Grownups and Children: 
Zalman Haran Primary School, 
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Dubi Bergstein, 5th Grade Teacher

A Story about the Relationship between Grownups and Children

Marina Hefets, 5th grade

Any person can be little or Big, even grownups. But the same person can behave differently at different ages. Grownups can make fun of children, but they don’t understand that it makes the children feel bad. They forget that they were once children.

A person can like something and when he grows up he doesn’t like it anymore. It is weird that the same person behaves differently at different ages. Let’s say a little person likes to play with his dolls and he doesn’t have to worry about money. But when he grows up he starts worrying about it, and that is how people change all the time.

The Loving Song

Idan Yassy, 5th grade

I am tall, I am short, I don’t want to go and learn.
I love freedom, I don’t want to be alone.
I am a grownup, want a job and I want—
To raise a family, live in a palace,
Be the ruler. And most of all I want to decide.

From Small to Big

Guy-Oz Golan, 5th grade

From small to big, from short to giant, from kindergarten to high school.
From weak to strong, from school to work, from underage to “responsible.” Are grownups necessarily better than children? Is being “responsible” better than being young?
Who said that grownup people are more responsible than young people? And why are young people being denied their rights?
That is the way the world is and there is nothing we can do to change it—
the “responsible” know better than the young.
But why is the world like that? Maybe it can be changed.
Maybe not in the whole world, but
Maybe at least in school or in our neighborhood.

I think we should have the right to decide in some circumstances what is right and wrong because many, many ideas that parents have are completely wrong, and they are influencing their children to do some things.

I think the parents should very gradually change the rules to give their child a little more responsibility each year. And then see how they do with it. And if they abuse it then take it away again. But if they don’t abuse it then keep on gradually changing the rules.

Topics of Philosophy of Education: 
Philosophy, Childhood and Subjectivity

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With philosophical practice as a starting point, we proposed to help children question their ideas about what it is to be a child and the relationship between adulthood and childhood. We also asked ourselves to what extent philosophy contributes to a more reflective attitude toward who we believe we are and the possibility of thinking of ourselves in different ways.

We held ten philosophy meetings in two classes at public schools in Brazil. Students were in third grade (approximately 9 years old, although in these groups, as in most Brazilian Public Schools, children of different ages are in the same class). Different texts, such as videos, films, children’s literature, photographs, slides and others, were used to elicit reflection about childhood.

Following is a discussion of a session held November 12, 1999. There were 35 students in the class which lasted an hour and a half.

The objective of this class was to explore the act of playing. Playing is commonly seen as something obvious and natural. But what do children think about the act of playing? How do their impressions of it compare to those of adults? How do we—and how ought we—to value it?

In the class, students played freely with playdough, in pairs or groups, as they chose. After playing for 30/40 minutes, the teacher asked the students to comment on their playing. The discussion started from their comments.

Jose: “If you didn’t want us to discuss you wouldn’t have given us time to play, we would’ve been wasting our time.”

Jose’s speech suggests that playing is only allowed in the classroom if it has a pedagogical objective. We see the act of playing according to its functionality; if there is a function or objective, then it is acceptable. Jose’s comment makes us rethink our role as educators and as developers of philosophical discussions among children. Other children came into the scene:

Ana: “Everything has to be done at its own time. You can’t do everything at the same time. The mother determines when it is time to play, and so does the law.”

Clara: “I can choose some things, but not everything. You have to be older to choose things, to tell yourself what to do.”

Ana and Clara introduce the discussion about the right time to do things, the time being determined by parents, the law, and older people. We can notice that a given assumption about children and adult rights is affirmed in both comments: adults have power, which includes making their own decisions about what to do, whereas children can do only what the adults decide they should do. These ideas were apparent among all of these groups of children. We developed some strategies in several meetings to enable the children to question these ideas.

Leo: “I prefer that there is a time for each thing. I think this is good. There must be a time for brushing your teeth. I feel lazy when I have to brush my teeth. If there isn’t a time for brushing my teeth, I won’t feel like brushing them.”

