

The Support of the Community of Inquiry in the Understanding of Death among Children: A German – Japanese Comparison with Gender Analysis

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This presentation of our research compares concepts of Japanese and German primary school children relating to the topic of death in the context of values education and the ethics of care. This is a project of the German-Japanese Research Initiative on Philosophizing with Children (DJFPK), which aims to facilitate individual autonomy by enhancing philosophical-ethical judgment. It encourages the application and appropriate transfer of values based on philosophical-ethical knowledge acquired through independent reflection on the situations of daily life.

Our presentation draws attention to the supportive function of the *community of inquiry*, not so much in terms of the intellectual potential it undoubtedly possesses, as has often been demonstrated, but rather in terms of its emotional potential. For in addition to intellectual support through shared examination of arguments, the *community of inquiry* also has an emotionally stabilizing function that should not be underestimated. This function makes it possible for children to deal with anxiety-inducing phenomena such as death and human mortality. In the *community of inquiry* children can examine together all aspects of such touchy topics and reflect upon them. In addition, the emotional strength children gain through the *community of inquiry* allows them to consciously break away from others who are important to them, attractive role models or those they love, in order to pursue ideas their societies do not accept but which are nonetheless important to them, such as, for example, the notion that grandparents are reborn in the children's pets. Here the group can provide emotional support and protection, especially when the children discover that others have similar ideas, and they can pursue and test their intuitions together.

Most educators, whether parents or teachers, wish to protect children and so are reluctant to approach the difficult topic of death themselves, or permit others to do so. For this reason it was not easy to find school directors willing to allow their students to philosophize about death. Especially in Japan there were strong reservations not only about the topic but also the method of "philosophizing with children." As a result we have very limited data here. Another problem was the fact that free expression of opinion, encouraged in German classrooms, is not a normal practice in Japanese classrooms. The discussion circle was also a novel and enjoyable experience for the Japanese children. The value of the *community of inquiry* as an emotional resource expanding the space for thought was less evident in the verbal arguments of the Japanese children, but more so in the pictures they drew to represent their constructs. The unaccustomed physical proximity to others (Japanese children, unlike German children, normally sit isolated at their individual tables) visibly encouraged them.

Children encounter death as a primary experience in their personal environment and as a secondary experience in the media. Starting from the hypothesis that globalization promotes the exchange of information between differing cultures, our research project, a cultural comparison that also considered gender, investigated how and to what extent the concepts of Japanese and German children differ with regard to 1. a metaphysical life after death; 2. a genetic life after death; and 3. a social life after death.¹ Here we limit our presentation to the first point: a metaphysical life after death. As an impulse for philosophizing, German children's author Marion Parsch developed a story for us in which children sitting at their grandmother's grave ask her whether

she can hear them. The story encourages thinking about the question: Is death the end of everything? Along with reflective verbalizations, the children made a sensory-aesthetic record of their ideas in drawings, which they then explained to others.

To ensure that the children's concepts covered the entire philosophical spectrum, the recorded lessons were constructed as a philosophical dialogue. We followed the Socratic "five-finger method" of German philosopher and educator Ekkehard Martens² in which classroom materials (photographs and stories) provide the necessary prompts to encourage phenomenological, hermeneutical, analytical, dialectical and speculative thinking in both critical and creative ways. These critical and creative modes are accompanied throughout by "caring thinking." With this technique of providing prompts we take up the chain questions of the philosophical riddle game, in which one fundamental life question leads to another. In the analysis of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, this type of archetypal play is the foundation of culture. We understand philosophizing with children as archetypal play and archetypal knowledge,⁴ since in this process the children first reconstruct images of themselves and their world within a given culture and then construct them anew.⁵ The lessons were recorded and transcribed so that we could carry out a content analysis of the children's views and their arguments.⁶

