

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING
IN RELIGIOUS LESSONS AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

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Zdá se, že vzdělání a kritické myšlení v programu Filozofie pro děti má didaktické potřeby v celé školní atmosféře. Je potěšitelné, že také zahrnuje hodiny náboženství.

Klíčová slova: Kritické myšlení; náboženství; základní škola

Why does somebody believe in good, somebody in destiny, astrology or “nothing”? Does our world have a beginning and an end, or does it not? Could science and faith understand each other? Are evil deeds excusable? Can war be just? What characterizes a friend? What happens if my friend deceives me? Does he or she stay my friend?

It is not so difficult to have your own opinion on something. It is much more difficult to be able to give reasons for your opinion, to state your case and to present strong arguments. And what is even more difficult? To be able to listen to other people’s opinions and arguments with an open mind and understanding, especially when they differ from our opinions, and based on this to amend our present view.

When describing and classifying conventional theories of education by specialists from different parts of the contemporary world, Yves Bertrand¹ mentions among others a group of so called academic educational theories. In California the Center for Critical Thinking has been established. R. Paul, its founder, suggests that education should cultivate critical thinking. This brings us to important questions: What does thinking mean? What does reasoning mean? How to teach thinking?² The Center for Critical Thinking describes the characteristics of a critically thinking person exactly: “*Every critical thinking or reasoning that deserves this name actually includes a certain number of the following elements: an objective, a problem, framework of reference, information, key terms, premises, deduction and consequences. The main features of critical thinking are: humility, courage, responsibility, discipline, sympathy, curiosity, stamina, integrity and mind independence*”³ How to ensure that pupils learn this?

The Framework Training Programme for Primary Teaching specifies the goals of primary teaching. It should help pupils form and gradually develop key competences, and provide them with a secure foundation for general education focussing especially on realistic situations and on practical use. Therefore, primary teaching seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To enable pupils to master learning strategies and to motivate them to learn all their life
- To incite pupils to creative thinking, logical reasoning and problem solving
- To lead pupils to multilateral, effective and open communication
- To develop their ability to cooperate with others and to respect their own as well as other pupils’ work and success
- To prepare pupils to be independent, free and responsible personalities who claim their rights and fulfil their obligations

¹ BERTRAND, Y.: *Soudobé teorie vzdělávání (Contemporary Theories and Practice in Education)*. Praha: Portál, 1998.

² *Ibidem*, p. 213.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

- To create a need for pupils to express their positive emotions concerning behaviour, acting and experiencing life situations
- To lead pupils to tolerance and consideration for other people, their cultural and moral values, to teach pupils to live together with other people.⁴

The Programme of “Philosophy for Children” and its Use in Tuition

Achieving all these objectives could be facilitated greatly by the method of Philosophy for Children, which results from the pragmatic pedagogy of John Dewey. The didactic movement emerged in the United States in the 1970s. Its main authors are Matthew Lipman from Montclair State College and Ann Margaret Sharp. Nowadays, Philosophy for Children is spread all over the world and is successful especially in ethical educational programmes, religious lessons and in humanistic subjects. It is distinguished from other programmes with similar aims by the effort to combine critical thinking with creative and at the same time engaged thinking.

Is it possible for one method to partake in achieving so many objectives? As a “taster” we offer an extract from a dialogue with ninth-year pupils from a religious school. The question was: What attitude do pupils have towards Christianity?

A girl says: “The Catholic Church waged many wars in the past. I don’t like wars, because they cause a lot of pain and cost a lot of lives... I don’t think it is good to be a Christian.”

Teacher to the others: “Do you have the same opinion as Monika?”

Several children raise their hands. They give their opinion one after another.

Teacher: “Could somebody sum up the views we have just heard?”

Monika: “Jirka disagreed with me. He said that not all wars of the Catholic Church had been unjust and he didn’t find it wrong to wage a just war, even though it cost lives. Jana also disagreed with me. She said the Catholic Church hadn’t only waged wars, but had looked after the poor and sick, and had founded schools. Petr thinks the Catholic Church is bad, because it teaches people to believe in God and this is unscientific...”

Monika’s expression is rather sad; evidently, she feels left alone with her opinion.

Teacher: “Monika, do you think that any of these arguments is strong enough to be able to alter your opinion on Christian faith and the Catholic Church?”

Monika: “Well, maybe, if Jirka gives me an example of a just Catholic war. But what Petr’s saying is also important.”

Teacher: „Does it make a substantial difference if Monika doesn’t agree with Christian faith because of the past of the Catholic Church and Petr because of the content of the Christian teaching?” etc.

What happened during this short time? The teacher led her pupils to express their opinion, to find logical arguments for their statements, to find correlations, to summarize information that had been given during the discussion, to return to what had been said before by someone else, to ask themselves if they were willing to modify their opinion under the weight of arguments etc.⁵

During such a discussion the teacher plays a role similar to the one of an orchestra conductor who controls what should be taking place. It is also implied by the layout of the group: everybody, including the teacher, sits in a circle.

