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Gareth Matthews wrote this column for many years. Now, hearing of his death, passing over our contacts in memory, I notice how much good he did for me.

*How can one answer, all at once, the questions: which animals should we not eat, what medical conditions warrant the termination of life support, and at what stage is it permissible to abort a pregnancy?*

I met Gary in the graduate philosophy class he constructed around this strange question. He taught by digesting the issues for the day into a short argument, then inviting discussion. His summary made the issues equally accessible to everyone in the class, and thus made a truly democratic discussion possible. This remains the only sort of lecture I can make sense of; it has become a model for my own teaching.

I haunted his office hours, mostly to point out mistakes. Because he made his arguments clearly, his mistakes stuck out, and we had so much fun thinking of ways to fix them. Each conversation reminded me again that philosophy is the best thing in the world.

I told him about my early work with philosophy in the schools, and he invited me to present on philosophy for children at meetings of the American Philosophical Association. This was a big deal for a young graduate student. I knew I couldn’t just present; descriptions wouldn’t convey the excitement I experienced in classroom. So, with his encouragement, I undertook to produce my first philosophy video. I went on to a shadow career in philosophical television production that has lasted thirty years. Without that initial encouragement, I wouldn’t have started.

Later on, as I was preparing classes and workshops for parents and teachers, I read *Philosophy and the Young Child*. This put me on to thoughtful children’s literature, especially the work of Arnold Lobel; the pieces Matthews discussed became the workhorses of my introductory courses. His suggestions were especially important for classes with parents, who used his suggestions and strategies to make their nightly story times into intellectual adventures.

*My older son, Tim, was bragging about being tough. My younger son, Ben, said, “Tim, you are not tough.” Tim responded, “I am tough, compared to lots of kids.” Ben shot back, “Tough guys don’t say ‘compared to.’”*

When my own kids started to talk, a stream of emails reports flowed from Minnesota to Massachusetts, one brilliant remark after another. Gary was more excited than I was about what my kids said; he sometimes put their sayings on the board to start a seminar. He kept urging me to write a book, just about Ben. Gary helped me to take my kids’ thinking seriously, and he modeled, in the accounts of his own parenting in *Philosophy and the Young Child*, a style of parenting that I could live with – that gave me a role in my sons’ lives that I could stand to play.

*If people could become invisible, I suppose everybody would do some bad things, but lots of people would do good things that they otherwise wouldn’t do.*
I saw Gary work with a group of children only once, at a conference I organized on the community of inquiry. He worked with Plato’s Gyges story, and his demonstration opened up two new ideas for me: (1) pieces of the classical canon, slightly rewritten, work well as prompts with young children; and (2) a philosophical conversation with children can and should have closure, should reach some kind of provisional conclusion. In my own classroom work, I had proceeded by opening questions and then pursuing the investigation until the bell rang. I didn’t see the point of summing things up. Gary liked summaries. In his demonstration, he made very clear the appeal of shaping a conversation into a work of art. That idea stuck with me, though I haven’t figured out how to do the trick yet.

*She believes that flowers feel.*

*Dialogues with Children* is Gary’s most enduring contribution to the philosophy for children movement, and his most perfect book – a fine introduction to philosophic work with young children. It is mostly an account of what kids said, presented with great care and accuracy from recordings. The opening prompts are varied, innovative, and clever. Also, Matthews has pulled off the astonishing trick of writing a helpful introduction to each of the major areas of conventional philosophy, entirely motivated out of students’ conversations – a book that can serve quite well as an intro text and also convey vital information about the attitude, attention, and skills necessary for successful, long-term philosophic work with children.

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My experience with Gareth Matthews illustrates some of the ways he helped bring philosophy into the lives of children around the world. He presented a set of clear alternatives to Matthew Lipman’s approach. His work was more accessible to parents, more open to children’s literature, more free-wheeling in the range of its basic teaching strategies, and more cumulative in its methods than Lipman’s classroom-oriented curriculum. Matthew Lipman was, in important ways, close to Socrates: a provocateur, concerned to build basic philosophic capacity. Gareth Matthews was closer to Aristotle: he wanted to make progress, to build on conversations to construct a plausible view that stood against objections. Together, they built a rich literature and gave generously to the future.
In the Beginning was the Deed: Empowering Children’s Spiritual Consciousness

With an introduction by Juan Carlos Lago Bornstein

Ann Margaret Sharp

January, 2010
San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico

Preface by Juan Carlos Lago Bornstein

The text below is an exponent of the line of work and research conducted by Ann Margaret Sharp in her later years. I was lucky enough to share, just before her death, long periods of time at her home in San Cristobal de las Casas (Chiapas, Mexico), and in those moments of peace and quiet, we could talk and widely discuss the intellectual and vital concerns that we were living, focused, mainly, on the spiritual dimension in our lives and on Philosophy for Children. In particular, her main concern was discussing whether this spiritual dimension can be worked or developed within a Community of Philosophical Inquiry. Above all, what bothered her was whether it was possible to combine a spiritual and religious dimension with one of the basic assumptions in Philosophy for Children, that of fallibilism and of being open to all perspectives and worldviews. She leaves us with the following questions: Is it possible to work a spiritual dimension into Philosophy for Children? If possible, is it necessary? And what advantages or benefits might come from working on this dimension with children? In the article presented here, Ann was trying to respond to these and other similar issues. The text is not not definitive, not finished, it represents a draft in development. In fact, these ideas were shared with members of the international community of Philosophy for Children through presentations and lectures, including an international meeting in March 2010 at Alcalá de Henares (Madrid, Spain). Ann was drawing from these discussions and conversations, to improve upon and complete it. Perhaps by publishing this text we will achieve, as Ann wished, to revive in our work her reflections and to incorporate some skills or competencies in the education of children that will enable them to develop their own spiritual dimension.

Introduction: Philosophy for Children in a Secular Age.

You and I live in a complex world, rich in texture and diversity, affluence, as well as fragmentation, poverty, environmental danger, sexual and racial discrimination and always the threat of nuclear war. It’s a world in which misunderstanding abounds, a world becoming more global and interdependent with every day. Technology has changed our world from separate cultures and nations into an interacting, interdependent organism, in which everything seems to affect everything else. Pluralism abounds. And most of us, at least in the West, would agree that we live in a secular age. It was Nietzsche, in his Gay Science, who saw with amazing foresight what was coming, and it was he who was the first one to announce that “God is dead.” And he also confronted the consequences:

What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither do we move now? Away from all the suns? Is there still any up or down? The tremendous event is still on its way. It is now upon us; and is indeed a tremendous event – that we now stand at the point where we can be present at the birth of a new world or can preside at the destruction of humanity itself. (Kaufmann 1950)

Dostoevsky told us that “If God is dead, anything is possible?” Perhaps he was right, maybe he was using an appeal to alarm in the face of the on-coming death of many organized religious beliefs and the coming of a secular age. Either way, it is to our benefit to investigate the inherent consequences of continuing to live in a secular age. Could it be that the fundamentalists of the major religions are right, that an affirmation of such a secular age would be the undoing of humanity?

Anthropologists tell us that we humans are beings that crave spirituality. They have given the name Homo.

Ann Margaret Sharp was the Associate Director of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children and Director of international Relations. She was the author and co-author of numerous books, articles and curricula in Philosophy for Children and instrumental in spreading Philosophy for Children throughout the world.
religiosus to our ancestors who buried their dead and set flowers and icons besides their graves. We are the creatures who seek answers to existential questions. We need stories to structure and orient our lives in ways that make sense and offer hope, to identify values and ideals, to transcend and interconnect. Fortunately, we have the capacity to transmit our accumulated spiritual understandings to one another and to our children through our language and arts, our behavior and traditions, allowing them to endure and evolve.

Reproductive success is governed by many variables, that have included the evolution of awareness, self-awareness, evaluation, creation of meaning and purpose. Sex and death have in common the fact that they are the two biological aspects of the mysterium tremendum. Some think that mystery has its ultimate meaning in these two human experiences. Both are related to creation and destruction and it is therefore not surprising that in our experience, they are often interwoven in such complex ways. Deep fear of death often equals obsession with sex. Sex is the easiest way to prove our vitality, our youth, our attractiveness and that we are not dead yet. This helps us believe in our potency in ultimate form over nature. As Plato reminded us, sex and procreation is our only way to win some immortality.

Self-consciousness has given rise to the emergence of art, science and spiritual reflection. If we are going to survive on this planet, children must become aware of their environmental context, how things interact and how they should learn then relearn how to interact in a humane and civilized way with people of different cultures and worldviews. In a word, we must change our behavior towards nature itself. Whether we like it or not, we find ourselves the stewards of this planet, with all its attendant responsibilities. But is that enough?

Philosophy for Children assumes that many modern children live in a secular age, an age committed to open inquiry that rejects any one framework as the only true world-view. It assumes that communal philosophical inquiry, mastered in elementary school, provides the dispositions of adult active participation in the governing of society, as well as the on-going attempt of humanity to make sense of themselves and their world. A commitment to fallibilism entails a commitment to the realization that there may be other versions of the world very different from their own. Moreover, these versions, after investigation, may turn out to be different but equally coherent, plausible, reasonable and constructive world views, if not better.

Let’s take a look at this poem by George Russell (A.E.)

THE HERO first thought it
To him 'twas a deed:
To those who retaught it,
A chain on their speed.

The fire that we kindled,
A beacon by night,
When darkness has dwindled
Grows pale in the light.

For life has no glory
Stays long in one dwelling,
And time has no story
That’s true twice in telling.

And only the teaching
That never was spoken
Is worthy thy reaching,
The fountain unbroken

We won’t analyze the poem now, but perhaps at the end of the paper, you would like to look back and see what significance it has to the spiritual dimension of philosophy for children.

The spiritual dimension of philosophy for children is not about justifying truth claims based on experience. Aside from tautologies and truth by definition, it is about the creation of meaning, stories rooted in ordinary human experience that help us make sense of our world. In a community of inquiry everything, including one’s own
procedures, is open to inquiry. With time, each child in a community of inquiry consciously or unconsciously makes a commitment to fallibilism, dialogue and open inquiry. However, even these can be investigated for their meaning. Focus is on collaborative rather than competitive creation of a global understanding of the other – some shared meaning of what it is to be a person living in this pluralistic world.

One of the purposes of engaging others in dialogue about important issues is that it helps children to discover each other’s perspectives, learn about different frames of reference and move towards being more inclusive in our understanding of the world. As children learn to listen and respect one another’s views, they begin to piece together a more comprehensive understanding of their world, much more understanding than can be based solely on one person’s personal experience.

Children in authentic communities of inquiry have discovered something essential: that dialogue about matters of importance can knit us together into groups with a common interest in making sense of the world around them. Cooperative inquiry in which each person contributes to and learns from the others provides each child with a grasp of shared meanings that are progressively more reliable and comprehensive. The children may dispute what benefits they have derived from their efforts, but surely they will have succeeded in a number of areas:

1. Knowledge. They have discovered principles and techniques of reasoning which they didn’t previously know. They have become more familiar with their own ideas as well as the ideas of others.

2. Meaning. The dialogue and activities in a community of inquiry ought to help children have a better understanding of their lives and the lives of other and our relationship to nature in general.

3. Values. The reasoning, social and emotional skills developed by the community enable the children to identify and analyze should be able to perceive thing better, how they would like things to be, how to choose their values more discriminate. And figuring out what is needed to create such a world – in addition to their improved understanding of how the world is. And they can learn how to create new stories that make the global and interdependent world we live in more meaningful, insightful, stimulating and illuminating.

4. Method. The children in such a community will come to adopt a myriad of different procedures for inquiry. They take pain to defend their methods and at times to reformulate it more clearly. And they are always willing to call into question the procedures they use, even when they have been successful. One of the chief merits of this method is that it is self correcting; it is the opposite of dogmatic. (Lipman, Sharp, Oscanyan, 1984, p. 442)

5. Emotions. If Nussbaum is correct that emotions are a form of thought, that means that they are open to inquiry, correctible and justifiable. Nussbaum stresses that compassion and love are two emotions of great spiritual import, analyzing the structure of the emotions and trying to justify them to oneself and others moves children into the dimension of spirituality.

**Question for Consideration**

Is it possible for us to hold on to the scientific worldview while at the same time find ways that this account can call forth spiritual responses, that render depth and meaning to our daily lives on the planet? If, as Thomas Luckmann reminds us in his *Invisible Religion*, spiritual emotions and impulses create meaning which becomes objective in culture and thereby goes beyond
immediate experience, then might the story of nature have the potential to serve as a global ethos that we all share, at least to some degree. This would necessitate an education of perception the fostering of a consciousness of the life-world, the dimension of smells and tastes and chirping rhythms warmed by the sun and shivering seeds and warm breezes, the biosphere as it is experienced and lived from within by the attentive individual who is entirely a part of the world that he or she experiences. (Abrams, 1996, p. 65.) Such perceptions tend to generate a disposition of reverence or gratitude that we exist at all, and that life itself is awesome. The word God has often been used in the past to explain these responses to understanding ourselves in relationship to nature. There was Plato’s theory of ideas and the Good, Aquinas’ theory of a transcendent, supernatural God and Spinoza’s theory of immanence, or the hypothesis that nature is God and God is nature.

There are those who think that since the laws of physics are perfect for the emergence of chemistry and chemistry is perfect for the emergence of life, that it all must have been designed by a God so as to yield life in general and human live in particular. Had any of the laws of physics been anything other than what they are, the universe would have been very different and life as we know it would not have evolved. However, as Ursula Goodenough in her Sacred Depths of Nature reminds us, these things could just as well have happened by chance since, had they occurred any other way, we wouldn’t be here to wonder about them.

There was also a philosophy known as Deism that developed around the time of the Enlightenment positing that a transcendent God created the universe, orchestrating the Big Bang as to author its laws, and then stepped back and allowed things to pursue its own course. For many people of today, however, deism doesn’t work because they can only think of a creator in human, personal terms, and the concept of a human-like creator of neutrinos and atoms has no meaning for them. Nietzsche’s announcement that such a transcendent and personal god is dead makes sense.

Today when people talk about spirituality, they often think of organized religions and some concept of God. They think of the religions of indigenous peoples and of such vanished civilizations as the Aztec, Greece, Egypt ad Persia. We understand now that there were and are many different religions; anthropologists estimate the total in the thousands. They also estimate that there have been thousands of human cultures. Every religion is embedded in its cultural history. Some religions have attempted to cross cultural boundaries and convert the pagans, but even here the invaded cultures put their unmistakable stamp on what they import as one can easily see in the study of the Mayan religions of Chiapas, Mexico.

Ultimately, these thousands of religions addressed two questions: How things are and which things really matter. How things are becomes formulated as a cosmology, how the universe came to be, how humans came to be, what happens after we die, and the causes of evil, tragedy and natural disaster. Which things matter becomes codified as a morality or a set of ethical rules: the Ten Commandments, the Five Pillars of Islam, the Buddhist Vinaya, and the Confucian Five Relations.

The role of religion is usually to integrate the cosmology and the morality to render the cosmological story so rich and compelling that it elicits our allegiance and commitment. As each culture evolves, a unique cosmology and morality appears in its co-evolving religion. For billions of us, back to the first humans, the stories, ceremonies and art associated with our religions of origin are central to our identity.

The realization that we might never have one absolute answer to the big philosophical questions need not send us into despair. On the contrary, it can be quite liberating. One can lay on the beach under the stars and the unseen galaxies and let their vastness wash over us. We can assimilate the scale of the distances, the impermanence, and the mere fact that it all exists. As Wittgenstein so aptly said, we are the creatures who can wonder at the world.

Nature as mystery, and humans as part of nature generates wonder, and such wonder generates awe. Such awe can terrify or liberate. As we allow ourselves to experience cosmic mystery, we might be able to join the mystics in their experience of what they called the divine, and what we might call the spiritual dimension of living. We are the animals that can reenact the spirit, if not the literal words and meaning of the wonderful music of a Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, the poetry of an Eliot, Whitman and Elizabeth Bishop, the novels of a Joyce and the insights of Spinoza.

Could it be that any global understanding needs to begin with a shared world view – a culture-independent accepted agreement as to how things seem to be, at least in one sense? One possibility is the understanding given us by modern science – an account of nature called the story of evolution, including the big bang theory, the formation of the stars and the planets, the origin and evolution of life on this planet, the advent of human
consciousness (awareness) and the resultant evolution of cultures – this is a story, the scientific story, we all might be able to share. Out of this story we might even be able to construct an ecological ethic.

Theologian, Philip Hefner offers a weaving metaphor to understand the situation with which we are faced. The weaver makes first strings the warp, long strong fibers anchored firmly to the loom, and then interweaves the weft, the patterns, the color, the art. Might the story of nature, the epic of evolution serve as our warp, motivating a response of gratitude, wonder and commitment? And then, after that we are free – all of us – to create our own wefts. These would consist of many different versions of stories that help us gain insight into our daily experience. David Hume in “A Treatise of Human Understanding (1740) even goes so far as to offer some criteria for the wefts we can create.. These stories must have a lively, fresh, original conception of the incidents of the daily life of the people. They must enter deeply into the concerns of the people: represent to the people their actions, their characters and friendships. Such stories must be able to evoke a response on the part of the listener or reader. By this I mean intellectual stimulation and illumination. Each version, even an agnostic, atheistic or pantheistic version, must meet certain criteria: coherence, integrity, color, texture, plausibility beauty and meaning. Nelson Goodman calls this designing of the wefts the art of world making. The versions might be expressed in prose, in music, in painting, in expressing in poetry our ultimate concerns. Together they would be akin to Gerard Manley Hopkins’ Immortal Diamond. As they enter culture, these narratives transcend our everyday experience, lend insight and illumination tonour lives and in this sense become eternal.

In the past, the weaving of the spiritual weft was left to prophets, poets, gurus and other visionaries. The sacred texts, stories and ritual that come from these ancestors included claims about nature and its relationship to humanity that, for some of us, in the twenty first century, are no longer plausible. Karen Armstrong observes in A History of God, that organized religion seems irrelevant to many. Our scientific culture educates us to focus our attention on the material world in front of us. Although this method has achieved great results, it has left many of us without a meaningful story to make sense of our world.

Hegel points out that “Socrates, like all heroes who cause new world to rise and inescapably the old ones to disintegrate was experienced as a destroyer, what he stood for is a new form which breaks through and undermines the existing world view. (Spiegelberg, 1964 p 236) Observe that Hegel says it is a new form which Socrates stands for; we are not left simply with nihilism.

Modern Times

In this secular age, many people have not only lost organized religion, but also a sense of spirituality, a sense of belonging to the pervasive mystery of nature. Some have even lost a concern with values such as compassion, forgiveness, benevolence and altruism. Dispensing with God does not have to mean dispensing with spirituality. It’s natural for humans to crave spirituality. However, we live in an age where belief in a god or gods is optional and takes many forms around the world. In many parts of the world, we live in a society that adheres to the separation of church and state. Few parents would want their children being forced to worship someone else’s god. However, there are still many who do want children to develop the spiritual dimension of their personality and become concerned with values such as compassion, kindness, intellectual humility and courage as well as honesty. Without such values, dialogue becomes impossible. Spirituality in the creative sense that I talked about before provides a rare combination of wisdom and playfulness, learning the fine art of self mastery and learning how to distinguish between the real and the illusionary, the important and the trivial. Such spirituality is a form of empowerment, empowerment that has easiness rather than an aggressiveness or forcefulness at its core. To be empowered is to have self mastery our thoughts, feelings and have learned how to identify our emotions as well as justify them to ourselves and others.

It is a fact that today children are beginning to understand that learning how to be at home with our selves in the universe is the prelude to environmental ethics. This is necessary for modern education but not sufficient. There are other aspects of personhood that must also be developed. Children can come to realize that there are many ways to see human beings as empowered persons who can be creative, noble, wise, judgment-makers, even if they are simultaneously part of nature. Any emerging global consciousness must be anchored both in an agreed-upon understanding of who we are as interdependent humans, a part of nature, while at the same time creative storyteller who can create new stories and myths that help us to make sense of our relationship to the world. It is in this sense that empowerment refers to increasing the spirituality of a community of inquiry. It involves elping the powerless to feel participatory, to develop a
confidence in their own capabilities, to speak their own voice. Such empowerment is always associated with the mastery of skills, cognitive, social and emotional and political accompanied by consciousness-raising.

Charles Taylor in his recent work, *The Secular Age*, marks modernity with four characteristics:

- **Inwardness or subjectivity** (Hannah of the Old Testament, Augustine, Pascal, Rousseau, Dewey and many modern philosophers)
- **Affirmation of ordinary daily life** (Joyce, Coetzee)
- **Nature as a moral source** (Spinoza, Emerson, Nietzsche, Whitehead)
- **Realization that there is no one framework or world-views of how the world began and what it means. Rather there are many versions equally plausible, characterized by coherence, integrity and meaning.** This sets the scene for an understanding of religious tolerance in all of its diversity and for a fresh contribution to the current debate of cosmopolitanism and the creation of a planetary ethic. (Nelson Goodman, Martha Nussbaum, Jorgen Habermas.)

What we lose in a Secular Age.

We shouldn’t underestimate what we lose when we give up belief in organized religion. For some, it is substantial. For others, not so. One consequence is that it is possible for many young people to completely ignore traditional organized religions which once were so pervasive of their grandparent’s everyday life.

But that’s not so tragic: it’s a historical fact, something we can come to understand, just as we came to accept the earth is round, and the sun goes around the earth. We are quite able of consciously arriving at a point where we put aside the literal truth of organized religions of the past, while, at the same time trying to preserve and appreciate the spiritual dimension embedded in these ways of understanding, As Elizabeth Bishop tries to tell us, there is an art to losing, an art that we can master.

The art of losing isn’t hard to master; so many things seem filled with the intent to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

What then do we lose living in a secular age? Among some of the things could very well be the following:

- Loss of belief in a supernatural world
- Death of personal God
- Death of personal immortality
- Death of belief in heaven and hell
- Death of organized religion
- Loss of notion of absolute certainty or truth replaced with notion like warranted acceptability.

The Gains of a Secular Age

Living in a pluralistic world rich in diversity, many stories that offer meaning to different peoples in figuring out their relationship to the world of nature.

- Re-formulation of what we mean by knowing, understanding and valuing,
- Reconstruction of what we mean by truth, and meaning.
- Consciousness of interdependence of all that is.
- A basis for cosmopolitanism and respect of the other
- Commitment to fallibilism and self correction
- Creation of new values, customs and traditions.
- Creation of new myths, rituals
- Preservation of old values, customs, ideals, myths and rituals continue to hold meaning for people.
- Renewed appreciation for the complex interdependence between humanity and nature.

Educating for Spiritual Consciousness

It was Goethe who wrote, “*In the beginning was the deed*”. And it was The Fourth Gospel that begins with the words, “*In the beginning was the word.*” And it was Wittgenstein who advised us to focus on how we think, how we speak and how we interact with all of nature if we want to taste of the spiritual dimension of experience? The question remains, “How do you help children become aware of the spiritual dimension of experience, and the answer has few words but of course is not simple: by converting traditional classrooms throughout the world into classroom communities of philosophical inquiry in which teachers would be prepared to foster communal dialogical and inquiring practice.

Such behavior is complex as we see from the
myriad of literature appearing in the last decade focusing on the intricacies of dialogical inquiry. We should remember that the term dialogical inquiry itself derives from logos meaning, “word” and dia, meaning through. Some have described authentic dialogue as stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us out of which emerges some new, creative understanding. In a dialogue nobody is trying to win. This shared meaning is the glue that has the potential to hold people together. David Bohm in his little but powerful book, On Dialogue, highlights how the creation of new shared meaning is aimed at the entire communal thought process and changes the way thought itself occurs when thinking as a group. As Vygotsky reminds us, it is as if we enter another dimension. It is not that there is this little change or this diversity of pattern, but the whole thought process itself works in a different way when people think together in community. Such a process is not purely cognitive, it involves perceptions, emotions, creativity and an ever growing sensitivity to the nuances of the issue under investigation.

Someone in the classroom gets an idea, somebody else builds on it either by supporting it or giving a counter example, and somebody else gives an alternative position which is inclusive of the counter-example. Then another child points out an assumption that the group as a whole is making or asks for a reason. The thought flows among the participants rather than one person trying to convince the others, or one person directing the entire dialogue. As the children begin to understand each other, (their ideas, their feelings, their values, what they really care about), they begin to not only to trust each other, but to internalize the moves that the other children seem to make so easily: detecting faulty assumptions, asking for consequences, identifying emotions and asking for justifications.

The object isn’t to win arguments or merely exchange points of views. Rather it is to understand and in so doing to create something new – something that didn’t exist before, an understanding of the issue under discussion in a novel way. To do this, children have to learn how, listen carefully, not just to words but to attend to body language, facial expression, the words behind the words and try to figure out what they mean. Out of these shared process new constructions of meaning emerge. A different kind of consciousness starts to characterize the group. The children are proceeding differently than at first, and they become very conscious of it: they can identify the differences and evaluate these differences on the inquiry.

Communal inquiry is not a mob where the collective mind takes over. Rather, it is something between each child and the group. It moves between the children themselves and teacher as it struggles for clarity in expression, coherence and meaning. Rather than a debate is analogous to a small orchestra who at first are trying to master the composition, but at a certain point have internalized the score to such a point that they can begin to improvise their interpretations of what the score means and how it relates to our shared lived experience. As one fourth grader told me one dreary, rainy afternoon, “It's like a miracle. Walt Whitman once wrote that “every hour of the light and dark is a miracle. Every cubic inch of space is a miracle.”

The miracle of dialogical inquiry is natural rather than a supernatural event, perennial rather than peculiar, comprising, rather than transcending, and it could be the order of things in every classroom in the world (Kirschner, 2001, p. 135.)

**Conclusion**

Empowered children understand the myriad of skills one needs in making better judgments. They have more options from which to make their choices. They have a sense that they have some control of that which impact on their life. Empowerment can be attained in many ways: one such way is transforming the traditional classroom into communities of inquiry here children learn to articulate their own ideas, to think for themselves and to build on the ideas of others. In time such children begin to distinguish the real from the illusionary, the fake from the authentic, the ruse from the real thing. So yes there is an empowering spiritual dimension to philosophy for children. This dimension is embedded in the procedures, practices and everyday behavior of the community as they struggle to understand themselves and other, to correct and self correct their procedures and to take a creative part in creating the spiritual stories that will help them make sense of their lives.

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Peirce Charles Sanders, Fixation of Belief New York: 1877)


ABSTRACT

Born in 1923 and recently deceased after a long struggle with Parkinson’s Disease, Matthew Lipman wrote this brief but detailed autobiography just before his illness made it impossible to write any more. It begins with memories of earliest childhood and his preoccupation with the possibility of being able to fly; moves through the years in which his family struggled with the effects of the Great Depression, through his service in the military during World War II, his discovery of the joy and beauty of philosophy, his quick academic rise at Columbia University, his sojourn in Paris, and his early and later career. “I feel for philosophy,” he writes in the last paragraph of this, his last book, “what an astronaut might feel at the sight of the earth’s sphere, all green and brown and blue, as it appears from a space station.” He then expresses the hope that Philosophy for Children “will build a better and more reasonable world for our children and their children to inhabit: a world that looks as beautiful from across the street as it does from the distance of space.” (170) Lipman’s memoir is a modest testimony to an extraordinary life-trajectory, and an exemplification of the philosopher as one with the form of double-vision—seeing life from outer space and from across the street—that is perhaps philosophy’s most profound vocation.

Matthew Lipman’s recent autobiography begins with his first memory. He is not yet two years old. He is standing on the top of the staircase, staring at the landing below:

The staircase has a carpet on it, and on the landing below, there is a bookcase with a glass door. I stand with my feet even with the front edge of the top step. I slide one foot out a bit. Now I begin to slide the other foot forward. With one hand on the banister, I edge forward again. I try to keep my balance, but suddenly I’m tumbling forward, down the steps, wailing with frustration. My experiment hasn’t worked! I didn’t fly! When my father comes home for supper, my mother shows him the door of the smashed bookcase—a casualty of my fall. My mother scolds me. My father fixes the door. . . . Lots of nights I have the same sort of dream—of flying through the air on my tricycle. In my dream everyone looks up at me with admiration. (1)

After this initial “defining incident,” as he calls it, the flying motif recurs; it appears at least four times, but turns with each successive incident closer to vertigo. At eight, he is regularly driving his teacher to distraction by attempting to climb out a second story window onto a fire escape. As a teenager in Hebrew school, he jumps out of a first floor classroom, “hitting my head on the window frame and making a loud ‘CRACK’. I giggled and ran home, not sustaining any great injury—but the Rabbi was furious.” (17) At college age, his fledgling university career interrupted by that “house of horrors” called World War II, the eighteen year old enters basic training, and finds himself climbing a steep bluff in Northern California, in single file with other soldiers in training, and tormented by the “option” of jumping off the ledge of the sheer face of the cliff. He wants to jump but he’s terrified of it too. Partly, he thinks that if he jumped he would be serving his comrades, whom he is slowing down due to his physical distress. And finally, as the “last good war” is ending and he, the Mail Clerk and Company Clerk of Company E, finds himself, per tourist, on the pinnacle of the steeple of the Bavarian Cathedral of Ulm, driven to ascend to a peak that terrifies him, and fighting again with the urge to jump.