Between 2006 and 2009 we philosophized in Germany with various primary school classes in Karlsruhe (Peter Hebel School) and Graben-Neudorf (Kussmaul School) as well as with individual groups of fourth-graders. In Hiroshima, Japan, in September 2009, we were only able to visit the fourth-grade children of the Noboricho Primary School and the children in classes 4a and 4b of Hankawa Elementary School, where we philosophized with them using culturally adapted versions of the same stories with Japanese names, foods, etc. Since we were not allowed to show imagery from the cemeteries and grave monuments of various nations to demonstrate the cultural variety of death conceptions, we instead used the German children's drawings of their ideas about life after death. Due to the limited quantity of data we did not attempt a statistical evaluation of the Japanese children's statements. Eva Marsal philosophized with the children in Germany and Takara Dobashi philosophized with the Japanese children. We abbreviate German girls by GG, German boys by GB, Japanese girls by JG and Japanese boys by JB.

1. A background sketch of traditional ideas about death in German and Japanese culture

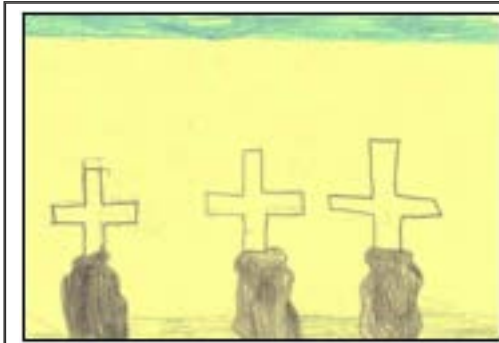
In Germany two thirds of the population belong to Catholic or Protestant churches. The remaining third includes Muslim and Jewish communities (ca. 5%) and a large group not affiliated with any church. The topic of death is generally avoided in schools, but Christian views of death can be considered part of general cultural knowledge conveyed by public rites and symbols and in the media. At the same time minority religious communities educate their members in their own traditions.

For Christians, death began with Adam and Eve's fall from God's grace, but Christ's sacrifice on the cross made it possible for the faithful to enter paradise and be with God after death. In traditional belief the dead arise with new bodies on the day of final judgment and are judged on the basis of faith, spending eternity either in heaven or hell, or for Catholics passing through the transitional realm of purgatory. In Islam the soul is also immortal. After death the archangel Azrail separates the soul from the body to await the last judgment in a transitional world (Berzah), where reward or punishment depend on the deceased's deeds in life. Obedience to Allah's laws laid down in the Koran is the most important requirement for entry into paradise, a realm of unimaginable joy. On judgment day Allah decides who will spend eternity in heaven or hell.⁷ Among Jews the immortality of the soul is less enshrined in dogma and a wide range of beliefs (or disbeliefs) co-exist.

In Japan, ideas about death are influenced by an amalgamation of Shintoism, a nature religion, with Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Buddhism presumes that humans are reborn into new, finite lives in accordance with their karma, until they reach Nirvana. *Shintoists*, by contrast, believe that the soul migrates into its world of origin or another world,⁸ or else alternatively it remains in a dark border region of this world.

2. Metaphysical life after death: The German children

Most of the children in the two fourth grade classes of the Peter Hebel School were convinced that individual life goes on in some form even after death; only 5% believed that death represented an ultimate end, as for example in the case of Michelle (GG2_10): “When you’re dead, you’re dead. Then nothing else happens,” or Tim (GB1_334): “Well, maybe death is like an empty room in the dark. Without anything, no sound, not a soul there any more, just everything dark.”



(German girl, 10 years old) (3) GG2_10 Michelle
“Just 3 gravestones, because when you’re dead, you’re dead. Then nothing else happens.”

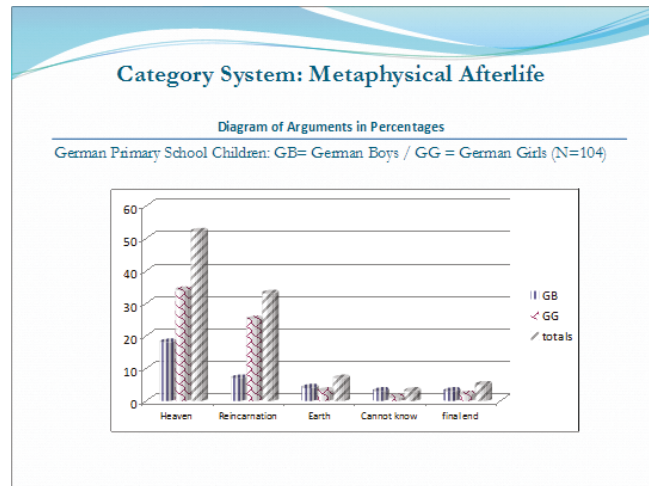


(German boy Matthias, 9 years old) “The dead person is lying in the ground; all around him are stones, and the roots penetrate down to the body. Up on the surface a bush is growing.”

