“Here the snowman could live, but he missed everyone”

Recognizing the life-philosophical dimension in a child’s creative writing and aiding the child to develop

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Abstract

In this article we analyse a short story, written by a child in sixth grade, to see what kind of life-philosophical dimensions can be recognized in it. Next we analyse the context in which the story was written, to see if we can extract more information about the child’s ideas, but also to find what would be a good learning environment for a child to develop its own life philosophy. We end by formulating five tasks for a teacher if he wants to guide a child in developing its own life philosophy.

1. Introduction

“Once upon a time there was a snowman who was melting. He had no hope anymore until his friend, the Christmas tree arrived. He had an idea and put him at the top of a mountain. Of course there was a lot of snow and it was cold. Here he could live, but he missed everyone. But when winter came, he could go back to his friends. And this happened every year. And everyone was happy ;-)!!”

(Anonymous, 6th grade)

This story was written by a pupil in the sixth grade, approximately 10 years of age, of the Koningin Juliana school in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. The subject was creative writing, the topic was “another Christmas story” and this was all part of a bigger project called De Lichtstad (e.g. The City of Light). This Christmas project was intended to help the children discover for themselves what Christmas meant to them (Schoemaker, 2013).

As teachers, we are used to giving children feedback on their technical, and even creative, skills in writing. But in this story the child also tells us something about how it looks at the world around him and about how to act in this world. In other words, the child tells us something about its life philosophy. Maybe, as teachers, we recognize this dimension in the story, maybe we don’t. In this paper I want to address two questions;

How can we recognize life-philosophical dimensions in a child’s creative writing?
How can we use this creative writing to help a child to develop its life philosophy?
“Here the snowman could live, but he missed everyone” Recognizing the life-philosophical dimension in a child’s creative writing and aiding the child to develop

2. Writing itself

The Dutch organization SLO (Stichting Leerplan Ontwikkeling, the government related organization for curriculum development) wants teachers to look at three different aspects of writing:

- Communication
- Expressiveness
- Conceptualization (van Gelderen, 2010).

The aspect of conceptualization, as in using writing to study, is of no relevance to this paper, so I will not go into this.

Looking at the communication means looking at spelling, at making good sentences and at thinking about the reader and asking yourself if you give the reader enough information to understand what you want to communicate. As you can see, this pupil knows pretty well how to perform on all these aspects.

Looking at expressiveness means looking at the way the pupils write poetry or short stories. This has a technical aspect as well as a personal aspect. When looking at the technical aspect of expressiveness, a teacher can teach children how to rhyme or which are the 5 main elements of a plot. The personal aspect is a lot more difficult for a teacher, because how does he know if the writing of a pupil is personal?

For a child in sixth grade, SLO describes how the most important way to help the pupil is by creating a context before starting to write. By this, they mean that a pupil, or the whole class, first start by making an inventory of different ideas, reading about a certain subject and taking notes. The more they learn how to do this, the more the children will be able to write a personally inspired poem or story (van Gelderen, 2010).

2.1. Building a context

The contextualization certainly took place writing the story above for the teacher stimulated the intuitive knowledge of the children (Oosterheert, 2007). As I wrote, it was part of a larger project called De Lichtstad, organized around a storybook called De Lichtstad (no author, 2012). In this story, two rivalling cities both get an order from the king to transform themselves into a city of light. Both cities are certain of winning this competition, even though they do not have a clue what a city of light actually could be. Following this story, all teachers and classes were asked to transform their classroom in a city of lights. They should use as many school subjects as possible to discover what a city of light could be and to decide how they would build their own city. At the end of the project, they would invite all parents and they could visit all classrooms (or cities) to see which was the best or which inspired them the most. This was their Christmas celebration.

In this sixth grade, they started by making a mind map to explore what they already knew (Schuppert & van den Bogeert 2012). In geography, they did research on the Dutch multi cultural society. Every morning, they started with reading a passage from the Bible, talking about different religious rituals concerning light or investigating how
they could be a light for someone, or who was a light for them (Trefwoord, 2013). And in creative writing, the pupils were asked to write “another Christmas story”.

### 2.2. Making personal choices

Taking the children through this process is the technical aspect of stimulating expressiveness. But it is even more interesting to look at the personal aspect of expressiveness (van der Harst, 2007). The first personal choice to be recognized is to look at which Christmas story the pupil chose to change into “another Christmas story”.

