Children's development of existential interpretations of death: A vital issue in a changing world.

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Abstract

In this article we will analyse and discuss pedagogical approaches for involving children as philosophizing subjects on the existential-moral arena, where issues regarding death and extinction are in focus for dialogue and mutual reflection. We draw on the work of the Swedish Professor in pedagogy Sven Hartman´s pioneering work, in which he highlights children's interpretations of 'vital issues' in a changing world, and develops strategies for how to build relevant and meaningful pedagogical platforms, starting teaching on life and death issues by focusing the existential sight of the child.

Our focus concerns pupils' existential questions regarding death and the affordances of educational settings beyond the school classroom, where children are engaged as existentially competent actors and as moral subjects taking part in democratic excursions in the fields of life and death. We are specifically interested in the ways in which 'death on display' in natural history museums affords opportunities to place pupils at the centre of such reflections and, in doing so, can create pedagogical spaces in which to engage with children's development of existential interpretations of death both for, and beyond, human-centred perspectives. Here post-humanist approaches to teaching life and death issues become important to highlight.

Key words: vital issues, Hartman, life and death, values education, learning beyond the classroom

Introduction

How can one approach existential issues in conversations with children and young people? Topics about life and death are not easy to understand for anyone. They set us face to face with a basic condition for our entire individual as well as collective existence: we will not live forever. That knowledge can worry and frighten: the insight that our own life story has an inescapable endpoint, whose occurrence may occur at any time and without warning, causes discomfort, not least because death is an existential basic condition beyond our control. Yes, of course, there is a possibility of choosing to end one´s life at a certain, earlier point, but this does not change the fact that none of us escapes death.

The didactical questions

A discussion about death, and the questions its inevitability raises among children requires both sensitivity and responsiveness. As we hereby claim, it is fundamental that children who engage in dialogues about human meaning and goals are regarded as existentially literate actors and moral subjects taking part in democratic excursions in the fields of life and death. Not least, when such dialogues are conducted in the context of school education, teachers

need to think carefully about what the classical didactic questions What, How, Why, For Whom and By whom can, and should, mean in this context. What is the perspective of human perishability that such teaching should pay attention to and in what way? Why is it important to discuss life and death issues with children, and how does one apply a responsiveness according to which each child, each subject involved in the discussion, is treated in a manner that takes care of both her questions, her personal experience and her insights as a young reflective subject? And who is, by the way, “I”, the one who initiates a conversation about life goals and meaning? This is a question every teacher, highlighting existential issues, has to ask herself. What do I think about the conditions of life and death, what experiences do I have about the boundaries of life and how can it affect my teaching?

Looking at the topics in which existential issues are addressed in school, it is often in religion and philosophy. One may discuss whether there are special subjects that will be responsible for teaching about these issues and consider which these should be. We will not go into that discussion further, but instead speak in terms of *values education*. A teaching about values is in itself broader than a teaching of life and death, but at the same time, there are often existential issues in focus when ethics and morals are discussed. Considering how to act as a moral subject in different situations, and how a good life together with others can be promoted in different ways, often requires an existential reflection that presupposes an awareness and a sensitivity to the fact that each of them is relevant to, and even dependent on, the fact that we have a limited time to live. The life we live now is, as far as we know the only opportunity to live a life on earth together with fellow humans. This means that the way we shape our own story together with others, at the same time as we help shape the lives of other people, is a legacy we leave behind. Such an inheritance commits. That is why ethical discussions are so important to do not least in school. And that's why existential conversations are so important to bring together with children and young people.

In the following discussion we will draw attention to the importance of involving children as philosophizing subjects in the existential moral arena, where issues regarding death and extinction are in focus for dialogue and mutual reflection. We will also, by way of example, focus on pupils' existential questions regarding death with reference to affordances of educational settings beyond the school classroom. Before discussing such examples, however, we need to say something about how values education, here perceived as involving existential issues of life and death, can develop. We will also explain how we wish to build the presentation on a theoretical platform inspired by Swedish professor of pedagogy Sven Hartman.