The statement of Sophia (GG 8), in contrast, is a good example of the prevailing opinion: “A person... I mean life... it goes on and on and never stops. When you die, you still live on.” Like the Japanese primary school children, the German children assume that there is a dual system. They suppose that humans are a union of body and soul that is prone to come apart after death, a thought expressed by Elvira (GG 33): “With people, here’s how it is: after they are buried they turn to dust and their spirit goes upward.” On the basis of this duality the children develop different forms of life after death, both immaterial and material gestalt types. In addition, they also distinguish between the individual fate of a given soul (which might live on as a soul, with God or elsewhere, or be reborn or resurrected) and the continued social life of the complete body-soul union in the memory of the living, as well as the inter-individual transmission of genes to descendants.

The individual’s metaphysical afterlife: Is the soul immortal?

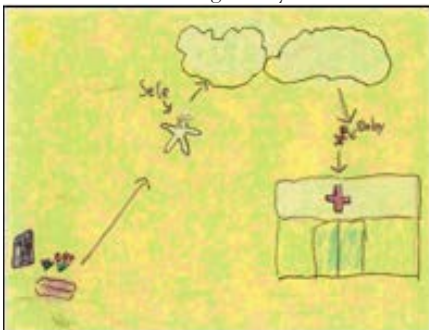
First we present the outlook of the German children with regard to a continued life of the soul. At the study’s outset, 3% of participating children stated that they could not comment on this because it was epistemically impossible to do so. For example, Norbert (GB1_290) states: “Jonas said that if you read the Bible you’ll know it, but the people who wrote the Bible weren’t even dead yet.” Or Larissa (GG1_27) wishes: “I would really like to know what happens when you are dead, whether you go to heaven or are born again or are just dead and nothing else happens... I’d like to know that, because the stupid thing is, when you’re dead and you know it, you can’t tell anyone about it any more.” But this epistemic impossibility of determining the truth does not prevent the children from developing and testing their own subjective theories within the classroom *community of inquiry*.



Most striking is the number in the 2nd category, reincarnation. One-third of the children presume that the soul will be reborn. This unusually high number for Germany results from the fact that 25% of the girls think there may be a transmigration of souls. Although one-third of the Japanese children also share this value, the responses of the German children reflect not so much a familiarity with Buddhist religion as wishful thinking. Lea (GG 277), for example, tells this story: “Back when I was younger, I kept on thinking that maybe my great grandfather was an animal or something, so then I always said ‘Hello’ to animals.” Or Sophia (GG 280) says: “I got cats, and (...) then I used to always think that it was my great grandfather, my cat, and then I always said his name.”

At that point it becomes clear that Johannes (GB 284), who had previously only operated with the Christian theory of soul, also has his own quite private notion: “Sometimes I also think that my fish... is my gra..., I mean my great grandmother, my grandpa, um, my great grandmother and great grandfather, and then I always say goodbye to them when I leave.” Since parents reject such ideas, normally the children did not speak about them. The experience of expressing these views openly in the *community of inquiry* and finding other children with similar ideas was a great relief to them.

Viktoria (GG2_46): offers another form of the reincarnation idea: “I think that then the soul rises up and then it is born again right away.” According to Norbert (GB1_344), rebirth can also take place in heaven and be repeated there indefinitely.

