Philosophy with children – working with H. C. Andersen fairy tales

A survey
Survey premise:
Why philosophy with children?

Two approaches:

1. Philosophy as an instrument to gain competences
   - Thinking skills
   - Social skills

2. Philosophy-for-life
   - Curiosity
   - Wonder
   - Enjoyment
Questions

1. Do H. C. Andersen fairy tales work well as prompt material for philosophy with children?
   • Fairy tales versus philosophical stories
   • Are there differences in the philosophical discussions?

2. What kind of material does the individual child prefer?
   • Fairy tales versus philosophical stories

3. Who should formulate the philosophical questions?
   • The children versus the moderator
The survey setup

- 10 children from Vejle Friskole – 9 or 10 years old
- 4 sessions of 45 minutes
- Agenda for the sessions:
  - The philosophical method
  - Story
  - List of the children’s philosophical questions
  - Vote for starting question
  - Discussion – based on preferred question and later other questions
The stories

• H. C. Andersen fairy tales
  • The Ugly Duckling
  • The Story of a Mother

• Philosophical stories by Peter Worley
  • The Frog and the Scorpion
  • The Meaning of Ant Life
1. Do H. C. Andersen fairy tales work well as starting points for philosophical investigations?

Yes – resulted in good philosophical discussions

Question: Why did the other ducks pick on the ugly duckling?

- He was different
- Jealous of him – he was special
- Different can mean many things
- You can be afraid of things that are different – unpredictable

Question: The mother did not dare to change destiny. What do YOU think?

- We decide our own destiny, we make choices
- The mother was already changing destiny by following Death to get her child back
- But we can never really know if we decide or if it’s destiny
1. Do H. C. Andersen fairy tales work well as starting points for philosophical investigations?

Yes - the fairy tales were well received by the children

- High activity
- Focus, enjoyment
- 7 out of 10 children had a fairy tale as their favourite story for philosophizing

But identification pose a special challenge to open philosophizing

- All the children identified with the mother in The Story of a Mother
- Very little questioning of the mothers choice to leave her child with Death
- The children were more neutral in their discussions based on philosophical stories
2. What kind of material does the individual child prefer?

• Close link between the individual child’s choice of favourite story and activity level

• The children’s activity seems more driven by the content of the story than by the genre
  • Most children had as their two most active sessions a fairy tale session AND a philosophical story session

• Less excitement with a well-known story

• BUT no clear link between favourite story and the quality of the discussion
  • ”The Meaning of Ant Life” was no one’s favourite story, but the discussion was excellent

The Ugly Duckling – I’ve heard it so many times, I cannot think about it
3. Who should formulate the philosophical questions?

Benefits from children’s own questions:

• Ownership
• Focus on what children find important
• Nurturing a philosophical attitude

BUT

• The fairy tales pose challenges: Technicalities of the fairy tales

• Demanding for the facilitator

How did a swan egg end up in a duck’s nest?

Why had he not seen his reflection before?

How could he become beautiful during a single winter?
Recommendations

• H.C. Andersen fairy tales work well in philosophy with children

• Work with a mix of questions: The children’s own questions / moderator’s questions

• Beware of identification with characters – moderator must force the children to search for more answers

• Select less well-known fairy tales

• Retell fairy tales instead of reading them (in philosophy-only sessions)

• Possibility of productive collaboration with Danish/literature studies