Values education

There are several ways to categorize different kinds of values education. One that is quite common is to distinguish between traditionalistic and progressive or constructivist values education. In the former case, there is a teaching in which teachers' education is perceived to be aimed at transferring values to children and young people, not least those considered to be necessary elements of a social ethic that can create community and association between the people living there. In other words, an ethical and moral ideal is required where a vision of

how certain values should characterize social life motivates the design of value education. (Thornberg, 2014, 26)

A progressive or constructivist concept of values education rather emphasizes how meaning and togetherness is created through interaction between teachers and students, that is, between adults and children. The idea of "the competent child" belongs to such a concept, but the application of this performance may look different. (Dewey, 1956) Not rarely, deliberative talks about norms and values are emphasized as an effective and important method of inspiring students to construct a moral understanding and personal attitude towards issues that are formulated in terms of, for example, justice and equality, freedom and responsibility. (*ibid*, 26f)

As highlighted in Thornberg (2014), there are a number of possibilities to bring together dimensions from both of these concepts, with space for both transmission and deliberative conversations, and therefore they should not be dichotomized in a narrow sense. Thornberg further emphasizes that a third conception can also be distinguished: a critical focus on the importance of how dominant beliefs leads to exclusion of certain groups, and that a powerful and not seldom hidden disciplination and reproduction of these beliefs maintains an ethical and existentially unfair imbalance in a society in which everyone should be given a place in the moral conversation. (*ibid*, 29)

A somewhat different categorization is found in Jones (2009), where four categories are used: a conservative, a liberal, a critical and a postmodern. The conservative in many respects responds to what was described above as a traditionalist concept of values education, while a liberal has many of the features that are said to be typical of a progressive or constructivist concept. The critical and postmodern both take advantage of important features in what is referred to above as a “critical conception”. (Jones, 2009; Thornberg, 2014)

When we below illustrate how a dialogical teaching of death could develop, it is primarily in the light of an educational platform that can be characterized in terms of progressive or constructivist values education, although a door may be left open for the integration of dimensions from the other concepts to which we refer. It is in, and through, an interaction between all participants in this conversation, adults as well as children, as meaning-building perspectives on issues relating to the brevity of life and the conditions for developing an existential and moral attitude to this central relationship can be created and cultivated. And it is important to emphasize that we assume that "the competent child", in an existential and ethical arena, is perceived as a moral subject that is attributed to a role not only for democratic reasons, but because children's experiences of and insights into life can arouse and change correspondent conceptions of other children as well as the adult's perceptions of human meaning and goals. The existential skills of children mean that, like other people, they bear a sign that they are in motion, in a sense of creation, in a growing understanding that makes them potential, in the sense not yet fully knowledgeable, seekers for knowledge and meaning. (Franck, 2017a)

As the American theologian John Wall has emphasized, we often use a comparative approach when speaking of children's skills. We use the adults' experiences and language to describe what can be said to be a development from less to more knowledgeable. But such a hierarchy of what it means to be existential and ethical literate is based on a hegemonic, undemocratic and, moreover, questionable idea of what should be considered knowledge and who can possess it. (Wall, 2010). We cannot exclude children from the community of not yet fully existentially and ethically literate searchers driven by a longing for knowledge and meaning on good grounds.

It is also important to emphasize that we believe that a dialogue about death should be philosophically anchored. Philosophy provides concepts, methods, arguments and analytical tools that are essential for developing knowledge about existential issues. Which tools that can best fit in different contexts must be discussed regularly, but they should always be present in existential conversations. (Hartner, 2015) In advance, teaching risks to be simplified and lose important dimensions of depth and complexity.

Hartman´s theoretical platform

Professor Sven Hartman, who for many years researched and taught children's existential and moral thoughts and questions, published a few decades ago reports of what he describes as "vital issues" which are at the heart of children's reflections. In *Children's thoughts about Life*, a book that can now be regarded as a classic and whose result has been the subject of much interest, most recently at an international conference in Sigtuna 2016, Hartman describes some of the theoretical prerequisites for his research.