⁴ *Framework for primary teaching. www.vuppraha.cz, pp. 12–13.*

⁵ MUCHOVÁ, L.: *Methodological Material for the Seminar of Philosophy for Children*. Ostrava: Catechetical and Educational Centre at Ostrava-Opava Episcopate, 2009.

By asking questions, the teacher ensures that the discussion does not touch the problem only superficially and that it does not turn into psychotherapy or telling life stories without further searching for deeper meaning.

The fact that children express their thoughts in a group discussion has three dimensions:

- 1 a cognitive dimension,
- 2 a social and ethical dimension, and
- 3 a philosophical dimension.⁶

The cognitive dimension could be supported by the following questions:

- Why did you say that?
- What reasons can support this statement?
- Is it the right reason?
- What does this statement anticipate?
- Are these two statements not contradictory?
- What conclusion can we draw from what has been said?
- Could you specify your question?
- Is it possible to prove this hypothesis?
- Could you find an example that would prove this hypothesis?
- Is there an example questioning our hypothesis?
- If we invert the sentence you have just said, will it still be true?
- Do these two sentences have the same subject?
- Can we try to define this expression / this thought?
- Does this thought resemble another thought?
- Is there an important difference between these two thoughts?
- Are there any synonyms that could help us understand better what we are talking about?
- Is it possible to divide the problem we are discussing into more parts?
- Can we look at this problem from another angle?
- Could analogy help us to a better approach to the problem?

The social and ethical dimension could be supported by the following questions:

- Do you need the help of the others?
- Can anybody give us an example to support Pavel's hypothesis?
- Can anybody help Jirka clarify his question?
- Can anyone of you express Petr's thought in the form of a hypothesis?
- Assuming that this opinion were one of the possibilities, what would it imply?
- If we accept Jana's standpoint, what consequences will it have?
- If one of you is right, does it mean that the other one is wrong?

The philosophical dimension could be supported by a successive choice of questions taken from informal logic, ethics, aesthetics, gnoseology and metaphysics.

For instance, the topic of "crimes against humanity" could raise the following questions:

Sample questions of informal logic

Do you think there is a difference between a person who is sad and a person who is crying?

⁶ We adopt suggestions for the running of communities of philosophical inquiry from seminars conducted by Prof. Sas-seville at the Faculty of Theology at the University of South Bohemia (TF JU) between 2003 and 2004 and from his article Chairing a Discussion in a Community of Philosophical Inquiry. *Working Translation for the Seminar of Prevention of Violence Using the Method of Philosophy for Children*. České Budějovice: TF JU, 2003, pp. 2–12.

Would you be able to describe the relationship between crying and sadness?

Do you differentiate between the expressions to commit an offence – to commit a crime – to commit a crime against humanity?

Sample questions of ethics

How big must the offence against another person be to be called a crime against humanity? When somebody who hasn't eaten for three days steals a loaf of bread, is it an offence?

When people claim that they don't separate rubbish, because there aren't appropriate containers in their town or village, is it an offence against environmentally friendly behaviour?

Is it possible to claim that man is the only creature on earth who kills not because of being hungry, but because of reasoning?

Sample questions of gnoseology

When I claim that the sky is blue and a colour-blind person claims that it is grey, which one of us has learned the truth about the colour of the sky?

When somebody claims that two plus two makes four, how do they know?

When somebody claims that their mother is the most beautiful woman in the world, how do they know?

If man is able not to kill another person in spite of being hungry, does it mean that their existence differs qualitatively from the existence of an animal? If so, does it have any consequences?

Sample questions of metaphysics

If there isn't any empirical evidence for the existence of extraterrestrials so far, does it mean we can deny such existence?

If religion claims that God inserts the soul into the human body, does it mean the soul has a different existence to the body it dwells in?

Is it possible to deduce from the fact that the entire existence in our space is ephemeral that there is an existence which is the opposite of ephemerality?

When a person dies, can their deeds continue living in a form? Is it also true for those who have committed crimes against humanity?

The examples listed above demonstrate how a philosophical discussion can deepen pupils' reflections on a specific topic in various subjects. Let us take a look at the way the method of Philosophy for Children can treat a topic in religious lessons. We have used the method in a group of twenty eighth-year and ninth-year pupils from a primary school. We had stories from the novel ...respect of s...⁷ by Ludmila Muchová at our disposal. First, we read a two-page story, from which we quote the following passage:

A passage from the novel ...respect of s... Hare Krishna?

"Hare Krishna, hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, hare, hare..."

