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Armaucourt primary school  
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"A philosophy hour in Primary School" (*no intermediate writing in 1999/2000*)

## NATIONAL INNOVATION N° 6

### Title

## The philosophy hour in Primary school

Result of the action

**school** : primary school

**City** : ARMAUCOURT

**Departement and district** ( 1<sup>st</sup> degree) : 54 POMPEY

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INNOVATION N° 6

**Title** : **The philosophy hour in primary school .**

The team contact :

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## 1 DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTION

Weekly philosophy periods with small second year children groups in a conversation workshop (a dozen of children at maximum).

**philosophy – conversation workshop – readiness to criticize - notions**

## 2 CONTEXT

The school is part of a dispersed educational gathering. There are 26 pupils from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year . The class is naturally the main meeting place for pupils of the same age from 4 villages belonging to the gathering. Some of the pupils are placed in an educative center by court order.

In the *XXIst century school charter the school is committed to a demarche which aims at knowing **the child's representations of his class activity better***. Short interviews take place after different learning sequences. Can the pupil give **sense** and **coherence** to the different tasks proposed to him successively ?

It appears , after analysing around twenty interviews, that on the one hand, the sense (what's the purpose ?) of the sequences is not always seen by the pupils and that on the other hand, the pupils' questions don't find any answers in the class activities.

Besides we make the assumption that the ability to question one's own representation during these shared conversation periods may be one of the factors for a democratic behaviour based on the respect of the other.

**The philosophy hour was created around these problems of sense and speech.**

### **3 GOALS OF THE ACTION**

#### **Primary goals :**

Could the fact that a child is able to deal with questions on knowledge and/or on learning practices under a philosophical angle (even metaphysical and ontological) foster a better comprehension of the different subjects? In an other way , allow the pupils to **be more active in the different subjects** in favoring his own questioning. To get this we must first help the child question his own experience: What do I know ?How do I know it? Is it trustworthy?

And secondly we must help him distance himself slightly and take into account the others' representation. Learning that contradictory debates are not side by side and sometimes conflicting monologues .

#### **Goals evolution.**

The primary goals didn't change. But it appeared as a necessity to add a requirement of a cognitive kind : helping them build a **critical thought**, and go farther than vague perceptions, emotions, feelings or opinions. This required two particular skills.

- Argueing (**reasoning**)
- Uttering judgments based on something (**ethics**)

Without these requirements the philosophy hour could have turned out to be mere chattering.

### **4 IMPLEMENTATION**

#### **length**

First planned in January 2001, the first hour only took place February, 23<sup>rd</sup> . We had to take time to think about the role of the leader and to take into account other experiences led in France or abroad.( read AGORA magazines n°3 and n°9).

Eight hours given from February, 23<sup>rd</sup> to May, 12<sup>th</sup> .

#### **Chronology of the Action.**

**January** : thinking and discussing with the leader about the strategy and the goals of the action.

The eight hours:

**February, 23<sup>rd</sup>** : playing / working

**March, 2<sup>nd</sup>** : being

**March, 9<sup>th</sup>** : robots / human beings

**March, 16<sup>th</sup>** : Am I free ?

**March, 23<sup>rd</sup>** : child / grown up

**April, 27<sup>th</sup>** : How can I know that something is true ?

May, 5<sup>th</sup> : loving sweets / loving your dog

May, 12<sup>th</sup> : fair / unfair

### Educational strategies.

Different subjects of conversation ( extracts from an article published in *Pratique de la philosophie* 6/06/99, Michel TOZZI ) are proposed to the pupils :

- Either a **notion** (being) or a **notional distinction** (playing/working). These subjects are demanding. They need us to work on conceptualization and therefore they need a rigor that can ,with young children, smother expression and mix philosophical questioning up with a formal and lifeless exercise. To avoid this I let the children talk and I did not interfere or ask questions. My contribution consisted in summing up the discussion regularly and reviving it by reformulating or questioning the children's own words. Rather than conceptualization we could use the word problematization.

The risk is to let these exchanges turn into a side by side discussion and not a line of argument. This happened twice for : child / grown up and How can I know that something is true ?

In the first case the subject seemed to be quite close to the children's preoccupations whereas in the second case it was very abstract.

