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Views of primary school teachers on philosophy books prepared for children

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the views of primary school teachers on which properties philosophy books prepared for children aged between 6 and 12 should have. A total of 6 primary school teachers have analyzed 7 philosophy books within the framework of 5 questions determined by utilizing the properties of philosophy for children. According to the teachers, philosophy studies with children should start at an early age and teachers should be trained in this field. Philosophy activities conducted with children, research, and teacher, parent, and child opinion should be guiding in the preparation of these books.

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1. Introduction

Philosophy for children is the orientation of philosophy to children and philosophizing with them and as it is different with philosophizing with adults, it has been called this. Philosophy for children, is having children combine what they have read, the world they are living, and their experiences and performing evaluations on what is existing and having them construct concepts through the establishment of dialogues and discussions based on a suitable text, a story, a newspaper article or experiences from daily life. A proportion of this study is based on a text and the other is based on the experiences of children (Direk, 2008). Based on this, it can be said that there is a close relation between literature genres such as story and novels and philosophy. One of the most prominent of reasons that require philosophy drawing closer to literature and benefitting from it, is having things that are difficult to express with abstract concepts acquire concreteness through human experience (Günay,2011). Due to these reasons, philosophy with children is conducted through texts. Stories to be used in philosophy for children can include elements such as imagination, living characters, happiness, and humor. The author can convey information that the reader can comprehend while being entertained. Philosophical questions, problems, and meanings should be scattered secretly on each page. Concepts discussed by philosophers intensely such as justice, hope, and happiness can be discussed in these stories, however, it should be kept in mind that children will get bored of abstract and technical concepts. Stories should encourage the natural curiosity of children and motivate them to discuss these (Lipman, 2003).

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In philosophy for children there should be texts that draw the attention of children and are related to the daily lives of children. It is necessary to concretize abstract concepts to be discussed with children through examples. Furthermore, the presence of activities based on questions and inquisitions with philosophical content is considerably important. It is necessary for philosophy books prepared for children to be close as possible to these characteristics.

In recent years, there are many philosophy books especially prepared for children aged between 6 and 12 on the market. The manner of how these books should have the previously mentioned properties and which properties they should have in order to guide children to philosophizing and having them like philosophy should be determined. The views of primary school teachers, who are familiar with the interests, needs, and curiosities of children, are of substantial importance in this determination. The purpose of this study is to determine the views of primary school teachers on which properties philosophy books prepared for children should have and the manner of how they should have these properties. This study can ensure the careful approach to philosophy books prepared for children. Furthermore, it may provide a clue on organizing and using books in line with their purpose.

2. Methodology

A total of 6 teachers consisting of 3 males and 3 females working at various schools with various socio-economic conditions participated in the study. The 6 primary school teachers in the study were requested to examine the 7 philosophy books prepared for children. The books dealt with were books addressing children aged between 6 and 12 years old. The teachers were given the book titled “The Free And Unfree” from the Crispy Philosophy series, which is the joint work of Brigitte Labbe and Michel Puech, the book titled “What is Freedom?” from the Philosopher Child series by Oscar Brenifier, the book titled “What will Happen if I do not Obey Rules?” from the Pure and Simple Philosophy series by Brigitte Labbe and Eric Gaste, the book titled “Death of the Divine Socrates” from the Small Philosophers series by Jean Paul Mongin and Yann Le Brass, the book titled “What is True?”, which is the joint work of Etan Boritzer and Graham Sale, and the book titled “Filozof Çocuk (Philosopher Child)” by local author Nuran Direk and “Çocuklar İçin Shakspeare ile Felsefe/ Atinalı Timon (Shakespeare and Philosophy for Children/ Timon of Athens)” by Levent Gönül, another local author, in order to be examined.

In the book titled “The Free and Unfree” the concept of freedom was presented by associating child heroes with short texts. There are concepts related to freedom such as law, rule, and responsibility and these concepts have been examined under titles such as “We are not robots!”, “Sometimes freedom kills freedom!”.

