philosophy. Such an initiative can ensure the determination of the problems experienced by teachers in having their students acquire philosophical thinking skills, the determination of problems concerning philosophy education by determining positive and negative perceptions towards philosophy, and provide an idea on the necessity and form of philosophy in the teacher training process.

2. Methodology

2.1. Model of the Study

A qualitative research method has been used in this study. Qualitative research is an inductive research process focused on the process and understanding, where the researcher is the primary data collection tool and data is described in depth (Merriam, 2009,p.15).

2.2. Participant

The participants of this study consist of 2nd year students attending the Hacettepe University, Department of Elementary Education, Division of Primary Education during the fall semester of the 2010- 2011 academic year. A total of 98 elementary teacher candidates participated in the study.

2.3. Data collection

Metaphors have been used as qualitative data collection tools in the study. Metaphors are used for the purpose of describing a circumstance. Metaphors, which are used in many social science disciplines, provide the researcher a robust and rich picture and visual image on the studied subject, phenomena, and event (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005,p.212). In order to determine their perception of the concept of philosophy, the participants had been asked to fill in the interview form that had been given to them. The participants filled in the gaps in the following sentence: “Philosophy is like/similar to....., because.....”. Out of the 98 students participating in the study, 67 of them developed metaphors that had a validity permitting it to be used in the study. The consistency in the explanations of the metaphors developed by the participants has been taken into consideration.

2.4. Analysis of data

The data has been analyzed by means of content analysis. Metaphors developed by participants have been assessed in terms of their common properties by taking their justifications into consideration and then they have

been categorized according to these properties. A total of 67 metaphors developed by the participants have been classified under 11 categories.

3. Findings

Elementary teacher candidates have developed a total of 67 metaphors oriented at the concept of philosophy. These metaphors have been separated into 11 conceptual categories. These categories and the metaphors constituting the categories have been presented below with participant expressions:

1. The philosophy that is the “Taste of Life”

It can be said that the metaphors of **women, salt and love**, which have been developed by the participants represent this category. The expression of one of the participants that used this metaphor is as follows:

“Philosophy is like salt; because it is possible to live even if it did not exist but there would be no taste.”

2. Philosophy that is a “Guide”

These metaphors developed by the participants have been included under this category: **the torch that never burns out, the person that is lost in the desert, the captain that knows his destination and friend**. The participant expressions with regards to these metaphors are as follows:

“Philosophy is like a torch that never burns out; because the more you feed the torch it burns as much as you feed it wood and sheds light on the surroundings. With philosophy, the more you feed it with questions; its answers shall shed light on humanity.”

“Philosophy is like a captain that knows his destination; because philosophy explores the path to appropriate thinking. Those who do not know this path, shall lose their way like a captain that does not know his destination.”

3. Philosophy that is “Limitless and Infinite”

Elementary teacher candidates have developed the following metaphors with regards to the concept of philosophy under this category: **deep well, sky, universe, water, a limitless world, outer space, God, the earth, sea, plastic bag with a hole, a door opening to another door and space**. The following expressions are samples of metaphors under this category:

“Philosophy is like the universe; because it has no boundaries, it forces you to constantly think and investigate.”

“Philosophy is like a door that opens to another door; because each door represents another experience, another view in philosophy. It is limitless. Each idea leads the way to another idea.”

4. Philosophy that is “Complicated and Obscure”

The metaphors developed by participants under this category are as follows: **Uncombed hair, well, puzzle, maze, dead end, life and a dream in a nice sleep**. Expressions of participants oriented at these metaphors are as follows:

“Philosophy is like life; because it is complicated and obscure. It is hard to understand even if you want to understand it.”

“Philosophy is like uncombed hair; because it is mixed up and needs to be untangled.”

“Philosophy is like a dead end; because there is more than one answer to a question. Thus, it is difficult to get out of it.”

5. Philosophy that is “Change and Development”

The following are metaphors developed by elementary teacher candidates under this category: **alive, stream, life, waterfall, flowing water and child**. The following are similes of participants regarding the concept of philosophy:

“Philosophy is like a child; because it develops by asking questions. Children also develop themselves by asking questions.”

“Philosophy is like flowing water; because it is constantly changing. Thoughts of humans change based on their perceptions. And this is reflected in their philosophy.”

6. Philosophy that is “Different Perspectives”

The metaphors under this category can be presented as **people, crossword puzzle, shattered rock, solid geometry, an enormous tree, freedom, an object that changes color according to the light, the Turkish Grand National Assembly, a blank notebook, liberty and humor**. The following are examples of these metaphors:

“Philosophy is like humor; because everyone does not find everything funny at the same time. There are different perspectives in philosophy. Everyone does not think the same way.”