GG2_16	Rashita:	The soul can..., that’s true, but there are many things. Some people say the soul goes to heaven that a person is born again, or some say it goes to hell and isn’t born again.
GG2_18	Larissa:	What Viktoria said, that’s also a possibility, because if a person is dead and then reborn, that could be. And I drew here that when a person is dead there is a kind of light where the person can then rest in peace.
GG2_20	Nina:	<p>“Well, I think about it some, when a person dies, that (...) my soul goes on to the next child. I mean, ... at the exact moment when I die, that maybe somewhere, like in a hospital or in someone’s home, a new child is born and it gets my soul.”</p> 

Another boy, Ralf (GB 9 years old) says: “But maybe when you die you are born again in heaven, and when you die there, you go to heaven’s next level, and so on forever.” Slightly more than half of the German children have the opinion, like Anna, that people live on in heaven. Anna (GG2_130) says: “But I think... I guess that the people who are dead, they go to heaven, because heaven is really huge; it has no end.” The dialogue then brings up the question of whether there is enough room for everyone in heaven:

GB1_296 Balduin: But if all dead people go to heaven, there wouldn’t be enough room, would there?

GB1_298 Jonas: Heaven is actually infinite, isn’t it?

GG1_302 Viktoria: But if there’s enough room for all the people on earth, why shouldn’t there be enough room in heaven?

GG1_304 Iva: But on earth people die, and then they go away again, and then there is room for everyone. If people didn’t die, then there wouldn’t be enough room.

GG1_308 Rashida: When I was at a cemetery, someone told me that only the most important part goes upward, because you might not necessarily need your legs and so on, only the most important things go with.

Teacher 1_309 Mh, mh. What is the most important?

GG1_310 Rashida: ... for example, the soul, the heart, things like that.

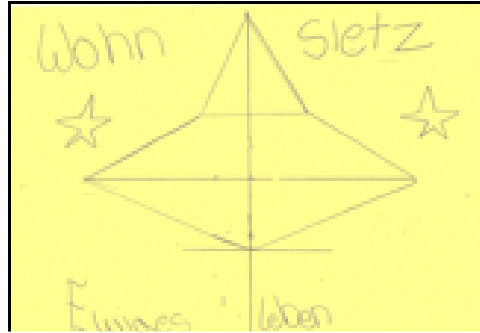
As a tentative solution, Rashida suggests that the soul is not physical and thus does not take up space. But apparently the concept of a being without a physical body is quite difficult for the children to grasp, since the same space problem arises in their discussion of the proposition that souls remain on earth or else return to it as ghosts or guardian angels:

Another question that greatly preoccupies the German children is what the souls do for such a long time in heaven. A condition that never changes for all eternity does not seem to them worth having, and so they talk about various metamorphoses, such as the transformation into a star or an angel.

GG2_30	Rashida:	I was thinking that when you’ve been in heaven for a long time, you turn into a star.
GB2_48	Norbert:	Maybe the souls get trained there and then they come down again as angel assistants.
GB2_50	Moritz:	Um, who gives them the training?
GB2_52	Patrick:	God.
GG2_56	Michelle:	Probably an angel who’s in heaven.



Mona (German girl, 9 years old) (2) 001 jpg
...that then of course we live on in heaven, and that then we are angels or something. ...



Gisela (German girl, 9 years old) (1) 001 jpg
I was thinking that when you've been in heaven for a long time, you turn into a star.

After the *community of inquiry* has thus cleared up the fate of the soul in what the members found to be a satisfactory process of argumentation, it moves on to the second component of its dual theory. There is soon agreement about the material development of the body. The children agree on a biological nature concept. As an example we cite here Sophia (GG 28): "When they die they live in the earth, that is, then they turn into earth..." and also Johannes (GB 30): "and then they live on as earth."

3. Metaphysical life after death: The Japanese children

Most of the Japanese children were convinced that individual life goes on in some form even after death. However they did not verbally develop their concepts of death as the German children did through argumentative exploration in the *community of inquiry*, but rather individually in their drawings within the community, after having reflected together about the story and the drawings of the German children. Although they were hardly able to account for these death concepts verbally, their drawings are very differentiated, rich in meaning, complex, and expressive. To begin we present here short dialogue excerpts:

Teacher TD: What do you think? Can Sachiko and Juichi see their grandmother who died, or at least feel her presence? What do Sachiko and Juichi believe, do you think?