In the book titled “What is Freedom?”, the concept of freedom has been examined under the six titles consisting of “requests”, “others”, “growing up”, “convict”, “rights”, and “usefulness”. Under these titles, children have been directed questions such as “Do you have to grow up to be free?” and “Do others prevent your freedom?” The book titled “What will happen if I do not Obey Rules?” is about the problems 6 year old Filo experiences with his family concerning compliance with rules. His friend, the Wise Bird Zof tries to eliminate Filo’s curiosity about abiding rules. The book titled “Death of the Divine Socrates” explains to children the views and execution of antique Greek philosopher, Socrates. The book titled “What is True?” the concept of truth is discussed and the truth has been attempted to be reached through examples related to the lives of children. The book titled “Filozof Çocuk” deals with the questions asked by 8 year old Hasan to the adults around him and questions he asks himself as a result of his experiences. These questions are related to the concepts of freedom, right, justice, reality, truth, goodness, and happiness. Each concept has been discussed in a separate section and after the sections there are different activities. In the book titled “Shakespeare and Philosophy for Children/ Timon of Athens” the work of Shakespeare called Timon of Athens has been simplified for children and a guide has been added following this work. In the guide there is information on what philosophy for children is and recommendations for practices. Furthermore, there are explanations, questions, and activities on concepts such as happiness, friendship, and optimism in the guide based on the story.

Based on these philosophy books prepared for children, the teachers were requested to answer 5 questions on how the properties of books that guide children to philosophy should be and the responses of teachers was analyzed through the content analysis method. The questions based on the basic properties of philosophy for children are as follows:

- How do you assess the concreteness of concepts, expressions, and examples dealt with in the books?

- How did you assess the examples discussed in the books in terms of their relation with the daily lives of children?
- How do you assess the status of the book regarding the direction of children to inquisition?
- Did you have students read such books in the past? If so, can you exemplify your experiences? If not, would you like them to read them?
- Do you consider philosophizing through such books with children to be appropriate? If so, how should it be done? What do you suggest? If no, what are the reasons?

3. Findings

Below there are views of teachers within the framework of the specified questions and regarding their comments on examined books, book names have been specified between parentheses.

The primary school teachers stated that the concepts discussed in philosophy books prepared for children are abstract and considered that when these concepts are associated with the daily lives of children and suitable examples they would be concretized. The following are the views of primary school teachers, who evaluated the said books, on this matter:

T1. *Instead of having the discourse of Socrates in an abstract manner, the referred concepts can be discussed with examples from the lives of children.* (Death of the Divine Socrates)

T2. *With examples from daily life, abstract concepts are concretized.* (Philosopher Child)

The primary school teachers focused on the concepts being in the daily lives of children rather than being abstract. One of the teachers expressed the following views regarding these concepts:

T2. *There are concepts such as justice, life, power, and presiding, these are concepts encountered by students in daily life and whose value they develop.* (Death of the Divine Socrates)

The teachers, who evaluated philosophy books prepared for children, stated that concepts not associated to examples cannot be adequately concretized.

T5. *Beginning directly with questions leaves many concepts ambiguous and these concepts cannot be internalized* (What is Freedom?)

T4. *The range of questions and the low amount of concretization with examples is not understandable for children without a certain level of readiness.* (What is Freedom?)

One primary school teacher stated that some of the discussed concepts were not suitable for children at this age. The view of the teacher is as follows:

T2. *“Death” is a relatively abstract concept. Attempting to explain this concept to a child at this age leads to the perception of the child drifting in other directions rather than leading to correct perceptions.* (Death of the Divine Socrates)

The primary school teachers consider the daily life of children being the source for the selected concepts and examples associated to these concepts to be important. However, it was also pointed out that the examples should address children with various socio-economic characteristics and examples in translated books should be adapted to our cultural structure. The views expressed by teachers concerning this matter are as follows:

T1. *Even though smoking and drugs are criticized and expressed as things that need to be stayed away from in related examples, I believe that these may be encouraging for small children. I believe that they are at least irrelevant for our culture.* (The Free and Unfree)

T2. *How correct is it to reach the positive through negative examples in such young age groups?* (The Free and Unfree)

T5. *The family lives of all children are not like the home orders and sibling and parent relations explained in the books. Furthermore, these relations can be unfamiliar for those children living in the slum neighborhoods of large cities.* (What will happen if I do not Obey Rules?)

