Exploring Children's Ethical Thinking: What Virtues Are and How They Can Be Learned

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Abstract

This article presents an educative research designed in light of some Socratic and Aristotelian philosophical assumptions to promote ethical education in schools and to explore children's ethical thoughts. In particular, the authors focus on an activity designed with the heuristic purpose of understanding what virtues are and how they can be learned. The presented data was collected from a group of 106 children (divided between six classes of four Italian primary schools) and qualitatively analyzed using a hybridized methodology combining the phenomenological method and grounded theory.

Keywords: virtue ethics, ethical education, primary school

1)Introduction

Our time is characterized by an ethical crisis, a state which is evidenced not only by current events and behaviors, but also by an impoverished ethical vocabulary. Modern society shows a reverence for technical language and young people who increasingly share information rapidly via social media are attracted to simplified forms of communication. The use of simplified language impoverishes mental activity and, consequently, also inhibits the process of elaborating the meaning of experiences. A term which was central in the discussion of ancient ethics is "virtue." The ethical philosophy of ancient Greece which is founded on reflection on virtuous dispositions has inspired the present project, an exploration of ethical education that involved 106 students ages 8–10 in the scholastic year of 2016–2017. The group was composed of children attending six different fourth grade classes across four Italian primary schools. This project was promoted by the Center of Educational and Didactic Research (Cred) of the University of Verona (Italy) and includes an educative pathway with different activities aimed at encouraging the development of children's ethical thinking. Furthermore, qualitative data was gathered with the aim of exploring the essence of children's ethical thoughts and the effectiveness of the proposed activities of ethical education. One such activity, promoted at the beginning of the educative pathway, focuses on the concept of virtue. During this activity, children were invited to answer the following questions: What are virtues? How is it possible to learn virtues? The paper describes this activity, framing it with the theoretical background offered by the Socratic and Aristotelian conceptions of virtue, the qualitative analysis carried out on the collected data, and the emergent findings that illustrated what the involved children thought about virtues at the beginning of the project.

2) Theoretical background

Reflection on virtue is central to Socratic and Aristotelian philosophy. In the *Apology*, Socrates states that "it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day" (Plato, *Apology*, 38a), and describes his educative mission as consisting of approaching each person like a father or an elder brother to persuade him/her "to care for virtue" (Plato, *Apology*, 31b). The concept of virtues of character, distinguished from those of thought, is well defined by Aristotle: virtue for a human being is "the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 6, 1106a). Since virtue deals with action, and every action can be oriented in relation to opposite poles, virtue can be defined as "a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 6, 1107a). This assertion rests on the assumption that "excess or deficiency ruins a good, whereas the mean preserves it" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 6, 1106b). However, a pertinent question required for elaborating a theory of ethical education is as follows: is it possible to learn virtue? Meno asks something similar of Socrates: "Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught?" (Plato, *Meno*, 70a). The dialogue leads to the hypothesis that, since it is not possible to find either teachers or students of virtue, then virtue cannot be taught (Plato, *Meno*, 96c-d). The same issue is addressed in *Protagoras*, in which we observe Socrates focused on the observation that "the wisest and best of our citizens are unable to transmit to others the virtues that they possess" (Plato, *Protagoras*, 319e).

Based on this evidence, one could deduce that virtue cannot be taught (320b). However, the conclusion which Socrates reaches is more fully understood if we consider the Greek terms he uses to frame the issue with; we discover that his effective belief is that virtues are not teachable in the sense that they cannot be transmitted as a didactic object. Instead, the conceptualization of virtue is at the center of his *paideia*. Socratic *paideia* can be defined as the educative process of soliciting people to care for their soul (Plato, *Apology*, 29d-e), and to care for the soul requires to cultivate virtues (Plato, *Apology*, 30b). According to Socrates, the fundamental purpose of education is to encourage the other to care for the virtues (Plato, *Apology*, 31b) by examining them and grasping their essence; this is the practice carried out by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues, wherein he invites his interlocutors to reason on virtues through the maieutic method. While Socrates suggests that in order to learn to be virtuous it is important to examine what virtues are, Aristotle takes a different position: according to him, in order to learn virtues is important to practice them. Indeed, he states: "We become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1, 1103b). The Socratic focus on reasoning and the Aristotelian focus on experience, considered together in a combined pedagogical perspective, inspired the MelArete project, an initiative designed to foster children's ethical development by encouraging them to ponder the essential meaning of virtues and on their experience of virtuous action. We carried out qualitative research on the activities realized within the project in order to gauge their educative effectiveness. The name "MelArete" combines the Greek terms "melete," which means care, and "arete," which means virtue. Indeed, care (Heidegger, 1996; Lévinas, 1991; Held, 2006; Mayeroff, 1990; Mortari, 2015; Mortar & Saiani, 2014; Noddings, 1984; Slote, 2007; Tronto, 1993) and virtue (Plato, Aristotle) are the theory's central concepts that inspire the project (Mortari & Ubbiali, 2017).