Minako JG:_N: I'm surprised that the two talk about a topic like this.

Yuri JB_N: I think the two children can be seen by their grandmother who died.

Naoto JB_N: I think if that would happen to me I would ask the same question as the two children did. That's why it doesn't surprise me.

TD: Do you think the same way as Juichi or not? What experience have you had?

Many: yes, yes.

Kento JB_N: I've had experiences like what was said a minute ago. At times I think like Juichi, about whether my dead grandmother can see me.

Yuki JG:_Ha: When my father's brother died I thought about it.

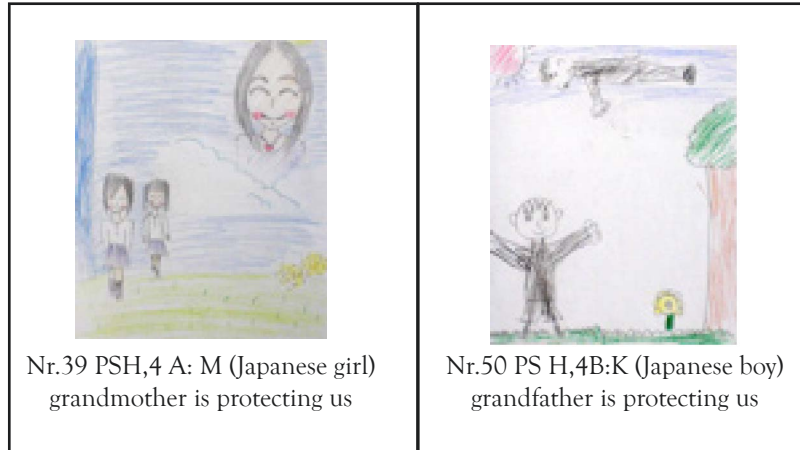
Setsuko JG_Ha: When my great grandmother died I thought about it.

TD: The boy Juichi thinks his great grandmother is still alive. What do you think?

Children: Silence

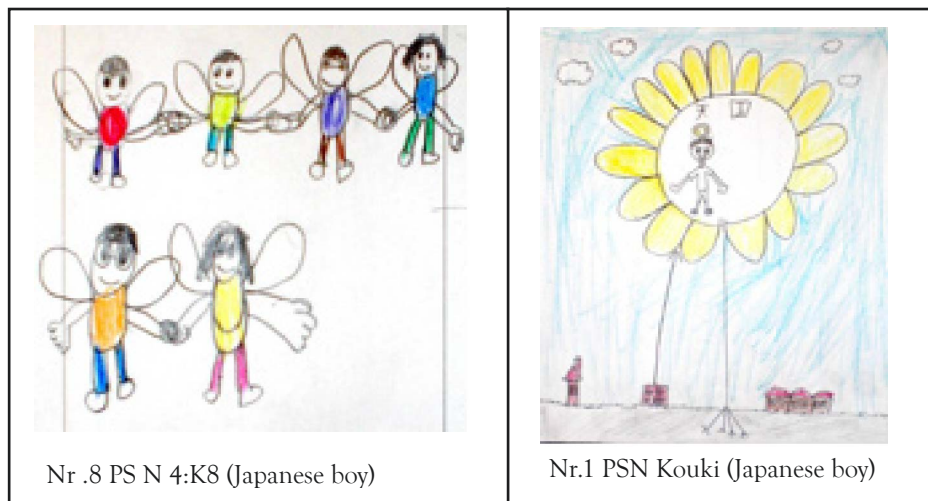
Saijaka JG_Ha: I think the grandmother is looking down from heaven and watching the figures of her grandchildren.

Mariko JG_Ha: Because it's necessary, our grandmother watches us from heaven with protecting eyes, I think.



TD: Our topic is the question, what form does the grandmother's *inochi* (finiteness of life) take? We've already heard one opinion, that the grandmother protects us from heaven. Have you ever heard the word *tamashi* (soul)? Do you think there is a soul?