The golden thread of these incidents—in which the desire to fly is, after its first frustration as a toddler, turned in the face of experience to the fear, not just of falling,
but of jumping, as if pushed by an invisible hand, to his death—is a mysterious theme in Lipman’s narrative of his early life, embodying some deep site of contradiction. In each case, he says, “a complicating factor was my tendency to ‘forget’ or ‘repress’ my having chosen to place myself on the very brink of the elevated location, so that in effect I was challenging myself or defying myself to throw myself off.” And the thread leads, in a surprising contretemps of symbolic mirroring and correspondence, to the experience of philosophy—but it is philosophy that resolves it. He has known from the age of two that he cannot fly, but the desire to fly remains in its negation—as a death wish—until he encounters that noble preoccupation, which, he finds, takes him to the heights without the danger of self-immolation. On leave in England during the conflict, he comes across a copy of Spinoza’s Ethics in “a little London book store.” The intellectually voracious twenty-year old struggles through it, and “... when I’d finally finished it, it was like reaching the top of a great mountain and looking down, seeing the countryside stretching out in every direction.” (79)

Later, Lipman specifically connects the experience of reading Spinoza with that of climbing the Cathedral at Ulm, which had in fact been a terrifying one (“The staircase spiraled more and more tightly around the central column, while the open casements pressed in more and more closely as one mounted” (48)); but here, on the summit to which Spinoza’s Ethics leads him (amor Dei intellectualis!), his love and fear of heights is transformed. Philosophy, he discovers, is connected with the high places, because you can see so far from there, and doing philosophy is a kind of flying—not falling, but flying. It’s the eye flying, the mind flying over the world, seized, tantalized by the possibility of “adequate knowledge,” the epistemological panopticon, the noetic rapture, the Archimedean point. “I was magnetized by the idea,” Lipman writes,

But philosophy did more than just deliver Lipman from a convoluted death wish. In fact in the space of a few pages chronicling his postwar entry into Columbia University as a student on the GI Bill, he gushes with images, metaphors and exultations about his entry onto this royal road. It provided him (“to some degree”) with the “objective understanding of the world” that he was seeking. “It opened my view of things,” (59) he says, “like discovering a camera that produced pictures that were so much more beautiful and clear than anything I’d ever seen.” (107) It was “like learning to speak and write in a different language, it was a language of languages”—not just the possibility of an Archimedean point, but a Rosetta Stone. It was a container for “many forms of logic that could be dissolved in the language all of us spoke.” (60) It also fulfilled, he confides, his socially “ambitious side”—it was a way of “taking the conversation to a higher level” by invoking, not just judgments about an artistic event, but calling for the criteria for those judgments. It was a form of social power that he, always the practical idealist intent on “effecting real change in the world,” (105) could respect.

This is a child’s love of philosophy—always as if he had just discovered it, in its beauty and power, and its usefulness. One of its first uses was to provide a framework for addressing the problematic that his youthful experience of WW II had posed him, the underlying elements of which I interpret as a binary: 1) the extraordinary cruelty, stupidity, immorality, extravagant wastefulness and the malicious, gratuitous destructiveness of humans at war, which inspired in him, he says, a “lifelong horror . . . with regard to cruelty and violence,” and a smoldering if usually hidden contempt for the ignorant hypocrisy that sanctions it; and 2) the extraordinary optimism and generosity of a generation and a nation that could claim the benefits of winning the only (it was thought) “just war” of the century—the optimism of US empire in ascendance. He had left home a child of parents in straightened circumstances—condemned by the Depression to a financial failure that had no logical relationship to his father’s hard work, intelligence, tenacity and inventiveness (his father was in fact, like him, an inventor), and with no money to enroll in the school he longed to attend, Columbia. He returned home in the euphoric national aftermath with a free ticket to Columbia through the GI Bill—a doctoral degree if he could do it all in less than five years, which he did.

The first element of the problematic—the war and its aftereffects—encouraged in him a desire to “effect real change in the world,” to live as much as possible
for the “exemplary act,” to pursue that life of “principled practicality” which he identifies as his father’s psychological patrimony. So, when he married an African American woman, a student like himself (“I had fallen in love with beautiful Wynona”) in the Paris City Hall in 1952, he (and she) could be considered to have been asserting the cash value of the victory over fascism. “I felt,” he writes, “that somehow or other, sooner or later, I would have to take the initiative and not wait for others to exemplify what needed to be done.” (80) The second element provided him with an environment of dramatic felt opportunity, a sort of cultural equivalent of the “spoils of war” which, after so much youthful picaresque wandering in the chaotic, high-jinx global theatre of war, bolstered his trust in his own capacity, not only to survive, but to prevail—a trust in his luck.

As a young child, he was preoccupied with flying. In middle childhood “I preferred play to study, and there were lots of opportunities to play” (9) in the small southern New Jersey Russian Jewish middle-class immigrant town of Woodbine, where his father owned and ran the machine shop until the Depression brought him down. In his high school years, “although I was the youngest in my class, I was the leader in mischief,” (7) and was in fact expelled from school in his senior year three weeks before graduation because “I caroused a bit too much, and the principal of the high school, Mr. Foley, interpreted my behavior as uncooperative to the point of being defiant” (29) His aunt, influential in the little town, and with whom he was living temporarily, managed to fix things up with the principal in time for the insouciant carouser to receive his diploma, but with grades “unimpressive” enough to deny him acceptance to Rutgers. Then, in his twentieth year, came the massive interruption of total war on foreign soil, in which he participated as a humble Company E, 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment clerk.

Lipman characterizes himself as an “unhero” in WW II—the one who found a spot away from the flying bullets, and who decided half way through the conflict that he would rather not load his rifle at all. He refers to himself at various points in the narrative of his own youth as stoic, modest, diffident, phlegmatic, shy, a novice, a naïf of sorts, with elements of a “passive self-destructiveness,” whose gifts surprise even him, and whose success always feels at least partially undeserved. His powerful analytic skills are projected, not onto himself or his relationships, but onto the world of philosophy and art.

Given how his life turned out, I would suggest that Lipman’s self-narrative is organized, not just around a response to the problematic put to him by his participation in a world war, but by a larger, archetypal narrative, not of the unhero, but of the Hero, interlaced with those of the Fool—for the two narrative tropes are often found together in interplay. The Fool, who is fully thematized in Tarot, is, in Russian and German folk and fairy tale, the youngest of three sons, which Lipman was. The Hero often has an early wound, in Lipman’s case the early onset and unnatural progress throughout his childhood of myopia, which did not stop him from devouring his parents’ bookshelf—he “repeatedly reread” the ten-volume sets of Mark Twain and Edgar Allen Poe, and read The Education of Henry Adams five times over—or lugging a duffel bag full of his favorite books and a typewriter all over Europe for four years.

The Hero encounters early trials. Lipman’s family was threatened by bankruptcy, foreclosure, and his father’s heart attack in his mid-childhood. At the moment he was poised to enter college, the war struck. The Fool sets forth with boundless but vague enthusiasm, and overcomes danger and mishap through pure and bumbling innocence and a good heart. He is unaware of the hardships he will face as he ventures out into the world to learn its lessons. The Hero defies fate and necessity in the search for his destiny, which ultimately comes from within. Lipman’s search was exemplified in his insatiable thirst for the “wealth” of the “enriched experience” of poetry, the novel, philosophy, music, art, courses, intellectual friendships. The Fool comes before kings, always somewhat
improbably. So Lipman, a young, slightly shy man with boundless enthusiasm and a gargantuan capacity for intellectual work, secures a Fulbright for post-doctoral work after Columbia, travels to Paris (he meets Wynona on the boat, and they bond immediately) and encounters Madame Marc Chagall (the painter is away at the time). She invites him back, to dine with her “lively, Renoir-like family.” He lets the opportunity pass—“due, I have since reflected, to my own shyness rather than to any lack of friendliness on the family’s part”—and thus misses the opportunity for meeting the eminent painter himself. He meets Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard, and multiple other prominent artists, poets and intellectuals. Merleau-Ponty, who has taken notice of one of his papers, invites him to a reception, where the Fool, like Parceval in the home of the Fisher King, meets the great man’s beautiful young niece, whom, he suspects,

had been given the job of making me feel comfortable at the soiree. It seemed that the perfect evening was unfolding right before my eyes and that I was unable to keep up with it. Suddenly I felt embarrassed by my crude French, and by my soiled, wrinkled clothes. I wanted desperately to stay and talk some more, or at least find out from my beautiful hostess whether I could see her another time. But all I managed to do was to mumble a hastily invented excuse and, despite her efforts to persuade me to stay, to flee. . . . When at last I was in a situation where the culture I wanted to possess wanted to give itself over to me, and even paraded its feminine beauty for me to see, I could do nothing with polish or cleverness or charm.

After two years in Paris, the Hero—this modest, deeply ambitious young Jewish intellectual from the hinterlands of New Jersey, son of gritty, principled, cultured, inventive immigrants intent on assimilation, labors in the Augean Stables of academia in greater New York for the next decade and a half as in a series of untenured positions—at the Columbia College of Pharmacy, the Mannes School of Music, City College of New York, and Brooklyn College—writing slightly labored philosophy in his work on aesthetics, at which he doesn’t consider himself particularly talented (“I had no great confidence in myself as a traditional philosopher”). He turns down offers from Reed College and the University of Arkansas. “I didn’t want to leave the city,” he explains, “because it seemed to me doubtful that an interracial marriage could flourish outside New York at that time. As a result, the out-of-state offers gradually trickled away.” In the course of time, he secures an assistant professor position in the Philosophy Department of the Columbia College of Pharmacy, which he supplements by teaching a course in the well-known general education course for undergraduates, Contemporary Civilization, in Columbia College proper, which he does for eight years, and a logic course at various sites in the city, all to make ends meet.

At the point of the realization of his dream of assuming a permanent position in the Philosophy Department of Columbia—the sanctum of his youthful scholarship, home of the very John Dewey, author of the first philosophical work he had every read and with whom he had formed a tenuous, diffident friendship during his doctoral period (he sent Dewey his dissertation)—on the verge of the conventional success he had labored for so long for, the Hero undergoes a crisis. He and Wynona had by then settled in Montclair, NJ, where they moved when she found a high school teaching job there. Pushed to the tipping point by commuter life, by the necessity of teaching adjunct courses in addition to his now tenured post at the College of Pharmacy (“The stress of driving each day from Montclair and rushing around the city was slowly wearing me down”), by the assumption of new parenting responsibilities when Wynona got involved in New Jersey politics—she was to become a New Jersey State Senator, a post that she held for thirty years—and beset increasingly by his ever-felt need “to make a meaningful contribution to the world”—he slips on an icy sidewalk and breaks his ankle while on a stroll with his three year old son.

His ankle is put in a cast and he is put on crutches. While being given training in the use of the crutches, he loses his balance, falls, and sprains his back. He spends five days in the hospital, where he reads Stendhal’s The Red and the Black. Seized by the “breathtaking moment” in which the hero, Julian Sorel, risks his life by seizing his lover’s hand while her brute of a husband sits nearby with a gun, Lipman realizes, he says, that

I too must change my life—not some little bit of it, but change it as a whole. It must be understood that I was not despondent over anything—Wynona and I were getting along well, I devoted any leftover time I had to working in her campaigns, the kids were a delight, and I enjoyed my own teaching in New York. Nevertheless, I strangely thought, this cannot go on. I must change my life. Was it something I’d read in Rilke or Gide or Camus?
It did not matter. Things could not go on as they were. Either my life’s meanings were the wrong meanings for me or else my life had no meaning at all. I was unhappy with my happiness. I must make a fresh start, I neurotically continued. But the only fresh beginning I could think of making was to do something more (which would be the down side of a new beginning) but also something different (which would be the up side of such a new beginning). (98)

This is probably as close to the voice of God sounding within a person as one could find in postwar secular academic Greater New York, yet Lipman—who from childhood was “intellectually comfortable” without the sense of deity (which foundered in the young child’s mind on the notion of omniscience), and whose parents, on his account, attended synagogue “not only because it was expected of them, but because it added a touch of mystery and elegance to their lives” (8)—is content to reference the grand European existentialist tradition in his description of this profound turn. There remains, however, the question of exactly what it was that moved him to realize this imperative of “something different” in the construction of a combination of elementary school curriculum and pedagogy both so obvious and so novel that in one stroke it lays a framework for a radically new theory of education. The educational praxis that emerged from Lipman’s venture, for all its apparent staid simplicity, operationalizes a postcolonial standpoint epistemology vis a vis childhood and children, pulls the linchpin that holds in place the school as ideological state apparatus, and empowers the elementary classroom as a primary site for democratic theory and practice.

Certainly childhood has had many interlocutors, known and unknown, in the classroom or out of it. Bronson Alcott, Tolstoy, Kornei Chukovsky, George Dennison, John Holt to name a few, but not Peirce, not Dewey in particular, not Lipman’s mentors Meyer Shapiro and Justus Buchler—not his intellectual heroes. Where are the models in his life for such a bold undertaking? When questioned about his predecessors, those to whom he is intellectual heir, Lipman tended to cite no lineage. If he had done this and only this, Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery would be nothing more than a charming curiosity in Western literature, most likely all but forgotten. But the novel is the beginning of that change of life that has called him, and the first weapon with which the Hero ventured forth into the both hidebound and treacherous terrain of American education. Although Lipman’s autobiographical style is characteristically both modest
and delicately ironic, even so there is a felt breathlessness in his account of leaving forever the academic prize of the Columbia College Philosophy Department that was at that very moment—the moment of his crisis—within sight. Instead, he takes a job at a rather provincial normal school—Montclair State College—because they promise support for his project, and spends the next nearly forty years gathering collaborators and colleagues around him, writing more novels, writing manuals for each that are in fact just huge books of philosophical questions, developing a post-Socratic pedagogy for facilitating communal conversation of the novels in classrooms (I was determined to be “radically inventive. . . Is a new pedagogy needed? Invent it!”) (116), organizing pilot and research projects, initiating, organizing and maintaining actual Philosophy for Children programs in local and national schools, seeking and obtaining grants, lobbying influential figures in education and philosophy, writing and editing multiple volumes on theory, singlehandedly founding and editing a journal dedicated to Philosophy for Children, organizing conferences, developing academic programs, organizing summer training retreats (the pedagogy of which is exactly the pedagogy that will be used with children—viz. reading and discussing the philosophical topics in the novels together, just as the children do in the classroom), hosting international students and collaborators, and going before the American Philosophical Association year after year to argue the case for children doing philosophy with snobbish and skeptical academic philosophers, who mostly turn a deaf ear.

He drove forward continuously, tirelessly, spending the first ten years in a trailer on the edge of campus, then, as the project prospered, moving the operation to a small two-story house on the other edge—Alderice House, which became the internationally known, central site of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, with its kitchen, its resident cat Ellie (which Lipman observed, pampered, and communed with), its seminar room and handful of offices. All through the seventies, eighties and nineties, Alderice House served as a cozy, communal gathering place for the continual stream of visiting scholars and graduate students—philosophers, educationalists and everywhere in between, at least half of them international—drawn to Lipman’s idea and to his own humane magnetism as if by an invisible melody. One had the impression that each new wandering scholar who arrived at the door of Alderice House had the same light in his or her eyes—was drawn by the same inquiry, whatever the combination of its three elements—philosophy, childhood, and education.

But the biographical question remains: why children and philosophy? What pushed him to that radical reconstruction of philosophy as dialogue, and dialogue, moreover, among children? What led him to choose childhood as the site for this radical democratization of the discipline? One senses Lipman asking this very question of himself in this book, with typical economy and modest understatement. His approach to the question is as refined, allusive and illusive, as befits a philosopher reflecting on his life at a late date, and also oddly sparse. Here is a passionate scholar who has no particular interest in developmental psychology, genetic epistemology, cognitive development, systematic analysis of children’s thinking, or the history of education, who brings into being a movement that, for those who embrace it, provides, not just insight but unlimited data into all those fields, and illuminates in one stroke the very core of the progressive tradition in education. As stated simply and eloquently in his first theoretical book on the subject, Philosophy in the Classroom, it suggests a revolution in education that replaces the goal of “learning” with the goal of “meaning.” It results in a classroom methodology—dubbed by him community of inquiry—that serves to operationalize the call from Freire for dialogue as the fundamental fulcrum of educational theory and practice. As the one who develops Dewey to the point where his thought is focused enough to meet Freire, Lipman’s work represents the methodological bridge between the two most influential philosophers of education of the 20th century.

What made him do it? Was it the wonder stirred by encounters with young children—for example the two-year old girl in the Jardin de Luxembourg—where he often strolled, sat, read, and eavesdropped during his “two wonderful years of adventure” in Paris—who, when commanded by her parents to hide herself (“Cache-toi!” they told her), squeezed her eyes shut? (70) Was it the concern for the education of his two young children, which, he says, took up “a considerable part of my thinking” in the early to mid sixties? Was it reading Hannah Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock” which “first stirred me deeply on the issue of children’s educational entitlements”? (94). Or his conversations with the eminent aesthetician Rudolph Arnheim about children’s art as they strolled in the bucolic surroundings of Sarah Laurence, where both were visiting professors? Was it teaching third graders in Sunday School at the Montclair Unitarian Church, where he attended with his bi-racial family? Was it his encounter with an exhibition
of art by children from Summerhill School that he visited at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in the late 60’s, where his eyes were opened to “a depth that I hadn’t thought children were capable of,” where he saw “their creative processes as a form of thinking,” where he thought, “Could there not be certain topics on which children’s thinking approached or perhaps even exceeded the thinking of adults?” Or was it, finally, the 60’s themselves—that torturous epoch, slashed, scarred and repeatedly astonished by internecine violence and heady social experiment—that period of wrenching cultural change, when the deep angst, rage, longing, and felt meaninglessness of mainstream American culture could no longer be contained by what seemed overwhelming forces of repression—that secreted in him, as the decade “slouched and stumbled along” (107), a response to his own times that was worthy of his own “strange confidence” and “chronic optimism”? (159)

I couldn’t help reflecting on whether there might be an opportunity, not for microscopic half-measures but for dramatic across-the-board educational changes that would affect not only the college students of tomorrow, but the professors of the day after tomorrow as well. What was needed, I thought, was an education that made children more reasonable and more capable of exercising good judgment. (107)

Perhaps it was a felt sense, in the slow burn that was the sixties, that the repression of affect, of creativity, of social conscience and autonomous thinking that announced itself everywhere around him, and which had suddenly become startingly, even grotesquely clear in a new post-colonial age, was somehow maintained through its capacity to hoodwink children; everybody to be sure, but children first of all. In this first stage of what appears in retrospect as almost an alchemical process, Lipman was disabused of his “gradualist,” “melioristic tendencies” vis a vis educational reform by the acrimonious events of the Columbia student riots of 1968. They jolted him into the conviction that “A whole new plan, a whole new practice, a whole new theory—all of these had to be drawn up and set in place virtually instantaneously.” He was “deeply moved,” he found, “by how children suffer, and how little they can do about it.” He began, he recounts, to “see the importance of freedom of inquiry, not simply for teachers, but for children as well. “The academic rights that college faculty enjoyed were not extended to children in the schools, and I was coming to realize how badly something of the sort was needed. What could be done, I wondered, to help children not merely to think, but to think for themselves?”

It was, in other words, not just the lure of children’s epistemological curiosity and their capacity for philosophical play that drew Lipman, but a genuine political concern. A kernel of democratic activism is hidden in the seemingly purely academic activity of P4C, and has been there since it was an idea in the mind of its maker—indeed, this implicit radicalism also shone in the eyes of those who showed up at Alderice House. The Hero’s felt need to “contribute,” to do something “radical,” combined with his nascent sense that the child is in many ways an oppressed and marginalized class led him to a project of educational reconstruction which “I hadn’t the least doubt . . . would have to be radical.” (112) “Education would have to mean something new and different, and the place to begin couldn’t be the adult world—the teacher, the professor, or the parent—for none of these were spoiling for a fight. It would have to come from one questioning layer of the social system—the child . . . “ (110) He would invent a curriculum and a pedagogy designed to protect children “against ambiguity and vagueness in the classroom, since this would in turn protect them from manipulative propaganda and advertising,” (108) and thereby provide them with the tools necessary to reconstruct their relation to the adult world, and later, the adult world itself.

Lipman’s alchemical project led, with characteristic fruitfulness, in four related directions: the practice of philosophy for children, which he invented, and which spontaneously presents a challenge as startling as was Rousseau’s two hundred years before to a second field, philosophy for education. Third, it led to a realm of theory called philosophy of childhood, upon which the practice of P4C is a kind of action-meditation, prompting adults as it does to reflect on children’s differences from and similarities to adults at the same time, and in the same discursive space. Although philosophy of childhood had long been present in literary criticism, and in certain themes in phenomenology (during his Parisian post-doc idyll, Lipman attended one or two of Merleau-Ponty’s lectures on child psychology at the Sorbonne), Lipman’s philosophy of education forced an encounter with philosophy of childhood that skirted those disciplines—cognitive and developmental psychology and sociology—that have long held it in their positivist thrall. Finally, his praxis also implicitly challenged those accounts of children’s philosophies, paradigmatically represented by Piaget’s The Child’s Conception of the World, which
represent childhood epistemology as evidence for various genetic and epigenetic stage-based theories of cognitive development, the most notoriously global of which is Recapitulation Theory.

Philosophy of childhood makes its first appearance in a fascinating collection of contemporary essays and historical texts gathered into a special double issue of *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*—the journal that he originated and personally maintained for nearly thirty years, and which has hardly a mention in this book. In the course of his career, Lipman left it to University of Massachusetts philosophy professor Gareth Matthews to articulate the philosophical view of the child that he assumed, and concentrated on the pursuit of the practice of actually writing for children and, in his theoretical texts, in advocacy of philosophy as an elementary school curriculum standard. Matthews attempted to articulate a critique, from a philosophical point of view, of Piaget’s view of children that had persuaded the mainstream educational establishment that they could not reason; to make the argument for children as moral thinkers that Kohlberg, Piaget’s intellectual disciple, had discredited through an overly simplistic developmental stage theory; and to offer clear evidence for the epistemological and metaphysical curiosity of children.

Lipman’s memories of his own childhood, as fragmentary as they are and as modestly presented, have the vividness of “screen” memories, in the post-Freudian sense of being symbols of all the depths of childhood experience—incidents containing a whole world of primeval experience. In brief, laconic strokes, he evokes the small town world of untrammelled, almost continuous, unsupervised outdoor child’s play (now considered an idyll reserved for past generations), and provides us a child’s view of the Promethean energy of his father’s machine shop, where he loved to spend time after school. There, “A huge electric motor empowered a ceiling-high shaft and wheels, which were then connected by leather belts to the individual machines,” and the young child “never tired of watching the blue-hot curls of metal spin off these cutting and shaping tools,” or marveling at the “sheer awesomeness” of his father—who was gentle and good humored at home—working at his forge, “heating a piece of metal and then bending and shaping it with his heavy hammer at his anvil.”

Reading these quietly glowing shards of memory, one cannot help but feel, given what came after, that Lipman’s love of philosophy, which drew him like a Siren song from his late teenage years, is based at least in part on its potential to conserve childhood. Perhaps what he called the “strange path” (23) of philosophy was for Lipman—as Rilke said of artists—a way of remaining a child, in the sense of always being at or near some beginning, of beginning again, which vocationally translates into a love for inquiry, of never presuming an end to inquiry--of, as many children are, being in a certain way haunted by wonder. Childhood is also a representation of the unity of being and existence—of the capacity to act that Lipman demonstrated paradigmatically in the initiation and fulfillment of his project. Once he had his task, the Hero worked with complete single-mindedness, with the whole dedication of one whose work is indistinguishable from his play. Here the principled practicality that he admired in his father and adopted for his own modus vivendi assumes exemplary form. “Purity of will,” says Kierkegaard, “is to will one thing.” Childhood does so effortlessly—as, it appears, did Lipman.

There are other narrative dimensions of this book of sketches, intriguing anecdotes, and self-questioning musings that invite a speculative glance—narratives of race, ethnicity and class, for example, with which his frank account of a small town southern New Jersey Jewish immigrant town is redolent. More mysterious, and no doubt more difficult to interpret, are the sudden, momentary appearances, throughout his youthful wanderings in the global theatre of war, of “special” women. These too have the qualities of screen memories, appearing as they do with a startling, archetypal brightness, each brief encounter delivered with a careful restraint that only enhances their romantic force. For example, during his first months in the army, while camped in a mountain bivouac in California, he hitchhikes to Los Angeles, and is “given a lengthy ride by a charming woman driver with whom I had a stimulating conversation.” (26) On another weekend in Los Angeles, he takes the bus back to camp instead of hitchhiking:

I arrived early for the bus—the first, in fact, in a small queue, and I had my choice of seats, choosing a window seat halfway down the aisle. A moment later a young woman got on who was about my age (20) and was exceptionally attractive. She paused a moment to survey what seats were available, and then came down the aisle and sat with me. I had had a number of experiences attesting to the hospitable nature of Californians, but this exceeded all expectations. We almost immediately turned to each other and began to talk. She told me she would be getting...
off in Santa Barbara. I said nothing, but when
the bus stopped at Santa Barbara, I couldn’t help
thinking about what would happen if I went
AWOL and got off with her. (26)

These women continue to appear throughout wartime,
figures each of whom one feels has been sent to pay the
shy, courtly Parceval a mysteriously admonitory visit. In
the last few weeks of the war, for example, while billeted
in a small German town,

I found a young woman staring at me and asking
if we could talk. She took me into her house and
showed me a framed photograph of her husband.
What was startling was that her husband and
I looked almost identical. She hadn’t heard
from him for some years: he was a soldier on
the Eastern front. She was quite shaken by the
experience of seeing me. Had our orders not
suddenly changed and we had to move out,
I would like to have stayed for a while longer.
Before leaving, I looked again at the photograph.
The resemblance was indeed uncanny. Maybe he
eventually returned home to his attractive young
wife and children and is at this moment writing
his memoirs.

Perhaps in one sense these fragments are brief
evocations of the erotic economy of wartime; when
the distance between life and death has narrowed, the
natural mistrust between the sexes narrows as well. In
the autobiography as mythic narrative, they signal the
appearance of the Goddess--the Muse--to the gifted,
starry eyed one, the Fool who will be transformed into
the Hero through the unification of his will.

As befits Lipman’s dogged secularism, his insistence on Ockham’s
razor in all situations, they are offered with a matter of
factness that creates a startling contrast. If they are so
matter of fact, why would they be so vividly remembered
or remembered at all, 60 years later?

Equally distinctive are his rather circumspect accounts
of his dark urges or refusals. In 1950 he was, he recounts,
in a “dismal period” that was exacerbated  by the advent
of a war (the Korean) that he thought the US had no business
waging, combined with a “disastrous” (read, he was
jumped by his committee) doctoral dissertation defense,
which led him to re-write the whole thing, even though
he was asked only to revise the introduction. Having lost
respect for the committee, he filed the revised work in
the Columbia Library without even informing his chair.

Later, his chair stopped him in the hall and apologized,
and Dewey wrote him a consolatory note: “It never
seemed right to me to use the beliefs of the faculty as a
measure of a student’s work.”

During this period he had, he says, “a series of
encounters, which were less than admirable, with certain
women in my life.” If there is any theme that characterizes
them, it would be a sort of seizure of troll-like irritation, a
sudden breakthrough of the negative, which is perhaps the
shadow side of the energy implicit in the unity of the will,
the purposeful, unyielding work on his vocation which
also characterizes him. Indeed, he alludes throughout the
book, to felt moments of inversion, rebellion, arrogance
and defiant anti-realism, and even a low-grade emotional
cruelty, or indifference.