3) Epistemological framework and research design

A theory of education should be oriented toward educative practice, since its utility lies in discovering strategies that enhance the educative processes. In order to adequately respond to this aim, theoretical speculation is not enough: educational research needs to manifest also in the form of empirical research which investigates educational principles in reality. To be transformative (i.e., to contribute to the enhancement of the educative processes), empirical research should not merely be exploratory (aimed at reaching a deep understanding of an educative phenomenon), rather, above all, it should be operative (aimed at testing educational hypotheses and rigorously studying their real-world effectiveness). Starting from the assumption that to educate means to offer significant experiences and that the theory of education has the task of individuating such experiences (Dewey, 1938), the empirical research promoted by the project consists in testing the valence of educative experiences that are directed by the aim of developing ethically-oriented thinking in children. Transformative research involving children is not merely research conducted "with" children, but rather "for" children (Mortari, 2009), because it is intended to provide them with experiences that will facilitate personal growth. The epistemological framework which inspires the design of research for children is "naturalistic inquiry" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which points out the importance of studying the phenomena in the context of their happening. In the case of the MelArete project, research was carried out in schools, a context which seems to be particularly adequate for educational studies, since in this environment children are used to being required to answer questions on different themes with both didactical and broadly educative relevance. In particular, the school seems to be an effective context for carrying out research on ethical education because it is a relational context where children grow up together, and where there are relationships, there ought also to be ethical tensions to bring out the best in them. The MelArete project can be defined as "educative research," because it is designed to have both an educative and a heuristic valence; the former serves to foster the development of children's ethical thinking and the latter to enable the comprehension of the essence and development of children's ethical thinking with reference to the proposed activities. The design of educative research is structured in an educative project and in the rigorous research on the data collected through it. In order to achieve this goal, the instruments used should have both an educative and heuristic valence (i.e., they should facilitate the construction of significant activities for children, and, at the same time, should allow researchers to collect data which will be subjected to analysis).In the scholastic year of 2016–2017, the MelArete project involved106 students ages 8–10 attending six fourth grade classes across four primary schools located in the north and center of Italy. Recognizing the importance of ethics education and its societal necessity, these schools expressed to us their willingness to adhere to our project and integrated it into their educational program for that academic year. The consent of the parents of the children to record their dialogues for data collection was taken by the teachers.

4) The educative pathway

The educative pathway was conducted in 12 meetings between the researcher and each class. These meetings, which focused on the concepts of good, care, virtue, courage, generosity, respect, and justice, were scheduled almost once every two weeks and lasted from 1–1.5 hours.

Meeting I

The educative pathway began with the reading of the "Story of Puc and Pec," wherein the little jaguar Pec cares for her friend Puc, who is sad because he is going to leave his home for a school trip. To comfort him, Pec gives him a special present that she has prepared for the moment in which her friend would feel alone. This story grounds the entire project because it focuses the children's attention on acting with care in order to search for goodness. After the story was read, the researcher asked the children the following questions:

- Did you like the story?
- Why?
- The word "good" is a beautiful word. What comes to your mind when you hear this word?
- The word "care" is another beautiful word. What comes to your mind when you hear this word?

The third and the fourth questions allow the researcher to involve children in a Socratic conversation that is characterized by beginning from eidetic questions (i.e., questions concerning the essence of a phenomenon). In this case, the questions asked by the research involve children in a reflection on the essence of good and care.