Kazuo JB_Ha: Yes, *tamashi* (soul) remains as itself.



TD: Or do you have a different opinion, that there is no more *tamashi* (soul) after death?

Children_Ha: No answer.

TD: Do you think it can be proved that there is a *tamashi* (soul) after death?

Children: Impossible.

Megumi JG_Hb: It's hard to prove it, but in Juicho's heart his grandmother lives as *tamashi* (soul). That's how it seems to me.

Many voices_Hb: Yes, we think so too.

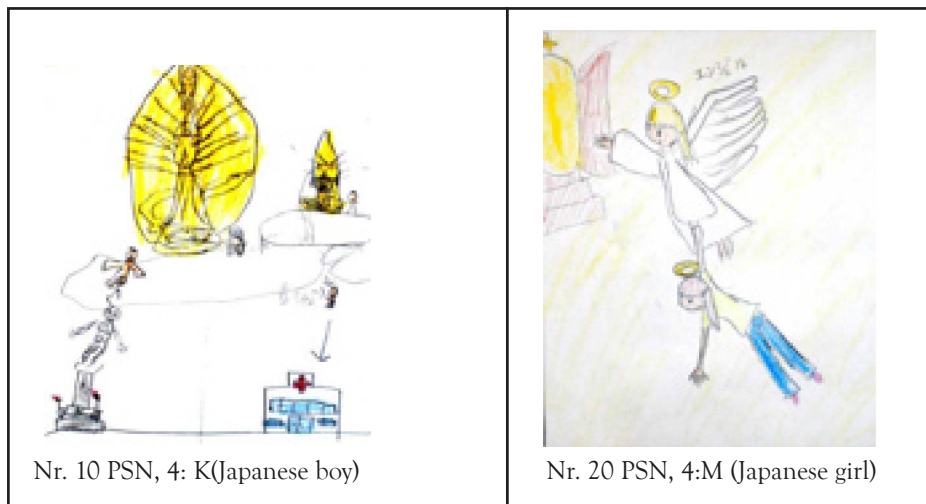
TD: Which idea is the best one for you? Your thoughts, please.

Sakura JG_N: My idea about dying is that you go to heaven.

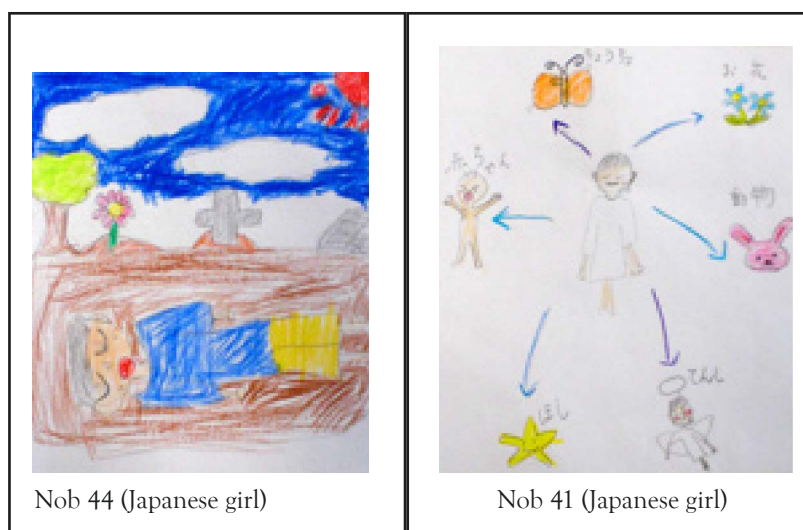
Koichi JB_N: That we are reborn as babies is the right idea for me.

Shin JB_N: I don't want to only ask about dying. I'd rather think that I will fly to heaven and be born again as a baby.