High Street connecting a railway station with a square of this city is full of people on Saturday morning. They are heading to the shops that are crying out loudly their unrivalled

⁷ MUCHOVÁ, L.: *Methodological Material for the Seminar of Philosophy for Children*. Ostrava: Catechetical and Educational Centre at Ostrava-Opava Episcopate, 2009.

cheapness in the region, or they are just wandering from one shop window to another licking this year's last portions of ice-cream. The autumn sun is just strong enough to let the guests in front gardens of restaurants drink their morning coffee at ease. And this is exactly what Miriam and her daughter Eva are doing.

From the station below joyful singing is flowing towards them, accompanied by the sound of small drums:

"Hare Krshna, hare Krshna, Krshna, Krshna, hare, hare..."

Eva has already spotted the procession in the corner of the street: Men with clean-shaven heads and flyaway clothes, women wearing big colourful scarves.

"If I didn't find it stupid, I'd romp with them at once."

Miriam gives Eva a surprised look. At this moment the Krshna group is passing a Catholic church. Somebody has opened the door and the melody of the Praise and Thank to Thee, my God hymn in organ version is flowing towards them out of the church interior. The blend of all these sounds has a rather confusing effect, especially when it is joined by the advertising yell from a nearby shop speaker:

"We are cheaper than bankruptcy, everlasting creator of all, hare, hare!!!" With this creative connection Eva added even more fuel to the smouldering fire of Miriam's unrest.

"Mum, it's great, isn't it? So many cries, everybody believes in their own God, can He hear them all? Or, are those who made a mistake and are calling Krshna or Allah by mistake down on their luck?"

Having read the story in full, the pupils made groups and formed the following questions:

Why are there so many religions?

Can God hear everyone?

Does the One we believe in have several names?

Why was Eva afraid of death?

What is it like in heaven?

What comes after death?

What are the reasons to believe or not believe in God?

The class chose the very first question to discuss. Thus, the diversity of religion and diversity of objects of human veneration became the base for a philosophical dialogue. The teacher had the following extending philosophical questions from the authors of the instructional material at her disposal:

1. Do you have any experience with different religions and the ways they practise their faith in God or in another supernatural being, or with totally different world views?
2. If there are voices of several religions in the main street of a city at the same time, does it mean that they don't leave room for each other? Or that they ignore each other? Or that one doesn't respect another one? Or does it mean anything else? – *Looking for premises*
3. If there are voices of several religions in the main street of a city at the same time, does it mean an invitation to passers-by? – *Looking for consequences*
4. If there are voices of several religions in the main street of a city at the same time and a Catholic is passing by, does it mean a different invitation to him or her than to an unbeliever? Or to a Hindu? Or to a believing Jew? – *Logical aspect*
5. If we took into consideration that the presence of various religions in public places is a part of their „advertisement for faith“, would it mean that we as citizens are in the „market-place of religion“ where we can „buy“ the one which suits us best? If so, what consequences would it have? – *Drawing conclusions*

6. Why do various religions present themselves in public places at all? Can they have other reasons than advertising themselves? What reasons? – *Looking for reasons*
7. Is it a good thing that people can meet various religions in the street? – *Ethical aspect*
8. Do you think that each supporter of a world view should have the right to practise it in public? For example in the street, on TV, in the radio, in newspapers...? If yes, why? If not, why not? – *Ethical aspect*

At the beginning of the discussion some pupils held a firm opinion and made clear statements, but they were not able to give reasons for their arguments. Step by step they learned to express and to specify their ideas and trains of thought, to keep a certain distance from them and they started looking for connections and contrasts among them. During the discussion they also became more sensitive to the thoughts and ideas of their classmates; they took them more seriously and strived to develop them. The way the discussions were held gradually changed pupils' behaviour towards willingness to accept the others, to tolerate them and to help each other when considering the answers to the raised questions.

Where to find more

We provide those who have become interested in this didactic method of critical thinking development with information on where it is possible to find more about this programme.

There is a civic association in Prague called Centre of Philosophy for Children. It focuses on practice.

The Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Education at the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice organize seminars on Philosophy for Children designed for students and teachers in practice. At some schools and leisure centres in České Budějovice region students of the Faculty of Theology offer chairing of a philosophical discussion by the method of Philosophy for Children within the framework of their teaching practice.

Another organization developing this programme and offering seminars is the Catechetical and Educational Centre at Ostrava-Opava Episcopate. The seminars are designed not only for teachers of humanities subjects at state schools, but also for religious teachers, priests and catechists. The seminars are called "Philosophy for Life". They are accredited by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports within the further education of teachers and educationalists and their graduates receive a certificate.

It seems that the education to critical thinking in the programme of Philosophy for Children has its didactic use in the entire educational school atmosphere. It is pleasant to see that it is also evolving in religious lessons.

Shrnutí

Rozvoj kritického myšlení v předmětu náboženství na základních školách

Vzdělání a kritické myšlení v programu Filozofie pro děti poskytuje didaktické podněty v celé školní atmosféře. Je potěšitelné, že program zahrnuje také hodiny náboženství.