On the contrary, subjects that seemed difficult at first sight led to attentive, exciting and rich exchanges with lots of small argued dialogues. The hour on "being" was the case.

The type of subject didn't seem to be the main factor for a succesful period. The children always managed to deal with a subject ,abstract or not, thanks to their own experience.

- Or a **question** ( *Am I free ?* or *How can I know that something is true ?* ). We thought these subjects would lead to contradictory exchanges with a line of argument. But there were no real debates with different points of view. Maybe this was due to a lack of argumentative dimension in their content or in the way we put them? Maybe my position as a regulator and my withdrawal from the exchanges were reasons too. Maybe I shoudn't have played the devil's advocate and I should have been more provocative, taken sides.....?

My role as a leader( make the children feel confident, pass along the speech, sum up the discussions...) excluded this type of interventions from the beginning.

This role as a regulator was not sufficient. Children said things without distinguishing opinion from evidence and facts from prejudices.

It was therefore necessary to light their way of thinking and name their interventions : opinion, example, counter example, evidence, argument, etc.

It was also necessary to question their arguments, to make them explain what they meant.

In the course of a discussion children easily go on side tracks, associate different ideas. It was important to tell them when they were off the subject.

For children this age we must pay careful attention throughout these demanding discussions. But this is a necessary condition for the debate to progress.

We often got late pertinent answers. One pupil talked to me one morning about something which had left him unsatisfied in the previous debate (the day before)

Two attitudes, (which might seem contradictory), must lead these sessions :

- The first one is to prepare a content, problematize a question. The risk is to guide the pupil's thinking and leave their own demarches behind, and this would lead to a pre-learning of philosophy as a traditionnal subject.
- The second one is to leave the talking go and, in this case, replace the discursive reasoning by a general conversation going from one topic to an other associating ideas without intention or coherence.

The difficulty is to take them from curiosity to **critical thought**; that is, a speech which questions the validity and the reliability of its sources.

It is also to favor the most productive and the most pertinent argued exchanges ( it's often dialogues) allowing each person to talk.

**Being allowed to express yourself whenever you wanted to was an unavoidable pre-condition for a successful session.**

**The respect of the other's speech** was an important pre-condition too. It was necessary to make everybody feel confident.

Here were the rules for the activity :

- **Everything is interesting.**
- **We don't laugh at each other.**
- **We let the one who talks finish what he has to say.**

When this was understood and accepted by everybody I proposed the subject. I explained it very briefly. For example:

*Today we're going to talk about the verb **love** used in two different sentences. **Loving** sweets.**Loving** your dog. Who wants to start talking ?*

the discussion began with no difficulty. Words went easily from one pupil to another with many interventions. In the whole group, only Jennifer (an excellent pupil ) never asked to talk. Loïc just wanted to talk and was not interested when he was not talking. All the others were interested even passionate.

During the first sessions the children talked about the subject, digressions were often present but I could lead them back into the subject without any difficulties or frustrations. However the children talked without taking care of their classmates' remarks. My role was to reformulate each intervention to make it **a proposition to think about** and thus initiate a debate.

We had to listen to a session recorded the week before to overcome this difficulty. Indeed the pupils noticed:

- that many of them repeated things that had already been said by others.
- that, in their interventions, they did not take into account the progress already made in the debate.
- that some interventions were off the subject.

We therefore decided :

- to avoid repeating something already said in the same way.
- to answer to the other's interventions (if they disagreed, if they didn't understand, etc.)
- not to be off the subject.

The last sessions showed an important evolution. The children questioned and answered each other, they made the debate progress ( they were eager to talk that's why a few digressions still remained). Mickaël, for example, always talked about personal anecdotes taken from his family life. However these tended to disappear by the end, the children being aware of the loss in time. At the end of a session Léonie explained her remaining silent: "*I don't say anything because i have nothing to say !*".

**The choice is difficult between the eagerness to talk, to hold the microphone and to see one's remark appreciated by the group or the leader.**

### **Organizational strategies**

These sessions worked with half a group (not more than a dozen pupils so that everybody could talk). At first, it was decided that both classes would do it but i finally preferred to start with the second years in order to be closer to the group and to be able to continue this action with this same group the following year.

