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# Commentary on Gladys Ceron: “A Pragma-Dialectical Analysis of the Argumentative Discourse in Children”

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of Gladys Ceron’s study is to describe and analyse argumentative discourse as it is used by children in a specific class situation; i.e. in philosophy courses from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade in a primary school in Santiago, Chile. The author has chosen the pragma-dialectical theory to analyse the children’s ability and progress in ‘coherent thinking’ and in engaging in an ‘open, respectful and tolerant dialogue’

The didactical idea is based on a ‘Philosophy for Children’ project, introduced by Mathew Lipman. All too often, children lose their inquisitive capacity in a school system that is focused on the reproduction of knowledge, whereas they should be encouraged to think for themselves, an activity that is essentially a matter of community and communication. In order to develop their ‘reflection, the inquisitiveness and the development in logical thought’, and in a way to reconstruct the discipline of philosophy, children take part in philosophy courses. The teacher introduces themes in a ‘narrative context’, and moderates the discussions.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The author has chosen the pragma-dialectical perspective for obvious reasons. It considers extra-linguistic factors, it implies the verbal, social and rational aspects of argumentation, and it provides us with a useful set of rules that define how to set up, analyse and evaluate a critical discussion. At this point in her work, Gladys Ceron provides us with a short introduction to the pragma-dialectical theory, mainly to introduce the terminology she will use throughout her study: argumentation structures, argumentative schemes, etc. She doesn’t explicitly motivate her choice for this theory.

Gladys Ceron doesn’t go into the emotional aspects she mentions while defining implicit notions of argumentation: ‘A rational activity that is based generally on intellectual considerations, even though the emotional aspect fulfills also an important role within the argumentation.’ (2.2.3) Surely the balance between rational and emotional development of children is a very interesting issue to take up when studying their argumentative skills. In discussing the results, the author does point out an evolution in the way the children argue, as well as the way the teachers guide, but clearly this evolution is not all that simple to describe and evaluate. Other criteria could throw more

light on this matter. Also the fact that the themes are introduced ‘in a narrative context’ probably plays an interesting role in the setting up and evolution of the argumentation.

Another question, not completely apart from the former, concerns the rhetorical aspects of argumentation that have been introduced by the pragma-dialectic school. Again, I assume that especially in discussions among and with children, it would add to our insight in children’s ways of discussing if their ability to ‘manoeuvre strategically’ would be taken into account.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Ceron’s work is a descriptive, non-experimental study. This means that the main purpose is to describe situations in their natural context, without manipulating certain factors or creating variables. By studying four different levels of classes, it is possible not only to describe situations but to start an investigation of the evolution and progress of the argumentative skills of the children.

An interesting point here is the didactic situation versus the pragma-dialectic theory. The latter describes argumentation procedures as critical discussions between a protagonist and an antagonist. The situations described by Ceron, however, are more complex. They involve a teacher who guides the conversations between the children. This could possibly form an important factor to take up in the analysis, especially since one of the results (4) in the fifth grade is precisely the fact that the children don’t really seem to engage into a discussion with one another but rather take the teacher as the opponent.

As for the procedure (3.3), analysis and interpretation (3.4), it is important to render the selection of the corpus more explicit. Ceron emphasizes that ‘the elements of the original speech that were irrelevant for the analysis of the argumentations’ were eliminated, i.e. ‘interruptions between the children, the interruptions that the professor makes to create an atmosphere of silence and respect, the challenges and threats of annotations stand out the professor makes, the anecdotes, etc. as well as the argumentations that escaped of the central subject of which they were speaking’. Presenting the selection principles more clearly could at the same time bring up some arguments about the above mentioned emotional argumentation and strategic manoeuvring.

### 4. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

It is interesting to see the overall preference for the symptomatic type of argumentation, as well as the very small occurrence of fallacious reasoning. As a whole, Gladys Ceron has been able to demonstrate the fact that children are capable to develop ‘reflexive, open, tolerant and respectful dialogue’. There is a lot left to study about this complex and fascinating issue, but this work is certainly an excellent start.

[link to paper](#)