

Allemagne : philosophizing with children at universities and schools in Germany

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The Status of Religious and Ethical Education in Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany consists of sixteen states with legislative competence. That means that the states each have a different curriculum for school subjects based on general standards for schools centralized by the Conference of the Federal Ministries of Education.

Concerning the value oriented education there is a special German constitutional status. The article 7 of the constitution considers religion as an obligatory subject for all students with the restriction that students don't have to participate if they or their parents refuse.

In the 60ies the lifestyle and value systems in Germany and in Europe split up. Many people left the churches and chose a more secular orientation. Their children no longer participated in religious education at schools. As a consequence, lots of students came home early from school because they were not religious. For that reason the Protestant and Catholic church of Germany called for an ethical education at schools for those students who did not participate in the religious education. The states Bavaria and Rhineland-Palatinate were the first who introduced ethics in schools in 1974.

Philosophizing with Children in Primary Schools in Germany

At present there is an ethical education on junior level (beginning at the age of 11 years) in all sixteen states of Germany. That means that the students have to choose either religion or ethics. In the primary schools there are only six states which offer ethical education for those students who do not participate in religious education (see table below). In the other states there is no subject to choose for those children who do not join religious education. The state Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania is the first state (also in Europe) which offers philosophizing with children as a school subject in competition with religion. Over 70% of students choose this subject in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in primary schools (Brüning 1999, 72).

Teachers have to pass a university examination for teaching ethics or philosophizing with children in the states mentioned in the table below.

The state of Brandenburg has a particular structure of value education in primary schools and on junior level. In this state and in the state of Berlin the primary schools lasts 6 years (in the other states of Germany it is only 4 years). In the fifth and sixth year there is the subject life-ethics-religious studies. This subject is obligatory for all students of Brandenburg. Those who want to take part in religious education can choose religion. This juristic solution was possible because Brandenburg (part of the former German Democratic Republic) was not part of Germany when the Constitution was created in 1949. Concerning the article 7 it has got a special status.

Philosophizing with children in primary schools has not only its place in ethical education in Germany. It is also called a comprehensive principle for other subjects, e.g. as a method in the humanities (society and nature). For example, the states Hamburg and North Rhine-Westphalia consider philosophizing with children one of the main instructional methods in their curriculum for humanities.

In Hamburg there is also a possibility in some schools to choose philosophy in the field of doing creative projects. Therefore an interdisciplinary work group of the University of Hamburg offers special university classes for teachers and students of all subjects who can obtain a supplementary qualification if they pass at less three classes and two practical courses in philosophizing with children.

The interdisciplinary research group in philosophizing with children consists of university teachers from different subjects such as didactics of philosophy and religion, didactics of humanities as well as didactics of biology. This group mainly aims at the development of cross-curricular methods in philosophizing with children and plans a project with South Africa.

This following table shows what subjects are taught at certain school levels in the different States.

Ethical Education in Primary Schools in Germany

State	Name of the school subject	Year of introduction and latest Status	Important topics of the curricular program
Bavaria	Ethics	c.: 2000 introduction: 1974 *Supplementary subject	Friendship, happiness, identity, labour and profession, family, religions of the world
Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	Philosophizing with children	c.: 2004 introduction: 1998 Supplementary subject	Nature and mankind, media, methods of learning, justice Methods*

Rhineland Palatinate	Ethical education	c.: 1998 introduction: 1974	Supplementary subject	Rules of communities, friendship, happiness, death, family, identity
Saxony	Ethics	c.: 2004* introduction 1997	Obligatory subject of choice	Rules of communities, family, death, time, elements of the world and development of the universe Methods*
Saxony-Anhalt	Ethical education	c.: 2005 introduction 1991	Obligatory subject of choice	Rules of communities, religions of the world, time, friendship, happiness Methods**
Thuringia	Ethics	c.: 2003 introduction: 1993	Obligatory subject of choice	Rules of communities, religions of the world, friendship, happiness Methods*

(latest research : June 2005)

Additional explanations for the table

* Supplementary subject means that religious education is the main subject; an ethical education can only be offered in a school if there is also religious education; subject of choice means that the students have to choose either religion or ethics

** Methods of philosophizing with children are among others: conceptual analysis, argumentation, Socratic dialogue and thinking experimentations with ideas (see further explication about methods)