In one incident, he “had established an enjoyable
friendship with a young woman who was also a graduate
student in philosophy.” She has decided to marry a law
student whom she thinks will provide her with a financial
security that Lipman will not. Lipman argues repeatedly
with her from the point of view of good reasons (not
his own desire, apparently), she ends by changing her
mind and breaking off the engagement, and he, in turn,
brusquely informs her that he “doesn’t wish to continue
our relationship.” In another, he is working at the
Columbia bookstore,

where I spent many hours chatting with a very
attractive clerk: an anthropology major, as
was her boyfriend. I think I must have envied
them their secure, stable relationship, because
I remember her saying she liked Prokofiev, so
I sent her a recording of his violin Concerto,
lacking any indication who it was from. When
she questioned me as to who might have sent it to
her, I steadfastly denied having had anything to do
with the matter. I suppose the pleasure I took was
in her speculations that she might have a secret
admirer. In the fall of 1950, which I was spending
in France on a Fulbright scholarship, I received
a pleasant letter from her, which I answered as
gruffly as an old bear. She had never done me the
least bit of harm, and my cantankerousness was
totally undeserved. (64)

These incidents have the aura of raw youth—the
involuntary, desire-driven feinting and parrying and
colliding of the sexes in the social world of Ivy League
twenty-somethings. One wonders, then, why they
burn so in his memory that they are subjects for a late
confessional, while, on the other hand, he recounts the history of his thirty year relationship with his wife Wynona with such brevity and aplomb. As it was, Wynona became a New Jersey State Senator, which required her moving to Newark, and Lipman stayed in Montclair in order to “attend to my own career.” (126) Neither thought of it as a separation, just a temporary inconvenience. But “after a time,” Wynona “took it upon herself to bring some order into our relationship; she decided to file for divorce.” Initially, he was “staggered.” “Such an action, I reflected, was one I couldn’t have taken. Ultimately, I concluded, she must have thought a divorce was for the good of both of us. It is conceivable, even probable, that she did it for my sake alone.” Their relationship remained “friendly and affectionate, a relationship we rightly or wrongly considered ‘par for the course’ among highly professional academics.” 126

The careful neutrality of this description—from an affective point of view, the tone is of one who has, unfortunately, and through no exact fault of his own, just missed a train—is suggestive in itself. Lipman was always the first to arrive and the last to leave Alderice House, and was known as something of a fish out of water in situations where collegiality veered towards more unrestrained sociability. As such, it would be easy to interpret this moment—1972, when he was launching the project that would preoccupy virtually his every waking hour for the next 40 years—as the closing down of his social and erotic life for the sake of his professional one. But at this very moment the Hero meets and, several years later, marries his anima, in 1972, in the person of a student 30 years his junior named Theresa:

... she was ... visibly joyous, radiant and healthy ... I had never met anyone like Teri before. In the presence of a philosophical idea, her face positively glowed. ... It was my first experience with such radiance, the product, I believe, of joy and spiritual insight ... deep friendship ... eventually grew into a love that was simple and pure ... for all the years that seemed to separate us, the age difference proved to be insignificant, and the marriage continued to be one of great happiness and fulfillment for us both for many more years.

One cannot help but speculate that Lipman has, in the history of his own erotic narrative, re-encountered the girl on the bus in 1952 whom he met as Fool, but whom, as Hero, he meets and wins without even having to go AWOL. His intergenerational marriage—she was 20 and he 50—is as exemplary an act as his first, interracial one, but what it exemplifies is more ambiguous. And the veil of obscurity that Lipman draws over his private life through a few bland phrases—“we became the ‘campus couple’ and more than one campus commentator was led to explain his pleasure that she and I had ‘found each other’. Teri was a continuous support to me too in my work”—suggests, either a tale too fraught to tell, or the same absent-minded attention to his private life—one side-effect of being, as he describes himself, a “workaholic”—that led to him to be blindsided by Wynona’s request for a divorce.

Lipman outlived both his wives—Wynona felled by cancer, and Teri by an overdose of sleeping pills—but he himself was progressively crippled in body and in the kind of spontaneous discursivity of which he was an effortless master by Parkinson’s Disease, the onset of which he recounts here. This memoir, in fact, was written at the moment just before it would be too late to write it, and as such it represents one last gesture of the Hero. Then he embarked on his last Labor, which is the one labor most philosophical—the Stoic labor of retaining his “chronic optimism” and what he describes, at the end of this book, as his love for philosophy, and his “love [for] the world that has produced something as beautiful as philosophy” (170) through the hours, days and weeks, months and years of gradual, crushing disempowerment, and the consignment of his body to the care of virtual strangers. The tone of Lipman’s memoir, both modest and pared-down, and even its unassuming title, are signs of this last labor. “What is great,” Seneca wrote, “is a steadfast soul, serene in adversity, a soul that accepts every event as if it were desired. ... What is great is ... to remember that one is a man; it is, when one is happy, saying to oneself that one will not be happy for long. What is great is having one’s soul at one’s lips, ready to depart; then one is free not by the laws of the city but by the laws of nature.” (Seneca, Natural Questions)

In the larger narrative of his life, Lipman’s Stoic resolve in the face of the grim sentence of Parkinson’s is, for me, linked to the moment at the end of the war at which, it could be surmised, the ground was laid for the transformation of the Fool into the Hero. In a passage that simmers with the analytic intelligence and laconic decisiveness that is vintage Lipman, he narrates the deep-seated metaphysical change that war’s end war announced for him:

For some veterans, the war they had
experienced had a certain insularity in it; other memories kept these veterans distant from the war. It is almost as if this time serving in the war belonged to—or actually was—someone else’s life...hence the reluctance of many soldiers to discuss their lives, for this is a period one may share with other veterans, but hardly with anyone else.

For other veterans, the wartime experience came to be the defining moment in their lives. It was to that experience that every alleged reality had inevitably to be compared. Either the war was the criterion of reality for these veterans, or else it was the criterion of ultimate unreality. Its authenticity superceded all other authenticities; its unreality superceded all other unrealities.

These are far from being the only possibilities that veterans might have experienced. There were then, as there are now, skeptics for whom nothing was believable, and there were those for whom everything had a dream-like status, including the dreams themselves. In addition, there were some who conceived of reality as a matter of intensity, so that the real was whatever evoked horror, terror, grief and other such experiential extremes. There seemed to me something wrong-headed about positions like these, and I could not help agreeing with an alternative answer to the question “What is real?” That answer was: “Everything.” (47)

It is Lipman’s “alternative answer”—“Everything”—that, I would surmise, purchased for him the extraordinary grace under pressure that he demonstrated over the last years of his life in his one-room lodgings in an elder care home, and that represents the personal fulfillment of one promise of philosophy—the promise of becoming “free not by the laws of the city but by the laws of nature.” As such, it was his final--and crowning--exemplary act. His capacity to stare into the abyss, combined with his deep generosity—a sort of filial piety writ large—towards the world and all its species, rests in the final account on that love for philosophy that seized him in his adolescence, and which drove him forward with what he described as “my strange confidence in what I was doing” (113)—a sense of utter sureness, a quality of single-mindedness that bespeaks some larger sense of destiny, a kind of mastery from beyond himself that he always trusted implicitly.

“I feel for philosophy,” he writes in the last paragraph of this, his last book, “what an astronaut might feel at the sight of the earth’s sphere, all green and brown and blue, as it appears from a space station.” He then expresses the hope that Philosophy for Children “will build a better and more reasonable world for our children and their children to inhabit: a world that looks as beautiful from across the street as it does from the distance of space.” (170) Lipman was faithful, not just to the world, but to its highest possibilities. His memoir is a modest testimony to an extraordinary life-trajectory, and an exemplification of the philosopher as one with the form of double-vision—seeing life from outer space and from across the street—that is perhaps philosophy’s most profound vocation.
Matthew Lipman: An Intellectual Biography

Félix García Moriyón

Interview with Matthew Lipman by Félix García Moriyón, in 2001

To begin with, the first question I want to ask you is: Can you tell us something about your time attending school and studying philosophy?

My academic life began with kindergarten, of which the only memory I can call up is of sitting with the other children in a circle and, when the teacher’s back was turned, joining in the seemingly hilarious practice of pinching one another as hard as possible. In the second grade, I caught the teacher’s attention by commenting that the paper-strewn room looked like “the ruins of Pompeii,” and was allowed to write, direct, and act in two plays, one on George Washington and the other on Napoleon. I tried to make the plays as funny as possible by filling them with jokes from comic books. My third grade teacher I drove virtually to distraction by attempting to walk on the wainscoting and out the second-floor window to the fire escape. I was allowed to skip fourth grade, probably at the request of the fourth grade teacher.

But then in fifth grade there was a change. Instead of giving us the usual fare of rather mawkish little books, the teacher read us several novels. One was Black Beauty, a heartbreaking story about a badly mistreated horse, told by the horse herself. The other was more saccharine: Little Lord Fauntleroy. No matter: these at last were real books! But the next few years seemed to be more and more boring, and with the eighth grade we hit bottom. It appeared to me that nothing could be more tedious.

If I expected that when I reached high school, the teachers would continue to be patient with me, I was mistaken. The high school was small (all four grades contained a total of only 75 students), as befitted a small rural town (Woodbine, in South Jersey). I was warned that disruptive behavior, such as emitting wolf howls between classes and sundry practical jokes, would no longer be tolerated. My mischief subsided, but I was still bored. I loved the subjects, especially English, but I didn’t feel particularly challenged by them, or by the way they were taught. Finally, just before graduation, I was expelled from school for being noisy in the library. A few weeks went by while I sat on the curbstone in front of the school, then a few cooler heads prevailed and I was allowed to graduate. So much for grammar school days.

It was Spring, 1939. In a few months, Hitler would invade Poland and World War II would begin. In the United States, the economy had crashed and even after six years showed few signs of revival. I was 15, with neither the money nor the grades that would enable me to go to college. I spent a year on a farm, then the next year returned to a different high school. I had decided to study engineering, and was told to improve my grades in mathematics. Immersing myself in math courses, I did well. But I still had no answer for the money problem. Four years went by. I volunteered for the Air Corps, but was rejected for poor eyesight. I waited to be drafted, which took place in 1943. Although assigned to the Infantry, I was first allowed to attend a university as a freshman preparing for a career in engineering. The university I ended up in was not CCNY, where I was first sent, but Stanford, in California.

The weather in Palo Alto was perfect, so that when the lectures would be particularly tedious, I would end up on the tennis courts. But they were not all tedious. One of them, an English professor, took an interest in me and told me about philosophy, mentioning the names of Aristotle and Hume, and giving me, as a farewell gift, two paperback books that told something of the years John Dewey had spent at Columbia University. I became hooked on the idea of attending Columbia and studying philosophy.

But the Army had other thoughts as to what might become of me. It offered me a choice between going into the Infantry (it was the time of the Battle of the Bulge, and the need for foot soldiers was acute) and staying on at Stanford so as to become a doctor, since doctors were becoming more and more acutely needed. Since I knew myself well enough to think that I could never become a doctor, I ostentatiously chose the Infantry, and was shipped promptly to a training
site in the Coast Ranges of California, where soldiers were being prepared for a mountain-jungle assault on Burma (which fortunately for me never took place.) On a free weekend, I was able to take a bus to Los Angeles where, visiting a bookstore, I discovered an anthology of Dewey selections entitled Intelligence in the Modern World, as well as some poetry collections. Naturally I was attracted to Housman:

We here lie dead because we did not choose
To run and shame the land from which we’d sprung.
Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose
But young men think it is, and we were young.

But it was Dewey who puzzled and fascinated me. I got to carrying his book around with me in my knapsack, so that, at every break during a march or climb, I could struggle with his complex prose, trying to get some sense of what he was talking about. When I arrived at the European combat theatre, towards the end of 1945, I continued my education by studying the books I was still carrying with me.

When the war ended, the American army, recognizing that it might take a year or so to send the soldiers back home, created an American university in Shrivenham, a tiny town near Swindon, in England, and I spent the summer and fall there. It was my first encounter with real philosophers teaching real philosophy courses. They were Prof. Charles Hendel, from Yale, a specialist in Hume, and Prof. Tsanoff, from Rice, a specialist in Ethics.

And so, after another year in Europe, I returned to the U.S.A., eager to get a regular college education. My GI Bill of Rights would pay for four years. I was determined to get a PhD in Philosophy within that time frame. But it was seven years since I had finished high school. Wouldn’t that be a disadvantage? Most of the colleges I applied to must have thought so, but I was accepted by the only one that I really wanted to attend: Columbia. They had opened a new program for older students, calling it “University Undergraduates” and aimed at returning servicemen. I fitted right in.

Columbia in 1946 bristled with energy and diversity. I luxuriated in the courses given in philosophy by the distinguished faculty: Nagel on Science, Schneider on Metaphysics, Randall on the History of Philosophy, Buchler on Locke. Outside the philosophy enclave, there were other greats: Ruth Benedict, in Anthropology, Meyer Schapiro in Fine Arts, Lloyd Motz in Astronomy, Mark van Doren in English, to name a few.

Having received a bachelor’s degree in 1948, I stayed on at Columbia for the PhD. There was a bit of a brou-haha about who my dissertation sponsor should be: ultimately it was decided that it should be a three-person committee containing Schapiro and Randall. The dissertation itself I called “Problems of Art Inquiry,” and I wrote it while doing my course work between 1948 and 1950. (In 1967 it was published under the title of What Happens in Art, but by then it was a different book.)

I learned a great deal during those two years of graduate study from other graduate students: Norwood Russell Hanson, Ted Mischel, Marx Wartofsky, Art Danto, Pat Suppes, Len Feldstein…By the time I’d finished my course work, I still had leftover stipends from the G.I. Bill.

In the summer of 1950, I was awarded a Fulbright fellowship that would enable me to spend a year at the Sorbonne. I welcomed the opportunity to get away: war over Korea seemed imminent. I visited Dewey, who was then 90, and discovered him to be very pessimistic too. (I couldn’t wait to get back to the campus and tell Schapiro and Nagel about the 2-hour session with Dewey. They seemed suitably impressed). Arriving in Paris in the Fall of 1950, I met some of the French philosophers I’d heard about: Gabriel Marcel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Yvon Belaval, and I attended lectures by various others. I signed up at the Sorbonne for a post-doctoral doctoral program (the so-called “Universite dÉtat” but Paris proved more seductive, and I gave up the project. By living frugally I was able to extend my stay in Europe for another year, completing it with a six month stay in Vienna.

With that, my formal studies came to an end. When I returned from Europe, in 1952, the situation had changed. I wanted a teaching job, and teaching jobs—especially in philosophy and in New York—were scarce. So from there on, while my education can be said to have continued—as it continues nowadays—it was on an informal basis, not on a formal one. I found that teaching required a vast amount of studying and learning. The informal education one derives from preparation for teaching is a serious matter. I learned gradually that there were other, equally significant, sources of informal education.

Did you find a real difference between French and American philosophy?

My experience with French philosophy occurred mainly in 1950-1952, when I was in Paris on a Fulbright grant. During that period I was rewriting my doctoral thesis for publication: it eventually came out under the title What Happens in Art. So my interests were mainly in aesthetics, and my advisor at the Sorbonne was an aesthetician, Prof. Etienne Souriau. I found French philosophy brisk and lively in its mode of argumentation, but sober and portentous in its attitude towards the world, as would befit a country trying to make sense of its involvement in two great wars in the space
of little more than a quarter-century. American philosophy, in contrast, was either a continuation of 19th century naturalism and pragmatism among the more traditionally-minded philosophers, or a sudden enthusiasm for British linguistic analysis. Had I chosen to go to England instead of France, I very likely would have immersed myself in the British way of doing things, which was highly professional and exclusively academic. Instead I became fascinated with the French approach, which was almost journalistic, and to be found in drama, literary criticism and poetry as often as in philosophical journals. The result was that I was able to break off bits and pieces of contemporary French thought and integrate them into the American outlook I still maintained, whereas had I become involved with linguistic analysis, I might have found myself confronted with a need to choose between it and American naturalism. Of course, in both instances, some affinities stood out. Ryle’s *Concept of Mind* seemed to me continuous with Mead’s *Mind, Self and Society*, and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, with its emphasis upon body-imagery, was directly continuous with a study I was doing on the same topic. In the long run, perhaps, it would be the British proficiency at conceptual analysis that most impressed me, and that I needed most, but I was greatly indebted to French philosophy’s efforts to make itself relevant to life.

**Can you tell me something about your first experience as a philosophy teacher?**

My first experience as a philosophy teacher took place in the spring of 1953. I had returned from Europe the previous year, and was looking for work. (There were teaching positions to be had, but not in New York city, which was where I wanted to stay.) Suddenly a job became available on the Brooklyn College campus of the City University of New York. It was a full-time position, involving several courses I hadn’t even had as a student. The circumstances were notorious. The previous instructor, a senior professor just a semester away from retirement, had invoked his Constitutional right not to testify before the dreaded McCarthy Committee on un-American Activities of the U.S. House of Representatives. For this he was arbitrarily fired by the President of Brooklyn College, and I was pressed into immediate service with virtually no time for preparation. (My predecessor lost not only his job but his pension.)

My method of teaching the introductory sections was derived completely from what I had learned as a student at Columbia: spend about 20 minutes of each session making some general interpretive remarks about the reading in question, and then spend the rest of the time in class discussion. It wasn’t well done, but neither was it a disaster. So much could not be said for the more advanced courses I gave. Even when the material was a bit familiar to me, I found myself inarticulate when I tried to rephrase it so as to help the students understand it. My only fond memory of the Epistemology course was that one of the students enrolled in it, Victor Balowitz (later to become a respected professor of philosophy and now deceased) took a sympathetic interest in my struggles and gently offered leading suggestions that would enable me to get through each session. His assistance was a lesson to me in caring thinking.

*Your two last answers were very suggesting. I could grasp how you mixed both influences, French philosophy and Anglo-Saxon philosophy, a combination that is always present in the P4C curriculum. On the other hand, your academic beginning reminded me of a sad experience I had as a student in the Faculty of Philosophy at Universidad Complutense of Madrid. It was during Franco’s dictatorship, in 1973. One of the most famous ethics professors in Spain, José Luis Aranguren, was fired from the Faculty just because he had supported students’ claims and demonstrations against Franco’s regime. A new professor, a Dominican priest (eventually, three years later he was my mentor in my doctoral thesis on Spanish anarchist thinking) was appointed as ethics professor. Students (I was one of them) started protesting against this professor, painted graffiti on the walls of the faculty and carried banners with moral and political condemnations. After a while, the professor did not resist the pressure against him and he never came to lecture us; of course he kept the position. That is only a personal anecdote. During that time the police patrolled inside the faculties and we had to show our I.D. before coming into the building.*
I would like to ask you two new questions: What impact did the McCarthy Committee have on American philosophy, and mainly on the educational environment?

At its peak, the McCarthy Committee had a terrifying influence on the American political and cultural scene. For a time, no one dared stand up against it. I think they were mainly interested at first in “exposing” big names in the entertainment industry rather than more or less unknown academics like philosophers, although a number of those were persecuted. In time the Committee collapsed, more or less unexpectedly, but it was an important factor in our history, like the Salem witch hunts.

Did you start a classical academic career: attending conferences, writing and publishing papers...?

Yes, I started out following standard operating procedure, attending American Philosophical Assn. annual conferences from 1948 to almost 1998, publishing a few books and papers, giving talks at college graduation ceremonies, etc. But I had little time in which to write. The manuscript I call “Judgment” took me 10 years, and I published only the first chapter to it. It was only when I got involved with P4C that publication activities began to accelerate, but then it was no longer a “classical academic career.”

Would you mind being a little more explicit about your intellectual activity before moving to Philosophy for Children? Was there any specific topic you were interested in? Is there any relationship between your manuscript on Judgment and your subsequent writing on higher order thinking?

During the summer of 1950 I was very discouraged by the war in Korea; this was mainly what I corresponded about with Dewey. He turned out to be more pessimistic than I was. I had been told to rewrite the introduction to my thesis, but instead I rewrote the whole thing, largely because I was stimulated by French philosophy. (At that time, unlike most other philosophy students at Columbia, I was uninterested in linguistic philosophy.) I met Merleau-Ponty, but misunderstood his reserve as aloofness. I think he would have welcomed further communication. Then Dewey died (1952) and some of the Deweyans in New York grouped around Justus Buchler, who was a professor of philosophy at Columbia and whose first book was published in 1951. He and I would meet for lunch regularly and discuss the book, which we saw as a continuation of Dewey’s metaphysics. In 1958-59 he asked me to edit a double-issue of the Journal of Philosophy, (which I did) dealing with his philosophy. Our talks turned into the New York Philosophy Group, which lasted about 10 years, and which talked mostly about Buchler’s philosophy at its monthly meeting. I wanted to write a book similar to his, but I was overwhelmed with work, and managed only a chapter a year. When I finally finished it, he read it and said, “Now there are two of us!” But when I sent it to a publisher, it was turned down, and I never sent it out again. (I agreed with the reader’s report.) It’s the ms. you call Judgment. It has very little in common with what I now think of as judgment. During the 1960’s, Buchler became a Series Editor for a big New York publisher, and so my thesis was published (as What Happens in Art ) I did an introductory text (containing innovative dialogues among the major philosophers), and I published (with a different publisher) Contemporary Aesthetics, a fairly solid anthology. But by now (1968) I was beginning to get interested in P4C, and while Buchler was too, no one else in the group was. Eventually it lapsed. I continued to become more interested in what Austin called Linguistic Phenomenology. I began to realize that to do a child’s version of philosophy, I really would have to relearn the whole discipline.

Once again your answer throws light on your philosophical interest during that period. From your words I can infer that you had a good familiarity with Dewey. Would you mind telling some more about your personal and/or professional (educational or philosophical) relationship with him?

About Dewey. A graduate student at Teachers College named Lyle Eddy had developed an intense correspondence with Dewey (then about 89) dealing with Dewey’s Logic. They had developed a private and almost impenetrable language. I suppose Lyle must have given me Dewey’s address (in the East 90’s in New York City) and I wrote him to say that I was starting my dissertation by writing about his notion of “tertiary qualities” (later to become Chapter 3 of my thesis). He sent word back that he would be glad to receive it. A few weeks later I got a card from him saying “I liked it.” Lyle then wanted to know if I wanted to visit Dewey, and of course I said yes. We got there the first thing in the morning and were greeted by Dewey’s new wife, Roberta. Their two small adopted children were having breakfast (oatmeal), and when Dewey came into the living room, he asked Roberta all about their breakfast. For the next two hours he did most of the talking. He wanted to know about the Philosophy faculty members at Columbia, once close to him but now estranged by time. No one there was interested in his Logic or in his last book, Knowing and the Known. Afterwards we had a correspondence for some months. (His letters are in the Special Collections Dept. at the Columbia University Library, and in the Dewey
Archives at Southern Illinois University. I don’t have copies of them."

On the other hand you mentioned your discouragement with the war in Korea. Did you have any political or social involvement in those years?

My attitude at the time of the U.S. involvement in the war against the North Koreans was that I felt the U. S. and especially Gen. MacArthur were as eager as the North Koreans for a fight. I thought of going to some neutral country, like India (under Nehru) or Yugoslavia (where I might look up Djilas). But my Fulbright was for France, and it was probably a good thing too. But I did go, with some Social Democratic friends, to visit the Social Democrats in Netherlands. Most of them had suffered terribly from the Nazis. But the attitude was not one of “a plague on both your houses” as between Washington and Moscow. No one had any use for the Stalinists, and the Social Democrats in France, Netherlands and Belgium, for the most part were ready to side with Washington if they had to.

You were beginning to get interested in P4C. Can you explain why and how?

Throughout the 60’s I’d been talking with my cousin, Joe Isaacson, who was then a trustee of the Child Study Association, about the education of young children. I think he was leaning a bit towards A. S. Neill’s Summerhill, a fairly Freudian approach, while I was an orthodox Deweyan. But Joe was far more of a Deweyan than he realized, even though I don’t believe he had read Dewey much. We also were both interested in children’s art in the 60’s, and we took a course together at the New School, given by Meyer Schapiro. But it wasn’t until about 1967 or so that I wrote to the National Institute of Education, in Washington, D.C., especially to a consultant named Martin Engle, to tell them of a research plan I was developing to help children deal with ambiguities (as in propaganda and advertising).

Was there any relationship between your interest in doing philosophy with children and political and social problems in the university during the sixties?

I cannot think of any significant relationship between doing philosophy with children and sociopolitical problems at Columbia in the 1960’s. It’s true I was interested in democratic socialism starting in 1951, and was present at the founding of Dissent, the major publication of democratic socialism in the U. S. since that date. But there was no connection that I can think of.

Your last email shocked me a lot, or at least it was a real surprise. For years I have explained here in Spain that one of the motivations you had for developing the program in the late 60s, was the political situation in the universities: students rioting against the Vietnam War, academic authorities not paying serious attention to students claims and the National Guard shooting them on campus. During that time, you thought adult people were not reasoning very well; so there was a need for fostering good judgment before it was too late. Your contribution was to select philosophy as the spine of a curriculum aimed at fostering higher order thinking and to start working with children eleven or twelve years old (according to Piaget’s suggestions about abstract thinking). So, your first interest was not academic achievement of children at school, but a political challenge: if we wanted to live in a democracy, we need people able to discuss with their fellow countrymen about the policies of their society, in a respectful and cooperative way. Of course, it is a secondary question when you actually read Dewey’s Democracy and Education. Well, that is the account I heard from you and from your books when I stayed there for one year (1986-87), and it is more or less the same story I have inferred or heard from other people in many conferences and workshops. Am I wrong? Is it just a personal reconstruction that has not any foundation in the theoretical and practical development of P4C? If so, I have to change my presentations of the program.

Apparently we are on somewhat different wavelengths with regard to the relationship between P4C and sociopolitical problems at Columbia. Your little narrative, in your letter of May 16, is quite right about the details (except that the National Guard shot four students at Kent State University in Ohio, not at Columbia) and is accurate enough. But I thought you meant some kind of direct relationship, not a merely causal one.

For that matter, I was very disturbed by the Spanish Civil War, and used to follow the Ebro River battle line every day, as shown by the maps in the newspapers. It was connected, in my mind, with the fight against Nazism, Hitler, Mussolini, and all that. But there was no 1-to-1 correlation between any ideas in Harry and the Columbia riots.

I was, it’s true, thinking politically by the time of the Sino-Japanese war, when I was 8 or 9 as well as the Spanish Civil War, when I was 11 or 12. After World War II, I still was involved politically, but mainly in my head. At Columbia, for example, I did a term paper on anarchism. But nothing that translated directly into the pedagogical underpinnings of Philosophy for Children. (I also gave a course at Columbia College on Political Ideologies, but this fed into Mark many years later, as did the whole curriculum of Columbia’s Contemporary Civilization core program.
that I taught in the 1950’s and 1960’s.)  If anything was politically sickening to me then, it was the Korean war in the 1950’s and then of course Viet Nam. But in 1968 I was very much the utopian academic: idealistic, theoretical, and alienated. I saw Harry, I thought--no, I knew--I was on to something that could be big. The only question was how to reconcile it with my academic and home responsibilities

Did you consider from the very beginning of the program that you were trying to develop some ideas from Dewey’s Education and Democracy?

The first book of Dewey’s that I read, Intelligence in the Modern World, was an anthology that contained a number of passages from Dewey’s books on education, but I didn’t read any of those books themselves, including Democracy and Education until many years later: possibly not until 1980. Actually, I was more interested in applying Dewey’s metaphysics and epistemology to education rather than drawing on his strictly educational writings. If I did use a lot of Dewey’s ideas in my dissertation (completed in 1952), I never denied it, just as I’ve never denied that I’m a Deweyan. But one can be a Deweyan and an analyst and a phenomenologist without necessarily contradicting oneself. What’s more, on some matters, I think I learned from Dewey what not to do. Like, don’t make proposals unless you’re prepared personally to carry them out. This is why I first wrote Harry and then began proposing that there should be such a thing as Philosophy for Children (1972). Dewey got some direct experience in the classroom early on, but he never wrote curriculum, and for that matter, he never advocated using philosophy in the elementary school. (I think he would have, if he’d known about it.) Also, he allowed himself to get tangled up with progressive education, and that didn’t do him any good. I think that for a long time, he had no friends who shared his educational vision, and he was forced to work with people who couldn’t appreciate his aims. I was fortunate in finding Ann Sharp, Fred Oscanyan and Joe Isaacson.

You also mention in your last answer that the contribution of Ann Sharp, Joe Isaacson and Fred Oscanyan was very important. Would you mind to explain with some detail their contribution?

The three individuals who had the most to do with the formation of the curriculum were Joe Isaacson, Ann Sharp and Fred Oscanyan.

Joe was neither a psychologist nor a philosopher, but he was deeply concerned about the education of children, particularly their art education, and about getting them to become critical thinkers, of which he was the best example I have ever encountered. From the time I was 15, he and I would conduct wide-ranging conversations on the question of what could be done about education. I would bring in Dewey’s views (that I knew rather badly), but this never to my knowledge impelled him to read Dewey directly. Nevertheless, his formative influence on me was enormous.

Some time around 1970 or 1971, Ann Sharp, having heard somehow about Harry, came in to my office at Montclair State College, sat down at a typewriter and asked if she could help. It was enormously helpful to have someone always ready to talk education /philosophy. We shared the same views about what was wrong and what needed to be done. We worked together feverishly--writing curriculum, training teachers, training teacher trainers, holding conferences, writing theoretical books, etc. In the 1980’s we slowed down a bit in order to establish international beachheads, and in the 1990’s we tapered off still more, partially because we were tired (and I was both sick and tired). She still has the same fanaticism about P4C that I have.

Fred Oscanyan dropped in on us one day. At the time he was a logician in the philosophy Department at Yale. We desperately needed a logician who would guide me in my forays into logic, which I had taught myself when I taught it at Columbia and CCNY. But Fred also loved the program in its entirety, and it was a great loss to us when he died suddenly and unexpectedly. He had been working on Tony, a philosophy of science novel for children. We miss him greatly.

Then, you decided to write Harry and later you wrote the manual, Philosophical Inquiry. Would you mind explaining the main problems you had to cope with in order to write a novel and the steps you took first to write the novel, then the manual?