“Philosophy is similar to an enormous tree; because there is an unknown amount of leaves on that tree. Philosophy means a lot of piled up thoughts. The leaves symbolize thoughts and the tree is philosophy itself.”

“Philosophy is like the Turkish Grand National Assembly; because everyone has something different to say. Everybody’s views, ideals, and desires are different, important and a part of life.”

7. Philosophy that is a “Lifestyle”

Some of the metaphors used by the participants have been collected under this category. These metaphors can be presented as **life itself/life/lifestyle, play dough, mirror, headache** and **bricks of the house of thought**. The following are samples of the metaphors of participants:

“Philosophy is like a mirror; because it reflects us and our lives. We discover our existence in it. It actually is an integral part of us. We discover ourselves in it. It is what we are.”

“Philosophy is similar to life itself; because we live, see, and apply philosophy in our lives. Philosophy is what shows a person their purpose of living.”

8. Philosophy that is “Full of Obstacles”

The metaphors of **fruit tree, bird, pathway full of roses with thorns** developed by the participants have been included under this category. Examples of expressions stated by participants with regards to these metaphors are as follows:

“Philosophy is like a bird; because it starts its journey in freedom and as it asks questions it starts encountering obstacles. This is like a bird encountering a hunter whilst flying.”

9. Philosophy that is “Trying to Understand”

The metaphors of **child, dreaming, getting to the root of everything** have been dealt with under this category. Examples of expressions used by participants with regards to these metaphors are as follows:

“Philosophy is like a child; it attempts to find out everything that is going on in life, it asks questions. It attempts to understand life.”

10. Philosophy that is “Not as it Seems”

Some metaphors developed by elementary teacher candidates have been discussed in this category. These metaphors are **oyster, the closed box in the spiritual world of humans** and **a box that is full**. Participant expressions are as follows:

“Philosophy is like a box that is full; because we can not understand what is in this box at first sight but when we look inside we encounter different things. Philosophy may not seem interesting when looked at from outside, but once we look inside we may learn different things.”

“Philosophy is like an oyster; because there is unbelievable meaning and intelligence in sentences, which we do not understand when we first hear them. Just like how oyster seem dull and invaluable from the outside but contain pearls in them.”

11. Philosophy that is “Thinking”

These are metaphors developed under this category: **Thinking, the inner world of humans, thinking officer** and **a cell in the brain**. Expressions of participants pertaining to these metaphors are as follows:

“Philosophy is similar to a cell in the brain; because philosophy starts in the brain and is dependent on thinking. You can philosophize if you think, but if you do not then you can not.”

4. Discussion and Conclusion

It can be said that the perception of elementary teacher candidates that have participated in the study towards philosophy is positive in general. Metaphors on philosophy being the taste of life or a guide for people can be demonstrated as examples for this.

The metaphors developed by elementary teacher candidates such as dead end and maze can be an indicator that they consider philosophy to be complicated and obscure. The number of those who have such an opinion towards philosophy is not little. One of the reasons for this may be the philosophy courses taken by students during their

course of education. The fact that philosophy is considered to be a pile of information consisting of views of philosophers that needs to be memorized can cause negative perceptions of philosophy. However, philosophy is at the same time a form of thinking and a systematic process of questioning. It is necessary to draw the line between philosophical education and philosophy education. Because, the first points out to a type of education and demonstrates the formal one, the latter making a claim concerning the content of education. It is highly important that the first bond between the child and philosophy is of the first type. This is because, the thing that is to be reinforced at this point is the natural questioning attitude demonstrated by the child (Çotuksöken, 2005). Philosophical education is acquiring the philosophical style of thinking, in other words teaching philosophizing. As Kant said, philosophy can not be learnt, philosophizing can be learnt.

Some of the metaphors developed by some of the elementary teachers oriented at the concept of philosophy (universe, outer space etc.), demonstrates that it is perceived as a limitless or endless activity. In respect of questions asked by philosophy and different answers provided for these questions by philosophers, such a perspective towards philosophy seems to be natural. However, this does not infer that all philosophical questions have been repeated in the history of philosophy as if there was no end and no correct answers have ever been provided. There are many examples of solved problems and answered questions in the history of philosophy (Dinçer, 2010,p.16). The answers are as important as the questions. However, considering philosophy to be consisting of open ended and never answerable questions causes individuals to distance themselves from philosophy and cause philosophy to be assessed as an empty and meaningless effort. This is one of the points that need to be taken into account in philosophical education.