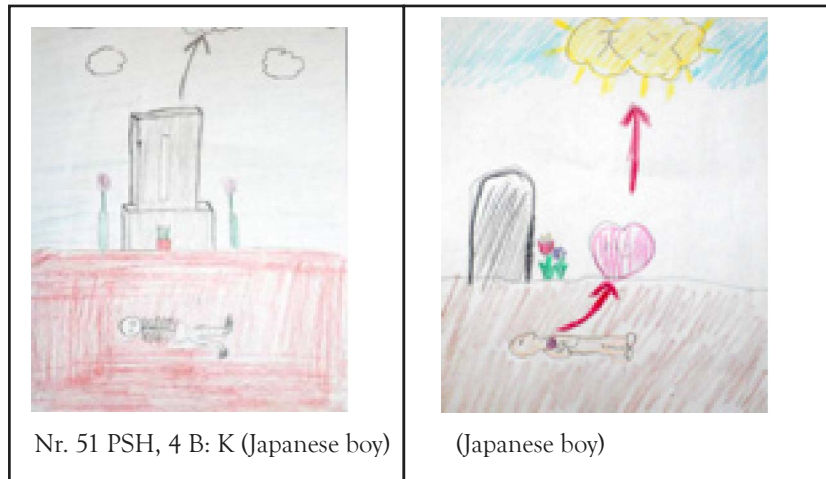
Ryo JB_N: I wish that some person like a god, like for example an angel can lead me to heaven when I die.



Taro JB_N: I still don't have a clear idea about this topic.



Exactly like most of the German children, most Japanese children have a dualistic worldview: the body decays and the soul lives on.

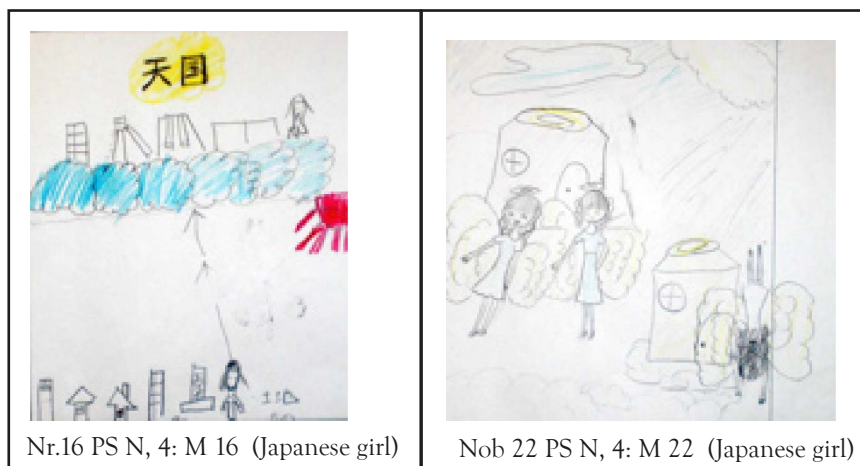


Unlike the German children, Japanese children like Ikuhei (JB_N), for example, believe that the dead remain among the living in invisible form:



Ikuhei: (Japanese boy) “The way I see it, the person is dressed in a white suit after he dies. The insignia is the proof that the person who comes out from the gravestone is someone who has died. This apparition can only be seen by the dead, but not by the living.”

Through the *community of inquiry* it is also possible for the children to discuss traumatic experiences, such as an earthquake that cost the lives of the grandfather and an infant, both of whom are now with Buddha in the granddaughter’s imagination, or death in a traffic accident.



But many children also project the things they wish for onto heaven, such as “eternally playing” or reconciling again with a friend.



4. Evaluation of the approach through the children's self-assessments

At the conclusion of our research process, we wanted to know how the children assessed reflecting about death through group conversation in the classroom. After all, talking about death is taboo in both Japan and Germany. This makes it especially burdensome for children to come to terms with this difficult existential topic.

While in Germany Nina (GG) reports positive feelings about remembering her grandfather again during the discussion of the death theme ("it was also nice...because talking about this made me remember my Grandpa again"), Somaa (GG) and the immigrant African girl Rashida exemplify ambivalent attitudes. On the one hand, they find thinking about the topic "death" quite difficult and become anxious. Somaa (GG3_174) emphasizes: "It could also happen that some children talking about a topic like this might be afraid that now maybe they will die too." On the other hand, they find the treatment of the topic liberating, as Rashida (GG3_172) points out: "It's like this: it's true that this is hard for children to learn about, but when they know it, in the end, then they feel freer, for sure."