The writing of Harry and the accompanying manual I’ve mentioned already that I had talks, throughout the 1960’s, with Joe Isaacscon about a new approach to middle school education. (I wasn’t yet thinking about the grades lower than 5th, nor higher then 8th.) When I talked with Joe, I talked about the problems kids in middle school seemed to have, and what could be done to overcome them. For example, I talked about the problems they had with ambiguity and vagueness. But for the most part I think we steered clear of the possible benefits of philosophy and logic. We weren’t thinking of a program: we were thinking how to change education generally. We never talked about how, if we should ever be successful in designing such an approach, we could get it into schools. We talked about how children might be induced to welcome education, and
how the ossified structure of traditional education had to be refashioned into the practice.

But when I talked to other people, I didn’t want to bore them with my (and Joe’s) idealism, so I told them about how children might be taught logic by means of a children’s story telling about how a group of kids discover logic, and the few people I talked to in that way seemed to like what they heard, so I was encouraged. (The person who specifically suggested that I write a children’s story was Rita Nadler, a lawyer whose kids went to the same school mine went to.)

Up to that point, my total writing experience consisted of a couple of short stories. Also, there was “The story of a mirror,” which was incorporated in the book Suki, but which was actually written many years before, while I was discovering Borges. The conceptual component of the new story, later to become Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery, came from my own experience in teaching Logic in the Evening Division of the City College of New York and in the undergraduate divisions of Columbia University. It was in the course of that teaching that I came to believe that the logical move called conversion was the main building block of Aristotelian logic. (Not that I was any sort of expert on Logic: I’d never studied Aristotelian or non-Aristotelian logic. I learned it at the same time as I taught it.) But I needed Aristotelian logic because it seemed to be relevant to two important contexts: language and the world, and I didn’t think either kids or college students would have much use for it unless these two demands for relevance were met.

I took it more or less for granted that the discovery of conversion would be the work of a boy, and after a few experiments with names that would pun on Aristotle, I settled on Harry Stottlemeier. I also took it for granted that as author I would have access to Harry’s mind, and maybe to one or two other members of the class, but no more. So I became the author with a God’s-eye view, and the contagions of the first two sentences show that very well.

The night before I wrote the story, which was later to become Harry, I tossed and turned in bed, while turning over ideas for a plot in my head. Once that part was settled, the actual writing of the story went quickly. It was only the Peirce-Dewey paradigm of inquiry (as explained in Exercise 1 of the Harry manual. Harry’s hypothesis is critical, of course, but so is Lisa’s counter-example.)

When I finished the little story, I thought nothing more would be needed, but within a few days I came to the conclusion that students would be unable to practice conversion unless they could translate ordinary everyday language into the simplified language of logic. It took a few weeks to write an additional three chapters explaining the rules of such translation (standardization). But then I thought, “Shouldn’t the beginning take up the problem of education (or, “Why do we go to school?”) with the kids themselves? It would be appropriate as the beginning of a book.” But I rejected this idea, and the book’s chapters thereafter remained in the same order as that in which they were written.

It occurred to me, while writing the chapter on education, that this was really the Philosophy of Education for Children. Not “about” it: it “was” it. But then, why not have additional chapters, each of which would be a “philosophy of”? (Later I changed my mind about that). So I continued with a chapter on the philosophy of religion, still others on art, sciences and inquiry. For a few years there were minor additions and corrections, but basically the book is the same as when it was written. I’d used no reference materials in writing it: it came out of my Introduction to Philosophy course or my Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method course. “Harry is fundamentally an undergraduate course pre-shrunk to fit the minds of middle-school students,” I told people. But privately I wasn’t so sure.

I think I was unaware, during this period, of having had to devise a pedagogy appropriate to my fictional characters and the quest for reasonableness in which they were engaged. Somewhere along the line I had had to equip the fictional characters with the capacity for dialogue and with intuitions as to what was valid with regard to inference. The pedagogy was later to be called “the community of inquiry.”

Even as early as Chapter One of Harry, I had resolved to include emotional experiences as well as intellectual ones, and to accord each fictional child a personal manner of thinking: this one “experimental,” the next, “empirical” the third, “analytical,” and so on. there was also the assumption that, between episodes, the characters somehow would get together somehow and bring one another up to date with regard to the progress of the inquiry. Another resolution was required to introduce the reader to the inner thoughts of the remainder; this was accomplished in Chapters Eight and Eleven by means of the sort of “Stop Action” dramatic technique that O’Neill used in Desire Under the Elms.

All in all, I don’t think Harry could have been written without the determination to be radically inventive. The decisions that went into its making were sweeping: does it need a new pedagogy? Invent it! Is a new subject - area needed? Try one (philosophy) that hasn’t been used in elementary school before! Is a new kind of instructional manual needed? Design one! Without such insistence, Harry would have ended up as a 4-page text on critical thinking.

On the composition of the instructional manual to accompany Harry. The manner in which the instructional manual for Harry was organized set the standard for the other instructional manuals in P4C. First I would write the novel. Then Ann would read it and together we would identify the leading ideas in each chapter. We would then
approach the ideas in sequential order, writing about a paragraph for each concept, and trying to make it readable for teachers. I would dictate to Ann and she would type, but if she disagreed with a formulation, she would stop me so that the matter could be discussed.

As each idea or concept was completed, I would study them and write one or several exercises or discussion plans for it. Some discussion plans were intended to introduce teachers to questions derived from the philosophical tradition; others were offered as models for classroom dialogue. Exercises were intended to sharpen skills that the children had come across in reading the novel.

When the leading idea and its exercises and discussion plans had been completed, I would proof them and turn them over to the typesetter. These proofs again had to be read and corrected before publication.

Since we were new to manual construction, we had to make many changes in the text even after publication. Philosophical Inquiry, for example, was revised four times, and although we never called the changes “new editions,” the changes were quite comprehensive, especially with regard to the logic, where we had the invaluable assistance of Fred Oscanyan, whose job was mainly proofing rather than composition.

We didn’t provide an index to the Harry manual, although we should have. It was only after several years that we found the time to write a list of the “sources and references” of the ideas in Harry, and subsequently of every other novel. (These “sources and references” should probably have been part of the manuals.)

The idea of numbering the lines in the novels so as to help the readers locate citations came to me as a recollection of the same device that had been used in Latin texts.

I should add that as we proceeded chapter by chapter to construct the Harry manual, we were trying it out in teacher education workshops in Newark. This was another reason why the first drafts weren’t always satisfactory.

_It looks like a hard and careful work, and at the same time a creative one: the novel and the manual kept growing and they presented their own challenges for the author to respond to. I think that this process was more or less the same with the rest of the novels and manuals. So my interest now is to know the reasons or motives that drove you to write a second novel, and a third, a fourth... Why Lisa? Why Mark? Did you have a previous plan for building a whole curriculum?_

The Harry novel was published in December, 1974, but it subsequently went through four sets of changes before we were satisfied. (For example, I hadn’t mentioned contradiction in the first version. All this changing, of course, was quite expensive.)

Several years went by in which we were doing a great deal of teacher training as well as trainer training. The New Jersey Department of Education continued to give us grant support, but they began to nudge us to do a moral education program. (Kohlberg was all the rage, and I agreed that an Ethical Inquiry approach was necessary to counter the Piaget/Kohlberg axis.) I therefore wrote the first edition of Lisa, with an emphasis on Aristotelian syllogistic. But this looked very clumsy to me, so I did the second edition based on the interaction between Ethical Inquiry and modus ponens / modus tollens.

As we were finishing the Lisa program, the people from the State Department of Education casually mentioned that a lot of pressure was being applied to improve the teaching of writing. I took the hint and produced the Suki program.

Almost simultaneously, I decided that my experience in teaching Contemporary Civilization in Columbia College could be used in a political and social science program, so I did the Mark program. Again, I would write the novels first, and then Ann and I would do the manuals.

However, Suki and Mark are pretty much designed for high school students, and we didn’t have much luck finding teachers who could be trained to use them. On the other hand, a lot of teachers were reporting success using the materials with younger age groups, and we began to rethink our notion that 5th grade was the lowest level we could reach. I had a story about a girl named Pookie who went to the zoo to find her mystery creature, so I decided to rewrite it for 3rd and 4th grades. (I had planned to use it in the New Jersey Test of Reasoning.) The story seemed to work well, although we left the Leading Ideas out of the manual, and that was probably a mistake. I thought it might result in getting the teachers to have a more spontaneous relationship with the philosophical concepts, and it was the assorted concepts (like a box of assorted chocolates) that I hoped the program would emphasize.

That left me with a program still to be composed dealing with thinking skills. I decided on a story about a blind girl (having once had a very appreciative student in a P4C course who was blind.) I thought the program would point up the epistemological differences between sighted and blind students. It would also enable students to use their cognitive skills more efficiently in the later chapters.

I wrote Elfie with the thought in mind that it would provide the basic platform on which all subsequent programs would rest. It probably does not perform that function. Then I went back to the 5th grade and wrote Nous about an intelligent, reasonable giraffe, with the thought in mind of providing an alternative program in ethics. The jury with regard to Nous is still out.
Writing all the novels and manuals was hard work, of course, and very successful too. All those very profitable years you were working in Montclair State College. Why did you move from Columbia University to Montclair?

It was not something I’d planned to do. I was living in Montclair, and I hated the daily commute to New York. Also, since I was already a full professor, staying at Columbia couldn’t lead to any further promotions. But the work load was light, and I didn’t plan to move.

However, during the 1968 riots, I was asked by the students to give a teach-in, and I talked about the desirability of having a student representative on the Board of Trustees. That evidently annoyed the Dean very much. The next year, when I applied for a grant to the National Endowment for the Humanities, he refused to put his signature on it, and I wrote a letter to the president of the university charging the dean with violating my freedom of inquiry. The president sent a strong letter of reprimand to the dean.

Meanwhile, I talked to the president of Montclair State College, whom I happened to know. The college offered me a full tenured professorship and an institute for Philosophy for Children. I accepted.

Did you find any resistance from your philosophy colleagues, or from psychologists and people from the educational domain? When did you get national and international recognition?

I don’t know of any significant resistance of any kind from my colleagues to this move. Some of them, of course, thought I was crazy to give up a tenured full professorship at Columbia, but people generally took this as my own business and didn’t interfere.

Not that what I was doing met with everyone’s approval. People in psychology were probably a bit miffed that someone from outside their discipline seemed to be “moving in”, and the same is true of people in education. On the other hand, philosophers were inclined to think that any move from philosophy in the direction of education necessarily entailed a loss of prestige.

Philosophy for Children began to receive a bit of national recognition in 1976, when we started running workshops for professors, and it increased steadily after that. International recognition began around 1980 with the first international conference, and 1986 saw the first such conference held outside the United States (in Denmark). After that, Ann Sharp and I visited a great many countries to establish P4C footholds, and she is still doing that.

During those days (in the eighties) there were two very interesting philosophical discussions going on. The first one was in the domain of political thinking, with Rawls, Habermas and Dworkin (more or less) on one side, and Rorty, Taylor, Barber and Bellah (more or less) on the other. The second one was provoked by “deconstructionists”, with Rorty and his new approach to Dewey and Heidegger, Derrida and some feminist like Judith Butler. Did those two discussions have any impact in the elaboration of the manuals and novels?

I assimilated some of the positions espoused by the philosophers you mention, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. But by the eighties, the curriculum was pretty much established, and I was not responding to the people you mention so much as to their sources. This was especially true in the case of Rorty, whose interpretation of Dewey I didn’t like, but whom I nonetheless found interesting (especially in his conception of “irony”). I stressed procedures rather than principles as did Rawls and, later, Elgin, but this was because a pedagogy had to be constructed that was practical rather than theoretical. Likewise, I stressed community, but that came from Peirce and Dewey rather than from Bellah (whose conservatism I distrusted). I liked some of the ways Barber understood community, but I didn’t think he saw its application to education very well. Taylor and Dworkin I read but wasn’t much influenced by; MacIntyre and Habermas I was influenced by -- with regard to practice in the case of MacIntyre and with regard to the ideal speech situation in the case of Habermas. I have not found much to work with in the case of Derrida. Feminist writings, on the other hand, have been influential -- particularly, once again, Elgin, and (very much) Nussbaum.

The construction of the curriculum in the later half of the 70’s and the earlier part of the 80’s completely soaked up my time, leaving very little for reading and interpreting current philosophical activities. I had to go with what I had, and if that wasn’t enough, so much the worse for me. For example, I took for granted the Rawlsian notion of the reflective equilibrium because I had always rejected foundationalism. I assumed all along that Harry, Lisa, etc. were illustrations of that position, even though they didn’t have that name.

The whole project of P4C was supported from the very beginning by an Institution, IAPC, then by an international network ICPIC. What was your attitude towards both institutions and what are at present your opinions about them?

To say that P4C was supported from the beginning by the IAPC is only a small part of the story. The IAPC was in turn supported by Montclair State College, partially in the form of housing (they pay for all utilities, charge us no rent,
I'm astonished that we accomplished what we did; I'd be astonishing if we accomplished 1/10th as much. I think ICPIC is a fine idea, but it has had to operate with anemic budgets. To be like the IAPC, it would have needed support from a global organization like UNESCO, or support from a national organization (of which there are probably no real examples). It’s my hope that I’ll be able to initiate a national P4C network which could be a model for other national networks, and ICPIC could then sit atop those networks and maybe draw some sustenance from them. I think it’s remarkable how successful ICPIC has been in spite of its precarious situation, and I hope it can continue to build towards the national/international series of tiers (such as UNESCO has) which will give it more of the muscle that it needs.

So, you have made a great effort not just in terms of the creative work that was involved in developing the curriculum (novels plus manuals), but also in the no less creative work of building a financial and institutional network that was very helpful in the organization and growth of the whole project. Two questions come into my head. First, what are your personal feelings about these two (perhaps) different tasks? Is it just like splitting yourself in two persons, Mr. Jekyll and Dr. Hyde or is there any serious contradiction or difficulty in working on both sides of the “river”? On the other hand, taking into account that you got a lot of money to fuel the dissemination of the program in the States, why is it that P4C is not really successful in your country? Of course I am assuming that it is not really working, according to a very interesting paper that Wendy Turgeon presented in the last international Conference of ICPIC and to comments from other people. I might be wrong about that point.

I didn’t feel as though I were splitting myself into two persons when I had to both develop the P4C curriculum and arrange for it to be published and disseminated. Maybe other people become uncomfortable under these conditions, but I wasn’t. On the other hand, there was just too much work of both kinds to do: books to be conceived, written, prepared for publication, proofed, published, distributed and all virtually overnight. I wonder if anyone knows how much we accomplished between, say, 1974 and 1984, not only writing and publishing each book and manual, but sometimes rewriting them (like Harry) four times. We worked seven days a week, morning to 10 pm., for that entire period. Add to that the hunting for grants, and the holding of workshops, and the setting up of affiliate centers, etc. etc. I’m astonished that we accomplished what we did; I’d be astonished if we accomplished 1/10th as much.

And then, perhaps most important of all, consider that, while this is happening in a rich country, it’s also happening in a country determined to be anti-philosophical. Philosophy goes against the American grain, and until that’s changed, we’re going to have a hard time getting through to the kids here. Moreover, we needed to get through to the teacher education colleges, and we weren’t successful in doing that--or were successful only too late. We made mistakes. People look back now and say that the two of us, Ann Sharp and I, should have transformed, virtually overnight, a country of 200,000,000 people, and they point out how much released time we had! Have they any idea how much it would have cost?

And who’s to say that we didn’t do our job right? Perhaps we prepared the ground, but it will be some years before what we planted takes root. Maybe some day it will all fall into our hands—not likely, but possible. Maybe a National P4C Network can be mobilized that will move things along a little faster. The thing to do is not to give up because it’s such a huge task ahead of us, but to keep building the foundation in such a way that it makes no sense to put any building but philosophy on it.

I totally agree with you in the sense that it was a tremendous accomplishment; and I also think that the weak dissemination of the program in the States is a consequence of a long tradition of suspicion regarding philosophy in elementary and secondary school, or against philosophy in general. That is not the case, for example, of Spain. Your last answer makes it easier for me to ask the next question. If you look back to the last thirty or forty years of your life, what are you more proud of? Do you miss something, or, if you could go back to your forties and start again, would you change something?

What am I most proud of? Unquestionably the writing of the novels, as well as the exercises and discussion plans in the manuals. Of course there are other things to which I contributed: the formulation of the community of inquiry, the establishment of the international P4C movement, etc.

Could I have done what I did more successfully? Of course. But what is the significance of that admission? I had a brief moment of enlightenment, and I had to do with it what I could. I had my share of weaknesses, prejudices, incompetencies, and so on, and I had to do what I had to do in spite of them. But keep in mind that the world wasn’t perfect either. It wasn’t just lying there quivering with eager anticipation at the thought that elementary school philosophy would soon be available. It was mostly indifferent, with a few wonderful exceptions in each country.

If I could go back, would I change anything? I think I would have made a move earlier to get into the teacher preparation process, but I’m not sure I could have assented to the cost of that move in terms of changes that would be...
demanded in the program itself. Epictetus was right: you shouldn’t expect to get something for nothing. But I think the opportunity will come around again, and maybe next time a better settlement can be worked out. One thing I feel sure of: we’ve made a deep impression, one that cannot be erased. at this moment the world isn’t going completely our way, but it isn’t finding any alternatives to our way either. I wouldn’t be so confident of this, if we hadn’t done what we did when we were given the opportunity to do it.

From your last answer I might infer that you are a little optimistic. Would you mind to explain a little more with regard to your personal impression about the present situation of philosophy for children as a progressive educational movement all over the world? (Think, for example, of ICPIC but also of other institutions and educational proposals that have some family ressemblances with P4C)

And a new question, probably the last one. As you know, there are right now many people, such as me, who are trying to follow the path you opened thirty years ago. Taking into account your own deep and long experience, do you have any advice for us: What are the next activities, and goals, we should be involved with in the future?

Since P4C came on the scene, it seems to me, there has been a subtle change in the nature of large-scale educational proposals. I think P4C has succeeded in discouraging rival programs (at the same time that it has encouraged other efforts to use philosophy with integrity as a basis for elementary school education.) What this suggests is that our limited success in establishing a global approach to education has nevertheless intimidated a lot of people who don’t want to invest time and money in educational approaches that have already been developed and disseminated.

At the same time, the P4C curriculum, while far from perfect and inviting many changes, has set the stage for the ideal of a universal curriculum. All the different programs—those that now exist and those that hope to exist in the future—are now easily seen to be convergent upon a single, normative requiredness of which philosophy in one form or another will be the core component.

So it is not a question of whether we will have or will not have Philosophy for Children, but whether it will be later rather than sooner. The more we can push now, the more likely it will be sooner. Each country, for example, needs a national network, a national advocacy group, with representatives in each region or state who will “marry up” interested schools and appropriate programs. When this happens, ICPIC will rest upon a solid base of teachers and teacher-trainers rather than on a small number of overworked, self-sacrificing individuals. (Needless to say, the country most in need of this network is the United States, and I hope to do something about it).

So I don’t think we will see the disappearance of key terms like inquiry, reasonableness, democracy, philosophy, thinking, deliberation, etc. They represent what Philosophy for Children anticipates.

I think in each country there will have to be a merger between the Philosophy for Children Center and the national colleges of education, but it will have to happen so smoothly that people don’t notice that the philosophy content is not being sacrificed and the institutional base provided by education continues to maintain its integrity. Even then it will probably take a century to accomplish such a huge transformation. I think that every year now, more and more people in education find themselves with us at heart and eager to learn how they can come aboard. Correspondingly, P4C people are beginning to move into the higher echelons of education, but this is happening very slowly and needs to be accelerated.

Don’t put too much weight on the fact that P4C is not prevalent at the moment in the United States. We are preparing a comeback which will be gradual but solidly based. I am very confident that in just a few years we will begin to develop the momentum we need to spread throughout the country. The whole transition will of course take much longer, but don’t be discouraged by the fact that the movement is cyclical: a new surge is in the making.

(Endnotes)

Philosophy for Children: An Educational Path to Philosophy

Maura Striano and Stefano Oliverio

Biographical- theoretical interview with A.M. Sharp by Maura Striano and Stefano Oliverio, University of Naples Federico II

Life and Education

Where were you born? (MS)

I was born in Brooklyn, New York, the first child of an Irish immigrant, Dolores McCarthy, and a young man from Palenville, New York, not far from Woodstock, where I now live. My father was of Dutch heritage on his father’s side for generations. I visited the Shoub grave yard when my mother died. The Shoub men emigrated from Holland in the 1600’s when the land was divided in plantoons. Something I found interesting: beginning in the 19th century those Dutch men always married Irish immigrants. And my father continued the tradition.

Why did this tradition start, and why do you think your father continued it? (MS)

I really do not know.

How did your birthplace influence your cultural and educational choices? (MS)

My birthplace, Brooklyn, New York, was a city of immigrants: Jews, Italians, Hungarians, Germans, French, Russians and Irish. I liked the diversity of languages, cultures, and customs and was always intensely curious in learning about the ways in which different people from different cultures lived their everyday lives.

Did you have the feeling only that people from different cultures organize their lives in different ways or also that they think in different ways? What made a bigger impression on you: to recognize that belonging to different cultures influences our way of life (that not all our values are universal) or to discover that, in spite of all differences, women and men are able to share experiences and values through dialogue, to find/build a meeting ground? (SO)

When I was growing up, I did not think that people from different cultures thought in different ways. I had many friends who were not Irish or Dutch-American. They had different ways of doing things, their values might have been different than mine, but I never thought that they reasoned any different than me.

I think it very important that when I was young I had access to people of different nationalities and cultures. I knew from a relatively young age that we could share experiences, dialogue about those experiences and when we did differ, we could talk about it and try to find a meeting ground.

I remember a passage of Elfie: kids speak about what they want to be when they are adults but this doesn’t seem to be related to a deep investigation of their lives. Where did your purposes for the future come from? Did they come from your personal investigation of your life? (MS)

My mother, born of the middle class in Ireland, was very interested in our educational advancement and from an early age I assumed a.) I would study as much as I could and b.) I would go to university and c.) I would get a doctoral degree. There was a sense in which I knew this from the age of 9 or 10: quite strange.

When I was 13, in my first year of high school, I began tutoring young children who were interested in passing the entrance exam to Catholic High schools in Brooklyn and New York City. In a short time, I had so many students that I couldn’t meet them on a one-to-one basis. There were just not enough hours in a day. A very nice Irish American lady in the neighborhood, the mother of three boys destined for Catholic high school, suggested I bring all my students together at her house three times a week, and so I created a little school that focused on helping children pass the entrance exams that lay ahead of them. I remember our sitting around the dining room table going over the math and English exercises, suggesting that we help one another.
to make sure we all passed the entrance exam. This school lasted during my high school years, thus beginning a pattern of learning what I could in school and then translating it for children younger than I in language they would understand. The pattern was to play out in a juvenile delinquent school for girls, a residential boarding school for very bright but mentally disturbed children, undergraduates at a number of colleges and universities and finally in Philosophy for Children.

The children liked me and I liked them, and their success rate in passing their entrance exams continually increased my number of students. As I look back, I realize now that most of my students were boys. It was important for these immigrants to have their boys go to a “good” Catholic high school. Little did they know that the local public high school was excellent and in many ways would have prepared their children as well, if not better than the Catholic high schools provided they had a strong motivation to learn. Also, I am sure the mothers of these children were not aware of the prevalent sexism that permeated their cultures: boys we worry about in terms of education, girls we do not. The fact that I was a girl didn’t seem to occur to them. Of course, I am saying this in hindsight; it was not something I was aware of at the time.

Why do you believe this pattern has been so effective educationally speaking? (MS)

I think this pattern has been educationally effective because it consisted of dialogue, practice, a fostering of solidarity and self esteem coupled with my ability to translate the material being studied and try to relate it to the student’s experience.

When did you start thinking that things could be different for women? (MS)

As I think back on my childhood and adolescence, I realize that I never thought a woman could not be a university professor. When I went to college, I was taught by highly intellectual and accomplished Ursuline nuns who served as models for me as to what women could accomplish. I was particularly influenced by my professors in philosophy and theology.

When and how did you meet philosophy for the first time? (MS)

When I was in my freshman year of high school, we used to have a one week retreat each semester, where we could read, listen to talks on the spiritual life, and think. We each had to have a book to read for the week, and we were to talk about it with our home room teacher. I chose St. Augustine’s Confessions – and although I think my teacher (I still remember her name, Sister Mary Jeremiah) probably thought it a little strange, she said nothing. We would talk about St. Augustine’s struggle to be a good person, how very difficult it was, and how vulnerable we were as human beings. This vulnerability was very manifest in Sr. Mary Jeremiah. She had a terrible temper; she was highly analytical, a math teacher who often would resort to throwing things….and I liked her very much. I know I am not the first person to come to philosophy through theology, but I often wonder if one of the reasons why my undergraduates are so unmotivated toward philosophical thinking is because they don’t have access to theological speculation, and much of what they do have in terms of religious background, if anything, is dogmatic, not subject to personal reflection and divorced from their everyday life.

What is the connection between philosophical speculation and religious thought? And what are the differences? (MS)

I think the relationship between philosophical speculation and religious thinking is the focus on the meaning of certain concepts: life and death, appearance and reality, freedom and determinism, mind and body, self and other, love, friendship and beauty, justice and oppression, and the right and the good.

Perry (The Thought and Character of William James, vol. I, pp. 171-72) tells that during the mealtime Henry James sr. set a problem on which his children had to debate. Passionate but disciplined discussions among the children started under the eye of the father, who acted as moderator. He meant all this as an exercise of pugnacious and critical thought. Was there something similar in your house? Did you receive in your family a philosophical education? Could this custom be considered as a forebear of P4C practice of philosophizing? (SO)

Yes, I know this quote from Perry, and am very cognizant of the kind of debate that went on in the home of Alice, Henry and William James in their formative years. And I am sure that this had a great deal to do with their formation. (However, I don’t think we should forget there were two other brothers in the James family who did not seem to benefit from such discourse. And Alice herself never really found an outlet for her intelligence, insight and talent.)

However, the answer to this question in regard to my own upbringing is NO and YES. There was no one in my home to initiate such philosophical debate, except me, when
I when I was in my adolescence. If there was a debate about anything in my early childhood, it was of a practical and story-telling nature. There was a custom of sitting around after dinner and talking, most of the conversation focusing on what we had done during the day, sharing of confusions, perspectives, gossip. I do remember entertaining my family with stories of what I had observed of my students, peers and their families, imitating the people involved with their accents, gestures and body language.

My mother would often tell stories of how she had come to the U.S. as a jilted lover, how her boyfriend followed her to U.S. even though he had become engaged to someone else, how she put all his presents on the street in New York City when she learned of his intent to marry this girl, how she lived in New York City with a French Woman in the early thirties and went to the Irish dances on 86th Street in New York City (where eventually I would also go when I was 17 and 18). In the evenings, after dinner, she would tell my sister, my brother and me about her job in New York City with a company called Anglo-American, her hopes, her dates, her dances, how she met my father, her homesickness for Ireland. From those stories we learned about her family in Ireland, her childhood, her adolescence, and were quite able to transport our imaginations to the days of 1915-35. I remember these stories and how they affected my dreams, hopes and gave me insight into the courage and resiliency of the immigrant mind and world.

Every Sunday my mother’s cousin, Aunt Nora and her friend, Mary Hyland, also from Ireland, also immigrants in their fifties or sixties, would visit. This occasioned more stories of Ireland, immigration, assimilation, working in New York City, meeting different people with different stories. I remember laughing and laughing at the juxtaposition of perspectives, the innocence of desire and the joy and spirit of these two pilgrims to the New World.

Is there any relation among story-telling, narrative and philosophical inquiry? What are the experiences that could bring young people to philosophical thought? (MS)

The kind of experiences that motivate children to think philosophically are reading good literature that deal with philosophical concepts, dialogue about matters of importance, inquiry regarding good reasoning, values and the meaning of philosophical concepts, viewing of good cinema and drama that deal with philosophical concepts.

When did you recognize in yourself a philosophical attitude? (SO)

It depends on what you mean by a philosophical attitude. I had an intense religious attitude at a very young age (probably much too intense). I was consumed with wanting to be a good person, probably much too consumed. It was about the fifth or sixth grade when I began to think about why things were the way they were and by 8th grade I had begun to think of myself as an intellectual. Not superior, but different. My “oddness” as my siblings labeled it did not separate me from people – I was actually quite social, in my own way, even being elected president of my class in high school. This position necessitated interrelating well with students of different aspirations. However, I was aware that my interests seem to be different from the people around me. It is not that I didn’t understand my friends, or didn’t care for my friends, it is just that I knew that my interest in newly discovered classical music, math and Latin, theology and history, a hatred of television and a commitment to intense reading was not the norm among my peers of 14-17 years of age.

Which have been the most meaningful experiences in your college and graduate studies? (MS, SO)

When I graduated from The College of New Rochelle, I went to Catholic University of America for a degree in American and Latin American History, as I had taken a major in intellectual history for my undergraduate degree (the nearest I could be to a philosophy or theology major at that time.) There I found myself playing again the role of tutor to a number of Brazilian Franciscan friars who had come to
take their doctoral degree in Latin American and American History but were struggling with language. Although they were studying for the Ph.D. and I was studying for the Masters Degree, I would coach them in the various course materials as preparation for the examinations, much as I had done as an adolescent teacher. Why it didn’t occur to me that I should not be studying for the Masters degree but, like these men, the Doctoral degree, tells one something about the prevailing aspirations of young girls at that time. It is men who go for doctoral degrees, and in Catholic circles, most women did not even go for Masters Degrees. If you were to ask me whether I was angry about the situation, the answer was no. I was so socialized to this norm that I actually enjoyed helping these young Franciscans prepare for their examination and when they succeeded, I was very happy for them and for myself. We used to meet in the Olivia de Lima Library of Catholic University of which we were all members since we studied Latin American history and intellectual thought, and the archives were most accessible to us.