These sessions took place in a different room ( the Art and Music room). The group sat on the ground in a circle. The leader sat in the middle, but on a chair.

A microphone was used to amplify and record the sessions. It passed from hand to hand when the pupils asked for it. It is a sort of speech wand which gives them a sense of responsibility and which motivates them (the children know they are recorded). However the exchanges were a little less spontaneous.

These sessions lasted about half an hour.

They first took place on Friday afternoons, but then took place on Saturday mornings ( better attention and availability).

### Pupils concerned

11 second year pupils.

## 5 A LOOK AT THE ACTION

### Memories

A logbook tells how the sessions go and collect notes taken during working sessions with the leader.

All sessions are recorded.

### Innovating aspects

The philosophy hour in Primary school changes **the pupil's connection to knowledge**. It is not a pre-learning of philosophy ( with an official curriculum and a rigid methodology) but a **call** to question the world, to question your own representations, to be critical of what is given as the only truth.

This new attitude, at least different from the one brought about by the traditional pupil's status, has an impact on the triangle **Pupil – knowledge– teacher**.

The pupil can legitimately question the knowledge proposed at school. For example, a philosophical reflection on language will feed his grammatical learnings. A reflection on «being » can be the starting point to learn sciences (differences between mineral / plant / animal) or to go farther (Sciences can't say why we are living). You can not avoid the question “ **What is it for?** ” anymore.

For the teacher , the use of philosophy in class can change his own representation of the job. He must accept the idea that the validity of his practice depends on what the pupils send back. “ **Putting the child in the center** ” may not consist only in individualizing the learning routes. The children's questions have to be in the center. The curriculum brings partial but essential answers to this philosophical questioning which is beyond their understanding but which connects them together.

### Pupils and parents perception

Pupils are proud of **having this philosophy hour**. Like Léonie explaining to older pupils what philosophy was.

These sessions are privileged moments in the classroom. The pupils submit to rules they do not really accept in other situations.

The parents are curious and have questions about this philosophy hour, but there aren't any negative reactions.

## 6 EVALUATION

### Evaluated fields

How this philosophy hour can favor a better apprehension of the different school subjects ?

What can the effects of this practice be on the pupils' social behaviour ?

### Nature of the evaluation

At this stage this is an internal and qualitative evaluation.

Observation of the group and of certain pupils (during the philosophy hours, the ordinary periods and the breaks).

### Indicators

Increased interest during the class ; (formulating criticisms being a sign of interest).

Increased ability to listen to others.

“ Philosophical ” skills : ability to argue, to base an opinion, to question an idea.

Ability to respect other people’s differences.

### First results

The observation of these philosophy hours shows an important evolution in the children’s ability to listen and to stick to the subject we deal with ( for most pupils).

Some pupils (a minority) start using these new skills (questioning things, being critical) in other classroom activities. We still need to stand back to make final conclusions and we cannot draw any conclusions concerning behavioral modifications. It is too soon to evaluate.

## **7 PERSPECTIVES**

The action will go on in 2001-2002 with the same group of pupils and will start with a new second year group.

Many changes will occur :

- The subjects will be more contextualized, linked to the school activities.
- Some sessions(for the third year group)will ask for more conceptualization efforts with more questions and explanations expected .
- We will think about a way to evaluate the benefits of such a practice for the pupils.

Moreover the pupils will have a philosophy copy book to note down their reflections.(for example a grid or a diagram which catches their train of thought/or which links the notions together).

## **8 TRANSFER / DIFFUSION**

Philosophy can find its place in all primary school classes as long as :

- The teacher gets a minimum training in philosophical thinking . The sessions mustn’t be mere interviews.
- This practice is in line with a global problematic which aims at giving the pupils a new status: a person with a **critical thought**. The contrary is unconceivable.

It would be interesting to set up a research group on philosophy in primary schools.

From now on, all the documents, experiences we can share with comprehensive schools and with other teams working in the same fields are precious.

## “ zoom ”

### SCRIPT of a philosophy hour at the primary school

**Leader :**

Today we're going to talk about the verb **love** used in two different sentences. **Loving** sweets. **Loving** your dog. Who wants to start talking ?