The Japanese children saw it as positive that they could discuss the topic of death since they "talked about a subject" as Kiichi (JB) from Noboricho says, "that we don't learn about in school. That's why it was very good for me." The others also found it "a good experience" like Taro (JB). Teruka (JG) from Hankawa added: "If you think by yourself about *inochi* (finiteness of life), it stays unclear, but when I thought about it together with other children it became quite understandable." Seiko (JG) went still further: "Today I experienced good learning. I am very grateful." Only Yasunai (JB) found it "difficult to think about the topic of *inochi*, because we have no experience with it."

This feeling can be attributed first of all to the fact that for most of the children death was affirmed to be "not final" and was associated with hopes for various forms of living on after death.

Second, the children felt liberated by their long conversation about the process of dying itself, and they were consoled to learn that not every death involves pain or represents a release from pain. It was also liberating for them to exchange their fantasies and anxiously guarded speculations, which had been rejected by adults: for example, their belief that grandparents lived on in family pets and were thus still present for them. Because their assertions were neither ridiculed nor treated with scorn in the classroom *community of inquiry*, but were instead received with interest and developed further in a respectful discussion, they experienced the conversation about this tabooed topic as a relief.

The intercultural perspective of this lesson enabled the children to develop comprehensive concepts related

to the themes *death*, the *finite nature of life*, and the *various forms of living on after death*. In our study we were able to show that the *community of inquiry* promotes not only the transfer of culture but also the development of autonomous, reflective, and age-appropriate pictures of the world; for in addition to intellectual support, the *community of inquiry* also has an emotionally stabilizing function that should not be underestimated.

Endnotes

- ¹ Takara Dobashi, "School as Caring Community. Toshiaki Ôse philosophizes with Japanese Children," in *Children Philosophize Worldwide. International Theoretical and Practical Concepts*, eds. Eva Marsal, Takara Dobashi, Barbara Weber (Frankfurt: Peter-Lang-Verlag, 2009), pp. 427-436.
- ² Eva Marsal, "A German Framework for Philosophizing with Children: The Five-Finger Model of Ekkehard Martens", in *Children Philosophize Worldwide. International Theoretical and Practical Concepts*, pp. 503-512; and Ekkehard Martens, *Methodik des Ethik- und Philosophieunterrichts. Philosophieren als elementare Kulturtechnik* (Hannover: Siebert, 2003).
- ³ Eva Marsal & Takara Dobashi, *Das Spiel als Kulturtechnik des ethischen Lernens* (Münster: Lit, 2005).
- ⁴ Takara Dobashi, "The First Children's Philosopher of Japan: Takeji Hayashi," in *Thinking*, IAPC Vol. 18-3 (Montclair, New Jersey), pp. 35- 42.
- ⁵ Eva Marsal, "Das philosophische Rätselspiel als ‚selbstläufiges‘ Gespräch: Philosophieren mit Kindern im öffentlichen Lernraum," in *Philosophical Foundations of Innovative Learning - Philosophische Grundlagen innovativen Lernens*, Proceedings of the International Conference on Philosophy for Children -Kongressband des Internationalen Kongresses für Kinderphilosophie, ed. Daniela G. Camhy (München. 2007), pp. 43 - 54.
- ⁶ Eva Marsal & Takara Dobashi, "Empirical Evaluation of Philosophy Instruction (P4C): Models, Methods, Examples," in *Children Philosophize Worldwide. International Theoretical and Practical Concepts*, pp. 473-478.
- ⁷ Helmut Werner, (ed.) *Das islamische Totenbuch. Jenseitsvorstellungen des Islam* (Cologne: Anaconda, 2009).
- ⁸ Masahide Satô, "Nippon ni okeru Shi no Kannen (The View of Death in Japan)," in, *Sei to Shi (Life and Death)* (Tokio: Tokyodaigakusyuppankai, 1992), p. 48.

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