But there was another side to my Masters degree at Catholic University. I was also to study American Intellectual History. My assistantship involved correcting papers in this course of study. It was during this time that I was exposed for the first time to American philosophy….the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Peirce, James and Dewey. My professor was a young man who encouraged me to read, write and help the students in the class as much as possible. …I learned a great deal, from the task of trying to understand what the students were saying in their essays, reading the related works, talking to those I trusted, to try to make some sense of how the students interpreted these different authors.

Remember the time, it was the mid Sixties. When I left Catholic University I took a job at an Afro-American State College in Fayetteville, North Carolina, teaching World History and American History. For me this meant teaching Intellectual History. There for the first time, I found myself in the minority. I was a White professor at a Black College and a rebel as far as the rest of the town was concerned. For a young white woman to teach at a black college in Fayetteville, North Carolina in 1966 was something that just was not done.

I enjoyed every minute of it, even when I was scared to death. I loved the students and they liked me. Since I was not married, I would hold extra sessions in the evenings to help those who were having trouble get good grades. And many of them did very well.

The following year, having married, I went to Virginia Union University, an Afro-American university in Richmond Virginia and continued to teach courses in intellectual history, an experimental program from Carnegie Mellon University in American history and world history. Through a colleague, I entered Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia where I was able to study modern theology and its relationship to contemporary European existentialism. Later, in 1968 when I began to teach at a small women’s college in Manchester, New Hampshire, I had the opportunity to not only teach intellectual history, but philosophy, and sociological theory, while at the same time continuing my study of these disciplines at the University of New Hampshire.

Have you always felt yourself belonging to a specifically American philosophical tradition? (SO)

I am not sure that I had any consciousness of belonging to an American philosophical tradition until I began my doctoral degree at the University of Massachusetts where I was introduced to the works of John Dewey. In undergraduate school, a Catholic college run by very intelligent Ursuline nuns with a commitment to the Intellectual life, I was exposed to European Philosophy, the Greeks, Medieval Philosophy and Modern European Philosophy. As I entered my senior year we had a visiting scholar from Louvain University who gave us courses in Sartre, Heidegger and Jaspers. But even in my third year, we had another visiting scholar from France who taught us contemporary theology. I remember doing a paper on the Fourth Gospel of St. John, handing it in and going home for the weekend. When I returned, this old theologian was holding a farewell party with champagne and toasted me as having the best paper in the class, (which by the way was highly indebted to Karl Barth). For the first time, I thought of myself as not just having a philosophical attitude, but perhaps actually being able to pursue my interests in philosophy and theology. It was an ecstatic moment for a young woman in 1962, despite his warning that “Theology and philosophy are men’s fields,” he said, “So if you want to enter their world you will have to be courageous and above all persevering.”

Why do you believe western philosophical tradition has been so much dominated by men while there has been much significant women’s thinking never acknowleded? (MS)

I think the western philosophical tradition has been so dominated by men because for the most part men were the only individuals who were educated. If a woman by some miracle was educated, the prevailing patriarchal and sexist society resulted in much of her thinking being ignored.

What role, if any, did the Catholic tradition of thought play on your education? Were you fascinated by the idea of the harmony between faith and reason? Or, as your ‘debt’ to
Barth can let suppose, did you find a ‘disproportion’ between them? Did you consider reason and faith as allies or as enemies? Did the existentialist thinkers and theologians that you quoted leave traces on your way of considering philosophy? (SO)

The Catholic tradition played a major role in my educational formation. I studied at Catholic schools, college and university till I received my Masters Degree. After I began teaching at Black Colleges in the Southern part of the U.S., I began to study at Union Theological Seminary, a Protestant seminar where I focused on philosophy and contemporary theological thought and then went to the University of New Hampshire and finally the University of Massachusetts. It was at the latter that I attained my terminal degree in philosophy of education, writing my dissertation on the philosophy of education of Nietzsche. At the undergraduate level, although I majored in intellectual history, all students were required to take 18 credits in philosophy and 16 credits in theology, which I have often thought was a major influence in my becoming interested in philosophy in my later studies.

At first I was interested in creating for myself some harmony between faith and reason, but with time, this interest played less and less a role in my study of philosophy and my interest in philosophy for children. On the undergraduate level I studied Thomism and Maritain and did not find a conflict between faith and reason; however, with more study in philosophy, especially modern and contemporary philosophy, I became convinced that in many ways they were speaking different languages with regard to human experience.

What kind of influence did continental philosophy have on your education? (SO)

I had been exposed to continental philosophy since my early undergraduate days. When I read Nietzsche for the first time, I don’t remember....but when I entered my doctoral program at the University of Massachusetts in 1970, I was sure I wanted to do my dissertation on Nietzsche. I had been teaching for six years at Black Colleges in North Carolina and Virginia and at undergraduate Women’s College in New Hampshire and was highly motivated to read everything he had written. I had not only been teaching his writing to my students, but subconsciously becoming a Nietzschean in many ways, (although I was later to rethink many of his assumptions.)

Something else significant happened during these years. While I was teaching at this Women’s College in New Hampshire, I joined my husband as a “house parent” at a school for emotionally disturbed, very bright children at the Hampshire Country Day School in Rindge, New Hampshire. Along with my studying at Notre Dame College for Women in Manchester, New Hampshire I was to be a house mother, counselor, tutor, advisor and soul mate to 13 adolescents ranging in age from 13-18, who had been selected from the Boston Medical Hospital to come and partake of an experimental therapy approach. All boys, these adolescents taught me a great deal. The first thing I did was to create a library for them and introduce them to classical music, cooking and dialogue about their common problems. When I would return from the College in Manchester, an hour and a half drive each way, I often had examinations to correct. Anxious to establish an intellectual bond with the patients-students, I would invite the students to meet in the kitchen, distribute the papers and communally, we would try to correct them. It was understood that all could use my books in the library I had set up to look up information they didn’t know.

Although highly intelligent, these children didn’t go to school, or if they did it was what we called “in” and “out.” When they had settled on a grade for their papers, they would have to defend the grade to each of us.....sometimes resulting in lowering or highering the grade, but often in keeping it the same. And I couldn’t help but notice that they would wait for me to return from the university, to begin their “work,” as they called it which often would go on into the early hours of the morning. There was one seminar that I was teaching called Man and Society, a senior seminar that they particularly liked. This seminar focused on contemporary problems in American Society, the Vietnamese War, and the pervasive racism and sexism that permeated the culture. Dialogue was as natural as sharing a meal and it was not long before I realized that they were learning as much, if not more, than my college students. I began to study for my doctorate in 1970 at the University of Massachusetts. I had a great mentor who worked with my interests in interdisciplinary studies. He encouraged me to study comparative literature, philosophy, intellectual history, drama, and educational philosophy. This exposure helped me to understand how philosophical thought is one strand of a very complex intellectual context and that to understand any philosophy is to understand the context in which it came to being.

This historical and contextual approach to philosophy was rejected at the time at the University of Massachusetts's philosophy department. However, as usual, there were exceptions and those were the people I studied with: Ann Ferguson in American Philosophy and Feminist philosophy, Leonard Erlich in existentialism, Robert Wolff in Kant and Marcuse. It was an exciting time for me intellectually and I had the confidence to dive into the readings and discourse with full attention.

I met my dose of sexism at the University of
I think there is a very close relationship between my experiences as an educator and my interest in philosophical inquiry as an educational process. From the beginning, I was interested in helping children think well and to think for themselves about matters of importance. I was convinced that philosophical concepts underlie our daily experience and if we want to make sense of the world there is a necessity to inquire about the meaning of these concepts and how they are related to our daily actions. Dialogue, study of the tradition and speculation are intrinsic components of such inquiry.

Your experience as educator is a constant struggle to find the better way to get people to have better understanding. Why is understanding so important in people's lives and learning? (MS)

My struggle as an educator has involved a struggle to find better ways to help children and adults have a better understanding of their world and themselves. Catherine Elgin in her work, Considered Judgment, writes of the necessary shift from knowledge to understanding as the main objective of contemporary education. For her truth alone is not enough. If our epistemic objective is to advance understanding and our method is the construction of increasingly tenable systems of thought, there will be any number of truths - literal and metaphorical.

We can be said to know something when (1) what we know is true and (2) we know why it is true. You can’t really know something unless you are sure of it. We can be said to understand something, when we grasp the relationships it has with the conditions which produced it and the effects which flow from it. In this sense, understanding involves the ability to explain the causes of a happening and to predict the consequences. But there are also times when we understand something; we know how to use it. For example, we can be said to understand a foreign language when we know how to use it. In this sense, you understand the meaning or purpose or rules which govern something, rather than the causes and the consequences of that thing. To understand a book is to grasp its meanings; whether or not one grasps how the story was written or what its effects may be on oneself.

To advance understanding, we need not discover anything new. We already have a vast store of information at our disposal. But a jumble of data has little cognitive value. Our problem, often enough, is what to make of what we know. Advancement of understanding then involves finding order in or imposing order on the information at hand. Narrative helps. It highlights patterns, spells out implications, draws distinctions and identifies possibilities we had not recognized in the welter of information before us.

Have you ever felt a sense of uneasiness with academic philosophy? (SO)

Yes, I have experienced a great unease with academic philosophy, as a student and as a professor. I have met arrogance, sexism, superficiality and pedantry. But, this has to be juxtaposed by the wonderful experiences I have had in philosophy classes in which professors were able to invite me into the tradition and relate it to contemporary happenings in my world.

From my early undergraduate days, there was a sense in which I saw myself as a translator: for my peers in undergraduate school, in graduate school and in my own teaching. As to the extent that academic philosophy needs this translation, I AM NOT SURE. Think of the Platonic dialogues. One would hope any adolescent might be able to understand them, but I discovered in my own classes that, without translation, they do not. What this tells us about contemporary education, I am uncertain. Perhaps academic philosophy has always had this need of translation.

Only the academic philosophy? Or every kind of philosophical 'activity'? Many think that philosophizing in itself is in conflict with common sense, that the laughter of Thracian maid haunts whoever philosophizes. Do you agree? Do you think that there will always be a need of translation, a gap to bridge between everyday life and philosophy? (SO)

I am sure that academic philosophy needs translation for people outside the discipline, if it is to help them make sense of their world. This translation can take many forms: narrative, painting, story-telling, music and cinema are all possible modes of translation.

As I look back, there was a sense in which I came to
Do you think translation should be the core competence for a facilitator of philosophical inquiry? (MS)

I think this ability to translate from academic philosophy to the everyday experience of the student is necessary for a facilitator; but it is not sufficient. The facilitator also needs to know how to create an atmosphere of trust. She must respect the ideas of students and know how to lead them from opinions to considered judgments. She must know something about the nature of inquiry and be able to model the moves of such a procedure for the students. She must know how to balance exercises in reasoning with dialogue about philosophical concepts and how they relate to our everyday lives. She also should be able to model certain dispositions: to wonder, to question, to infer, to reflect, to doubt, and to self-correct.

Which books (both novels and essays) and which authors have most influenced your cultural growth? (MS)

The authors that have had the most influence on me have been Heraclitus, Plato, Augustine, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Dewey, and Emma Goldman. It was from Emma Goldman that I learned what it was to live a life that instantiates a philosophy: a struggling to be a good, courageous and caring person, an individual who is committed to making a difference for the good in this world. I was young when I met Emma Goldman, but I still admire what she manifested in her everyday life, an imaginative, critical and compassionate love of others, an earthiness and a willingness to try to make a difference for the qualitative difference of those to follow.

Do you think there is a relevant relationship between what philosophers are in their lives and what they study and develop as a philosophical theory? Do you think that there must be a coherence between a philosopher’s conduct of life and his thought? Is in your opinion incoherence between what one philosopher thinks and how she/he acts only a sign of her/his personal weakness or does it throw a shadow on her/his thought? (MS, SO)

Ideally there should be coherence between a philosopher’s conduct and his philosophical thought. As the contemporary saying goes, philosophers should be able to “walk their talk”, that is, there should be a manifest consistency between what they think and what they do, what they say and what they do. However, philosophers like all human beings are fallible, and often an inconsistency between their actions and their thought is due to human weakness. But there can be times when an inconsistency throws a shadow on their philosophy, itself. …..For example, I have often thought that Heidegger’s joining the Nazi party, even for a short time, might be indicative of something questionable in his philosophical view.

On another note, I am also highly suspicious of philosophers who use an abusive methodology to teach philosophy to novices, justifying their abusive procedures as necessary to learn how to philosophize well. For me, there should be a consistency between means and ends, and the procedures used in the philosophy classroom should be of a nurturing and empowering nature.

Philosophy, Education and Society

In your opinion, does philosophy have an educational value? In other terms, which is the relationship between philosophy and education? (MS)

Somewhere in Democracy and Education, Dewey says that philosophy is the applied method of all genuine education. When I was a young graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, most philosophers of education did not take these words seriously, but I did.

What is the relationship between human experience and philosophical inquiry? (MS)

When I think of philosophy, I think of a myriad of skills married with a history of ideas that have created our intellectual legacy, a legacy to which every child is entitled. These skills involve critical, creative and caring inquiry, being able to recognize, frame, formulate and solve our common problems by creating new ideas, testing these ideas in practice and knowing how to self-correct when the ideas no longer serve us well.

Such inquiry is philosophical because it forces the student to consider the ethical, aesthetic, logical, political and social dimensions of the problem at hand. Such inquiry
is communal and dialogical because it works cooperatively and collaboratively, with other inquirers interested in the same problems and requires the transformation of classrooms into communities of inquiry that not only consider the knowledge inherent in each discipline, but also consider the controversial conceptual terms around which the discipline is organized. In the study of language this means inquiry into the nature of language, connotation and denotation, metaphor, analogy, communication, speech, silence and meaning. In history this means inquiry into concepts such as freedom, rights, democracy, justice, education, community, society, citizenship and personhood. In science this means inquiry into concepts such as cause, effect, explanation, description, analogical reasoning, hypothetical reasoning, falsifiability, testing, evidence and proof. And in mathematics, this means inquiry into the nature of concepts such as number and verifiability. But such inquiry in any of these basic disciplines requires philosophical skills: the ability to speculate, render hypotheses and counterexamples, identify good and poor reasons, good and poor reasons, good and bad distinctions. One must be able to detect assumptions, recognize valid and invalid inferences and offer alternative points of view for consideration. One must also be capable of anticipating probable consequences, recognizing inconsistencies, seeing the connections between means and ends as well as parts and wholes and thinking empathetically and compassionately when the suffering of species are involved in our study. Finally, one must be able to recognize the contestable issues of any discipline, the variety of viewpoints that have been offered regarding these issues and the imagination to think up new ways of thinking about these concepts and issues. Thus to be educated is to learn how to think philosophically about what you are studying and to begin to understand the relationship between one discipline and another and how the variety of disciplines relate to our experience.

In The Study of Philosophy, MW vol.6, 1910-1911) Dewey wrote: “A study of philosophy is no sure road to becoming an intellectual leader, but it does acquaint the student with the forces that create ideas and make them potent, and it should give some increase of expertness in the use of the tools by which the leading ideas of humanity are worked out and tested. To help a man make a living is the ultimate end of education; if we are accustomed to limit the phrase to earning money for maintaining physical subsistence, that limitation shows not what it is to make life, but the narrowness of our own imaginations. To have some part in the making of ideas is a necessary part in the making of a living that is worth living, and the chief justification of philosophical study is that it renders the student more apt at this particular kind of making”. Do you agree with this position? (MS)

With regard to the quote of Dewey that you cite, yes, of course I agree. I don’t see a dichotomy between making a living in terms of economic sustainability and learning how to criticize, empathize and create new ideas that move us in the direction of a better world. People who do not have their basic needs satisfied, who are always hungry, fearful, without love or security, are blocked in their potential to create new ideas. To be educated well presupposes that children live in a society where they have the chance of flourishing economically, socially, emotionally and intellectually. Good education involves not only inheriting the tradition of the history of ideas that have been created before we were born, but to be actively prepared to create new ideas, new relationships, new institutions, new ways of understanding and learning how to live together in a world that is more just, more free and beautiful.

How can ideas change the world? Is this an utopia or a real possibility? Which role can philosophy play in a democratic society? (MS, SO)

As to the role that philosophy can play in the development of a democratic society, I think it follows from what I said above that this role will be indirect and educational. If philosophers would make the commitment to help transform traditional classrooms into genuine communities of inquiry in which the ethical, aesthetic, logical, political and social dimension of experience was brought to bear on the study of the other disciplines in a rigorous and systematic way from the earliest years, we could move toward a democratic society. Such communities would be facilitated by teachers who knew how to foster philosophical skills of reasoning, concept formation and dialogue, encourage children to identify their emotions and explore their emotions’ underlying beliefs for validity, and create a mini-democracy environment in which children discovered themselves in a collaborative, democratic and cooperative community and soon discover themselves inquirers who could eventually make a difference to the kind of world we live in. Such a generation would be highly critical of the institutions of their society, as well as creative and caring in the construction of new institutions that would serve all of us, rather than just a few, better. They would be emotionally mature people, willing to let go of destructive and self-destructive emotions, transforming them into energies that can be put to work to make a better world. Philosophers could join with other educational specialists to prepare a generation of children whose commitment to dialogue, self-correction and continual inquiry would put them in a good position to push for the elimination of forces that foster violence, ignorance and injustice.
Lipman in an interview published in an Italian review wrote that philosophers could have an important role in society for the connection of theory with practice and the development of critical thinking. Do you believe their role can be significant in today’s scenarios? (MS)

Yes, philosophers have skills of critical thinking. Often they are good logicians. These skills are necessary but not sufficient. If philosophers wanted to, they could commit themselves to an educational reform that would make a difference on a global scale. They have access to the metaphysical, ethical, social and political theories of mankind that could be translated for young people in a way that children could appropriate these ideas for themselves and in dialogue with their peers attempt to refine and move beyond them. There are those philosophers who have experience in creating new ideas, thinking up new solutions, new ways of living in the world that can serve as a model of what persons can do when they are motivated by ideals of justice, beauty and truth.

Sadly, we know from history that most philosophers do not have educational interests. To the extent that this attitude persists, I am afraid that there might be little relationship between philosophy and the formation of a genuine democratic society.

Philosophy for Children

The P4C curriculum was designed by Lipman in the seventies. Do you believe it has substantially changed in time, or can you say that its original structure has maintained its strength? (MS)

Although the philosophy for children curriculum was designed in the seventies and early eighties, I do not think that it has substantially changed in the subsequent years. It has been translated and adapted into many languages, but the original structure of the various programs has been maintained. This structure has a recurring focus as well as a developmental focus. The reasoning skills are developmental in terms of helping children become conscious of they are doing when they make a distinction or give a reason or create an analogy or detect an assumption, etc. The philosophical themes are recurring in most of the programs. Children at four, as well as students at seventeen, are exposed to the philosophical themes of Western philosophy among which you can find reality and appearance, friendship, thinking, mind, identity, body, love, rights, good, truth, beauty, democracy, power, freedom and fairness.

Are there philosophical and educational models to which the P4C curriculum can be traced back? (SO)

Yes, there are models, not in terms of a blueprint but in terms of influence. There are the aphorisms of Heraclitus, sometimes similar to the philosophical gems that come out of the mouths of children. There are the dialogues of Plato which probably had the most influence on the form of the stories. There are the works of Diderot and other Encyclopediasts who attempted to bring philosophy to all people. And there are the great novelists who have been able to motivate the reader to think about philosophical concepts that are integrally connected to human experience: James Joyce, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and others. But no one before Lipman attempted to reconstruct all of Western philosophy for children in a way that would make it accessible for them to practice as an ongoing conversation in the school classroom. The theory of such a reconstruction can be found in Dewey; the actual reconstruction of the discipline of philosophy in the form of narratives for children has no blueprint: it was the original work of Matthew Lipman.

Nowadays some authors happen to attack against so called western rationality, as if it were a just a local form of approach to reality and existence and therefore incommensurable with other cultural worlds. How was P4C curriculum, which shows a passionate trust on inquiring rationality, received in non-western countries? Was it considered something alien or even colonialist (if we have to give credit to the mentioned authors)? (SO)

I have had the good fortune to be able to work with children in many different non-western countries: China, Nigeria, Taiwan, Korea, Zimbabwe. I have also been able to work in many Latin American countries where emphasis is on narrative, story-telling and myth combined with “western rationality.” In each of these countries, I have discovered children who were highly receptive to the philosophy for children programs at the early elementary level. If I had to pinpoint a particular program, I would cite Pixie and the manual, Looking for Meaning, as the most universal program. Its stress on analogical reasoning, assumption-finding, language, friendship, family relationships, identity, agency, and meaning as it relates to childhood experience has not only been well received, but thoroughly enjoyed for its intrinsic value. To witness children putting on the four Pixie plays in Nigeria, Mexico, China, Taiwan, Argentina, Zimbabwe, Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Zimbabwe is to witness the universality of children’s imaginative search for meaning throughout the world.

Whoever reads P4C books realizes that they have something particular in their narrative structure. How were the stories of the curriculum created? (SO)
What they have in common are a spine of reasoning skills that aim to help children become conscious of their own reasoning process and how to self-correct when necessary, while at the same time making sure that each chapter contains a myriad of philosophical concepts that are deeply related to children’s experience. When I say a philosophical concept, I am talking about a concept that is common, central to children’s experience and contestable: concepts such as free, mind, self, friend, love, power, rights, beauty, truth and justice.

*Which was your practice of writing? (SO)*

I did not write the stories of the original p4c curriculum, I co-authored the instructional manuals. However, in 1994, I did write a program for early childhood students called The Doll Hospital, (Making Sense of My World) and in 1998-2000, wrote two other programs. One was a sequel to The Doll Hospital called Jesse and Nakeesha (Flesh of My World) and the other was a program for middle school children, focusing on philosophy of body, philosophy of sexuality and child abuse, called Hannah. (Breaking the Vicious Circle.)

With The Doll Hospital, I knew that I wanted to problematize the behaviours of a community of inquiry in such a way that children could discuss the procedures in relation to their own practice. As for the story itself about the doll, the germ came out of my childhood experience, while the evolution of the story was guided by the philosophical concepts that I wanted to introduce: person, reality, good, beautiful and true. I also knew that I wanted to help children become conscious when they were doing three things with language: giving reasons, contradicting and working with “if...then sentences.” Why? Because I thought they were essential to the fostering of philosophical dialogue.

Nakeesha and Jesse is a sequel to The Doll Hospital that focuses on philosophy of body, the experiencing of bodily sensations and the realization of the bodies of others. The issue of child abuse is treated within a context of philosophy of body, personhood and the cultivation of philosophical friendships. The story takes place the year after Jesse and Nakeesha have graduated from the day care center and begin the experience of going to formal school.

Hannah with its manual Breaking the Vicious Circle again focuses on philosophy of body, the concept of evil, child abuse and the nature of personhood. Intended for children around the age of puberty, it introduces basic themes of philosophy of sexuality and attempts to show children attempting to make sense of sexuality within the framework of personhood. If you were to ask me where this story originated, I would have to say, “I don’t know.” Some of the characters have similarity to people I have met in the past, but I think the story itself developed out of the philosophical themes that I wanted to introduce to children of this age.

*Game is at the centre of contemporary thinking. Can P4C be considered also as a form of game? Can rational inquiry be practiced as a game? Or would a game-like approach to philosophizing impair its effectiveness? (SO)*

I think a game-like approach would impair the effectiveness of doing philosophy within the context of a community of inquiry. Such a community is based on certain intellectual virtues: fallibilism, (intellectual humility) respect for others, trust, honesty, perseverance, courage and self-correction. Philosophical dialogue is an opportunity for children to make sense of their worlds in a way that fosters a reliance on the efficacy of dialogue, reason and communal inquiry. If it were reduced to merely playing a game, I fail to see why children would take the enterprise seriously and with that lack of sincerity and seriousness, the motivation to probe, persevere despite the complexity and develop the necessary skills to proceed would be lacking for many children. If it is merely a game, why should I try so hard to make sense to myself and my peers. Why should I persevere in finding out what other philosophers thought about the same issues. Why should I spend hours thinking about the consequences of adopting one alternative view over another?

*The community of inquiry model is particularly effective for the development of philosophical reasoning. Do you believe that it permits to achieve other relevant educational outcomes as well? Which ones? (MS)*

I have just finished a paper called Going Visiting. The paper deals with the making of better judgments and the role of imagination, empathy and story-telling in the fostering of intercultural understanding. Children go visiting when they share their world-views and try to make their peers understand the reasons for why they say the things that they do. This sharing takes the form of story-telling, on-going narrative and comparing and contrasting the various world views in the group. When I begin to understand others who see things from very different perspectives, I deepen my understanding of myself and my own world view and begin to realize how contextual our world views are in themselves. It is the fostering of such understanding that gives hope that the next generation will be able to deal with the multitude of global problems in a non-violent and just manner.

*What is the relevance and the uniqueness in contemporary educational scenarios of the P4C? (MS)*
Philosophy for Children taught within the context of a classroom community of inquiry has the potential to foster the following:

1. critical, creative and caring thinking
2. concept formation skills
3. dialogical skills
4. reasoning skills
5. inquiry skills
6. global consciousness
7. intercultural understanding
8. better judgment-making
9. education of the emotions

Whether philosophy for children accomplishes the above is highly dependent on the quality of the preparation that the teacher has received, as well as his/her ability to create an environment of trust, respect for children’s feelings and ideas, in which dialogue and communal inquiry can flourish.

Note that I added education of the emotions to the list: it is something that I have focused on these past few years. I am just finishing a program for middle school children that focuses on the philosophy of emotions in the community of philosophical inquiry. The program consists of ten short stories with accompanying discussion plans and exercises that focuses on the (a) identification of emotions, (b) discovering the underlying beliefs of one’s emotions, (c) inquiry regarding justification of these beliefs and (d) strategies for transforming emotions if they are not grounded in valid beliefs or are destructive to self and/or other.

**Endnotes**

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Economic Crises and Education: Some Philosophical Reflections

Laurance Splitter

Abstract

The ongoing series of global financial crises offers some important philosophical lessons and insights for educators. The epistemological lesson is stark: we should beware of certainty and all claims to it. Were the disposition of generic skepticism in place at all levels of schooling, then the intellectual rigidity that has characterized economics as a “discipline” would be balanced by demands to consider possible alternatives. The ethical lessons to be learned include ensuring that ethics, as a form of rigorous but open-ended inquiry into key questions about the kind of world in which we want to live, be included in every classroom and curriculum. At the center of this inquiry are relationships, most notably those between and among individual persons, on the one hand, and those between persons and the groups to which they belong and on which they are often said to depend, on the other. Such relationships also have an aesthetic dimension, in terms of their place in building, not just an ethically better world, but a more wholesome, integrated and harmonious world.

What lessons and insights might educators glean from the ongoing series of global economic crises, and with what implications for teaching and learning? I offer three broadly philosophical responses, drawing on epistemology, ethics and aesthetics, respectively.

Epistemology: What can we know?

The epistemological lesson is simple enough: beware of certainty and of all claims to certainty. Embrace, model and teach the kind of generic skepticism – or intellectual humility, in more positive terms – which sounds warning bells when someone claims to “know” the truth (moral or otherwise) with absolute certainty. I am not advocating doubt for doubt’s sake, or the paralysis that comes with attempting to doubt everything at once. To the contrary, I hold that it is a key function of education to help young people work out who they are and what really matters to them, to the point where they can say with full and passionate conviction, “This is who I am and this is what I stand for”. When it comes to having, expressing and acting on a network of personal beliefs, values and commitments, such self-awareness – we may call it “self-knowledge” – is a crucial safeguard against the vacuity of believing nothing, valuing nothing, and being committed to nothing at all. Still, intellectual humility is the little voice that whispers to us, in the face of even our most certain beliefs, values and commitments, that we might just be wrong. Put another way, while second-order claims to knowledge (knowing what I believe or claim to know, which is really a kind of clarity about oneself) are vital, first-order claims to knowledge are always precarious. As things stand, I may support (and have appropriate beliefs regarding) the rights of women to have abortions, the theory of evolution, the once-heretical belief that the earth revolves around the sun, and the mathematical claims of group theory and calculus. I may even allow myself to say that I not only believe but know these things – assuming that in every case, I have good reasons for believing them – but that little voice reminds me that even in the face of such commitment, I should remain open to the possibility of being mistaken.