**Léonie :**

It's different because loving your dog... it's a person... well, an animal. He lives. So I prefer my dog than sweets... even if I like sweets.

**Ophélie :**

Sweets, we eat them. Dogs, we don't.

**Adèle :**

We do! In China, they eat dogs.

**Mickaël :**

We can eat sweets. We cannot eat dogs. Dogs eat meat.

**Léonie :**

We can! There are countries where they eat dogs. And you said the same thing as Ophélie but well....

**Nicolas :**

Loving sweets, you can eat one, after there's nothing left. When you play with your dog, you can play almost all your life, until you're dead and until your dog is dead ...A sweet you eat it and that's it, it doesn't exist anymore. You won't think about it anymore.

**Arnaud :**

If you eat your dog , it will be sad because it's a human being like us. And your sweet, it's not sad, it's food...

**Ophélie :**

Er ...Dogs you can eat them if you buy it to eat it. But sometimes you buy it because you are bored or to watch the house.

**Léonie :**

Yes but Arnaud I don't think you buy a dog and you want to eat it afterwards. If it's your dog, me I don't want to eat it because I like my dog, I don't want to eat my dogs.

**Nicolas :**

Arnaud said a sweet was food. No, it is not. A sweet is a sweet thing. A vegetable it's good for us, but not a sweet.

**Joseph :**

I've got a rabbit, I like him, I don't eat him.

**Mickaël :**

At my grandmother's I had a dog, He was run over. He was dead.

**Ophélie :**

Dogs in the other countries, we can eat them. But sometimes we can have fun too, make lots of things.

**Théo :**

Yes , dogs can be run over. But squashed sweets , we don't care, there are plenty. A sweet is nothing.



**Nicolas :**

In France, it's good because you don't often eat dogs.

**Leader :**

Good. Let's sum up what you just said. First, one thing. I think Léonie said "It's true that there are countries, in China for example, where they eat dogs like we eat rabbits". This is true. Therefore this point doesn't make a difference.

But there are two other important things which had been said and we could think about these. First, I don't remember who said it, if my dog dies or disappears it makes me sad. Whereas if I squash my sweet, I'm not sad. It's important because the fact that I like my dog is enough to make me really sad if he dies. For sweets, it's different; if my bag is empty, it doesn't make me cry.

And something else has been said, very important as well. Somebody said "Sweets, I eat one and there are plenty, I can have others. They are all the same. I go to a shop and I buy some. Whereas a dog is unique. If my dog dies, it's my dog who is dead. I don't have another one; he 's gone for ever.

So you can see that there are two things in this verb. You love your animal , enough to be sad if he disappears and enough to think he cannot be replaced. Nothing will ease my pain if this dog dies.

**Léonie :**

His dog, if he dies, if you want another one even if my parents buy another one, it's my dog that I want. The other dog they would have bought me, it won't be the same. Nobody is like the other.

**Ophélie :**

My granny, she had a dog. she was a girl. She was very old. She couldn't go up the stairs. She died. And when we went back my grandmother she didn't tell me but instead, she gave me a sweet.

**Nicolas :**

A dog is unique. He can have his tastes, he can prefer meat and chicken rather than vegetables. He can prefer to play with his ball than something else.

**Mickaël :**

I've got a cat , it fell off the window, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, it bled.

**Théo :**

When Léonie said dogs didn't look alike... yes ! sometimes some dogs look alike.

**Nicolas :**

Dogs that look the same, they can have brown or frizzy hairs. But it's not because they have the same fur that they should eat the same things... They have characters, they don't like the same things : play ball, play with a cuddly rabbit ... I don't know...

**Arnaud :**

I disagree because Léonie said they only ate rabbits in China. I eat rabbits too.

**Nicolas :**

He made a mistake Arnaud. Léonie didn't say that.

**Léonie :**

Arnaud, it's not me that said that. Rabbits, we can eat them in all countries. Dogs, I know where they eat them: Indonesia, China, and ... I don't know the other countries.

**Leader :**

Let's forget what you can eat here and there. You all said that we could not replace the dog, he is unique even if you can find another one which looks exactly the same. I'd like to know why my dog is irreplaceable.

**Anthony :**

My dog, I like him. If he dies, I will think about him all the time... If I have another dog it won't be the same. He will not do the same things. I will like my other dog better.