Meeting II

The 2nd meeting started with a game called "The basket of virtues." The researcher showed three baskets, and gave the children some cards on which the names of different things (jobs, games, and virtues) were written. The children were asked to determine the suitable basket for each card and, at the end of the activity, to give a name to each basket in which the cards had been gathered. If the children did not propose the term "virtues" for the nomination of the appropriate basket, the term would be proposed by the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher extracted from the basket the specific virtues on which the class would focus throughout the educative pathway (i.e., courage, generosity, respect, and justice). The children were then required to write a definition for each virtue the researcher presented. This activity was aimed at verifying:

- if the children knew the word "virtue"; and
- if the children knew the meaning of the specific virtues that are the object of the educative pathway.

Meeting III

In the 3rd meeting, the researcher read "The Story of Alcibiades," in which the donkey Alcibiades receives a bucket of milk from Cloe the cow as a gesture of gratitude for having helped her (he had overcome his fear of water to take for her, who was thirsty, a bucket of water). Subsequently, Alcibiades decided to share the milk received by Cloe with his friends. During the conversations among the characters of the story the following two questions emerge:

- what are virtues? (an eidetic question, that is a question that – in a Socratic perspective – looks at the essence of things) (Plato, *Complete works*)
- how is it possible to learn virtues? (a practical question, that is a question that – in an Aristotelian perspective – improves the reflection on one's experience) (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*)

Children were invited to answer in a written form to these questions. The activity had an educative relevance because it led children to reflect on the general concept of virtues and on the ways of learning them. These types of reflections are important because they foster the development of children's ethical thinking, specifically the disposition to reason both in an eidetic and in a pragmatic perspective.

Meetings IV–V

The 4th and 5th meetings were concerned with the virtue of courage. In the 4th meeting, the researcher presented teachers with two options for an activity on this topic, the first of which addressed the courage to defend someone being threatened by someone stronger and the second concerned the courage to say something important to someone else. These stories were used as a stimulus to induce reflection (first individually in written form and then collectively with classmates) on the following elements: a courageous action, the thoughts associated with this action, the effects that it produces, and the emotions felt by its author. In the 5th meeting, a game, named "The pathway in the wood of courage" was used to foster children's invention of a story about the conceptualization of courage. As an alternative to the game, children were involved in a reflection on vignettes (i.e., a graphical presentation of situations concerning an ethical dilemma or problem was used to stimulate the children's reflection on courage).

Meetings VI–VII

The 6th and 7th meetings concerned the virtue of generosity. In the 6th meeting, a story about generosity (once again chosen by the teachers between two options given by the researcher) was used as a stimulus to induce reflection (first, individually in written form, and then collectively with classmates) on the following elements: a generous action, the thoughts associated with this action, the effects it produced, and the emotions felt by the author.

One story concerns helping the other by giving him/her time, whereas the other story concerns helping the other by giving him/her something of your own. In the 7th meeting, a game called "The crossword of generosity" was used to foster children's invention of a story concerning generosity interpreted as giving something to another, doing something for another, or giving time to another. As an alternative to the game, children were involved in a reflection on vignettes (i.e., a graphical presentation of situations concerning an ethical dilemma or problem was used to stimulate the children's reflection on generosity).

Meetings VIII–IX

The 8th and 9th meetings dealt with the virtue of respect. In the 8th meeting, a story about respect chosen by teachers between two options (the first concerning respect for another and the second concerning respect for the environment) was used as a stimulus to spur reflection (first individually in written form and later together as a class) on the following elements: a respectful action, the thoughts associated with this action, the effects that it produced, and the emotions felt by its author. In the 9th meeting, a game called "The vases of respect," was used to foster conversation about which of the ten provided situations were more or less respectful on a scale of 1 to 5 and more or less disrespectful on a scale of -1 to -5. As an alternative to the game, children were involved in a reflection on vignettes (i.e., a graphical presentation of situations concerning an ethical dilemma or problem was used to stimulate the children's reflection on respect).