Reason and its dispositional cousin reasonableness are on the side of the generic skeptic here. They were conspicuously absent in the minds of those who “knew” that the sun revolved around a flat earth, and who did all they could to quell the voices of Aristarchus, Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and a few others who dared to disagree. And they are, incredibly, still absent in the minds of those who “know” that the earth and all life on it were created some 5000 years ago. By contrast – to continue with the same example – reason is conspicuously present as a tool for contemporary evolutionary scientists for, try as they might (and as scientists, they ought to try), they have so far been unable to find good reason for rejecting their theories (although, they have actually been considerably modified since Darwin first promulgated them). Accordingly, they are well justified in proclaiming these theories to be true...
– or, at least, in claiming a warrant for asserting them – but, of course, they might be mistaken! What makes evolutionary theory good science is not merely its empirical and conceptual credibility, but its defeasibility, i.e. its vulnerability to contrary empirical evidence (were it to be found).

Where, one might ask, does this leave matters of faith, religion, and the like? While this question will always be a difficult one, there is no inconsistency between faith and generic skepticism, unless the former claims either the status of certain knowledge or the rigor of scientific inquiry. It is not the power of faith to move its adherents to act in certain ways that is inherently dangerous, but the tendency to dismiss those who do not share that faith. Here we may rely on the intuitive distinction between claims to believe and claims to know (with absolute certainty). My faith may commit me to certain beliefs and convictions, some of which are inconsistent with those to which your faith commits you. Perhaps I would like to convince you that my beliefs are “better than” yours or, more humbly, that we ought to try and understand each other’s beliefs a little better; at the very least, we can co-exist in peaceful harmony. However, if I know that my beliefs and convictions are correct, I can also claim to know that yours – in so far as they are inconsistent with mine – are false. And, of course, vice versa. Hence, as history has revealed time and again, we are well along the road to faith-driven intolerance, religious crusades and outright war. After all, there is little chance that either of us will be able to persuade the other, since we both know that we are right; furthermore, there seems no clear procedure for critically examining either one’s own faith or that of others.

This brief commentary on the distinction between faith-based claims and claims to absolute or certain knowledge provides a convenient bridge to matters economic – my main topic. Consider those many years of entrenched certainty during which a generation of economics students was taught – “indoctrinated” might be a better term – that there is really only one orthodox, one framework that fits the kind of society we live in, viz that of the free market whose players are equally matched individuals competing freely against one another. It is only in the wake of extreme economic strife that key economists such as Alan Greenspan have been willing to admit that their unblinking commitment to this framework was flawed, in large part because it stifled any serious consideration of alternatives, even in the face of mounting evidence. Notwithstanding my own particular skepticism regarding such economic libertarianism, what I am pointing to here is the absence of the kind of intellectual humility that would have encouraged students and teachers alike to question this dominant orthodoxy and consider alternatives – including the rejection of anything approaching a theory of economics in relation to human affairs.

In a recent New York Times commentary, Robert J. Shiller comes to a similar conclusion, albeit via a somewhat different route. Citing the work of social psychologist Irving L. Janis – specifically his 1972 book Groupthink – Shiller points to the tendency of laypersons and experts alike to “self-censor personal doubts about the emerging group consensus if they cannot express these doubts in a formal way that conforms to apparent assumptions held by the group.” (Shiller 2008). To stray too far from the consensual status quo is to risk alienation, to the point of being regarded as irrelevant. The irony for those of us who believe that we can only truly make our mark in the world when we think for ourselves is striking!

Succumbing – whether consciously or not – to the need to conform in order to avoid alienation and irrelevance is, of course, what peer pressure is all about, and it begins well before the years of one’s professional life. How often are worried parents told that their adolescent offspring’s peer group immersion – with its accompanying rejection of adult authority – is a necessary step in said offspring’s personal development? And is it not quite appropriate to worry if the developmental shift here simply replaces the voice of one authority with that of another?

I suggest that the cultivation of a healthy degree of generic skepticism or intellectual humility – which is not so much a skill as an attitude or disposition – should be an essential component of schooling from the earliest elementary years; it will serve students well in future years, both inside and outside the classroom. But am I not thereby condemning those who dare to question or challenge the dominant status quo to the perils of alienation from the very groups with which they seek to identify? In response I suggest that teachers and classrooms could do much more than they currently do to help students develop a robust sense of identity – or a sense of robust identity – that actually prepares them to deal with peer group pressure, rather than sitting back and allowing them to find their own way (or not).

Schools and classrooms need to be places where generic skepticism is the norm rather than the exception, albeit one grounded on relationships of mutual care and trust. If we all develop the wherewithal to question and challenge where appropriate, and not take things for granted, then both the adolescent peer group and the panel of experts referred to by Shiller and Janis will serve to reinforce, rather than block, such behavior.

Imagine that economics classrooms and expert panels alike are populated by those who are generic skeptics, in the sense I have outlined. Then, irrespective of the siren-like appeal of one particular theory or framework, there will be an overwhelming demand for consideration, at least, of alternative possibilities. And that, in and of itself, might be
enough to make students and experts alike stop and think again.

But we ought also to ask what it is about one particular economic framework – that of the free market and its idealized population of equally-placed individuals all in competition with one another – that has so dominated the thinking of so many otherwise intelligent individuals (not to mention the rest of us!)? The contemporary American commentator John McCumber offers a succinct analysis of “rational choice theory”, which he describes as a post-World War II attempt to present American-style individualism in a morally neutral guise: we each make choices in order to maximize our particular preferences – where those preferences could be selfish or altruistic – and we do so rationally, on the basis of clear-headed judgment and certain knowledge of the consequences of this or that choice (McCumber 2011). McCumber observes that rational choice theory dominates the halls of power in business and government (“Today, governments and businesses across the globe simply assume that social reality is merely a set of individuals freely making rational choices.”) – and, I should add, university schools of economics – but that, from a philosophical perspective, it is fundamentally flawed. Epistemologically, not only do its adherents adhere blindly to its basic tenets with a fervor more akin to faith than to science, but one of those tenets is precisely that we can predict the future with complete certainty – something which no genuine scientist would accept.

It is hard to get past the notion that behind this dominant paradigm lies the simple human – if not more general biological – drive to survive and thrive in a world full of others who are trying to do the same. Contemporary theories in genetics, psychology and economics coalesce around this idea which, needless to say, represents self-interest in its purest form. McCumber points, on the one hand, to those institutions – like corporations and business schools – which flourish precisely because of their single-minded commitment to the ideals of wealth and power; and, on the other, to struggling institutions such as public hospitals and philosophy departments which have, if not a commitment to, at least an awareness of, an ethical dimension which grounds human choice and action in something other than the individual. Citing Hegel’s view of the world as more chaotic than ordered, McCumber appeals to the humanistic notion that our ethical decisions rely upon the judgements of those communities on which we depend as the providers of coherence and structure to human affairs (“and ethical life correspondingly consists, not in pursuing wealth and power, but in integrating ourselves into the right kinds of community”). This line of thinking resonates well with those of us for whom an appropriately modified conception of community provides refuge from the extremes of individualism and collectivism. Still, McCumber has laid down the challenge to philosophy as a discipline struggling to justify itself in these wealth and power driven times: find your voice or fade ever further into irrelevance!

Ethics: How should we live?

It cannot be denied that this dominant economic paradigm has proven remarkably robust and resilient, notwithstanding calls for a more altruistic framework coming from various quarters. In many Western nations, most notably the United States, a strong belief (perhaps “faith” is a better term) in the “trickle-down” economy of the free market, combined with a perceived dread of socialistic alternatives have resulted in such concepts as care, compassion, sympathy, equality and fairness being relegated to second-class status, where they survive, if at all, either as mere epiphenomena (impotent by-products of more powerful forces) or as means to more self-interested ends. An example of the former might be convincing ourselves that the quality of life will improve for all as a result of the rich getting richer; and of the latter, the old retail mantra: “The customer is always right” (i.e. let them go away believing this and they will return again and again).
Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children, Volume 20, Numbers 1 & 2

I happen to believe that a world of self-centered individuals is both morally and conceptually impoverished, but this claim begs the question raised above: namely, that even the strongest arguments are unlikely to win the day against the hard realities of self-interest and a market-based economic mentality. Those at the top of the financial tree are likely to be deaf to such arguments, particularly if their wealth and success are the result of speculating in and otherwise dealing with money and wealth creation (as with hedge-fund managers, for example). But such is the power of the market-place that even those at the bottom of the tree will still revere it; they will simply believe that they have failed. In this context, the role of education is not to try, likely in vain, to replace one economic or social model with another, but – picking up my earlier theme – to teach and urge students to think about the issues involved, which includes contemplating the possibility that the prevailing socio-economic framework – like any other – is but one another others.

The kind of teaching I have in mind here has both descriptive and prescriptive dimensions. Whatever we decide is worth teaching from a descriptive perspective (which is, itself, a matter of prescription!) – be it social studies, economics, civics, or related subject areas, must be underpinned prescriptively: in order to make good judgments about what is worthwhile, students must integrate what they learn about how the world works with well thought-out views about how it might or should work. This kind of deliberation would ponder questions such as: “Do we, as individuals (perhaps also as children) have obligations and responsibilities toward the groups – families, cultures, societies, nations, … - to which we belong?”; “Do these groups have complementary obligations and responsibilities to (each one of) us?”; “How can/should each person’s legitimate self-interest be accommodated by society?”; “Am I ultimately alone in the search for my own identity, or am I part of a larger whole?”; “What kind of society/world do I want to live in, and what kind of world do I want to bequeath to future generations?”; “Why should I care about others anyway?”; “What implications do/should our responses to these questions have for the things that we think, say and do in our daily lives?”; …

These questions are complex, yet accessible to (almost) any thinking person (adult or child) who cares to consider them. To attend seriously to them takes time, skill and effort. Can teachers find time and space in a crowded curriculum for their students to deliberate on these “big” questions? What skills and strategies do teachers need to develop to ensure that such deliberations do not end up chasing their own tails, endlessly and aimlessly – on the one hand – or being “zapped” by the premature injection of an “expert’s” decisive viewpoint, on the other? Likewise for students: what skills do they need to develop to ensure that their deliberations on these matters are significant – that they will “dig deep” into the issues and not merely skate along the surface? And by what criteria do participants judge that their deliberations are worthwhile, particularly given that their answers to questions like those raised above are likely to be tentative and contentious, rather than determinate and consensual? Finally, what does it take to ensure that students will care sufficiently about these issues, to devote the intellectual energy and passion that will, inevitably, be required, within the framework of generic skepticism discussed above? As always, we seek balance here: to care to the point of commitment but not to the point of dogmatic pigheadedness. Indeed, genuinely to care about something is to eagerly seek as many alternative perspectives as possible, so that our own may be maximally enriched.

Over and above nurturing the kind of generic skepticism which I have already considered, it should be clear that the questions and issues raised above – as well as the skills and sensitivities required to deal with them – have both ethical and aesthetic dimensions (perhaps metaphysical as well). At the center of the conceptual framework in which these questions are raised is the idea of being a person in the world. We explore this idea from a moral or ethical perspective when we consider that persons, perhaps alone among living creatures (that we know of) are both blessed and burdened with a moral sensibility – a sense of right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, fair and unfair, etc. How we are to understand these terms and distinctions, and how (or whether) we infer from them guidelines, principles, values, or virtues regarding what it means to live well, in relation to oneself, others, society, the rest of humanity, and the world as a whole, are topics in a dialogue that is fundamentally moral (both normative and meta-ethical) in character. Teachers need to engage students in this dialogue, but they also need to equip them with the tools of ethical inquiry (perhaps through the dialogue itself). When emotionally-loaded concepts such as greed, selfishness, socialistic, welfare, rights, duties, etc. are thrown up in the course of reflecting on the economic downturn the world is currently experiencing, we want students to be able to make sense of, and offer their own appraisals of, the behavior of banks, corporations, individuals, countries and governments. And we need to engage students in this kind of dialogue – which might well draw on lessons from the present crisis – as part of their regular curriculum, with a view to preparing them to act and respond appropriately (which may well include seeing themselves as critical observers of the corporate behavior of others), in and for the future.

I also want to call attention to the ethical dimensions of the classroom itself, in terms of the nature and quality of the interactions and relationships that are part and parcel of its own identity. Whatever curriculum subject or topic is under consideration, how teachers and students
deal with one another (as caring or as indifferent, as democratic or as authoritarian, as respectful or as callous, as kind or as brutal,…), has significant ethical and personal implications.

**Aesthetics: Towards a more beautiful world**

The aesthetic dimension of the questions and issues raised here is not as readily acknowledged within the context of education, although it deserves to be. Indeed, it can be argued that this dimension lies at the very heart of the education process, and that its neglect – as signaled, for example, by the low status afforded such subjects as music and art in the mainstream curriculum – is symptomatic of the materialistic and economically-driven times in which we live. Consider that all the questions which I identified above call into question the relationships in which we, as individuals, groups, nations, participate. Consider, also, that over and above their moral connotations, these questions gesture toward a certain harmony or integrity in asking us to imagine, not just a better world, but a more complete world: a whole whose parts and relationships – most notably, those involving persons – are intrinsically satisfying and appealing, much as when the component instruments, notes and phrases of a piece of music are composed and conducted in such a way as to produce a symphonic masterpiece, or the individual brush-strokes, colors and shapes imagined and enacted by an artist come together in a visual masterpiece.

I hardly need point out that the “bottom-line” demands of accountability and corporate-like outcomes, in the context of a world in which we are all told that technological and business imperatives are essential for survival, leave little room for a deliberative consideration, on the part of policy makers, curriculum planners, and teachers, of the aesthetic dimensions of our experience. In an attempt to straddle both the real and the ideal here, I suggest that we can “have our cake and eat it” – that with very little compromising of existing demands and priorities, educators can find ways to open up this essential dimension to students. Distressing as it is to see the decline of art and music as valued areas of the curriculum, my comments here are along somewhat different lines.

The sense of aesthetic satisfaction that comes from grasping how things fit together, how parts are related, how the whole is constituted from its parts, etc. can be experienced and heightened whenever teachers (i) demonstrate and model this sense themselves (for example, when a student comes up with an unpredictable solution, idea or theory); (ii) encourage students to attend to and express how they feel when they have solved, discovered, invented, or even simply understood, something or, alternatively, when their classmates have done these things. Ideas and thoughts, as well as physical achievements and actual solutions, can be celebrated for their own sake; (iii) call attention to the aesthetic dimensions of their subject-matter. Regarding the last of these, while the fine arts may provide the most obvious examples, these dimensions are present in every discipline, from literature (noticing a particularly beautiful expression, or gesture, or action) to mathematics (reflecting on the elegance and sheer beauty of a particular solution or pattern).

Further opportunities for aesthetic appreciation may be found in the classroom itself, not just in its physical aspects (which may or may not be readily discernible), but in its growth as an inquiring community whose members blend together a mix of thinking styles (the coldly analytic style, the speculative style, the strongly interpersonal style, …) to produce something special (a new way of seeing things, a deeper appreciation of a problem or task, …). When students sense both that they, as individuals, have something to offer the class as a whole, and that their own ideas, beliefs, attitudes, values and perspectives are affected by what they experience as members of something larger than themselves, then they may see themselves as participating in the creation of something wonderful.

I remarked earlier that those societies proceeding at break-neck speed down the corporate track, in schools, the workplace and elsewhere, will not easily be swayed or even slowed by appealing to contrary conceptual or ethical considerations. The same may be said for the appeal to aesthetics, for it is surely a necessary condition of making such an appeal that we take the time to do so. Concepts of beauty, along with such cognitive procedures as wonder and appreciation, demand our (reflective and deliberative) time and attention. Those chiefly responsible for organizing the timetables of young people – notably parents, teachers, schools, governments, etc. – can do a great deal here by slowing things down so as to allow both the time and the space for these aesthetic considerations to take root.

**Concluding Comment**

I am claiming that the changes proposed here can become part of classroom culture – part of the life of the classroom and all its members – with just a little nudging and encouragement from teachers and, hopefully, parents and other stake-holders. I am also claiming that as matters stand right now, in the face of immense social and economic stress, we have a golden opportunity to rethink some basic questions about the nature and form of our systems of education. Hitherto, pressure from the dominant economic and political status quo has pushed education – particularly teachers and students – along a road that has seemed, to many, to have become increasingly impersonal,
technocratic, and reductionist. We are witnessing – as well as experiencing – major fissures across this road, to the point where even the most ardent champions of such economically-driven imperatives are forced to concede that they are no longer working well, even in their own terms (how else to interpret, for example, the injection of billions of dollars from government – i.e. ordinary citizens – into the “free”-market?). May we not now pause, collectively, to consider our best response, not just for the present, but for the sake of our children, and theirs?

The Rabbinic scholar Hillel is credited with capturing the kind of harmonic balance we ought all to be seeking:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

But if I am only for myself, then what am I?

And if not now, when?

References

Lam, C. M. Childhood, Philosophy and Open Society (Springer, forthcoming)


Endnotes

1 This claim is consistent with two other claims: that some of my second-order knowledge claims are incorrect, and that some of my first-order knowledge claims are correct.

2 For an interesting discussion of such Popperian thinking in relation to philosophy for children, see Lam, forthcoming.

3 Salanti (1987, 385) cites the following from Pasinetti: Given the crude simplications that economists are compelled to make, some considerable dose of humility about the merits and applicability of one’s theories, and at the same time the avoidance of quite unwarranted attitudes of intolerance against other theorists’ theories, would seem a code of behaviour much more appropriate to the state and nature of knowledge in economics.

Salanti concludes his thoughtful critique of applying Popperian notions of falsification and fallibility to economic theorizing with a reminder that any formal theorizing about human agency – including, I might add, the attempt to reduce it to the play of market forces – is bound to be intricate to the point of implausibility. The notion that the market can be regarded as a legitimate, albeit theoretical entity with a life of its own, may be no more plausible than the idea that a new chemical substance called “phlogiston” can be posited to explain the phenomenon of combustion.

4 Resisting the unreasonable aspects of peer pressure does not require individuals to define themselves, or their identities, in isolation from the relationships they form with others. But this relational view is conceptually quite different from one that ties personal identity to the peer group – indeed, to any group that claims one’s affiliation. I have discussed this point elsewhere, for example in Splitter 2007, 2010, 2011.
Reconceptualizing the Aims in Philosophy for Children

Robert Karaba

Abstract

Both Walter Kohan (2002) and Nancy Vansieleghem (2005) have questioned the aims of Philosophy for Children (P4C). It is the intention of this current paper to pursue the line of inquiry opened up by these authors, but from the standpoint of John Dewey’s pragmatism. Dewey’s philosophy shifts the focus from discovering the aim of P4C to aims in the particular contexts in which P4C operates. As such, aims in education (including P4C) are seen as: required for intelligent education, inseparable from the means, contingent upon specific contexts, used for ethico-politico-aesthetic purposes, multiple and complementary, and internally generated from those engaged in the practice.

Walter Kohan (2002), working in Brazil, and Nancy Vansieleghem (2005), working in Belgium, operate in different cultures from each other as well as that of the United States; yet both authors question the aims of Philosophy for Children (P4C). The aims, as re-stated by Kohan, are “‘education for democracy’ and ‘education for thinking’” (Kohan, 2002, p. 4). Both Kohan and Vansieleghem call into question the notion of using philosophy as a means to achieve either of these two oft-cited aims of the P4C enterprise. It is the intention of this current paper to pursue the line of inquiry opened up by these authors, but from the standpoint of John Dewey’s pragmatism.

The tone of suspicion of aims that permeates Kohan’s (2002) and Vansieleghem’s (2005) voices may be well founded. Aims have served to dominate through hegemonic processes that manipulate people. A curriculum that uses children instrumentally for adult political purposes is prima facie abhorrent to their senses. It is a form of indoctrination, even if indoctrination into democratic life. Kohan (2002) cautions,

When philosophy is the official voice of a politics or morality—whether aristocratic or democratic, liberal or authoritarian— it loses its subversive and transformative power. Moreover, when any morality, politics, or religion is set up as a purpose of philosophy, philosophy itself becomes impossible. If philosophy is possible at all, it is because morality, politics, religion constitute an empty space, an interrogation, an interval. (p.11)

What exactly can Kohan mean by philosophical education in “empty spaces”? What may be meant by the seemingly paradoxical claim of an education that is not formative, yet “trans”-formative? Is Kohan suggesting education without aims? Can there be intelligent education that is direction-less, goal-less and aim-less? Does P4C or any kind of education make sense without aims?

If Kohan is advocating for a kind of aimless education, then this view presents a problem from a Deweyan, pragmatic perspective. For Dewey, meaningful action must have an “end in view,” or an aim. “To have an aim is to act with meaning” (Dewey, 1916, p. 104). In Dewey’s concept of education, direction and goals are inherent in the idea of education, else why educate? It would have no purpose or meaning. Aim-less education is meaning-less and sense-less education and therefore not educative at all. An aim is something that gives meaning to action, and without meaning there is no intelligence. “The net conclusion is that acting with an aim is all one with acting intelligently” (Dewey, 1916, p. 103). Aim-full action is equated with intelligent action. Therefore, I begin with the premise that intelligent education must have aims, and for P4C to be intelligent education there must be aims in P4C.

However, I also believe Kohan’s worry of indoctrination, and Vansieleghem’s (2005) concern of “the instrumentalised nature of Philosophy for Children and the loss of originality that this instrumentalisation means” (p. 19), are legitimate concerns. I suggest Dewey’s re-conceptualization of aims in education is one way to address the paradoxical impasse of P4C educators having aims with Kohan’s apprehension of indoctrination and Vansieleghem’s
worry of instrumentalization.

Dewey (1916) re-conceptualizes aims from a Western, dualistic, Platonic conception to a more pragmatic interpretation. His re-conceptualization shifts the focus, thought, and language from the aim of education to aims in education. As we have just seen, Dewey views aims in education as 1) one with acting and educating intelligently. He also re-conceptualizes aims as: 2) connected to the means, not separated from them, 3) contextualized, multiple and contingent, not single and fixed, 4) complementary, not conflicting, and 5) internally generated, not externally imposed. Thinking of aims in P4C via a Deweyan viewpoint ameliorates Kohan’s and Vansieleghem’s concerns about the aims of democracy and thinking in P4C.

Aims in education are connected to the means, not separated from them

Dewey re-conceptualizes an aim or goal of education from something separate to be achieved, to thinking the aims are an integral part of the means. This is because aims, for Dewey, focus attention on certain aspects of an activity, and as such becomes, (or better, is) the means. “The aim is as definitely the means of action as is any other portion of an activity” (Dewey, 1916, p. 106, emphasis in original).

For example, think of the activity of playing a game. If my aim is to win the game, (like, let’s say in a professional baseball game) then I will direct my observations and engage in activities that are pertinent to that end. However, if my intention is to have fun, (like, let’s say on family game night) then that aim directs my focus and activities in another way. Finally, if the goal of playing the game is to teach, (like, let’s say my son the game of chess), then the means of playing chess in that instance will be different than if my aim was to win (perhaps- retracing moves, showing traps, etc…). Aims are seen as focusing attention and guiding action during the means, thus they are inseparable from the means.

When aims are seen as general in an abstract way and divorced from the means, then they are detached from all specific contexts. “And such abstractness means remoteness, and throws us back once more, upon teaching and learning as mere means of getting ready for an end disconnected from the means” (p. 109). In education, Dewey states, the separation of aims and means results in “rendering the work of both teacher and pupil mechanical and slavish” (p. 110). From this viewpoint, aims are conceived of as,

something to be attained and possessed. When one has such a notion, activity is a mere unavoidable means to something else; it is not significant or important on its own account. As compared with the end it is but a necessary evil; something which must be gone through before one can reach the object which is alone worth while. In other words, the external idea of the aim leads to a separation of means from end, while an end which grows up within an activity as plan for its direction is always both ends and means, the distinction being only one of convenience. (p. 106, emphasis in original)

When aims in P4C are conceptualized as separate from the means, then P4C is seen as instrumental only; a necessary evil in order to achieve the ends of democracy, reasoning, or other. P4C is not seen as intrinsically valuable. When viewing aims in this way, P4C is seen only as a means to achieve the external ends of thinking, democratic citizens, and the concern of Vansieleghem’s arises; that of P4C becoming instrumentalized.

Dewey (1916) shares Vansieleghem’s apprehension that aims may be taken as separate from the means. He writes,

Even the most valid aims which can be put in words will, as words, do more harm than good unless one recognizes that they are not aims, but rather suggestions to educators as to how to observe, how to look ahead, and how to choose in liberating and directing the energies of the concrete situations in which they find themselves. (p. 107, my emphasis)

Dewey re-conceptualizes aims in education from ends that are separate from the means to aims as integrally connected to the means. This perspective views the goals of democracy and thinking in P4C as not some general abstraction to be attained, but as suggestions for P4C educators to focus their observations and guide their actions while engaged in the activity, i.e. the means, of P4C.

Aims in education are contextualized, multiple and contingent, not single and fixed

For Dewey, there is no one final, eternal, Platonic aim of education to be discovered. Aims in education are created and used by specific people in specific contexts. As such, aims in education are multiple and contingent, operating at different times and within different scenarios. Dewey (1916) explains more fully.

And it is well to remind ourselves that education as such has no aims. Only persons, parents, and teachers, etc., have aims, not an abstract idea like education. And consequently their purposes are infinitely varied, differing with different children, changing as children grow and with the growth
of experience on the part of the one who teaches. (p.107)

Hence, Dewey alters the philosophical project of seeking the aim of education to recognizing and using aims in education.

Kohan (2002) writes of P4C, “When any morality, politics, or religion is set up as a purpose of philosophy, philosophy itself becomes impossible. If philosophy is possible at all, it is because morality, politics, religion constitute an empty space” (p11). Here, Kohan seems to be aligning himself with a traditional onto-epistemological project of discovering the True essence of philosophy and philosophical education.¹ In other words, with this statement he insinuates that real philosophy, and the real teaching of philosophy, is, and should be, devoid of ethical and political aims. Thus, this view assumes a kind of neutrality in philosophy and philosophical education. If this is what Kohan means by teaching philosophy in “empty spaces” then he positions philosophy itself a having a metaphysical essence to be discovered.²

Dewey not only contextualizes aims in education, but he also contextualizes philosophy itself.³ The study and teaching of philosophy, just as research and teaching in any field, is laden with ethical and political notions. Deweyan pragmatism does not shy away from, but embraces the ethical, political, and aesthetic dimensions. Aims in any kind of education are not amoral and apolitical, just as philosophy itself is not amoral and apolitical. Dewey’s philosophy shifts the focus of inquiry from discovery of True philosophy and the True aim of philosophical education to the ethical, political, and aesthetic uses of aims in education for particular purposes by particular people.

Contextualizing aims in education transform them from single and static to being multiple and contingent. The object is not to be goal-less, but to have multiple goals to employ for intelligent action within varied contexts. Looking at aims in this way allows for a variety of aims to be used in a variety of contexts. Democracy, as a moral and political aim, is seen as one goal, which implies a certain focus at certain times in certain circumstances depending on the context of the educator and the situation with her students. Those that are involved with the P4C curricula may be mindful of democratic aims at one time, stress reasoning and thinking skills at another time, focus on aesthetics another, and feelings at another. Dewey’s re-conceptualization of aims in education means he does not view the educational aim of P4C as an abstraction to be discovered, but educational aims as something educators use, dependent on the common sense of the teacher and what that teacher has taken into account from the specific make-up of the particular students in the particular class in the particular socio-cultural-historical context in which that teacher is operating. So, Dewey re-conceptualizes the project from seeking the single, fixed, aim of P4C, to recognizing aims in P4C. And these aims are ethical, political and aesthetic. From a Deweyan, pragmatic standpoint, aims in P4C are not seen as neutral and stemming from the true nature of philosophy, but are seen as something to be used for ethical, political and aesthetic purposes.

**Aims in education are complementary, not conflicting**

Dewey (1916) also urges us to realize that these multiple, contingent, experimental, ethical, political, aesthetic educational aims need not be conflicting. One cannot climb a number of different mountains simultaneously, but the views had when different mountains are ascended supplement one another: they do not set up incompatible, competing worlds… One statement will emphasize what another slurs over. What a plurality of hypotheses does for the scientific investigator, a plurality of stated aims may do for the instructor. (p.110)

Focusing on one aim at one time, and another at another time can be complementary; varied aims may enhance, and not compete, with one another. As such, they give a fuller view of the terrain; a more complete view than one fixed static aim will offer.

Kohan and Vansieghem challenge P4C’s use of aims of democracy and thinking. Yet these aims do not exclude teaching for other aims at other times, even if it is the impossible, paradoxical aim no aims they may have in mind. For instance, it seems Vansieghem may have a notion that teaching for rationality or thinking is contrary to teaching for emotionality and feeling.

Critical thinking and autonomy in an environment open to new ideas, dialogue and responsibility are taken to be the ‘necessary’ conditions for democracy. This means, in other words, that logic, dialogue and critical thinking are the ‘only’ organising principles of democracy and freedom. (Vansieghem, 2005, p.25, emphasis in original)

Vansieghem apparently has a view that reasoning skills are opposed to other, more feeling and introverted capacities. Yet “necessary” does not mean “only.” Garrison (1997), a prominent Deweyan scholar maintains, “Dewey entirely rejected any dualism of reason and emotion” (p. 33). And he supports this with Dewey’s own words, “A
moral judgment, however intellectual it may be, must be at least colored with feeling if it is to influence behavior” (p. 33). Deweyan pragmatism sees education for reason as not excluding educating for feeling. With this perspective, the teaching for thinking skills is viewed as helping, not hindering moral sensitivity and judgment.