A fundamental thought in Hartman's project is that the teaching that is conducted at school about existential and ethical issues is far from the students' life and worldview. They do not put "the eternal questions" in the way that is done at school and the textbooks used. As long as the gap between children's considerations about goals and meaning and the way in which existential subjects are dealt with in the school continues, the interest will remain. (Hartman, 1986)

Hartman's first keystone is therefore that meaningful teaching needs to be based on children's questions about life and about death. This is where the dialogical meetings in school can and should happen. Children must be given the conditions and space to ask questions in the form and in the linguistic costume that is theirs.

This, of course, does not mean that a teacher passively should wait for students to ask questions about vital issues. What it is about is that they will inspire students to reflect on their lives on their own and together with others, thus providing them with the conditions and opportunities to develop a stance in and to life, an understanding of and commitment to existential and ethical perspectives and challenges and an ability to seek ways to go and try in life. Hartman gives many examples of how such an invitation may look - sometimes you can use linguistic questions and thoughts, sometimes pictures - and we think certainly also of artistic, musical and other cultural expressions to invite children to think about life, what

which feels important to care and develop, what it means to live in a good community together with others, and what it means that the life we live is not eternal. (*ibid*.)

Thirdly, Hartman emphasizes what was pointed out earlier, namely, that children should not be regarded as a special and existentially and morally less developed group of people in relation to the more developed, as adults, have a responsibility to control and adjust when it comes to what issues about life to be asked and what answers can be considered satisfactory. Children can formulate existential questions in ways that can make other people think thoughts never thought before, and see things in a new and different way. Therefore, it is the invitation to dialogue that in a values education is expressed in conjunction with a desire to listen to what it is for valuable and meaningful experiences and insights children want and can convey. (*ibid*.)

We do not have the space to treat Hartman's research on children's life issues in full, but we want to emphasize that the three keystones listed serve as starting points also for the approach we wish to develop. And when we do that, we want to note that Hartman, in his research, supports a methodological approach that can be applied not only within the framework of a values education, but also in dialogue conversations beyond the demarcation of classrooms.

Hartman was strongly critical of the teaching of vital issues undertaken in the adult world without any sensitivity to what questions children would like to talk about. Today, in many countries, we have a situation where ideals expressed within the framework of New Public Management are at risk of achieving a similar situation. Knowledge requirements and grades that correspond to bureaucratic mediated criteria that will ensure measurability that makes it possible to carry out evaluations of knowledge and knowledge development, tends to steal focus from what should be the core or soul within the framework of a values education where ethical and existential questions are addressed and discussed in the classrooms of the school. (Franck, 2017b) In that situation, it is important to remind of Hartman's three keystones - but also that one may need to seek new forms of teaching about life and death and meaning. Such teaching beyond classroom conversations should be noted in the following.

Natural History Museums: “Death on Display”

Poliquin (2012) has named museum collections of taxidermic specimens ‘*The Breathless Zoo*’ (unnumbered, title page) as they present the biological diversity found in zoos, with one critical difference: all the animals are dead. Museums are also places where teachers accompany classes and families take their children, so as a place for confronting questions of ‘life, death, self and other’ (Pederson 2007, 159) they hold many possibilities (Sanders & Hohenstein, 2015). Moreover, the visceral material nature of the collections is, we believe, critical to their capacity to provoke children’s thoughts and feelings:

> In spite of the death, the skinning, dismemberment, and refashioning, the animal form holds. The eyes may be glass, but the animal stares back. An animal – even if taxidermied – is not an arbitrary object, materiality indistinguishable from a bowl or a painting. The astounding realism of the Blaschkas’ glass flowers is not the same as that of the animals in the African Hall’s dioramas since the verisimilitude of the latter

> is not technically verisimilitude: these are the actual animal skins. This uncanny animal-thingness of taxidermy has the power to provoke, to edify, and even to undermine the validity of its own existence (Polinquin, 2008, 127).

