A case study: “*The Earth Charter*” in Middle Schools Bioethics Education

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Abstract Since the 70s of last century, people started to talk about philosophy for children in order to improve students’ ability to think through the philosophical dialogue. Nowadays we wonder whether it makes sense to talk about ethics and bioethics for positively influencing the civil life of pupils. It is certainly right, in fact, that the public school is secular, but it cannot be totally deprived of values. This problem cannot be solved with the study of Religion in school, but perhaps include activities of ethics and bioethics in the daily teaching can become a good habit. In the second part of the article, a teaching about environmental education is described. We tried a new protocol for the teaching of bioethics at school: we have combined the discussion, typical of “Philosophy for Children” to “Life skills teaching.” In “Life skills teaching” the boys are faced with challenging situations in order to increase their skills. This activity was aimed to excite students about acquired many skills and to develop and share the lessons learned during the discussions of bioethics. The document on which these discussions were based is “The Earth Charter”, an official document written at the invitation of the World Commission of the United Nations.

Keywords Life skills · Bioethics · Education · Environment · The Earth Charter

“You enthuse yourself to life because it is very sweet. Bite your lifetime! You burn because when you how great you can warm up thanks to the coals of your youth. Do not become melancholy. If you do not have confidence in life, adults who are watching are more unhappy than you. more numerous are the people to whom you shake hands, more you grow. You have to cultivate the interests of peace, justice, solidarity and respect environment ”- Don Tonino Bello, “Letter to Young people”

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Introduction

Theoretical basis

The idea that Philosophy could benefit the human and intellectual growth of students dates back to the 70s of the last century, and was introduced by Lipman (Castoldi 2010). He argued that the ability to think of the children could improve through thinking exercise.

It has also been shown that *philosophy sessions at school can have a positive impact on pupils' Math, reading and perhaps their writing skills. But crucially, they seem to work especially well for the children who are most disadvantaged.* (Lamb 1998)

Philosophy emerged to meet the most common existential questions: "What is real?", "What is beauty?", "What is justice?", "How can I be sure of what I know?" "What is the right thing to do?"

The Philosophy, however, is not only the process of endeavoring to answer the big questions, but also the ability to inquire about the attitudes and behaviors to be in a constantly changing society with the aim to build a world where everyone feels welcome, respected and loved and can make the most of their abilities.

Civil society, in fact, needs to be adjusted, first through the values and then through the law.

The school's mission is not only to instruct but also to educate; it cannot escape, therefore, from asking: "What is the right way for the spread of universal ethical principles?"

It is important to emphasize, however, that the discussion on the existential questions is not useless, but can make a major contribution to social life. The author Anne Maclean argues that ethicists applied would be unable to contribute in some areas, such as health care, as they are devoid of specific expertise. They, in fact, may increase the feeling of loss and create a decision-making paralysis (Maclean 1993).

Lamb argues that the philosophical disquisition can be fruitful only if it eschews fundamentalism and is willing to change their ideas through discussion with experts in specific disciplines, such as Biology, Medicine and Law (NAESS et al. 2010).

When Bioethics exceeds the anthropocentric perspective, we speak of ecological Ethics. The American environmentalist Leopold said it was necessary to start thinking that all members of the community of the living.

This thought is reinforced by A. Naess, who is convinced that the Self is not only in the biotic community, but also in abiotic systems (Resnick et al. 1995). The man is, therefore, part of an environment that he must preserve to preserve himself. The kids love nature and have a continuous contact with it, so they are particularly sensitive to this issue and must be addressed in a targeted teaching.

Religions at school

It is believed that the study of religion at school it is sufficient to absolve the education in Ethics

In Europe, the teaching of religion is majority, but not everywhere of one religion: this case occurs only in 6 countries (including Italy) to the Catholic religion, in the second for the orthodox one (Cyprus and Greece) and 1 (Turkey) to Islam.

In other countries, however, the situation is very different, but all, in some way are discussing the problem of ethics in education.

The variety of the situation in the different states and numerous political and legal debates that take place in every corner of the

World, makes it clear that a solution to the teaching of the ethical and religious principles in the school has not been found. Yet it is essential that the educational agencies consider the ethical problem.

The study of religion at school it is considered, moreover, an imposition for many students who do not understand the usefulness of it. The 20 students of the sixth grade involved in the project, described in this article, were submitted to a survey.

The questionnaire consisted of two questions:

- 1) Do you think it is important to discuss a school of life and values?
 - 2) In which school subject these issues are discussed?
- All pupils have responded in the affirmative to the first question.

Regarding the second question:

- 15 pupils responded Literature;
 - 2 pupils: History;
 - 3 students: all subjects.
- Nobody answered: Religion

Questionnaires like this were given to other students to other students with comparable results. Even when, philosophical questions like this are asked, during the class discussions: “How can you help people understand the value of life?” “How would you explain the value of solidarity?” students often start their sentences with the word “Doing.”