X-XI meetings

The 10th and 11th meetings dealt with the virtue of justice. In the 10th meeting, a story about justice chosen by the teachers between two options (the first concerning how to divide something fairly and the second concerning how to repair a committed damage in a just way) was used as a stimulus to spur reflection (first, individually in written form, and later, together as a class) on the following elements: a just action, the thoughts associated with this action, the effects it produced, and the emotions felt by the author. In the 11th meeting, a game called "The memory of justice*"* was used to foster the children's reflection about the rights of people. As an alternative to the game, the children were involved in a reflection of vignettes (i.e., a graphical presentation of situations concerning an ethical dilemma or problem was used to stimulate the children's reflection on justice).

Meeting XII

During the final meeting, a story was used as a narrative framework to involve children in the same tasks as those introduced in the explorative activities proposed during the 2nd and 3rd meetings; indeed, children were required to define courage, generosity, respect and justice in writing, as well as virtue and how, according to them, virtues can be learnt. This conclusive activity was aimed to understand if and how children's thoughts had changed during the educative pathway.

5)Data collection and analysis method

In this article, we have focused on the data collected during the third meeting, i.e., the children's answers to the questions: "What are virtues?" and "How is it possible to learn virtues?". The material was transcribed verbatim in an anonymous form in order to respect the privacy of the children involved. The analysis of these data serves an explorative purpose, because they allow us to understand how each child, at the beginning of the educative pathway, defined the concept of virtue and how he/she thought virtues can be learned. The data was analyzed qualitatively, following a methodological crossbreeding (Mortari, 2007; Mortari& Silva, 2018) between the phenomenological-eidetic method (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Mortari, 2008) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In order to adequately approach the phenomenon under study, it was necessary to combine different methods which share some fundamental aspects; the characteristics shared by the phenomenological-eidetic method and grounded theory are as follows:

- adherent to data in order to faithfully describe a phenomenon;
- brackets or suspends preconceived assertions, theories and expectations in order to better understand the specificity of the phenomenon under study;
- avoids deductive reasoning and constructs knowledge through inductive procedures.

This methodology seeks out the essence of the phenomena on which the children were invited to reflect by labeling and categorizing their answers. Particularly, the analysis aimed to understand how children describe the phenomenon of virtues in terms of their qualities and how they are learned. The analysis was carried out through the following heuristic criteria:

- read the text multiple times;

- identify significant units in the answers;
- elaborate a descriptive label for every significant unit;
- create a conceptual category within which it is possible to group similar labels (i.e., labels referring to the same general concept or to the same particular aspect of the investigated phenomenon).

In the tables below, we present a selection of data analyzed through this method.

Some answers to the question: "What are virtues?"	**Labels**	**Categories**
"They are actions, such as caring and forgiving."	Virtues mean to care for others and to forgive	Virtues are actions
"Virtues are the feelings inside you."	Virtues are emotions	Virtues are emotional experiences
"Virtues are good actions to make others happy."	Virtues are good actions	Virtues are actions
"Virtues are words that describe you, such as: generous, courageous…"	Virtues are ways of being	Virtues are qualities
"Virtue is a difficult but beautiful word; according to me, the word virtue can mean beautiful things, for example it can mean to help another person."	Virtues mean to help others	Virtues are actions

Some answers to the question: "How is it possible to learn virtues?"	**Labels**	**Categories**
"Virtue is learned by doing something beautiful for others."	Virtues are learned by doing beautiful actions	Virtues are learned by doing
"They are learned by reading [about] them a lot."	Virtues are learned by reading about them	Virtues are learned at school
"Virtues are learned by doing good deeds."	Virtues are learned by doing good actions	Virtues are learned by doing
"Virtues are learned when [one] does good without wanting anything in return."	Virtues are learned by doing good actions freely	Virtues are learned by doing
"Virtues cannot be learned but you already know them when you were born".	We own virtues from birth	Virtues are not learned

The last heuristic action of the analysis process is to construct a coding system that includes labels and categories in order to make the results of the analysis evident at a glance.During the analysis, the self-monitoring of the researcher's mental activity was carried out through the commitment to practice *epochè* (Husserl, 2012), a cognitive technique proposed by phenomenology for promoting the bracketing of all theories, beliefs, and preconceptions that could affect one's knowledge of the phenomenon. Engaging in *epochè* is important for adhering to Husserl's principle of faithfulness, according to which "complete clearness is the measure of all truth, and that statements which give faithful expression to their data need to fear nothing from the finest arguments" (Husserl, 2012, p. 155).