In this particular class, the children chose five or six different main Christmas stories to alter. Eight children chose the Biblical story of the birth of Jesus. Six children chose the story of Santa Claus, flying through the air in his sleigh to distribute presents. Six children chose a story about Christmas decorations. Five children chose the story of friendship, warmth and restoring broken relations. Only two children chose the story of the city of lights, which surprised me because this was the main story that was being told during these two weeks. And there were also two pupils who did not really use a famous story but who did something else (Schoemaker, 2013).

The diversity of Christmas stories shows, first of all, that Christmas is a holiday with a lot of different aspects, both secular and religious. It also shows that, even in the school context, it is not obvious that the pupils choose stories that are told in school. The fact that only two pupils chose the story of the city of light proves this, but also the fact that this is a protestant school and still only eight pupils chose the Biblical story. This probably shows that, also for children whose parents choose a Christian school, the Biblical story is not the major Christmas story for these children.

It is always difficult to interpret why a pupil chooses a certain story. But it is at least probable that it tells more about the pupil than it tells about the story (van Weelden, 2012 or Schoemaker, 2011-2). If we want to understand why a pupil chose this story, we have two ways of finding out. The first would be to ask the child. This is, by far, the best way to find out. But as this pupil was anonymous, in this case I could not ask the child. The second possibility is to look at what the pupil did with the story (Kropac, 2007). What changes did he make and can we discover why? To look at this aspect, I first have to say something more about expressiveness, not as an aspect of writing, but as an aspect of creativity.

### 3. Creativity

“Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler”, every man is an artist, said the German artist Joseph Beuys (Zumdick, 2002). Everyone is creative and especially children seem to be. When we give our pupils lessons in creative writing it is not so much that we teach them to be creative, because they already are. But then, what do we teach them? The most important thing we can teach them, is to know what it means to be creative. By giving the pupils a definition, we can also help them to be aware that they are creative and what they can do with this.

According to May creativity is ”the process of bringing something new into being” (May, 1975, p. 39). If this were the case, there are very few creative people or creative moments, because something really new is seldom found. A more practical way of looking at creativity is to define it as the process of combining two things that were never combined before. Or, as Landau states “die Fähigkeit, Beziehungen zwischen
Here the snowman could live, but he missed everyone. Recognizing the life-philosophical dimension in a child’s creative writing and aiding the child to develop vorher unerzogenen Erfahrungen zu finden, die sich in der Form neue Denkschemata als neue Erfahrung, Ideen oder Produkte ergeben.” (Landau, 1969, p. 10).

The most famous example of a creative moment is told by Plutarch. Archimedes, the Greek scientist, was looking for a way to find out if a beautifully crafted crown was made of pure gold. When he could not find a solution, he took a bath and noticed that the water flowed over the edge of the bath as he stepped into it. This made him so excited that he ran out into the street, without his clothes on, crying ‘EUREKA, which means, I found it. Combining the problem of the crown, with the idea that the water rose when he stepped into the bath, he figured out that this would be a means to measure the volume of the crown. He also combined the idea that a kilogram of stones has a larger volume than a kilogram of feathers. So he made up a hypothesis that every material had its own way of combining the volume and the weight, its specific gravity (Thijs, 2001).

When we stimulate children to be creative, we actually stimulate them to combine two things they know into something that is new, at least to them. I explain it in this way so that you can see that this is the basic principle of social constructivist learning (Oosterheert, 2007). I also explain it in this way so that we see that most things children do, all day, and certainly in school, is being creative, is connecting different things to increase their knowledge and their way of understanding the world.

3.1. Creative writing

When we talk about creative writing, we also stimulate our pupils to combine two things that are not usually combined. Sometimes we specifically give pupils two things to combine; write about something you experienced during your vacation, but write it as a recipe. More often, we do it unwittingly. When we ask a pupil to write “another Christmas story”, we actually ask the pupil to combine a known Christmas story with something else. The pupil has to decide on how he wants to combine it. Usually he will combine it with the thing most at hand: his own life. This could be something he has read, he has seen on television or something he has experienced himself. It is always something that has meaning to him. Otherwise he would have forgotten about it. This process is so evident, that different creative and artistic therapies are based upon this principle.

This means that, when the pupil wrote her “another Christmas story”, she (I imagine it to be a girl) combined the Christmas story of friendship and being there for each other, with something, probably some of her own experiences or maybe even fears, into a new, creative story about a snowman that started to melt. Knowing this, it would be very interesting to hear from this pupil what she was thinking of when she was writing this story. Remember that I stated that education is meant, not only to teach children knowledge, but also to make them strong people who can handle themselves in modern-day society. By translating this story back to her own life, a teacher can offer her a way to reflect on the way she handles the problems she comes across.

