

## **Philosophizing with children by using Socratic Methods**

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### **Introduction**

As the future lies in the hands of our children we should equip them with a huge backpack of wisdom and knowledge in order that they can progress in their own ways of life. As the key to knowledge is learning, formation institutions and teachers should try to form pupils into self-confident creatures who can take over responsibility for themselves, for their fellow men as well as for the world.

Unfortunately still many teachers apply inappropriate teaching methods to the children or use certain methods in a partial way. The reasons for using inappropriate methods diversify (while for example some teachers may just tremendously underestimate their pupils' skills others are just afraid of introducing a new approach). Instead teachers should trust in the skills of the children trying to educate them to self-dependent and life-long learners, who are willing to explore the world by adopting critical thinking. To set that educational goal into reality there are many methods a teacher can apply in order to motivate the pupils learning on their own.

This essay deals with one of those effective learning methods, which is called 'Das sokratische Gespräch'. Furthermore the essay demonstrates how children can easily turn into philosophizers in the classroom.

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### **Dialogue as 'Das sokratische Gespräch'**

'Das sokratische Gespräch' was invented by the German philosopher Leonard Nelson (1882-1927) and depicts a teaching method, which leads to self dependent thinking. It is a modified version of the Socratic dialogue, because while the Socratic method takes place in a dialogue, 'Das sokratische Gespräch' executes a moderated group discussion. The discussion leader is not allowed to give any opinion. Based on the concrete experience of the discussion members either a definition, the answer to a question or a decision is being searched, which should be accepted by all of the group members. Nelson considers Socrates as a teacher, because his pedagogic idea motivates the students to think on their own (cf. Pihlgren, 2008, p. 50-51).

*Leonard Nelson emphasizes "The Socratic method, then, is the art of teaching not philosophy but philosophizing, the art not of teaching about philosophers but of making philosophers of the students." (Pihlgren, 2008, p. 50)*

The secret lying behind this effective method is just the approach to motivate the pupils to think on their own. By discussing different points of view, children can learn a lot from each other. By adopting that method children learn to build their own opinion and pose their statements during the discussion. Furthermore they gain communication skills such as being aware of defending their own opinion. Through the permanent social interaction during the discussion their thinking processes improve and they learn how to take on responsibility for themselves and the others. Moreover the Socratic Dialogue supports “critical thinking,” encourages “growing in understanding and integrating new ideas into your own,” it “challenges what you think, and allows a flow of interaction from other students, reminding us of forgotten knowledge” (Billings and Pihlgren, 2010, p. 4).

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## **Fictive class scenario**

The Socratic Methods can be perfectly applied to the classroom like we did in our course with the short story „an ominous baby“ or the wooden box. In my fictive class scenario the teacher adopts this approach to the subject Art. The pupils are supposed to ascertain and discover the meaning of the painting ‘The scream’ by Edvard Munch.

### ***Preparation***

Before the lesson actually takes place the teacher should previously plan the lesson very thoroughly (material, sequence of actions, timetable, opening questions, end discussion questions). Moreover it is very important, that the teacher is aware of possible occurring implications by using that method. For example the teacher could consider that applying that method might require more working time in class as if you would use other methods.

### ***Introduction: Individual examinations***

First of all the teacher introduces the painting „The Scream“ by Edvard Munch to all of the children without mentioning the painter’s name nor the painting’s title. Next each pupil receives a printed version of the painting and then the teacher invites the children to just look at the painting and get inspired for five minutes. Within these five minutes the teacher raises the following opening questions:

- What can you see on this painting?
- What should the painting express?
- Which feelings does the painting convey?
- Which atmosphere dominates the painting?
- Who are the persons in this painting?
- If you were in the painting, how would you feel in this situation?

During these five minutes the children are supposed to write down all their upcoming impressions and try to answer the opening questions on a piece of paper. After this short phase the teacher explains the upcoming sequence of actions, advises the children of the rules as well as answers all the children's questions. In addition the children get the task to set a personal goal for the upcoming discussion such as: "I want to raise one question", "I want to listen very carefully" or "I do not want to interrupt somebody while speaking". They should try to achieve their goal during the discussions within the small groups. In the end-reflection the teacher refers back to the pupils' goals by asking if they could achieve them or not.

### ***Main part: Discussion within small groups***

After the introduction the children get divided into small groups out of 4 pupils. The second task for the children is to compare their impressions and to discuss the answers of the opening questions within their group. In the end they should try to find collective results, which will be finally presented in the open class discussion.

#### **Pupils' tasks**

The children have to discuss their answers and opinions within the small groups. It is very important that each of the pupils participates actively in the group discussion and issues his/her opinion. While the other group members are willing to react with the statement by questioning, the speaker is supposed to defend his/her assumption. By arguing different points of view each pupil analyzes the painting again and may develop a more critical attitude towards the painting.

At the same time the children are required to observe the rules given by the teacher. As Detlef Horster points out (Pihlgren, 2008, p. 52) there are a couple of demands of the participant such as for example "*Participate every time!*", "*If possible, be short and distinct!*", "*Take examples from everyday life!*" or "*Try to be consistent!*". Following these rules facilitates the process tremendously; for this reason the teacher should assert all the necessary rules adequately.

In the end of the discussion each group should try to define answers to the opening questions, which are accepted by each group member. Furthermore the pupils should find different and similar aspects they had during their discussion. Finally the group writes their answers and the aspects on a piece of paper.

#### **Teacher's tasks**

During the discussion the teacher's function is to motivate the children to create their own ideas and help the pupils reaching their goals. The teacher moves from one group to the next one and participates to the discussion for a few minutes listening to the children. The teacher should mind if the pupils are observing the rules correctly. It is imperative that the teacher neither interferes the

discussions nor answers to the pupils' questions. Instead the teacher "*should require that the participants keep to the subject and should remind participants of the demands made on them if necessary..*" (Pihlgren, 2008, p.51), what is very important so that further appendages might not get lost.

The teacher should raise further questions during the discussion, which activate the pupils' thinking-process:

- Where is it? How did the people get there? What are they doing there?
- How do the persons in this painting feel?
- Is there a relation between the persons?
- What could be the title of the painting?

### ***Open class discussion and reflection***

After the discussions within the small groups an open class discussion takes place, in which each group finally presents their results. The children should put their chairs in a circle, because this social structure allows the pupils to speak face to face. The teacher writes the most important questions regarding to the children's result on the blackboard. The following questions should support the pupils during the presentation:

- What were your first impressions?
- What is your opinion about the painting?
- What are your answers to the opening questions?
- Which different aspects did you find?
- Which similarities could you discover?
- Where there more different or more similar aspects?

The teacher might not just concentrate on the pupils' results, nevertheless he/she should also scrutinize the behavior and group dynamic of the children during the discussion by asking them to answer and reflect to the following questions:

- Did you follow the rules?
- How was the climate during the discussion?
- Did you feel confident?
- What disturbed the discussion?
- What was very easy/difficult for you?
- Did you follow the rules?
- Could you achieve your personal aim?
- Do you have the feeling that you have actually learnt something today?

Phases of reflection are very important, because by pupils' reflections the teacher can thus gain insight into the pupils social-emotional perception they had during the discussion. The teacher has the possibility to find out how the children dealt with that new teaching approach and has the chance to inspect and improve his/her lesson as well as the application of the Socratic method.

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## **Conclusion**

In conclusion it must be said, that I really hope that some day all the teachers can find confidence in their pupils and discover that they do not have to use expensive material in order to make their classes interesting. Instead they should just tie in with the natural interest of the children and create learning arrangements that motivate the children to think and learn in a self-dependent way.

## ***References***

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