6)Findings

The analysis of the collected data allows us to understand 1) what children think virtues are and 2) how they think that virtues can be learned. For both these questions, we present a coding system based on our analysis with an illustrative answer for each label.

6.1) What are virtues?

Concerning the first question, we collected a total of 90 answers, but 16 were unclear. Therefore, the analyzed answers have been 74. Below, is it possible to see the coding system, which includes illustrative examples for the different labels:

CATEGORIES	**LABELS**	**ILLUSTRATIVE ANSWERS**
Virtues are emotional experiences	Virtues are emotions (40)	*"The virtues are emotions that come from the heart and can be positive or negative, for example the compassion for others, that is an emotion that usually gives you the drive to do good things…"*
	Virtues mean to feel good for having acted well (1)	*"… feeling good for having done a good thing."*
	Virtue is to be happy (1)	*"For me virtue is to be happy."*
Virtues are actions	Virtue is to do the good	*"The donkey has explained to Theaetetus [that] virtue means to do*

	(6)	*a good thing for the others…"*
	Virtues are good actions (3)	*"Virtues are good actions to make others happy."*
	Virtues are things done with the heart (1)	*"Virtues are things done with the heart: you are afraid of the dark, and your sister asks you [to take] something [to her] because she already has something to do, and then you take courage and take it to her."*
	Virtue is to do the right thing (2)	*"Virtue means to do the right thing."*
	Virtues mean to do things right (3)	*"According to me, virtue means to do things right and with calmness and with kindness."*
	Virtues mean to help others (4)	*"Virtue is a difficult but beautiful word; according to me, the word virtue can mean beautiful things, for example it can mean to help another person."*
	Virtues mean to do a favor (1)	*"To do a favor for the cow."*
	Virtues mean to care for others and to forgive (1)	*"They are actions, such as caring and forgiving."*
Virtues are qualities	Virtues are ways of being (4)	*"Virtues are words that describe you, such as: generous, courageous…"*
	Virtues are the qualities as character (3)	*"…are the character of a person…"*
	Virtues are qualities of a being (1)	*"Virtues are the qualities of a person, of an animal or of a thing. The virtues are like sugar, and they help us to do beautiful things for ourselves and for others."*
Reference to specific virtues	Reference to virtues on which the project focuses (11)	*"According to me, the word virtue means courage."*
	Reference to virtues on which the project focuses and to others (4)	*"Virtue means loyalty, courage, consistency, sincerity…"*
	Reference to virtues on which the project does not focus (kindness) (2)	*"Virtue means to be kind to the others."*

Some answers express definitions which we called "composite definitions," wherein children conceptualized the meaning of virtues by referring to two or more different concepts, and therefore to two or more labels. For example, in one case we found that a student thought that virtues were conceived as emotions as well as things done with the heart.
We also found 3 answers that expressed definitions which we called "protruding definitions," i.e., definitions that could not be categorized because to categorize them would mean to lose their conceptual richness; an example of such definitions is as follows: "Virtues are also to keep the world clean, to behave well with parents, to respect teachers, not to argue with brothers and sisters, orto help sad people."

6.2) How is it possible to learn virtues?
Concerning the second question, we collected a total of 90 answers, but 11 were unclear. Therefore, the analyzed answers have been 79. The coding system emerged from the analysis process is the following:

CATEGORIES	**LABELS**		**ILLUSTRATIVE ANSWERS**
Virtues are learned by doing	Virtues are learned by doing good	Virtues are learned by doing good actions (20)	*"Virtues are learned by doing good deeds."*
		Virtues are learned by doing good actions freely (1)	*"Virtues are learned when [one] does good without wanting anything in return."*
		Virtues are learned by loving each other (5)	*"Virtues are learned […] by loving each other."*
	Virtues are learned by doing them		*"Virtues are learned with kindness, with generosity, with*