Modern education is increasingly dominated by digital experiences (Oudeweetering & Voogt, (2017), and thus the materiality of learning and associated competences within the classroom are changing. Furthermore, under New Public Management, performativity and testing regimes influence much of the educational landscape (Comber & Nixon, 2011). In contrast learning experiences beyond the classroom can foreground existential materiality:

> Being confronted with an object that appears to violate a child's unconscious expectations about death may ironically force implicit learning to become more conscious. Moreover, children are likely to be accompanied in the museum setting by adults, and thus conversations about death may be initiated, possibly creating opportunities to explicate understandings about life and death (Meehitiya, Sanders & Hohenstein, forthcoming).

Facilitating children's reflections in such settings in ways that acknowledge cultural and developmental diversity is a complex task, especially if the teacher has not confronted her own inner feelings and thoughts concerning questions of life and death.

Here it seems that deliberative strategies of the kinds mentioned above would be methodological candidates for supporting both teachers and students to grow: existentially by getting access to arenas where fundamental issues on life and death are allowed to develop without restriction, and ethically since the mutual reflection which takes place on such dialogical arenas would be able to inspire the participants to emphatic reflection. A meaning-making dialogue pre-supposes willingness and dedication to listen to others, in trying to understand the contributions fellow-humans are anxious to give in the dialogical process. Such a process has to develop beyond the narrow conceptions of knowledge and learning sanctioned by the testing regimes of our days, with their hegemonic claims, defined in terms of measurability as the supreme way to success. Reflection on, and reasoning about, existential and moral issues regarding life and death is at risk of being used as instruments for a measurement which paves the way for a backlash, tending to create an existential void, rather than a meaningful content when governed by a striving for judging in accordance with strict and formalistic grading scales of various kinds.

That is one fundamental reason why a need for identifying arenas for discussions on life and death beyond the school classroom seems important to highlight and handle in existentially and pedagogically meaningful ways. If such discussions are taking place in cultural and aesthetic arenas outside a more or less formal school context, existential freedom, integrity and curiosity seem to be better off as forceful keystones for meaningful dialogical processes where participants engage without the need for judgment built on narrow conceptions concerning measurement and grading.

Presence and Experiential Narrative

Bencard (2014) has drawn on the philosopher Runia (2006a, 2006b) to discuss his notion of "presence" when museum visitors confront an object, especially when that object is a dead animal (or person). Presence, according to Bencard, does not come from narrative but 'lies in what happens when you actually see it [the museum object]' (Bencard 2014, 29). Similarly, Poliquin notes 'Experiential narratives arise not from textual accompaniments but from the physical encounter between viewer and thing' (Poliquin 2008, 129). Such encounters, we suggest, afford socio-material conditions in which children can explore 'vital issues' (Hartman, 2016). However, we recognise that such meetings between 'school and the animal other' (Pederson, 2007) will not merely reside in existential questions of human life and death but also extend to ethical and moral questions regarding our relationships with the more-than-human world and, as such, add complexity to the ethical competences we bring to teacher-training, particularly if we orientate such an education around Deweyian notions of justice and equality, freedom and responsibility.

Returning to the child meeting the taxidermied animal in the museum questions will arise concerning both the death of the animal and its route to the museum and who might be responsible for both death and journey this, Bencard notes, is the child starting to 'creatively and ruthlessly search for continuity between events' (Bencard 2014, 32). Such a discussion could be challenging, as Meehitiya *et al* (forthcoming) have observed: 'If you have ever conducted handling sessions with taxidermy you may have been asked by a child, "Did you kill these animals?" or even, "Why did you kill these animals?" … In this situation the child is immediately aware of two facts: that the animal is dead and that you are here with it.'

Being present with the child, in the presence of the animal specimens is, we admit, a complex arena, both philosophically and didactically, however, such complexity we suggest can enrich a child's education- beyond the science of biology- in the arenas of philosophy, values and ethics; both for their human selves and the more-than-human world. Furthermore, in the current New Public Management era it reframes education as a process in which the child experiences an education in which their questions about "life" are afforded, and encouraged, as integral in a pedagogical process in which moral and ethical values are both openly discussed, and perceived, as "vital issues".

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