Teachers have stated that philosophy books prepared for children should be curiosity arousing and interesting in order to encourage inquisition. According to them, the pictures in these books, the animals in the examples, stories, and curiosity arousing questions draw the attention of children. The expressions of teachers demonstrating these views are as follows:

T4. *Fable style books, in which animals participate in the story and speak, draw the attention of children in this age range more. (What will happen if I do not Obey Rules?)*

T5. *The plenty of pictures and Filo having a bird friend called Zof, facilitates the children in this age group to relate with the hero in the book. (What will happen if I do not Obey Rules?)*

T4. *Books, in which animals and used belongings are participating in the narration, draw the attention of children in the 7-10 age group. Books with technological devices and sports branches are more interesting for children in the 10-12 age group. (What will happen if I do not Obey Rules?)*

T4. *The child is directed to think on nearly all aspects of the concept of freedom through questions. As the title of the book is a question sentence, it arouses curiosity. (What is Freedom?)*

Based on the books they analyzed, the primary school teachers have stated that the existence of a guide for adults was important in terms of acquiring the habit of inquisition. The following are samples of teacher views concerning the matter:

T1. *The guide directs children to inquisition. If there was only a story, this would have been inadequate. Through this, the inquisitive characteristic of the book increases. The guide is a section that can be utilized over and over again. (Shakespeare and Philosophy for Children/ Timon of Athens)*

T3. *The guide is guiding for both parents and student. (Shakespeare and Philosophy for Children/ Timon of Athens)*

The primary school teachers stated that the answers to questions in books that contribute to the inquisition habit for students should not directly be in the book. For instance, a teacher stated the following concerning this matter:

T4. *Providing answers to the questions may not provide the student to think and find his/her own answer while reading. (What will happen if I do not Obey Rules?)*

Another perspective is that constantly asking questions is not appropriate. For instance, one of the primary school teachers has used the following expression:

T6. *I had 10 year old students read it. They were bored of the constant inquisition and not reaching a conclusion. (What is True?)*

One teacher expressed the following with regards to reaching a conclusion:

T4. *Asking questions is fine even if the questions remain unanswered.*

Another view is that telling the students which rules and for which reason they must be obeyed will constrain them from inquisition rather than leading to discussions regarding concepts such as rules, freedom, and rights in the books. According to teachers, telling what the proper behavior is and the necessity to conduct it is included in the scope of value education; this must not be considered as philosophy education.

Primary school teachers are requested to state whether or not they have taught philosophy books prepared for children before and to share their experiences they underwent if they taught it. The teachers stated that they encountered these types of books for the first time and expressed that they might use them in their lessons from now on. Teachers' views on this matter as follows:

T1. *I have not taught it before because I did not have an idea about it, too. I was unfamiliar with philosophy for children. I want to teach books that I believe to be correct and useful.*

T3. *I want to teach these types of books to students for certain and to enable them to think about and discuss them.*

Teachers also expressed their views regarding the reason why it is necessary to introduce students to philosophy:

T5. *In fact, all we must do is to teach philosophy rather than the core courses; I noticed that it was necessary to include such a course in the curriculum in order to allow for inquisition. The individual that does not inquire anything does not inquire problems in moths and thus, cannot solve it; when they go into details in other courses, they get confused. If our aim is not a rote learning based education system, then the importance of philosophy is evident.*

T1. *It is a fine alternative against raising a generation that does not inquire but learns in a parrot fashion.*

Primary school teachers stated that they supported an educational understanding based on inquisition rather than an educational understanding based on rote learning. They also added that the students would acquire different perspectives by speculating in a philosophical manner. The expressions reflecting their views are as follows:

T1. *I think that readings will lead to different discussions in classroom and the children will acquire different perspectives in understanding and perceiving the world they live in.*

T3. *What else could be nicer than developing the children's perspectives by allowing them to ask such philosophical questions at an age, during which they ask the finest questions!*

Primary school teachers expressed that studying philosophy with students must be initiated when they were at their early ages. The reason presented by a teacher regarding this view is as follows:

T6. As there are great differences among the districts in Ankara (socio-culturally), each district interprets inquisitions in the book according to the dominant view in its own environment. This may cause misperceptions. Philosophy may be taught during the ages when children are more inquisitive and stereotyped thoughts have not been constituted yet.

Primary school teachers also reported different views on how to apply philosophical activities with children. One teacher stated that first of all, teachers must receive necessary education on this subject and expressed his/her views in the following sentences:

T1. First, education must be provided on this subject and one must be competent about its methods. Children may be developed with the correct method and interesting daily life-related examples.

Another primary school teacher expressed the teachers' use of different methods and techniques in addition to the books while discussing the philosophical concepts with the students as in the following sentences:

T4. Even if we do not have such books read individually in class, books are introduced to the class or those who read them may present them to their classmates and different answers may be sought for the questions/problems and various aspects of the case may be discussed on the basis of a case study and several techniques may be used such as the Sixth Hat Thinking or brainstorming.

Primary school teachers remarked that philosophy books prepared for children must contain certain properties.