At this stage of growth, in fact, their capacity for introspection, but not all, they still have the ability to argument and abstraction. They explain better with actions than with words. Therefore, it is important to use in teaching not only the dialogue but also the planning of events and actions that help them to better understand and express their thoughts and feelings. It seems, therefore, it is very helpful to match the typical discussion of philosophy for children, even the innovative Life skills teaching.

The educational experience described in the second part of the article is an example of how ethics can come into daily teaching, during the Literature and Science lessons.

Environmental education has been a useful starting point for discussion, and also to design and to build a special day with the students and their families.

The document to which the discussion gave rise was the “Earth Charter”.

The teaching protocol that we used can help to introduce Ethics, Bioethics and ecologic Ethics class curriculum.

- (1) Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, *Growing up with Philosophy*, Temple University Press, 1978
 - (2) Education Endowment Fondation, Philosophy for children, Independent evaluators: S. Gorard, N. Siddiqui, B. Houtsee, *Evaluation report and executive summary*, 2015
- Maclean, *The Elimination of Morality*, Routledge, London 1993.

- (3) D. Lamb, *L'etica alle frontiere della vita*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1998, p. 14
- (4) NAESS, K.F., Arne Naess. Some Non-Philosophical Aspects, "The Trumpeter", vol. 26, n. 2, 2010, pp. 8-15

The project "Eco – logic day" : an example of a protocol for teaching bioethics

Introduction

In teaching experience that follows, we tried a new protocol for the teaching of bioethics at school. We have combined the discussion, typical of "Philosophy for Children" to "Life skills teaching."

The used protocol can be reproduced with ease in any type of school: it consists of three stages:

- Reading and discussion about a piece with ethical significance. In our case, the passage is taken from an international document, "The Earth charter";
- Design of an event with the aim of disseminating the shared values that have resulted from the conversation;
- Realization of the event and the budget debate.

Background and content

This experiment was carried out in an Italian middle school on 2015. The school is located in Trino (VC), a village of about 7000 inhabitants, in the Po valley. The class involved was a sixth grade with 20 students, including two children with learning disorders and 5 foreign children (Moroccans 3, Romanian 1, Albanian 1).

The annual program provides for this class knowledge environment, generally, and the knowledge of the area in which the students live. These goals are common to different disciplines: Italian, geography and science.

For this reason, the Italian teacher and I have decided to work together to draw up and implement this project.

The document : " The Earth Charter"

It is not always easy to choose the right texts to operate on with the boys. In this age (12 years) the boys have not developed sufficient critical capacity to read texts in which the author expresses his opinion in a clear way because they run the risk that students will leave convinced by the words of the author.

Many teachers choose anthology passages that may be valid points for discussion. We tried to use a very valuable document: "The Earth Charter".

This document is a declaration of fundamental ethical principles, drawn up following the recommendation of the World Commission of the United Nations, 1987.

It “seeks to inspire in all peoples a sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family, the greater community of life, and future generations.” (Text of The Earth Charter)

The four pillars of the Earth Charter are:

- I. Respect and Care for the Community of Life
- II. Ecological Integrity
- III. Social and Economic Justice
- IV. Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace

Methodology

In the first part of the experiment, the Italian teacher has read the document with the students and started discussions (<http://www.philosophy4children.co.uk/home/p4c/>).

His role has been to ask the questions and guide the discussion. He was careful to keep an attitude of active, interested and non-judgmental.

He divided the children into groups of three people and asked them to point out the sentences of the “Earth Charter” that had affected them more. A representative from each group had the task of reading all these sentences and to explain the reasons for the choice. The teacher opened the debate and was driving it. When the boys expressed opinions that he was far from universal values of “Earth Charter” posed questions designed to understand them and to make them understand that what they said was not good for society.

In the second part of this experimentation, I, as the science teacher, threw the boys a teaching challenge: design and create a special day for their teachers and their families with the aim of spreading the ideals of the “Earth Charter”.

At this stage I used the educational model: “Life skills” and the methodology of teaching by project.

In the last decades a new idea of learning, founded on the concept of *Life skill*, is progressively affirmed. This concept has suffered a deep evolution during the years. The Boterves (Earth Charter Initiative: “Text of the Earth Charter”) reassumes it as the passage from “to know” to “to know to be” and to “to know to act” intended as synthesis among to know how to do and to know how to be for facing a challenging situation.

This model of teaching would cure, therefore, the deep fracture among scholastic world and the real world, underlined by Resnick.

The importance of the renewal of the school in this direction has been observed by numerous International Organizations and it has totally been embraced by the European Union.