Michael Pritchard (1996) invokes a distinction between “rationality” and “reasonableness.” According to Pritchard, reasonableness includes one’s feelings for others, a kind of moral intuition and judgment that include empathy for others, as opposed to a strictly rational self-interested view. His concept of reasonableness converges with a pragmatic notion of the place of reason and reflects a view that reason and emotion are not polar opposites. It is not that reason is jettisoned, but rather that the limits of reason are recognized. Reason is used to aid and enhance moral sensitivity and judgment. In other words, the claim that teaching for reason excludes other voices, sets up a false dichotomy. One can have reason and feeling, dialog and silence, talk and contemplation; reason and emotion can supplement each other.

Re-conceptualizing aims in P4C as complementary, not competing, results in a perspective of teaching for thinking and teaching for democracy as not conflicting with other aims. Furthermore, these aims are viewed as enhancing other aims and giving a fuller view. Aims in P4C are seen as multiple complementary suggestions for P4C educators to use within the varied contexts in which they find themselves.

**Aims in education are internally generated, not externally imposed**

Conceptualizing an aim as a discovered abstraction that is single and static may result in that aim being handed down from an external authority. This may make the task meaningless to those involved. Speaking of externally imposed aims, Dewey writes,

Instead of helping the specific task of teaching, it prevents the use of ordinary judgment in observing and sizing up the situation. It operates to exclude recognition of everything except what squares up with the fixed end in view. Every rigid aim just because it is rigidly given seems to render it unnecessary to give careful attention to concrete conditions. (p. 108)

An educational aim, in this sense is seen as fixed, not flexible, because it is handed down from above with the expectation of adhering only that aim. The aim, therefore, is not directly associated with the activity; it is not nuanced and changing with the contexts, but static. Thus externally imposed aims have the potential to become meaningless, or at best instrumental. For Dewey, externally imposed aims restrict judgment and meaning making, they do not free it up.

Kohan unites with this aspect of Dewey’s concept of aims when he cautions against an “official voice” of philosophy. If imposed from above, the aims of democracy and thinking are subject to be rendered meaningless and mechanical, with P4C viewed only as instrumental to these aims. If the aims of democracy and thinking are externally imposed goals from above, and not internally generated from the educators participating, then the aims may be meaningless, or they may not get translated into the educational activities at all.

For Dewey, the people engaged in educational actions are the ones that use aims in education. Indeed, aims internally generated may be the only way aims in P4C, or aims in any educational practices are translated into meaningful activities in the classroom. Educators themselves are the ones that implement aims in a way that has meaning to them. How does a specific teacher make sense of his or her aims for the educational event? That is what gets translated into classroom practices.

Dewey re-conceptualizes aims in education from externally imposed dictates that must be followed to internally generated goals by particular teachers in particular educational contexts. Thus, Dewey’s pragmatism sees democratic and thinking aims in P4C as aims that P4C educators think about deeply themselves. It sees educational goals as suggestions for aims that may be internally meaningful to specific teachers in their specific socio-cultural-historical contexts.
Conclusion

My intent has not been to criticize Kohan and Vansieleghem’s work. I have used their challenges to democratic and thinking aims in P4C as a launching point for my own inquiry into the aims of P4C from the pragmatism developed by John Dewey. Dewey’s philosophy shifts the focus from discovering the aim of P4C to aims in the particular contexts in which P4C operates. Dewey conceptualizes aims in education as the means because they intelligently direct what is focused on and acted upon in a particular educational activity. Aims in education are seen as contingent upon specific educators in specific socio-cultural-historical contexts. People use educational aims for ethico-politico-aesthetic purposes. Aims in education are seen as multiple and complementary and giving a fuller view of the terrain. And, aims in education are internally generated from those engaged in the practice.

If aims in P4C are conceived of in this way, then one question that arises is, How do actual P4C educators make sense of aims in P4C? Dewey also writes, “A truly general aim broadens the outlook; it stimulates one to take more consequences (connections) into account. This means a wider and more flexible observation of means. … Then the more general ends we have, the better” (Dewey, 1916, p.109-110). What does Dewey’s suggestion of general aims mean to this discussion? Are there other general aims that P4C educators use to help them make sense of P4C?  

Works Cited


Endnotes

1 It is important to note that I have not discussed this with Professor Kohan. Although his intent may be otherwise, I am interpreting his statement from a Deweyan, pragmatic standpoint.

2 When Kohan sets up his project as inquiry into the “real” nature of philosophy, he does so in order to adhere to that nature, and thus does incorporate ethical and political notions; although he seems to neglect those dimensions of his project.

3 See John Dewey (1920) Reconstruction in Philosophy (Boston MA: Beacon Press).

4 I have conducted a pilot study on how a group of P4C educators make sense of aims in P4C, but that will have to wait for another time.
Strictness and Second Chances: Serbian Children’s Ethical Readings of Hogwarts and its Teachers

Dr. Amy Shuffelton

ABSTRACT:

Because the Harry Potter novels are set in Harry’s school, conversations with children about the books give insights into their thinking about teachers and school. Conversations with Serbian children about the books reveal a perspective on the ethical landscape of schools that is distinct from familiar scholarly perspectives on children’s ethics, particularly the ethics of fairness and caring. Serbian children judged teachers to be good if they were “strict but not too strict.” The “strict but not too strict” axis along which Serbian children aligned teachers is here explicated and compared to alternative ways of judging teachers good or bad. This article concludes that while the “strict but not too strict” standard has significant weaknesses, it deserves to be taken seriously as a conception of how imperfect human beings create relationships that promote human good, as well as a commentary on the role of the teacher.

While I was running an after-school program in Belgrade, the Serbian elementary school students I worked with drew me into frequent conversations about the Harry Potter novels, which many of them were reading avidly. Because the novels take place largely in Harry’s school, Hogwarts, and because Harry’s teachers are important characters in the series, these conversations included much discussion of teachers, school, and ethical conundrums faced by schoolchildren. Some of what the Serbian children said about the books was predictable, for example that they loved the books for their magic and excitement, but some of what I heard surprised me. I started hearing in what they said a perspective on ethics and school that was distinctly different from those I had encountered in the literature on children’s moral development. Because the children were deeply interested in the novels, the books provided a good way to hear from children what they thought about school and teachers.

Flying broomsticks may not be realistic, but Harry’s teachers and situations Hogwarts students find themselves in are, and in discussing the books the Serbian children expressed opinions about teachers and about dilemmas Harry and his friends face that yielded an understanding of ethics that deserves the attention of educators and philosophers interested in children’s ethical thinking about school. This paper presents this alternative ethical vision, subjects it to philosophical scrutiny, and suggests some insights, however imperfect, that the children offer to those of us interested in children’s thinking about ethics.

Serbian children presented a standard for measuring the goodness/badness of teachers that contrasts in interesting ways with axes commonly referred to by education philosophers, particularly justice and caring. Theories of justice, based on the seminal works of John Rawls, Jean Piaget, and Lawrence Kohlberg, and theories of caring, based on the work of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, provide measures for considering teachers just or unjust, caring or uncaring, and thereby good or not so good (Rawls 1999; Piaget 1966; Kohlberg 1981; Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984). Serbian children measured teachers by a different standard: “strict but not too strict.” When I asked them to explain in greater detail what made particular teachers good or bad, this phrase came up repeatedly. Asked to elaborate, children provided a picture of “appropriate strictness” (which was closely linked to the idea of “giving everyone a second chance”), which this paper presents and examines for its insights. The Serbian children’s strict-but-not-too-strict standard, I ultimately conclude, draws our attention to important (and too frequently overlooked) features of the school landscape. Though it has some significant shortcomings as an ethical framework, the strict-but-not-too-strict standard highlights aspects of how children experience being students, how they think of teachers, and what they want from schooling.

This essay subjects empirically collected data to philosophical analysis. It is based on open-ended interviews with 14 Serbian schoolchildren aged 11-14. Some of the interviews were one-on-one; in others, I spoke with children in small groups. My sample is not intended to be representative of Serbian schoolchildren; rather, the children I spoke to were selected by me and by other teachers as students who had read the Harry Potter

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nods (in Serbian translation) and were interested in talking to me about them. Some of these children were model students; others were identified by their teachers as curious and eager readers but not academic superstars in the classroom setting. This study does not purport to be a study of how all (or any particular subgroup of) Serbian children think. Instead, it presents an ethical position illuminated by a handful of Serbian fifth, sixth, and seventh graders, a position that deserves our attention regardless of whether it is representative. Besides presenting data from these interviews, this paper also uses philosophical analysis to compare the Serbian children’s viewpoint with views central to the moral education literature. The paper concludes with some comments on these children’s insights and some discussion of the implications for educators concerning our role in classrooms.

The Ethical Landscape at Hogwarts

Though modeled on a British public school, Hogwarts has features that make it a familiar sort of institution to students attending school throughout the United States and Europe. Among the similarities are the types of teacher. Readers can recognize in Professor McGonagall the teacher who is strict but unshakably fair, whom students are afraid of, whose authority they sometimes think is applied too inflexibly, but whom they (sometimes grudgingly) respect for her commitment to equality and fairness. Professor Snape is the teacher schoolchildren are presumed to resent above all others: the teacher whose strictness combines with favoritism to produce authority-abusing meanness. We have also a host of minor characters who are other recognizable teacher types -- the incompetent teacher, the energetic gym teacher, the toadying bureaucrat, the boring teacher who lectures from old notes in a monotone.

Also familiar are many of the ethical challenges Harry and his friends face at Hogwarts. Hogwart School is the site of conflicts great and small. Evil threatens there, but Harry and his friends also have to make everyday choices about what’s right and wrong to do. Students have to choose whether and when to break rules, by cheating on their homework for instance, or sneaking out of school or around parts of the school where they are not supposed to be. They have to decide if it is important to speak out to teachers in the name of what they think is right when their ideas conflict with the teachers’. They have to navigate relationships with authorities and peers, often when they find themselves caught in conflicts not of their own making. These ordinary, school-related, ethically troublesome problems are less cataclysmic than the good versus evil showdowns, but they are particularly interesting because we may not find them easy to answer either. Schoolchildren do, however, have to come up with answers. Not all schoolchildren find themselves face to face with evil personified, but all schoolchildren have to make choices about what to do in situations like Harry’s at Hogwarts.

In this recognizable school, the characters often (though not always) divide neatly into good and bad. The students who live in Slytherin house are generally bullies and snobs, while in contrast Harry and all his best friends are in Gryffindor house. This, we are shown, is no mere coincidence. On their first day at Hogwarts, first-year students are sent to houses by a “sorting hat”, a magic hat which can sit on a child’s head, tell which “sort” of person he or she is, and send him or her to the appropriate house. A Hogwarts song lists the sorts of child there are, all defined by character traits which have strongly ethical connotations. Gryffindors are “brave at heart”, while Slytherins are “cunning” and “use any means to achieve their ends” (Rowling 1997). The central teacher characters, McGonagall and Snape, head these houses, and they are also different sorts. The close association of teachers with their houses, combined with the frequent neatness of the good/bad divide in the Harry Potter novels, makes it reasonable to understand them as models of good and bad teachers. (This has changed somewhat in later books, with Snape’s character in particular becoming more and more ambiguous. Questions about Snape’s true loyalties, however, become interesting in later novels precisely because of his original and frequent association with badness.) That Professor McGonagall’s most visible characteristic is her absolute fairness sends a message that the good teacher is impartial. Her foil is the favorite-playing Snape. Partiality, the books suggest, supports cruelty and is a characteristic of bad teachers.

What Serbian Children Had to Say

In this strange yet familiar school, characters and situations can sometimes seem to fall neatly along good/bad, right/wrong axes (and indeed one of the criticisms sometimes launched at the books is that the good/bad dichotomy that runs through the series is too simplistic). Serbian children’s understanding of the teachers at Hogwarts school, however, and their ideas about what is right and wrong to do, suggest that not all readers interpret Hogwarts, and their own schools, in the same way. What Serbian children said about the books in interviews reveals a different, but insightful, take on the ethical landscape of schools.

As noted, interviews were open-ended. In general, my questions concerned specific teacher actions, choices, and decisions portrayed in the Harry Potter books, with a particular focus on teachers’ fairness, uses of authority and
relationships with their students. After I realized in the first handful of interviews that students had less to say about teacher fairness than I expected, I began to use broader ethical terms, e.g. asking “do you think so-and-so is a *good* teacher” (rather than a *fair* teacher), curious whether students would even bring up fairness if I did not speak of it directly. Most often, they did not. I also asked what children thought about Hogwarts students’ treatment of each other, both friends and foes, listening for their ideas about loyalty and the demands of friendship. Other questions were about school rules and incidents when Harry and his friends, or other students, break them.4

When asked who they thought the best teacher at Hogwarts was, Serbian children gave names that surprised me. Snape was not on my list of likely candidates, but several children called him the *best* teacher. The good teachers, many of the children said, are good because they are “strict-but-not-too-strict.” They did not all agree about which teachers were just strict enough, but that was the axis they lined the teachers up along. In making sense of their conception of good and bad teachers, right and wrong behavior in schools, the question then becomes what that axis looks like.

According to one boy, Sava, McGonagall was a good teacher “because she’s not too mild because that would spoil the children. Nor is she any kind of hair-splitter. She knows how to have fun sometimes, but she knows where the boundaries are.”5 A teacher would be too strict, Sava said, “if she watched every little thing, mainly if she didn’t respect children, if she didn’t let them do anything, if everything had to be just so and if children messed up she’d make a big fuss about it.” Sava’s words capture themes that came up over and over again in Serbian children’s responses.

From the perspective of the children interviewed, teachers who are “too strict” are cold and never praise students. They expect too much of them. When students make mistakes, they scold them, which is mistreatment according to the children I talked to. But children did *not* think they should be allowed to do anything they wanted. The criticism “not strict enough” occurred often in our interviews. “Not strict enough” means letting children do whatever they want, and that, the children said, would spoil them. Snape is a bad teacher, a boy named Nikola proposed, because he expects too little from his Slytherin students. Towards them, he’s “indulgent, as if they were like little kids in nursery school, not like grade-school children.”6 No one seemed to think children were completely capable of holding themselves to appropriate standards; that required a “strict enough” teacher. Underlying the Serbian children’s definitions of “too strict” and “not strict enough” was an assumption that children are prone to making mistakes and need someone to force them to study.

The good teacher, who is *strict-but-not-too-strict*, understands that children make mistakes. She helps them – and she “gives everyone a second chance”, which was another phrase often repeated by Serbian children. She helps students learn by explaining and by making class enjoyable, though knowing just how far to let laughter go, rather than just handing over a lesson, telling students to study, and then testing them. When she does test students, she adjusts her questions so that they require studying but are answerable. (When Serbian students talk about being asked questions, they are referring to standard Serbian classroom practice, in which a teacher calls one student to the board to answer questions about the material they are covering as a class. A teacher can therefore adapt questions she asks to particular students.) The children I talked to had a keen sense of who deserved what kind of demands; Sava described Snape as “cold, hostile” because “he calls students to the board when he knows they don’t know, that they know the least. He should ask someone who does know the answer, who wants to answer; that would be helpful because other students could learn something from that kid. The result of this is that kids are scared, no one ever wants to answer, they just want to get out of his class . . . they’re scared. Snape makes himself look bad, and he makes his subject look bad.” The teacher who understands that everyone makes mistakes and takes this into account in her teaching is thus a more effective teacher.

The Serbian children’s good teacher is understanding in the sense of sympathetic, but understanding also implies knowing, in the sense of insight, and the good teacher knows when *not* to be sympathetic. That would be *not*
strict enough.” The good teacher knows who has done the work and who is just lazy. Although Sava thought teachers should not frighten students, for instance, he had little sympathy for his classmates who were “lazy, irresponsible, not drastically stupid, they just don’t want to work.” The good teacher understands that all children are different, with different abilities, and she also knows who is capable of what kind of work and does not spoil those who are lax in their studying.

The good teacher gives children good advice so that they can better keep themselves out of the trouble they tend to fall into, and she helps them straighten things out when they get into trouble anyway. The teacher Serbian children mentioned most often as the best teacher at Hogwarts, whom all the children I talked to identified as good, is Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster, who most clearly has these qualities. (Dumbledore, in fact, is the only teacher all the children I talked to identified as good.) He is the character who always sends Harry help when he most needs it. He cannot be considered too indulgent either, as he only steps in to help Harry when good faces evil, not, for instance, when Harry gets sent to detention. One girl, Snezana, said he was the best precisely because “he has his limits.” He is known to have given Snape, who used to be connected to the forces of evil but says he no longer is, a second chance by hiring him to teach at Hogwarts. The Serbian children judged the same way. (Dumbledore, in fact, is the only teacher all the children I talked to identified as good.)

Insights and Shortcomings of Strict-but-not-too-Strict

In many ways, these children’s descriptions of a good teacher seem reasonable and commensurate with common appraisals of good teaching. The strict-but-not-too-strict teacher values learning, and by helping and encouraging students, she teaches them to do the same. Implicit in the children’s definition of a good teacher is the notion of a good student as someone who studies and learns. Although they think they should be held to learning, the students I talked to were no passive recipients of whatever schools offered but demanded “real knowledge.”... The boring history teacher was mentioned as the worst teacher “because there’s no point to his classes,” as was the incompetent teacher, who inexcusably teaches an important subject that he himself is no good at. In the children’s vision of a good school, the teachers respect the students; the students have the self-respect to resent being frightened and humiliated; they respect the teacher who has high expectations of them; and the students are forced to overcome their natural laziness. The Serbian children’s strict-but-not-too-strict might seem a standard that we have every reason to agree with. However, there are significant differences between their vision and two alternative measures of good and bad teachers and schools, namely fairness and caring. Caring and justice offer alternative axes for judging teachers, and before settling on the Serbian children’s version as entirely agreeable, we should look at how it compares to each of these.

The absence of considerations of fairness from the Serbian children’s judgment came out most strongly when they were asked about Harry’s resolution of problems. I was particularly interested in what children had to say about incidents that seem to call for considerations of justice, particularly when it is acceptable to break rules. I asked about Harry’s choice to break a rule and leave school for a day out in the nearby town of Hogsmeade, where he is not allowed to go. He is able to leave because he has a cloak that will make him invisible and a magic map that will show him secret passages that lead there, but he is not allowed to go because his aunt and uncle, out of sheer meanness, refused to sign the permission slip. His teacher, McGonagall, refuses to make an exception for him because “rules are rules.” Ultimately Harry does leave, is caught, but is then saved from trouble by Professor Lupin, a teacher who takes special care of Harry, having been his father’s friend. This is a complex case of fairness because partiality shown by a teacher works as a correction to earlier capricious disregard for fairness shown by Harry’s guardians. Should Lupin have helped Harry that way, I asked, and was the rule fairly applied in the first place? I also asked about the situation in which Harry’s friend Ron asks their studious friend Hermione to borrow her homework so that he and Harry can copy it. Finally, I asked students what situations they thought McGonagall was a good teacher because she “treated all students the same way,” was “principled” and “fair,” but few students brought up fairness independently of my explicitly questioning them about it. Fairness, though praised, was not uniformly required of good teachers.

When I pressed questions about favoritism on students who had not mentioned it or fairness, demanding yes or no answers to whether teachers played favorites and why that was or was not a problem, many of the children’s answers sounded incoherent in terms of fairness discourse. In the Kantian/Rawlsian logic of fairness, the problem with favoritism is that personal preference is inherently unfair and the unfair teacher is not a good one.7 For these Serbian
children, however, favoritism was not indisputably bad. For instance, when I asked one boy, Marko, whether Snape was “good or bad,” leaving the meaning of those terms open, he said “It depends for whom. He’s an excellent teacher for his Slytherin students . . . because he always favors them, gives them the best grades, likes them the best.” When I asked if grading his house’s students better was fair, he answered that Snape “wants the best for his own” and was therefore “fair for Slytherins but not for Gryffindors.” This response suggests a very weak understanding of justice, as the very definition of fairness towards students excludes differential treatments of them after taking into account relevant differences, and we do not take a teacher’s loyalty to his or her “own” students to be a relevant difference when it comes to grade-giving. According to another boy, Zoran, Snape “ought to do everything [for his house] so that they’ll be better than anyone, so that he makes sure that they’ll be on the best path because he likes Slytherins specially, to help them succeed.” This same boy continued, however, that “teachers shouldn’t let their own class get away with things.” Good teachers can favor their own students so long as they are strict enough.

Similarly, when asked whether or not Harry should break a rule, none of the Serbian children independently brought up the fairness of the rule. A response they typically gave me instead was that it depended on whether he could get away with it or not. “It is ok for Harry to break rules,” Jovan said, “because people respect him . . . and teachers think he’s more powerful,” and he extended this to anyone. He didn’t break rules himself, he said because “if someone sees you – no problem. But if someone finds out, you have to go to the teacher, the principal, and you’re in big trouble.” Other children, when I specifically brought up fairness, shifted the conversation away from questions of fairness to other considerations. It is ok for a teacher to help a child break a rule, said Snezana, “sometimes but sometimes not. It’s good when nothing bad will happen. When nothing bad will happen to anyone.” After one more interchange, she said of teachers that her favorites were “McGonagall because she dispenses justice and Lupin because he always helps Harry,” evidently seeing no inconsistency there. Similarly, when asked whether or not friends should help friends cheat, there was general agreement that it was acceptable or even crucial to friendship. A good friend should share homework “because a good friend is more important than other things.” The children agreed that there were times when you shouldn’t help – on an important test or when the person asking to borrow the homework never did his or her own work – but sharing homework at other times was not a problem to them and was even virtuous. Finally, when I asked for examples of difficult choices Harry has to make, they suggested times when he risks getting in trouble if caught by adults, never situations that meet conventional philosophical measures of ethical ambiguity.

It would be easy to read the Serbian children’s most common answer to whether it was acceptable to break rules as evidence of a limited understanding of ethics. On Kohlberg’s scale, for instance, these children’s answers would place them at the lowest stages (Kohlberg 1981). The instances in the books that I asked about are not unlike questions children are asked to face, as hypothetical or in real Just Community schools. Compare, for instance, Clark Power and Ann Higgins’s analysis of students’ conversations and conclusions (Power, Higgins et al 1989). Some of the children’s responses might be interpreted as “conventional moral judgment,” as they do show concern for relationships (e.g. “no one should get hurt” and “it’s ok to break rules if people respect you”), but the children were overwhelmingly concerned with avoiding punishment. Just as fair/not fair was not the axis students placed teachers on, the legitimacy of rules as fair or unfair was not what children saw as grounds for judging decisions. “Getting around the rules” was preferable to protesting them as unfair. Protesting them aloud to teachers would obviously be difficult, but the children did not protest them to me either. None of them expressed resentment of unfairness in rules, either of rules Harry is expected to abide by or rules imposed on them. As Sava put it, Harry should have “found some other way to get his uncle to sign the permission slip because that way he wouldn’t have to worry and he wouldn’t have to lie and say he hadn’t gone and he’d have a clean conscience, he should have found another way to get around the teacher.” Professor Lupin should have helped Harry, Sava said, because otherwise Snape would have found him out and Harry would have gotten into big trouble. Inherent in his words is some recognition that lying dirties your conscience, and by implication lying is therefore wrong, but ultimately finding a way to sneak around the rules, helped by people who want to keep you from trouble, is the best policy.

An alternative interpretation of these responses would be that the Serbian children were adhering to the theory that ethics means not simply applying principles but taking many contextual details into account. Insistence that contextual detail matters, however, and/or that fairness is not the most important characteristic of good teachers, does not mean we can conclude that Serbian children valued the ethics of caring as it is commonly described. The most popular teacher was Dumbledore, who is a model caring teacher – he sees situations from the student’s perspective, attends to their individual concerns, and, “giving everyone a second chance,” he helps people move beyond their mistakes to more learning. But the students also thought Snape was a good teacher, and he is the very antithesis of the caring teacher. The caring teacher does not blame students when they help each other, humiliate students, or ignore peer
bullying.

The strict-but-not-too-strict standard that appears to structure these Serbian children’s ideas about how it is appropriate for teachers and students to behave in schools thus becomes problematic. Accepting teacher unfairness as unimportant, even necessary if teachers are supposed to be good heads of classes, would seem to work against pressing students to see justice or injustice in actions, rules and social institutions. Being humiliated by teachers was a wrong that resonated more strongly with students than seeing others favored, but so long as teachers should be strict, it seems an unfortunate occasional side-effect.

Conclusion

Why take the Serbian children’s strict-but-not-too-strict standard seriously, except as a clinical report of deficiencies in their ethical thinking? Their ideas about what is good or bad for teachers and students to do are an ethically perspective worth taking seriously, I would argue, because they do include a deep understanding of human relationships. Echoing through the Serbian children’s responses are two key demands of teachers: understanding and helping. According to these children, human beings are intrinsically flawed; they are lazy, self-interested, and they make mistakes. Children are, and they recognized that adults were less than perfect too. Although all thought that teachers should encourage their students, explain lessons, spend time on each individual, they also noted that, in Sava’s words, “teachers can’t always because they have lots of students, and they get upset, they have their own problems.” Adults make mistakes just as children do, and (like Snape) they also deserve second chances. Because people are prone to bad judgment, and do not grow out of this tendency, they need other people to help and understand them. They need the people around them, authorities and peers, to insist they do the right thing and to help them out of trouble when they fail. People should know enough about each other that they can tell when they’re being taken advantage of, and they should refuse to be – they should be somewhat strict. The strict-but-not-too-strict standard, which asks people to help and understand one another within important limits, binds imperfect human beings together, creating a web of relationships that are not always caring or fair but that do promote human good.

A useful step forward might be to invoke a distinction the children did not make: between what we might call “disciplinary” strictness and “epistemological” strictness. Teachers are responsible for upholding school rules and procedures, e.g. getting students through the hallways without disrupting the work of others, moderating class discussions, and making sure assignments are handed in on time. Teachers are also responsible for upholding certain epistemological standards: seeing that arguments are backed with reasons, questioning the validity of claims so that students are pressed to strengthen them, and not letting wooly-headed nonsense pass for truth. Of course, these kinds of strictness sometimes overlap: the teacher who insists that students take turns speaking is both keeping order and supporting the back-and-forth of dialectical reasoning. The distinction remains important, though, because at other times disciplinary strictness does not support the pedagogical objectives of epistemological strictness. My critique of Serbian children’s viewpoint mainly concerns what they said about teachers qua disciplinarians. As Philosophy for Children has long held, however, it is possible for teachers to be warm and friendly disciplinarians and yet be strict upholders of high epistemological standards. In fact, less strictness in discipline, inasmuch as it opens up the classroom to children’s thinking, may make possible greater epistemological strictness, as children engage in real thinking, real dialogue, and real learning. I think Serbian children recognize this to some extent, as when they spoke against humiliation and laziness, against inflexible punishments but also against letting students off the hook when it came to learning. Perhaps their most powerful suggestion is that we educators should not forget that children themselves recognize the merits of holding people to high standards when it comes to the pursuit of truth and learning, provided this is done in a comprehensible and supportive way.

Bibliography


Endnotes

1 The Serbian phrase is strogo ali ne prestrogo

2 Additionally, it bears noting that the ideas of children I spoke to were no doubt influenced by the particulars of their time and place. These children, some of whom lived in Belgrade, others in the provincial Serbian town of Pozega, were born just before war broke out in the former Yugoslavia, and their childhoods were taking place in times of ongoing political uncertainty. Because they lived in Serbia, these children had been much less touched by violence than children in places such as Bosnia and Kosovo, but economic crises, war, the NATO bombardment, and threats of political instability cannot have been absent from their awareness. This study does not intend to establish any claims about how historical circumstances affected the children I spoke to; rather, I want to note that children just a few years older and younger than these might well have very different understandings of human conduct and ethical obligations. I make no claims to be capturing a generally Serbian sensibility—only the thought-provoking perspective of a handful of book-reading Serbian children.


4 Interviews were conducted in Serbian, transcribed with the help of a native speaker of Serbian (Darko Babic, for whose help I am grateful), and analyzed by me. Translations of children’s words are mine.

5 Names assigned children in this paper are all pseudonyms.

6 Compare, as another example of “too indulgent,” one of the teachers portrayed in Jackson, P. W., Robert E. Boostrom and David T. Hansen (1993). The Moral Life of Schools (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass). They describe a high school teacher who appears to hold ninth graders only to the standards of middle-school students. There is overlap between their criticism of the messages that teacher sends and the Serbian boy’s criticism, but one significant difference. The high school teacher’s lessons do not give children enough intellectual challenge. This cannot be the problem with Snape’s classes, since the Slytherin students Snape indulges sit in the same classes as Gryffindor students, are taught the same lessons, and given the same homework assignments, and this Serbian child took no issue with the lessons offered. The problem, he thought, was that Slytherin students were let off too easy when they made mistakes.

7 Rawls, Kant, and other philosophers who address fairness of course provide far more specific analysis of justice, impartiality and fairness. I am painting in broad strokes here to emphasize that even these broad strokes were often not recognized by my Serbian respondents.