3.2. Unsolvable dilemma

By the way, there is another aspect of creativity that is shown in this story. What is described in this story is a dilemma that has no good solution. When the snowman wants to live, he has to go to the top of the mountain (and will be lonely). If he does not want to be alone, he has to go down to the valley (and melt). When you want to start a
creative process, you always have to start with an unsolvable dilemma. In different writings about creativity, they talk about the tension between recognition and alienation (Grözinger, 1987 and Schoemaker, 2011 – 1). When we talk with our pupils about these dilemmas, our goal should not be to help them find a solution, because in general there are no solutions. Our goal should be to help them find a way that they can live with these dilemmas, because they will always exist. But when we start talking about these dilemmas, we are no longer talking about creativity, but we are talking about religion or life philosophy.

4. Life philosophy and religion

Before I go into the aspect of life philosophy or religion, I would like to make a few remarks on the Dutch educational system. In the Netherlands we have three different kinds of primary education; ‘openbaar onderwijs’ (public schools which are neutral in their religious identity), ‘bijzonder onderwijs’ (publicly funded schools which can have a religious or reform pedagogical identity) and private schools. Approximately 40 % of all children attend ‘openbaar onderwijs’, 60 % attend ‘bijzonder onderwijs’ and hardly any children attend private schools. This means that 60 % of the parents choose to send their children to religious schools even though only 10 % of the Dutch people are actively committed to a certain religion. Many of the children who attend ‘bijzonder onderwijs’ (religious schools) do not have a religious background (Zondervan, 2012). This leads to two interesting discussions. The discussion in the ‘bijzonder onderwijs’, is on how to deal with the non-religious children in a religious school. The discussion in ‘openbaar onderwijs’ is on the question how to deal with religious issues that enter the classroom. For many years they wanted to be completely neutral in religious matters, mostly by not addressing these issues (ter Avest, 2003). The last couple of years these ideas started to change. With a lot of people coming form (mainly) Muslim countries, they recognized that you have to address religious issues. But they also recognize that for many people you cannot separate education from beliefs. To grow up as a strong person, you also need to help children develop their own beliefs (Zondervan, 2012).

This led, among other things, to the interest of both ‘bijzonder onderwijs’ and ‘openbaar onderwijs’ in, let us call it, life philosophy. When we talk about life philosophy, we mean something that has the same function as religion, but is not (necessarily) committed to a certain faith (like Christianity, Islam or Judaism). As we say, everybody has a life philosophy but not everybody has a religion (E.T. Alii, 2009). When we talk about life philosophy we mean morals, the forming of an identity, dealing with the big moments in life as birth, death and severe illness, and also dealing with the ambiguities of life; feelings of belonging, the monster under your bed, the demons from your past or how you want to control the world even though you know this is impossible. Children have to learn to deal with these issues, in a religious or a non-religious way (van den Berg, 2013).

4.1. Developing a life philosophy

Looking at the story of the snowman from this perspective, it is clear that the author talks about issues of life philosophy. How do you cope with the idea of melting away? How do you deal with feelings of loneliness? How can you help a friend in need? When you agree that helping a child develop itself also in its dimension of life philosophy, it is important to notice these signs and act upon them. To help teachers, Jef de Schepper
made a list of 10 skills that children should develop: perceiving, exploring, representing, arguing, communicating, handling situations, handling tradition, connectedness, trust and transcendence (Schepper, 2004, p. 213). As you can see, these skills are not purely religious or concerning life philosophy. These skills have a life philosophical dimension, just as life itself has a life philosophical dimension.

Using these ten skills as a guideline to interpret the story of the snowman, it gives us a better perspective on what is important to this pupil and how she is able to handle the different skills.

She perceives the difficulties of choices and recognizes how some choices will always remain a dilemma. She explores different options of coping with this dilemma and chooses a way to handle this situation. She has the ability to represent the dilemma in a narrative sense. If she knows how to represent it in a rational sense, is something we do not know. Skills like connectedness and trust are also in good hands with this pupil.

5. Dialogue School

It is one thing to recognize how a pupil communicates his life philosophy, how to stimulate your student in childhood education is another. For a long time religious education in ‘bijzonder onderwijs’ was considered to be a transfer of knowledge and values. With the change from teaching religion to guiding the children in the personal development of a life philosophy, this concept had to change. One of these concept-changes is the project Dialogue School. This is a project where the HAN University of Applied Sciences, faculty of childhood education works closely together with three primary schools to develop a didactics in guiding in the development of life philosophy.