Joao: “If it is time to go to school and I don’t go, my mother tells me off.”
Leo’s statement indicates his belief that if there were not determined times for doing things, he would not do many things that he dislikes or that make him feel lazy; he seems to understand though, that many of these things are necessary, such as brushing teeth. Therefore, Leo does a lot of things he does not like and, in Leo’s opinion, having a time for each activity (even though the ones you do not like to do) is good. It seems that Leo is not given the opportunity to question or participate in the elaboration of the social rules that govern his life. They are transmitted as obligations, duties. Joao confirms that children have no role in making the important decisions concerning their lives. He cannot chose to go to school or not.

Sara: “The child is not independent, free like the adult. This is why the adult has to say when it is time to do this or that.”

Sara makes a strong distinction between children and adults; the former is dependent, not free; the latter is free. She seems to understand independence as freedom.

Sara: “Playing is doing nothing.”
Joao: “I disagree. Of course it is doing something. If I am playing, I am doing something: I am playing.”

In the social scale of values, playing appears as doing nothing, it has no productivity, no concrete benefit. Playing is not recognised as something important in itself by adults (even those of us who say we do so and bring philosophy to schools to help children develop a more thoughtful relationship with their own reality!). Joao disagrees with this state of affairs; according to him, if the child is playing s/he is involved in an activity, s/he is not just doing nothing.
Alex: “There are people who discriminate against boys who play with girls’ things.”

Angelica: “Why?”

Clara: “I don’t know. When I was born this was already determined: boys’ toys and girls’ toys.”

Angelica: “And how do you know which toy is for boys and which is for girls?”

Clara: “We see the toys and know who they are for.”

Bia: “My father doesn’t let my brother play with me, with my girls’ things.”

Alex: “My uncle doesn’t let my cousin play with a doll.”

Sara: “If you get a doll, will you become a girl?”

The gender issue appears in the discussion. The students did not know how to explain from where this distinction came; when they were born, it was already there. We play with gendered culturalized toys. For Clara, this is natural, obvious, it is just a matter of “noticing”: knowing what toy is appropriate for a girl or a boy is a matter of observing. Sara questions this reality in a very deep way. What is the influence of toys on the player? How do toys interfere with the subjectivity of those who play with them? Jose answers:

Jose: “No, but the adults determine what we can play with.”

Angelica: “Is it true that the adults determine what you should play with?”

Joao: “The child can play with whatever s/he likes, s/he knows what s/he likes.”

Pedro: “All I know is that we can’t tell ourselves what to do, we can’t do what we want.”

According to Jose, even though toys do not influence significantly children’s subjectivity, adults determine what children should play with. Again, Joao expresses his disagreement: it is the child who knows with what s/he wants to play. Therefore, he/she should decide with what toys to play. Pedro expresses the voice of the oppressed child: even if a boy wanted to play with a doll, that desire would be repressed and he would be prevented from doing so.

Throughout these meetings, children had the opportunity to make their voices heard and to listen to one another. Some of them changed their views during the discussions. They analysed and reflected about their own conceptions about childhood and adulthood. Some children gradually became more conscious of their ability to make decisions concerning their own lives. Some students saw the conception of childhood as problematic, and questioned whether adults really know everything.

It was hard for us. Sometimes we were disappointed not to hear what we expected to hear from children about childhood. We felt the tension between respecting the children’s voices and hearing ideas expressed by what seemed to us to be alienated children. If we interfered, weren’t we too much directive? If we did not, wouldn’t we be collaborators in an oppressive reality?

These questions are still alive; as are many of questions these children had the opportunity to ask—in some cases for the first time—as part of the gift of philosophy. Might this be a sufficient goal for the practise of philosophy, at this time when so many answers are imposed on children? A place where questions can be constructed and expressed by children themselves.

**NOTE**

1. We thank Julian Merçon for assistance in translating this text and Jana Mohr Lone for revising it.