	(9)		*humility, with goodness, with friendship, with the joy of having someone next to you."*
	Virtues are learned by doing beautiful actions (2)		*"Virtue is learned by doing something beautiful for others."*
	Virtues are learned by doing right actions (2)		*"Virtues are learned by helping [others] and doing the right thing."*
	Virtues are learned by behaving well (6)		*"Virtues are learned by behaving well."*
	Virtues are learned by behaving kindly (3)		*"[Virtues are learned] by behaving kindly."*
	Virtues are learned by staying well with others (3)		*"According to me, to learn virtues you must stay well with others…"*
Virtues are learned from others	People from whom virtues are learned	From parents (2)	*"According to me, virtues are learned with the education of the parents."*
		From friends (1)	*"According to me, virtue can be learned […] also from our friends."*
		From well-mannered people (1)	*"Virtues are learned […] from well-mannered people."*
	How virtues are learned from others	Seeing others who do them (1)	*"[Virtues are learned] by seeing others who do them."*
		Empathizing with others' experience (1)	*"Virtues are learned from others; from the experience you find when you see another person in difficulty."*
		Staying together (1)	*"To stay with the others."*
Virtues are learned on your own	Virtues are learned by learning to think (1)		*"Virtues are learned […] by helping our brain to think."*
	Virtues are learned by understanding mistakes (1)		*"To learn virtues one has to make mistakes and understand the mistakes made."*
	Virtues are learned through self-understanding (1)		*"They are learned by living them and understanding the expressions you have: […] if you want to take risks or you are able to express what you think is courage, […] if you lend things to someone who does not have them you are generous…"*
	Virtues are learned through feeling (6)		*"They can be learned by feeling emotions."*
Virtues are learned at school	Virtues are learned by going to school (2)		*"One goes to school."*
	Virtues are learned by studying them (2)		*"Virtues are learned by studying them."*
	Virtues are learned by reading about them (1)		*"They are learned by reading [about] them a lot."*
	Virtues are learned by MelArete project (1)		*"To learn virtues, you go to school and do the project MelArete and will learn virtues."*
Virtues are acquired with the passing of time	Virtues are acquired through experience (2)		*"According to me the virtues are learned with the passing of time, when you hear and hear them again you learn them."*
	Learning virtues requires time (2)		*"To learn virtues you must go on with time, because in life things that can make you feel emotions happen."*
Virtues are not learned	We own virtues from birth (2)		*"Virtues cannot be learned but you already know them when you were born".*
	Virtues come from our mind (1)		*"Virtues are not learned but come from your mind."*
	Virtues are within us (1)		*"Virtues are not learned but you have them inside you."*
	Virtues are in our heart (2)		*"They cannot be learned because they are in the heart, that is to say [that they are] feelings."*
	Virtues are given us by Jesus (1)		*"…Jesus gives them to you."*

One child suggested that it is not possible to learn virtues; he wrote that "virtues can never be learned." Concerning the question "how is it possible to learn virtues?," we similarly encountered "composite definitions," and also 9 "protruding answers," i.e., answers that we elected not to categorize in order to preserve their richness. Some examples of these "protruding answers" are as follows:

- "First of all, you need to know what they are, then you need to try to be kind, courageous, happy, etc., and you have learned them. If you don't succeed, be yourself anyway and you'll see that sooner or later you will learn them too."
- "They cannot be bought or donated, but they are reached through friendship."
- "According to me, to learn virtues you do not have to go to school as you go for many things. To learn virtues you have to commit yourself to love others, but not only friends: above all [you have to love] people you find unpleasant."

7) Conclusion

The involved children have demonstrated great ability in reflection and conceptualization, and the emergent findings make evident the richness of their ethical thinking. At the end of the educative pathway, during the twelfth meeting, we asked children the same questions as we did during the third meeting, i.e., "What are virtues?" and "How is it possible to learn virtues?". The comparison between the data collected during the third meeting and those collected during the twelfth will allow us to understand if and how children's thoughts changed in response to the educative pathway in which they were involved. However, in this article, we were primarily concerned with presenting a useful educative activity to allow children to pay attention to a concept that was central to ancient philosophy while, in our time characterized by an impoverished ethical language, seems to be forgotten. The research shows that encouraging children to reflect on the essence and learning of virtues is possible and educationally effective, not only to enlarge their lexicon but also to develop their thinking competency.

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