**Nicolas :**

I agree with what Anthony said. Because if you like a dog, he is irreplaceable. You will think about him all the time. If you eat a sweet, you're not going to think about it all the time.

**Léonie :**

Of course, you ate it, you ate it. You're not... Your dog, if he dies, you can't replace him, for example if you have another dog, I will think about the other. If I have another dog, he won't have the same memory, the same character. Even if he has got the same fur, if he is exactly the same.

**Ophélie :**

That's true! But sometimes you can find another dog and teach him the same things and you stop thinking about the other dog... In a film I saw a dog trained exactly like another dog. He is dead so the other dog does exactly the same.

**Arnaud :**

A dog is maybe irreplaceable. You must ask your daddy to train him like the other dog otherwise he won't be replaceable.

**Nicolas :**

Arnaud, if you train a dog, he will never be the same. He won't have the same tastes. He can have the same eyes but there will be lots of differences.

**Leader :**

It's very important. In all what you said, you're not the only one to love your dog. You are linked to him. He comes and rubs against your legs. He doesn't speak but you communicate with him. You don't want another dog because you know your relation is unique. You talked about the dog's memory and character... The last question we're going to think about is How do we love a sweet and how do we love a dog? What kind of pleasure does a sweet give you? And the dog, how does it feel to be with him? Do we love them in the same way?

**Anthony :**

The taste. Because if you don't like a sweet, you must taste it. If you like it, you love it.

**Ophélie :**

Dogs, you can train some of them, but sometimes he can not do like the other dog. He doesn't know how to do it.

**Leader :**

Listen carefully to my question. Anthony started answering correctly, he said : A sweet has a taste. You will never say "it tastes good" if you talk about your dog. So when he says the sweet tastes good, he likes the sweet with his mouth, with his palate, with his stomach. Do we like our dog with our mouth, our palate, our stomach?

**Théo :**

We like the dog because he plays with us, he rubs whereas a sweet, it's just a sweet, that's all.

**Arnaud :**

We like a dog more than a sweet.

**Mickaël :**

A sweet, if you don't have any left, you're not going to cry, you go and buy another one. Your dog, if he dies, you think about him, you won't be able to replace him.

**Ophélie :**

Sweets, you have a taste, favourites. Me I like the lemon taste only.

**Nicolas :**

You eat a lemon sweet, you like. You eat a chocolate sweet, you don't like.

**Théo :**

For the dog it's not the same, he doesn't have a taste, it's better. He can play, do lots of things.

**Leader :**

Let's be more precise. Anthony said: I like the sweet with my mouth because of its taste. As for the dog, when he's around you're happy and you're sad when he's not . So I like him differently. What do I like him with? How do I like him?

**Léonie :**

Sweets you like them because you eat them. The dog you love him with your heart.

**Leader :**

Loving with your heart is not loving with your mouth. It's completely different. When you love with your heart, a dog or anybody else, what does it mean ?

**Anthony :**

In your heart, you think, you remember things.

**Ophélie :**

With your heart, when your dog is not there anymore, then you're sad. You don't know what you can do.

**Leader :**

So let's sum up our discussion. First you noticed that we didn't eat dogs counter to sweets. It's obvious we don't like them for the same reasons.

But Adèle and Léonie said that in certain countries they ate dogs. So our first point is not sufficient. **It's not because dogs are supposedly uneatable that we love them differently than sweets.**

You all said : I don't eat my dog because it's my dog and I love him. Joseph even said he wouldn't eat his rabbit for the same reason.

*It's therefore because I love my animal, because of my feelings for him, that it seems impossible to me to eat him.*

My dog is a living being, you said. Ok ; but a pig or a cow are too. Léonie almost said a person. With him you do lots of things and if he disappears you're sad.

**it's not because he's living that you love him but because he's an affectionate friend. You have a special relation with him : You love him and he loves you.** You have a mutual bond and for this reason he is unique and irreplaceable. But another dog (which would be exactly the same) could not replace him because what is **unique** about him is that **he is your friend.**

*To conclude :The sweet gives you pleasure but only in your mouth whereas your dog is in your heart and in your head ; I've got feelings for him.*