Methods

The curriculum for ethical education in primary schools recommends the method of philosophizing with Children as the main didactic method (see table). It contains the following four central methods of philosophizing with children:

a) Conceptual analysis: The curriculum recommends that the children should think about philosophical concepts that play a big role in stories or questions (e.g., students discuss the question how to deal with the problematic situation if there are four children and only three sweets which can't be shared. Discussing this situation, they will finally arrive at the concept of fairness). To clarify what fairness means they have to discover how fairness can be described in different situations. They practise language games such as: What is the counter-concept to fairness? With which other terms (concepts) can fairness be compared?

b) Argumentation: Children are also asked to give reasons for their beliefs and opinions (e.g. why is it unfair if one child doesn't get one of the sweets?). In the curricular program of Saxony it is recommended that children in the third and fourth grade give more than one reason for their opinion (Saxony, 2004, p. 7).

c) Socratic dialogue: The modern Socratic dialogue is the main method of ethical education in Germany. Children are forming a community of inquiry to solve a philosophical or ethical problem with the help of the teacher who is supporting and encouraging them to find a solution. The teacher is asking questions or giving summaries but she doesn't deliver "the right answer" at the end of a lesson. That defines a new role of the teacher, because she is no longer the one who knows everything in a thinking classroom community.

Similar like the community of inquiry also the Socratic dialogue doesn't ask for a consensus at the end of the dialogue. This is quite in contrary to other school subjects (e.g. in a discussion about weather plants can have feelings, flowers can be happy for some children and having no feelings whatsoever for others). It is possible to have more than one solution of a problem and both answers can be regarded as good arguments. The problem might not be solved satisfyingly for all children. Therefore the teacher has to make clear at the end of a discussion if a consensus has been agreed on or not. (e.g. "We were looking for a good solution of our problem, but not all of you might be satisfied by it. Let us think once more about the various steps of our thinking process.").

Certain techniques to lead a Socratic dialogue are one of the main topics in advanced teacher trainings for ethical education (e.g. in Saxony and Thuringia).

d) Though experiments with ideas is a method which aims to development the philosophical imagination of children (e.g. what would you do if there were no friends in the world?). The curriculum considers philosophical fantasy as a very important tool to encourage children to develop their own ideas, also for situations which might not be real but could happen one day (see Brüning 2001).

Summary

In Germany philosophizing with children in primary schools is established in the subject ethical education as an alternative to religious education. It takes also part in other school subjects such as humanities projects like children's university. The curricular programs are aiming at the development of thinking abilities of younger children by establishing a classroom community.

Recommended materials are children's books, paintings, fairy tales, short novels and subjects of children's daily life.

University Classes in Philosophizing with Children: the example of Hamburg

Hamburg was the first university in Germany which offered special classes in philosophizing with children for all school types (also in primary schools). In 1979 Prof. Dr. Ekkehard Martens organized

the first class in philosophizing with children on the basis of the novel Harry Stottlemeier's discovery. In 2005 a second working group of philosophizing with children and young adults was founded at the Department of Education in the field of the didactics of philosophy.

This group consists of representatives of university teachers, of the teacher's association, the school administration as well as of representatives of teacher's refresher courses in Hamburg. It is aiming at a theoretical, practical and institutional investigation of philosophizing with children and young people as well as its promotion, for example in curriculum work, teaching experiences, empirical research and advanced trainings for teachers. This group is completing research on the "Hamburg-Model", which is a student- and problem-oriented way of philosophizing with children and young people on a regional, national and international level. A particular issue of this model is philosophizing in primary schools. Barbara Brüning supported for example the first curriculum program in philosophizing with children for primary schools in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and developed special school books for several states.

In October of 2005 there was a lecture in philosophizing with children by Martens and Brüning at the University of Hamburg about the question: Why can't we buy happiness? The children's university is a project which is being run by many German universities. They offer many different subjects and philosophy is one of them. At the University of Hamburg they offered for the first time special classes in philosophizing with children. The questions of these classes were: Can animals think? (Ekkehard Martens); Must people be punished if they do evil things? (Barbara Brüning); How to come out of Plato's cave? (Markus Tiedemann) and Who am I? (Martina Dege).