The metaphors developed by elementary teacher candidates demonstrate that they consider philosophy to be not as it appears. According to them, philosophy appears to be negative due to reasons such as it being externally incomprehensible and abstract but as you go into its depths its value can be better understood. Philosophy can be perceived negatively due to such reasons. However, the fact that persons can overcome this prejudice once they encounter philosophy can be perceived to be positive.

It can be observed that elementary teacher candidates also perceive philosophy to be a lifestyle. Philosophy is in our lives. However, how appropriate would it be to reduce philosophy to the lifestyle of an individual? Does philosophy only consist of questions binding one's own life? Philosophy is undoubtedly not an ordinary and shallow activity. It is a systematic and questioning form of thinking. It is a critical activity where universal questions are directed and contains a wide perspective. Individuals lacking the skill of philosophical thinking, though they perceive philosophy in a positive manner can be a result of philosophy not being comprehended in depth. When this applies for teacher candidates, the acquisition of these skills by students can not be possible.

Elementary teacher candidates perceive philosophy mostly to be different perspectives. Different answers provided to philosophical questions seeking answers for centuries verifies this perception. However, every perspective may not have philosophical depth. Thus, philosophy needs to be differentiated from the daily, ordinary, and usual form of thinking.

Some elementary teacher candidates participating in the study perceive the concept of philosophy to be change and development. The questions asked and answers received in philosophy may vary according to different cultures and time frames. However, philosophy is not a developing process or a process, which progresses with accumulation. Answers provided to philosophical questions asked centuries ago are still being discussed, are maintaining their validity, and still are being advocated. This perception can be explained with elementary teacher candidates not being able to adequately comprehend philosophy.

Teacher candidates comparing philosophy to children can be considered to be positive. The common aspects of children with philosophers are their curiosity, their efforts to understand their surroundings, habit of constantly asking questions, and being surprised at things they see. Such a perception is important in that, teacher candidates can develop the philosophical thinking skills of children without having children lose the mentioned characteristics.

The fact that many elementary teachers consider philosophy to be full of obstacles indicates that they are aware that the journey of philosophy is in progress with new questions, showdowns, and debates. The efforts of teacher candidates to understand the concept of philosophy or their association of this concept with the activity of thinking is of considerable significance as it highlights the necessity and importance of philosophy for life.

The concept of philosophy has been defined and described by many philosophers in different eras in various manners. Philosophy is undoubtedly a multidimensional concept that can cover many perspectives. Elementary teacher candidates have developed a single metaphor pertaining to the concept of philosophy and they have described it with a single characteristic. It is certain that these characteristics are the ones that reflect their perceptions pertaining to philosophy the most.

5. Suggestions

The positive perceptions of elementary teacher candidates towards the concept of philosophy should be utilized in the teacher training process. By means of acquiring candidates with the view that philosophy asks questions from within life and is a critical and systematic form of thinking, it can be ensured that they combine philosophy with their lives. Furthermore, the extent of the importance of philosophy for the children that the candidates shall address should be emphasized.

The view that philosophy is so complicated that it can not be understood is highly related to the philosophy education received by teacher candidates. It is evident that philosophy can not be learnt through the memorization of the views of philosophers or philosophical movements. As Kant had expressed, only philosophizing can be learnt. The fact that philosophy is an activity of questioning and a form of thinking can be demonstrated through learning processes where independent and different opinions are shared without judgment through methods such as Socratic speech, debates etc. Elementary teacher candidates can overcome their prejudices in such settings and their students can learn to question in such settings.

Elementary teacher candidates perceive philosophy to be infinite and limitless and they associate this to philosophy constantly asking questions and providing various answers to these questions. The fact that questions are as important as answers in philosophy should be emphasized and answers of philosophers reflecting the extensive and deep accumulation of philosophy should be analyzed, discussed and explained. This should be realized in both related courses in teacher training institutes and secondary education philosophy lessons.

Considering philosophy to only be a practice of life or a product of random experiences shall render philosophy to be an ordinary and meaningless activity. Philosophy, which is perceived to be a lifestyle by elementary teacher candidates, may encounter such a problem. Therefore, it can be ensured that elementary teacher candidates comprehend philosophy in a correct manner in philosophy and philosophy of education courses.

Comparison of philosophy with children by elementary teacher candidates demonstrates that they are aware of their curiosity, efforts of questioning, and need to make sense of their environment. This can enable them to contribute to their student's skill of questioning.

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