- (6) Earth Charter Initiative: “Text of the Earth Charter”, <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/>
- (7) The Boterves, *De the compétence, Essai sur un attracteur étrange*, Paris, Les Editions of organisation, 1994, p. 43.
- (8) L.B Resnick, *To learn inside and out the school*, in C. Pontecorvo-A.M. Ajello-C. Zuccheromaglio (edited by), *The social contexts of the learning*, Milan, LED, 1995, pp. 61-70.

In the Life skills teaching the teachers are not the protagonists of the didactic action anymore, but a director that creates situations becomes only, He/She observes, corrects, evaluate; He/She is a true point of reference for the class group.

A methodology that is in full accord with the Life skills teaching is the *teaching by a project*; in which class is invited to build a tangible product that means to mobilize the knowledge of all pupils and to increase their *Life Skills*.

Results: the “Eco - logic” Day

Pupils have dedicated 18 h of science classes to organize this day that was held Sunday, June 7, 2015 at the forest “delle sorti della Partecipanza” - Trino

The day was preceded by an inspection at the local lowland forest during the month of May in school hours.

98 people took part to the initiative: the students and their families and 10 teachers.

The initiative was called by the boys “Eco - logic Day” and was structured as follows:

- Welcome speech read by a student;
- Ecological walk during which pupils have done as nature guides;
- Reflection’s moment: the pupils have asked all participants to stand in a meadow with their eyes closed and they read some sentences from “The Earth Charter”;
- Debate: the boys have asked their parents and their brothers and sisters to comment on what had been read;
- Lunch;
- Developing games: competitors were parents who, in the course of the race, had to answer questions about what they have learned during the day.

Conclusions

At the end of the experience, the students have produced texts concerning their personal opinions about the environmental issues and their feelings during this day. The depth of their thinking and their enthusiasm impressed the Literature teacher.

They were also evaluated through theoretical tests of Science and Geography and have all achieved positive results: 25 % on average of the students in that class usually do not get adequate results in the tests.

Achieving key skill analyzed: *spirit of initiative* was evaluated by the teacher of Science in the work of organization through an evaluation rubric (Table 1). Even in this case, the results were positive. We can conclude that this activity has allowed the students to increase their knowledge and their skills and to include pupils with special needs, increasing, above all, their motivation.

This protocol of action of bioethics in the school seems very successful because it allows you to combine the philosophical discussions to practical actions and the academic world with the real world.

This day was lived with joy and interest by students and families who have understood its deep meaning.

Table 1 Rubric used for measuring the achievement of the key skill

	Partial	Acceptable	Intermediary	Advance
Understanding of the assignment	It needs to be driven to gather the sense and the objectives of the projected action.	It has clear the general sense of the projected action and the essential objectives.	It has clear the sense and the objectives of the projected action.	It has clear the sense and the objectives of the projected action and it is prefigured the process of the project.
Planning of the strategies of action	It labors to individualize the fundamental steps of the process of the project and to direct the action.	It individualizes the fundamental steps of the process of the project.	It individualizes the steps of the process of the project and it own direct action and own operation in strategies of theirs relations.	It individualizes and it autonomously plans the steps of the process of the project and it directs their own action in operation strategies of their realization.
Control / regulation of the process of the project	It labors to hold under control the passages of the process of the project and to see the run again.	Is available and in degree of monitoring and to hold under control the essential passages of the process of the project	is available and in degree of monitoring and to hold under control the process of the project, re - directing, if necessary, the run.	is available and in degree of monitoring and to hold under control the process of the project, verifying the coherence of it with the objectives and re - directing, if necessary, the run.
Social interaction	It has needed to be motivated and solicited to participate in the activities and to undertake in initiatives and common projects.	It participates in the activities but work to assume a purposeful role and to assume initiatives.	It participates in the activities with constructive attitude and spirit of initiative and availability to the search and the action.	Is motivated and it participates in the activities with constructive spirit, spirit of initiative and availability to the search and the actions and open to the dialogue, to the comparison and the sharing of knowledge, competences and resources for the realization of common projects.
Sensibility to the context	It must be stimulates to seek and to analyze useful information to the knowledge and the understanding of the context of action and to use her.	Search and it analyzes useful information to the knowledge and the understanding of the context of action and functional.	Search and it analyzes useful information to the knowledge and the understanding of the context of action using to define her objectives and lines of action.	Search and it analyzes critically useful information to the knowledge and the understanding of the context of action, using to define her objective meaningful and functional lines of action.

Other strengths of this project were:

- He was in full harmony with the scheduling of disciplines;
- It has been carried out on the territory and with adults; this has made alive the ideals of “The Earth Charter”.

Such activities should be encouraged because it is not right to delegate religions or specific disciplines for the education of universal values.

The school is an educational agency and it must take responsibility for this issue.

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