T4. Such books must stand aloof from religious/ethnic, sexual discrimination, and prejudices like all books. Telling and describing people from different religions, nations, and beliefs is not a thing to refrain from. It must be considered that social development and readiness level of each age-group in their daily lives varies from region to region.

These views indicate that philosophy books prepared for children must contain examples to address socio cultural differences but not include the elements of any beliefs or ethnic discriminations. Another teacher expressed the necessity of a course to be taught at schools to speculate on things in a philosophical manner with children in the following sentences:

T5. I may say that it is important to have one-hour philosophy lessons each week at all schools. Just as all primary schools have one-hour free reading activity, there must be one-hour free thinking activity to cover philosophical topics.

4. Discussion and result

According to teachers, to make children understand and discuss abstract concepts in books, these must be associated with examples overlapping their daily lives. Besides, primary school teachers also stated that concepts such as freedom, rights, justice, and happiness are concretized in the daily lives of children. Splitter and Sharp (1995) that conducted important philosophical studies for children expressed that children might find these abstract concepts in their tangible lifestyles (Muris, 2000 cited from Splitter & Sharp).

Primary school teachers emphasized that the examples in the books must not stimulate negative behaviors. Although this is not what is aimed, it is stated that the use of examples such as smoking and drug use would create an encouraging effect.

In addition, primary school teachers also explained that the examples given in the books must reflect our cultural characteristics. Thus, the examples that carry the properties of socio-cultural environment are necessary for the child to associate philosophy with his/her daily life; however, teachers indicated that the examples and the lives of families or children presented in them must address children living in villages, towns, and suburban areas. This view supports the idea that philosophy is an activity not only accessible to certain sectors of society but also for everybody.

Primary school teachers expressed that telling the students what to do is not associated with speculating in a philosophical manner but with the value education that makes them gain the proper behavior. Philosophy may provide a substantial contribution in forming values but rather, it deals with discussing and examining value-related concepts.

According to the teachers, the presence of a guide addressing teachers and parents in philosophy books prepared for children is important, so it will be possible to have an opinion on what kind of a way to follow and to benefit over and over from the knowledge or questions written here.

Teachers stated that the examples or stories employed must draw the attention of children. According to Lipman (2003), who is the pioneer of philosophical studies for children, the stories selected to direct the children to philosophy must promote children's natural curiosities and prompt them to discussions.

Teachers specified that pictures that are suitable to children's ages and interests and stories with animal characters, and examples relating to technological devices or sports may be included in such types of books.

Except for the qualities such types of books must contain, one view expressed among other views is that discussing a subject with children permanently but drawing no conclusions at all at the end of the discussions make them feel bored. In fact, even if the answers are not obtained, it is necessary to state that the efforts to ask questions and trying to understand and inquire are important in philosophy. At this point, it is necessary to remind the views on the necessity of teacher training to speculate on subjects in a philosophical manner with children, so they will be able to learn about philosophy and know how to philosophize with children.

Moreover teachers expressed that it was necessary to start philosophical studies with children when they were thinking freely at their early ages and that such a course must be taught in primary schools. In many countries the presence of the philosophy course as of pre-school education for children supports this view of the teachers.

5. Recommendations

Philosophy books prepared for children must contain concepts that are embedded in children's lives and the examples from their lifestyles. In these books socio-cultural differences of children must be taken into consideration and the discrimination of religion, nationality, and gender must not be allowed.

While writing such types of books, philosophical activities conducted with children, completed researches, the views of teachers, parents, and children should be guiding and these books must contain the basic properties of philosophy for children. Philosophical concepts must be concretized with examples and discussions must be related to their daily lives. The book must direct children to ask questions and explore the answers of the questions. Also its examples, texts or stories must draw the attention of children and questions must arouse curiosity in them.

Translations from books of foreign authors must be paid attention and then they must be adapted by considering the cultural properties of society. Moreover parents, teachers, and publishing firms must make efforts to prioritize books of local authors.

Inclusion of a guide in books for teachers will make the books more functional to create a philosophical inquisition atmosphere; however, it cannot be said that this will enable each teacher to conduct a philosophical discussion. For this reason, primary school teachers must be familiarized with philosophy for the sake of children and must be knowledgeable on how to conduct these types of applications. It must be borne in mind that a philosophical attitude and a critical point of view are needed not only in a sole course extent but also in all courses. A separate course where philosophical subjects will be covered for children must be taught by those who have received philosophy education. Philosophy courses must be included in the curriculum of primary schools for children. Even this education must be initiated during the pre-school period and children must be introduced to philosophy at their early ages.

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