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Third-Graders Learn about Kant's Categorical Imperative

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In five elementary schools in Jerusalem, philosophy has been added to the curriculum.

Class 3A in the Efrata State-Religious School in Jerusalem breaks up into pairs and each child has to imitate his or her partner's movements. One waves his hands in the air; a second makes a face. The game is just an introduction to a philosophical discussion of reflection, the limits of knowledge, and perceptions of reality. "Is there some action that you can't do to yourselves?" asks Ayelet Lerman, the instructor for the Children Do Philosophy program in this school. One girl says it's hard to cross her arms behind her back or move her eyes in opposite directions. This may be a correct answer in most cases, but it isn't what Lerman is driving at. "If you tickle yourself, you won't laugh," replies another pupil, and the discussion continues.

The Children Do Philosophy program currently operates in five Jerusalem-area elementary schools, including Efrata and the girls' school in Issawiya. In the past attempts have been made to introduce philosophy into the schools, and pupils in a few high schools even take matriculation exams in the subject. Only this year, however, did the Israel Center for Philosophy for Children, in cooperation with the Hebrew University School of Education and Department of Philosophy, start conducting the program in an organized manner.

The class is taught by teachers who studied philosophy in college. The material is not divided into different fields and there is hardly any use of philosophical terms or explicit references to major philosophers. The idea is totally different: to create a space for asking questions.

The program is conducted in approximately 70 countries, based on principles developed by Prof. Matthew Lipman of the United States, one of whose books has been translated into Hebrew

for the lessons. The protagonist of the book is Nur, and the lessons revolve around questions that enter her mind. For instance, she says that Nur is not her real name; her parents gave her her real name, but Nur is the name she gave herself. The class then discusses whether something can be part of the world without having a name. “The philosophy classes develop thought,” says Nadav Milo, a third-grader at Efrata. His classmate Keren DellaPergola adds, “You can take the principles of philosophy when you learn other subjects, too. We learn that there are several answers to every question and that it’s important to develop a discussion.” Some of the teachers also say there has been a change in the pupils. According to one of them, “It used to be that many of the students just gave yes or no answers. Now they’ve started explaining their answers.”

The class doesn’t follow a fixed pattern. The pupils choose a different topic each time from Nur’s stories. In recent weeks, for example, some of the lessons have focused on questions related to the human body: do the children’s legs belong to them in the same way as their nails that grow or their hair that is cut? Gradually, the examples meandered into more abstract matters like memories or dreams. In Ayelet Lerman’s class, a different question came up for discussion—one very relevant to the pupils’ lives: how to react in the case of violence. “I used the idea of Kant’s categorical imperative,” she said. “I told the kids that they could do whatever they want, provided that they’re willing to have their response become a general rule. Very quickly, they came to the conclusion that it’s better to treat each other fairly and that peace is better than war.”

Efrata School belongs to the State-Religious system, and some of the philosophical arguments that the children bring up are anchored in their spiritual world. For instance, in a discussion of whether the stomach can digest itself, one pupil explains that it cannot possibly do so. God would not permit it, he says, “because then we wouldn’t be able to eat.” “In such cases, I try to say that this kind of reasoning doesn’t lead the discussion anywhere,” Lerman says. “Often the children use religious arguments not necessarily based on profound thinking, but because they want to participate in the discussion and that’s the explanation that is immediately available to them.”

Similar responses may be found in the school in Issawiya. One lesson dealt with the question of what is real and how this can be proven. According to the instructor, Denise Haddad, the general

answer was that “if God created something, that means it’s real. The pupils said that they exist because God created them. The next stage in the discussion is whether God is real.”

Dr. Jen Glaser, a member of the Mandel Leadership Institute, says that the program sometimes encounters opposition from principals and teachers. “There’s a tendency in the education system to think that pupils need certainty and clear answers, because ambivalence makes them feel insecure,” she explains. “Our position is that the children live in an ambivalent world and manage to cope. One of our difficulties is educating the educators to realize that they don’t have to be afraid of the questions.”

Philosophy studies

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