To explain the didactics, the metaphor of a whirlwind cabin is used. In this cabin float a lot of pieces of paper with possible religious or philosophical influences a child could experience in everyday life. When a child steps into this cabin, it can try to catch as many pieces of paper he can. This is similar to how a child experiences his life: it experiences many influences and some will stick. When the child leaves the cabin with all these pieces of paper, it could make a selection, which pieces are important and which is not. In the metaphor, the pieces of paper have the shape of pieces of a tangram puzzle. With the kept pieces, the child could put them together and create an image that is inspiring. This is his life philosophy, at least for this moment.

Following this metaphor, the teacher has 5 tasks to perform:

1. Make children aware of the different influences
2. Add extra influences that you think are important
3. Stimulate children to choose which influences they want to keep and which they throw away
4. Stimulate children to combine these influences into an own inspiring identity

1 More information on the project Dialogue School can be found on the website www.samenonderwijsmaken.nl, Dialog School.
5. Learn children how to communicate their ideas and how to learn how to act upon them

The project Lichtstad was designed as part of the bigger project Dialogue School. In this project, you can see how the different steps are working. The teacher started out by making a mind map (step 1). This is how the children discovered what they already know. The teacher also used subjects like geography to show the children that different topics have a religious dimension. That children undergo different influences, also outside the school, is also shown in the fact that the children use different Christmas stories even though they were not a part of the program.

The teacher also added new “pieces of paper”. Every morning they read stories from the Bible or stories from different religions and offer activities to stimulate the socio-emotional skills (step 2). The teacher stimulated the class as a whole to make choices (step 3) when they had to decide on what to show the parents. The children were stimulated as individuals when they were asked to write “another Christmas story”. They not only chose which Christmas story they wanted to use, but also which influences they wanted to use to change it.

It was difficult for the teacher to find a way in which the children could combine the different choices into one inspiring image (step 4). It was only later that she recognized that, by asking them to write the story, she was actually stimulating the pupils to make these connections. And in the same process she had also stimulated the children to give words to their life philosophy. In the case of the story of the snowman, the child had even found a way to act upon a difficult dilemma in life in general, or maybe in her own life.

6. Conclusions

Looking at the story of the snowman, we started out by asking two questions:

1. How can we recognize life-philosophical dimension in a child’s creative writing?
2. How can we use this creative writing to help a child to develop its life philosophy?

We looked at the way SLO describes creative writing in the curriculum. Even though there is room for life philosophical feedback, SLO does not stimulate this way of looking at creative writing, let alone they make life philosophical guiding a required part of the curriculum.

In the required curriculum, the most important part seems to be to stimulate the technical and personal expressiveness of the children. We found space in looking at expressiveness from the perspective of creativity, mainly as a way of combining two things into something new and meaningful.

5.1. How can we recognize life-philosophical dimensions in a child’s creative writing?

When we talk about life philosophy we mean morals, the forming of an identity, dealing with the big moments in life as birth, death and severe illness, and also dealing with the ambiguities of life; feelings of belonging, the monster under your bed, the demons from your past or how you want to control the world even though you know this is
impossible. The task of the teacher is not to give answers to these questions; it is to teach the children ways to deal with these ambiguities. As the child combines two things in its creative writing, it is important we, as teachers, notice that this is what the child is doing. Often we will recognize that these two things also address a life philosophical issue.

5.2. How can we use this creative writing to help a child to develop its life philosophy?

The next step we took is that we compared the process that took place in the classroom leading to this story of the snowman, with the five tasks of a teacher who wants to guide a child in developing its own life philosophy. These five tasks are:

1. Make children aware of the different influences;
2. Add extra influences which you think are important;
3. Stimulate children to choose which influences they want to keep and which they throw away;
4. Stimulate children to combine these influences into an own inspiring identity;
5. Learn children how to communicate their ideas and how to learn how to act upon them.

It was clear that all five tasks could be recognized, even though they were not all performed consciously. To help the children develop their own life philosophy, we can state that it is important that we teach our students in childhood education, how to perform these five tasks.

5.3. Discussions

Of course this article only states the first steps in finding a way to help a child develop its own life philosophy. The results up to now are promising but we need more examples to be analysed to conclude that this is the way to guide children in the development of their life philosophy. At this moment a research group is doing research on the following sub-topics:

What should an interview guide look like when talking with a child about its creative work?

What does a child develop when the teacher is using Godly Play?

What does a teacher have to develop to let go of the content of the curriculum and focus on the 5 tasks of Dialog School, focussing on philosophising with children?

How does Dialog School work in development-oriented education?

What should a curriculum look like in Montessori education?

How can we use the visual arts and crafts to stimulate the development of a life philosophy?

How can we use children’s literature to help a child develop its life philosophy?
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**Biographical notes**

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