8 The Serbian word we were using was “fer”, which is slang, I assume derived from English. There is a native Serbian word, “pravedan” that translates as “just, impartial, fair” and children used this word when praising teachers for their impartiality. When I asked English-speaking Serbian adults how to translate “fer”, they insisted it was “fair”; but these interviews and other conversations with children lead me to think that “fer” is a word meaning little more than “nice, good” in their thinnest senses. At times children used “fer” interchangeably with “fair” in the sense of just, impartial. In any case, whether “fer” means nice or fair, the teacher who played favorites was often thought to be good, even good because of his or her favoritism.

9 In this, the Serbian children’s opinion was not far from that of Serbian adults I talked to. While a Serbian friend was helping me transcribe the taped interviews, for instance, he asked me just why I was so interested in cheating. Because it seems to me that Eastern European children cheat a lot in school, I said, and that it’s not such a problem that you should turn in peers who cheat. Of course you shouldn’t!, he said. When I explained American honor codes, he was shocked by the very idea that anyone would be asked to turn in a peer—and would actually do so.
Abstract

This paper considers one key aspect of doing Philosophy with Children; the use of children’s questions. In particular, the paper reflects upon the place and importance of children’s questions in McCall’s Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI). Generally children are allowed, within Philosophy with Children practices to ask their own questions. In some approaches questions are set for the children to inquire into. These questions often come from teachers’ manuals. What is different about McCall’s CoPI is that the facilitator selects the question for the inquiry and not the children. McCall’s CoPI is practised by facilitators with a background in philosophy, who are therefore able to recognise the philosophical potential in children’s own questions and who are also able to structure dialogue to stimulate and engender philosophical dialogue. In the article it is further suggested that not using children’s questions to promote philosophical dialogue, poses some fundamental questions about how children are perceived and how this may impact upon their place and potential voices in society.

Philosophy with Children (PwC) is a generic term for all forms of practical philosophy that may be undertaken with and by children. Some practices will be more commonly known than others; Philosophy for Children (Lipman, 1988, 1991, 2003), Guided Socratic Discussion (McCall, 2006), Socratic Method (Nelson, 1949; Saran & Neisser (eds), 2004), Thinking Through Philosophy (Cleghorn, 2000), Philosophical Inquiry (Cam, 1995) and Community of Philosophical Inquiry (McCall, 1991) are likely to be the most frequently practised or known within Britain. There is often confusion that all practices are the same. In fact, there is, at times, confusion amongst practitioners and some academics over the approaches. There is a common tendency to assume all practices are Lipman’s Philosophy for Children – this is not the case. Certainly there are similarities and some practices have things in common, but no two approaches or methodologies are the same. In fact, there are some distinct differences in the respective structures that go a large way to ensuring philosophical dialogue to a greater or lesser extent. This paper aims to consider one key aspect of PwC, namely the role of questions and in particular the use of children’s questions in generating philosophical dialogue. The paper will consider what this issue denotes as regards the view of the child and the role of children themselves within PwC. The focus of the paper will be McCall’s Community of Philosophical Inquiry.

It is helpful that prior to exploring the role of children’s questions in PwC to provide some background and rationale of McCall’s Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI) since one of its distinctive features is the role it accords children’s questions. CoPI was created by Catherine McCall, a philosophy and psychology graduate who later trained with Lipman in the 1980s and was in turn training others in his practice of Philosophy for Children (P4C). While she had been president of the Metaphysical Society at Trinity College, Dublin, between 1975-76, McCall devised a practice that mirrored what she had seen philosophers do at conferences. She structured this practice in such a way that after participants’ thinking had been stimulated by a paper, they would make contributions and these contributions would link to contributions made by others within the dialogue. It was this practice that she took to Lipman’s Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy with Children (IAPC). She was responsible for creating a course for infant teachers in New Jersey when they signed up – against the rules – for the courses run by the IAPC. Lipman did not advocate philosophy for the under tens and when infant teachers enrolled to train in P4C there was no course available. It was at this juncture, to save turning these teachers away, that McCall began to use CoPI, as she had created it, with the teachers and the children in their classrooms (McCall, 1997, 2006, 2009).
Cassidy (2007) explains that essentially, CoPI follows a very simple structure. Participants begin with a stimulus, usually a written text. They read this text as a group and then indicate to the facilitator that they have questions they want to ask prompted by the text while reading. The facilitator notes these questions down verbatim and records who asked the question. The facilitator then selects a question and asks the originator of the question what they found puzzling or confusing about their question. After the first speaker, others may contribute by raising their hands and waiting to be called. Individuals are not necessarily called in the order that they put their hand up; the facilitator juxtaposes different philosophical perspectives by selecting the order in which participants speak. When they begin their contribution, participants must either agree or disagree with something that has gone before and provide reasons for this agreement or disagreement. There is no search for conclusions or consensus, as in some other practices. Also, participants, unlike in other approaches, need not give their own opinions. There is a further rule that no technical language or jargon is used. In other words, individuals must use everyday language to say what they mean in order that others can understand what is being said. Additionally, participants may not refer to authorities, for instance, television documentaries, books or grannies, for their reasons for agreement or disagreement; it is the individual’s own thinking that is important. This structure and these rules remain the same regardless of whether participants are children or adults.

There are four assumptions upon which CoPI is built (McCall, 1991; Cassidy, 2007). The first is that there is an external reality into which we can inquire, leaving everything open to question. Secondly, we, as humans, have the disposition and capacity to reason, and are able to reason with others. Thirdly, as human beings we are all fallible. This allows that everything is open to question and also explains why participants may not refer to authorities for their reasons since the authorities themselves are also fallible. The fourth assumption underpinning CoPI is that we are, as humans, all creative. Every time we speak we must create meaning for ourselves and others. Similarly, in listening we must also create understanding and meaning for ourselves. McCall suggests that in being creative we are ‘… capable of generating original ideas. This does not mean that every person does in fact originate new ideas, but that by virtue of the fact that an individual is a human being, any individual has creative potential’ (1991, p. 30).

So, given that CoPI asserts that we all have the capacity to question and reason and that we are all creative individuals, one could be forgiven for wondering why it is that CoPI is often different from other PwC approaches in that it considers it to be important that in philosophising with children children’s questions are used rather than questions set in a teachers’ manual or handbook.

Perhaps most importantly, in using questions set by an individual external to the Community, something could be said about the place or role of the children in the dialogue. Those approaches that set questions for the children to inquire into, one could argue, imply that children are not capable of asking philosophical questions. Instead, they impose the questions that the author of the stimulus materials thinks worthy of exploration. This is a more complex issue than simply children’s abilities in asking questions or the imposition of topics through set questions. There is a more fundamental, ethical point about the role or place of children in the practices of Philosophy with Children. There appears to be a power relationship that places children in the position, as is often the case in the classroom, where the teacher is in control and children do what the teacher wants; this includes inquiring into questions set by the teacher. In saying this, there is no intention to suggest that PwC is about subjugating children, far from it. PwC, in its several guises empowers children in many ways to articulate their ideas and their reasoning, but with respect to the entire practice, it seems odd, at the very least, that in such an egalitarian practice, children should not be trusted to ask or explore their own questions. Certainly, in some practices, children are allowed to vote on the question they discuss, but this raises a different issue to which we will return later.

No, in setting down questions for children to engage with we are missing a crucial point. Children are, under these circumstances, perceived to be inferior, not trusted, not as able as adults to ask questions that are philosophical. This is entirely bound up with the way children are perceived, and in perceiving them as less than adults, we cannot claim egalitarianism as a fundamental aspect of PwC. Indeed, one could go further and suggest that in order for children to be treated equally, we must explore what the fundamental difference between children and adults is that allows that we treat and engage differently with them. Cassidy (2007) suggests that children are not persons since they are treated as means to ends. She holds the perspective that it is only in treating others as persons that one is a person and since adults always behave towards children for what they will become – future plumbers, citizens, parents, playmates for siblings, and so on – then they cannot be, and are not, treated as persons. The sentiment, that children are seen as different to, and inferior to, adults, is shared by others (e.g. Archard, 1993; Jenks, 1982, 1986; Matthews, 1994; Stables, 2008; Rysst, 2010) when they highlight that children are not yet full members of society. Cassidy goes on to suggest that in using CoPI as a model for society, children would be persons. It is in CoPI, she claims, that children are engaged as ends in themselves and it is partly in allowing children to ask questions to which they want answers that we are allowing personhood, since children in this setting are being
treated in the same way, or are afforded the same freedoms, as adults in the same setting.

It may be suggested that children are simply not capable of asking philosophical questions. Certainly, in asking ‘why’ type questions one cannot be assured that a question will be philosophical. It may be interesting to note, as an aside, that in the west of Scotland, ‘why’ is often substituted by ‘how’ questions where children and adults are not asking procedural questions. For example, ‘How does mum not listen to the children?’ is not asking in what ways mum is physically able to not listen, but rather is asking why she does not listen to the children. Nonetheless, questions beginning with ‘why’ do not necessarily lead to philosophical questions and as a facilitator one cannot make the assumption that it does. Indeed, in But Why? (2004) provides case studies that illustrate excerpts from some children’s dialogues. The questions demonstrate a range of formats; why, if, how, would, can, and should questions are all evidenced. In my own experience of facilitating CoPI over many years, there has been a similar selection of types of questions.

Piaget, for one, would not allow that children were able to philosophise, he suggested that asking a question that seemed unusual or did not conform to his pattern of stage maturation was a case of what he called ‘romancing’. He suggests that children in instances such as these are not interested in thinking, never mind engaging in dialogue, about the question and states that in asking a question, what the child is doing is ‘… merely verbal, and indicates pure astonishment without calling for any answer’ (1960, p. 164). Matthews (1980) discusses Piaget’s refusal to accept anything that falls outwith his stage maturation theory, especially his denial of children’s reasoning abilities at an early age (Donaldson, 1987). This, one might suggest, is because Piaget was looking to fit the results of his experiments with his theory (Pulaski, 1980) and he did not give credence – or even consideration – to the philosophical potential embedded within the questions asked by children who took part in his experiments. Indeed, he ignores them. Pulaski highlights this refusal, or denial, of Piaget’s and goes on to suggest that Piaget would assert that regarding stage maturation, many individuals would not reach his fourth stage – even in adulthood.

In point of fact, children can and do ask questions to which they want answers. They can and do ask questions about abstract topics. They can and do ask questions that require philosophical consideration, contemplation and dialogue. It is an interesting exercise, when working with those at the very early stages of training to facilitate CoPI, to provide a set of questions generated by adults’ and children’s groups. The questions are mixed up and students are asked to sort the questions into those asked by adults and those asked by children. Questions might include examples such as: Why do people spend their time doing pointless things?; Where are the places the sun doesn’t shine?; Why is it so hard to be sure?; Are words important?; Can you see your thoughts?; Are there such things as monsters?; What language does God speak?; What colour is gravity?; What would life be like without decisions?; Is there an inside of everything?; Does the older person always know best? How can you run out of time?. The exercise always proves worthwhile as no-one has yet been able to separate the questions into two wholly correct sets and this goes toward making the point that children are as able and adept as adults at asking questions likely to provoke philosophical dialogue.

In fact, children not only ask questions that some would only credit adults with being able to ask, they ask the same questions as recognised, published and revered philosophers. Granted the questions may not use the same vocabulary, but they are, to many intents and purposes the same questions. Take, for instance, the following questions:

- Are numbers real?
- Where are your thoughts?
- Who made God?
- Do we need friends?
- Should people be put in prison?
- How do we know what’s right?
- How do we know things?

These questions were all asked by children between the ages of seven and thirteen who attended primary and secondary schools in particularly economically deprived areas of Glasgow. These same questions were investigated by well-known and respected philosophers: Frege, Descartes, Russell, Aristotle, Foucault, Kant and Plato respectively.

And so, it is adults that Piaget affords the realm of flexible thought, yet if we were to apply Piaget’s tests or theories...
Matthews (1994) suggests that philosophical wondering and questioning is natural and that while we are still children we lose the inclination to question as we so often meet with disapproval or impatience on the part of those adults with whom we try to engage. Again, this raises questions of our ethical treatment of children. In encouraging children to not ask questions, rather than to ask questions, we are placing them in a role inferior to those adult members of society who are free to question and are seen as competent questioners. CoPI embraces the notion that children question and that their questions are worthy of interrogation and philosophical dialogue.

There is one difference between CoPI and many other forms of Philosophy with Children. Approaches such as Lipman’s P4C and Nelson’s Socratic Method allow participants to select the questions with which to engage; McCall’s CoPI does not. In considering McCall’s practice, it may seem that there is something of a contradiction in saying that children should be free to ask the questions, but not free to choose the question for the Community to consider. There are sound reasons for this approach within the CoPI practice, and one that may prove beneficial to other forms of PwC. Facilitators of CoPI have a training or background in formal, academic philosophy. While other forms of PwC aim to promote philosophising, McCall (2009) would assert that it is essential that those facilitating, or chairing, philosophical dialogue must have a grounding in philosophy. To illustrate, one may, as a teacher, have a very able and willing classroom assistant that one asks to work with a group of children on their reading or mathematics. While the classroom assistant may do a good job of working with the children s/he is not trained or educated in the pedagogical underpinnings necessary to diagnose problems or difficulties, to ascertain developmental needs for a child or to gauge or assess whether and what learning has taken place. In much the same way, those who practice PwC may do well at engaging the children in dialogue, but with a philosophical background, they will better be able to recognise the range of philosophical perspectives within the topic and note those that are evident within the dialogue. In having formal philosophy to draw upon, the facilitator is able to create a dynamic within the dialogue and to ensure there is a forward momentum within it. As CoPI is a practice that is best undertaken over time, the facilitator comes to know how the participants generally contribute and is thus able to juxtapose different philosophical perspectives in order to generate this dynamic and ensure that the dialogue remains philosophical without the aid of what some approaches prescribe in their teachers’ manuals. Without this background, it may be claimed that there is dialogue or discussion amongst participants but not necessarily dialogue of a philosophical nature.

It is in structuring the contributions that the facilitator ensures philosophical dialogue occurs. Often in some PwC approaches where there is little or no structure to the dialogue, children need not relate what they say to something said previously and what results is a turn-taking exercise where children fail to build upon previous contributions and work towards the notion of a Community and one that demands meaning and understanding. In setting criteria for engaging in discussion Bridges offers that one should

… be disposed to understand, to examine and to ‘take’, or be affected by, opinions other than one’s own. Furthermore… one can claim that discussion would have no point unless there was reason to suppose that in general people’s understanding or opinion was in fact modified by the consideration of alternative perspectives (1979, p. 16).

The facilitator with a philosophical background is perhaps more likely to ensure philosophy is happening because s/he recognises it when it happens and is able to structure the dialogue accordingly. Indeed, the participants – children or adults – in following the structure and engaging in the dialogue are more likely perhaps to do as Bridges advocates. However, before even reaching dialogue, the facilitator must select the question for consideration.

Having the necessary philosophy background, the facilitator of CoPI is able to work with the questions provided by the children. When questions are initially
taken, the facilitator notes these down verbatim. It is vital that questions are recorded exactly as the questioner asks them as they, the questioner, know what they meant by the question; the context is with the questioner for her/him to draw upon. Changing a word, a tense, a phrase here or there within the question changes the meaning of the question and, in turn, changes the question. It is, therefore, essential that the questioner’s words are recorded accurately. In noting children’s questions it is tempting for teachers to correct grammar, structure or try to reword the question in order that it fits their, the teacher’s, own understanding. If the facilitator were to succumb to this, it would again be an example of failure to recognise that the child knows what s/he means when s/he asks a question. It is often the case that questions may be framed in ways that do not read or sound in the way one may otherwise frame them and in this they often demonstrate something of the confusion or puzzlement of the one asking the question.

The facilitator needs to select the question to be explored with the view that their loyalty is to the dialogue and they must work to ensure that this dialogue is philosophical. There is no place for a personal agenda in the facilitator’s role, and they equally cannot be swayed by the individuals within the Community. In choosing the question for the Community the facilitator, using her/his knowledge of philosophy, opts for a question with much philosophical scope or potential. Many questions may appear to be philosophical at first glance, but some may, if selected, lead participants down the route of a psychological inquiry, for example. Questions that relate to feelings, personality or character traits are often of the type to generate more psychological than philosophical content. Similarly, some questions may seem on first reading to be philosophical, but are, in fact, empirical questions where the questioner simply wants a quick and finite answer. It is in the skill of the facilitator that s/he must very quickly consider the questions offered and determine a range of possible topics that could be embedded within each. In a recent CoPI session with ten year olds, the question chosen was: ‘How could you be nowhere if you’re always somewhere?’. It was important for the facilitator to recognise that there was potential for notions of personal identity, death, reality and space to come up within the dialogue. These topics did come up, to a greater or lesser extent, but there were also other key philosophical ideas emerging, those relating closely to philosophy of mind when the children discussed where their thoughts were, and what actually constituted thinking. The dialogue went further into an unanticipated area, that of gender issues and perceptions and assumptions surrounding the role of males and females which led the Community into another issue of what it means to be good at something or better at something than someone else. The reason this question worked so well was not solely because the facilitator recognised the potential philosophical scope it afforded, but also because it was one of the children’s questions.

There may be concern that children might not ask philosophical questions and the feeling is that these need to be provided. Certainly, at the beginning of a new Community, some children will ask questions that do not appear to be philosophical. However, very quickly children learn what types of questions not only get picked by the facilitator, but that yield the most enjoyable, challenging and philosophical dialogues. In short, they learn how to ask questions that are philosophical or have philosophical potential.

In using the children’s questions there is already an intrinsic interest on the part of the children forming the Community to inquire into the question raised. The shared stimulus at the beginning of a CoPI session is important as a starting point where there is a communal activity and a unifying context. From this starting point the Community is able to generate questions that will, usually, be meaningful to the rest of the participants in the sense that, having shared an initial context in the shape of the stimulus, they will have some understanding of where the question has come – although they may not necessarily have any understanding of the question at that time. Children are more interested in finding answers to their own questions. This is something they share with adults. By and large people are less inclined to invest time in seeking answers to questions set by others; they have their own questions that they want answered and are willing to spend time and effort on this. The very nature of Community allows that although the question may come from one individual, it has been generated by a joint Community activity. Further, in selecting a question from the Community of participants, no matter how that question is framed, the dialogue will benefit by revealing the questioner’s confusion.

If participants were expected to explore a set question they may, granted, engage in some philosophical dialogue, but they have little notion what the questioner meant by the question and have no recourse to find out. If a question is chosen from amongst the Community, then the questioner, being first to speak, will be able to elucidate about what s/he found confusing. S/he will be able to explain the difficulties within the question on a personal level and may draw upon personal experience or examples to help illustrate the point for other members of the Community. What this first speaker does is set the ball rolling for the rest of the dialogue to follow. The example provided, if one is used, is likely to be referred to by the rest of the Community. The philosophical perspective of the speaker may be revealed in this first contribution which enables the rest of the participants to offer alternative or supporting perspectives to the problem. There is joint, collaborative
and cooperative searching for meaning on the part of the Community and this is furthered by using a question from one of the Community in following the structure created by the facilitator. Bridges (1979) also emphasises the importance of the group and one’s relationship to others and their opinions in the promotion of effective discussion or dialogue.

It is in recognising that the participants have formed a Community of Philosophical Inquiry, that there is recognition that children’s, like adults’, Communities of Philosophical Inquiry, can be trusted to ask philosophical questions and engage in reasoned, philosophical dialogue that children are given status and voice. The power of children philosophising has been recognised by the United Nations Educational and Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in their report Philosophy: a School for Freedom (UNESCO, 2007). In denying children the opportunity to ask their own questions and have them considered by the Community, children are kept in an inferior position, they are not as empowered or engaged or as equipped for full engagement as they might otherwise be, and this will feed in to how children’s voices are enabled in wider society. Lundy (2007) suggests, in considering Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, that space to be heard, facilitation of their voices, an audience to listen to these voices and real influence as a result of having a voice work together to ensure children are engaged and taken account of in society. This could be supplemented by the assertion that it is not enough to suggest that children have a voice to talk about the issues of the day, issues that adults allow them to discuss. It is vital to the place of children in society that they are encouraged to ask their own questions and learn how to search for meaning and understanding through shared inquiry.

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Endnotes

1 It should be noted that many PwC practices allow children to ask questions and to select the question for discussion. This article draws upon McCall’s practice as an example of a PwC approach that allows children to ask questions but not select the question for consideration.
The Education of Thinking Course: Innovation in Turkish Schools

Nimet Küçük

In the memory of Ann Sharp and Matthew Lipman

ABSTRACT

Philosophy courses are compulsory in all high schools and vocational schools in Turkey. These courses give students a vision by showing how problems have developed historically and been discussed systematically. Since 2006, a new course, called “Education of Thinking” has been introduced as an elective course for 6th, 7th and 8th grade students. This course provides more opportunities for philosophical development in children’s activities. The aim of this course is to enable students to be “a subject” and “a critical thinker” by doing philosophy and practising thinking skills.

Education in philosophy is in fact the education of thinking. As indicated by Lipman, for the improvement of thinking in the schools, the most important dimensions of thinking to be cultivated are the critical, the creative, and the caring. Success in this education can be ensured by educating children in philosophy. In this paper, I will examine and share the benefits of doing philosophy in the classroom in Turkey.

The 21st Century is marked by the rapid consumption of information and technology. Creating the society of this Century will require individuals who criticize, create, and conceptualize, with the ability to solve problems. In fact, when the very term “human” is used in the true meaning of the word, it is considered “an entity that continuously studies, criticizes, renovates, and creates oneself.” Human beings can only realize themselves through this process. The success of this process can be ensured with philosophy education. Philosophy education is the education of thinking. The purpose of philosophy education is to cultivate active human beings who know how to think, make criticisms, see causes and effects and learn how to solve problems, by using their awareness to take positions in the face of these problems. There are significant activities being held throughout Turkey to realize such a philosophy education. The most important one among these activities is the newly launched “the Education of Thinking Course” in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. This article delineates the novelty brought in by this course into the Turkish educational system and the benefits of making philosophy in the class.

Philosophy education includes education of individuals in thinking. Philosophical education is a process, which begins during primary education and continues throughout life. To be successful, this process requires us to create the necessary conditions in which students can examine the philosophical tradition. (KUCUK: 2007,49). Historically, in Turkey, philosophy education in high schools has a short history. Even though the interest in philosophy emerged as early as the period of the 1839 Administrative Reforms, (the) philosophy education in high schools first began in 1911. After the proclamation of the Republic, teaching philosophy courses rose in importance. Established with modern and pro-enlightenment motives, the Republic led to major changes in the society. (KUCUK: 2007a) Many texts from Western languages were translated in order to create sources in the field of philosophy. Collaborations with universities were established in order to educate philosophy teachers. Today, philosophy courses are compulsory in all high schools and vocational schools in Turkey. The philosophy courses start with the study of Ancient Greece, the dawn of philosophy, and the development of philosophy to the present day. These courses give students a vision of the philosophical view by showing how problems have developed historically and have been discussed systematically.

One should receive philosophy education in order to learn to think accurately. Then the questions that must be asked are, “How should philosophy education be conducted? What kind of philosophy education should be conducted?” First of all, it should be admitted that the purpose of philosophy education is not to convey existing knowledge or making a synthesis thereof, but to raise awareness with regard to problems and have students ask questions about these problems. Philosophy education should provide a perspective that teaches the individual to look into the
world with his/her own eyes. However, philosophy courses as practiced in the high schools with the existing text books cannot provide the expected benefits. The philosophy course schedule includes a structure that aims to provide knowledge on philosophy history rather than a structure that promotes questioning, criticizing, and making students think. Naturally the philosophy course schedule is so ‘loaded’ that it cannot be completely covered by a two hours a week schema. The philosophy books include an intensive flow of information. They are more oriented to teaching philosophy than making philosophy. In general, rote learning is dominant in our education system. Rote learning-based education prevents individuals exercising their creativity and freedom. The learning that must be a part of history turns out to be a catastrophe in philosophy. The information learned by rote for achieving a pass degree is not permanent and is deleted from the memory in a short time. However, the objective should not be loading information but to teach the ways to reach information and use the information in a creative way. Therefore the introduction of certain structural novelties was required.

A significant step was taken by the Ministry of National Education in 2006 towards the necessary structure of the philosophy education. The Ministry of National Education launched a course named “Education of Thinking Course” for the 6th grades in the 2006 – 2007 educational year, and later decided to adopt the course for the 7th and 8th grades in 2007. The “Education of Thinking” course provides more opportunities for philosophical development in children’s activities. The aim of this course is to enable a student to be “a subject” and “a critical thinker” by doing philosophy and practicing thinking skills. (TTKB: 2007) Education in philosophy is in fact the training of thinking. The information flow of information. They are more oriented to teaching philosophy than making philosophy. In general, rote learning is dominant in our education system. Rote learning-based education prevents individuals exercising their creativity and freedom. The learning that must be a part of history turns out to be a catastrophe in philosophy. The information learned by rote for achieving a pass degree is not permanent and is deleted from the memory in a short time. However, the objective should not be loading information but to teach the ways to reach information and use the information in a creative way. Therefore the introduction of certain structural novelties was required.

The Education of Thinking Course was based on the search by Socrates: “Know Thyself”, using the skills of critical thinking, creative thinking and caring thinking. These three skills materialize simultaneously and in a complementary fashion. In the program, critical thinking includes logical thinking, making judgments, and determining and using criteria. Critical thinking enables us to think about our way of thinking. Creative thinking ensures emergence of new products and ideas with an original perspective departing from the already known information; it is intuitive as it is rational. Caring thinking enables us to differentiate between logic and emotions in necessary situations. We can balance social behaviors as far as we learn to balance the emotions. The concept of empathy is also one of the significant concepts of the caring thinking. It can be construed, when these foundations are examined, that the “Education of Thinking Course” was inspired by the “Philosophy for Children” field as developed by Matthew Lipman. As indicated by Lipman (LIPMAN: 2003,6) for the improvement of thinking in the schools, the most important dimensions of thinking to be cultivated are the critical, the creative, and the caring thinking. The “Education of Thinking Course” considers the class a questioning group, since creative, critical, and caring thinking can only be realized in a community of inquiry. It is important to transform the class environment into an investigative group. Each student in the class sees the other students’ ways of thinking and corrects the errors. Students are active in the questioning group. In this student-centered approach, the teacher acts only as a guide and conducts the course through Socratic questioning and question – reply methods. Moreover, such methods as brainstorming, debates, and sample case examination can be used. Jokes, stories, newspapers, photographs, films, daily life experiences, and the Internet are used as tools in the preparation and implementation of the course activities. The students are not assessed on a point basis in this course. Nevertheless, performance tasks and evaluation tools can be assigned to make assessments about their aims. (KUCUK:2007b)

It is necessary that the basic understanding and aims of the “Education of Thinking Course” Education Program are conceived by the teachers and realized in the class environment in order for the program to achieve success. The teacher must ensure a reliable environment in the student-centered class and provide a platform of discussion in which the students can freely express their ideas. More
than the sense organs of the students should be targeted in the class applications. Individual differences of the students must be taken into consideration.

The “Education of Thinking Course” is a very important course with regard to the philosophical activities addressing children in Turkey. However, the course contains certain challenges. The content of the course should be developed by the course teacher. This is not the situation which teachers are familiar with in the Turkish educational system, since the Turkish educational system is centralized. The textbooks for each course are available for use by the teachers only after approval by the Ministry. The teacher uses the text books in the courses that were produced according to the annual schedule. As a matter of fact, this course gives the responsibility of the course to the teacher. The teacher must improve him/herself, do research, change and enrich the content of the course based on his/her own resources. Since there are not sufficient studies in universities regarding philosophy with children, creating teachers to lecture in these courses is a separate problem. It is necessary to provide professional development opportunities for teachers in association with universities in order to resolve this problem.

In addition, in order to ensure that the “Education of Thinking Course” is conducted in a suitable environment, the number of students in the class should not exceed ten. However, in many public schools the number of students in a class reaches 40 which does not allow healthy conduct in the class. Solutions should be provided in this area.

As a teacher for the “Education of Thinking Course” in the past two years in Istanbul, I have witnessed with admiration students making philosophy in the classroom. This convinces me that children can do philosophy. Perhaps, as said by Gareth Matthews, “children are natural philosophers.” (MATTHEWS: 1994,6) Is this true? Or is it true to say that children cannot abstract ideas from concrete examples and make analogies? Here I want to give an example from a course that I prepared for the “Education of Thinking Course.” The thinking experiment is based on a question asked by William Molyneux(*) in the 17th Century which still has a very important discussion dimension.

To illustrate Molyneux’s Problem, I draw a globe and a cube on the board, and then pose a problem and ask the question that follows: Imagine a man, blind from birth, who is taught to distinguish between the globe and the cube. If his sight were suddenly restored to him, could he distinguish the globe, and the cube without touching them? Here the purpose is to make them recognize the logical or experience-based data, regarding how we obtain information/knowledge, and see the problem. The student must definitely establish the foundations of her/his solution. The questions that are put forward are as follows: 1) How do we obtain information/knowledge - by experiment or by logic? 2) Can this blind man recognize objects after his sight is restored? 3) Can we recognize objects by touching? 4) How is the relationship between visual and tactile concepts formed: by experience, or from birth (by logic)? 5) Here the concept “being blind” or in general “being disabled” can also be discussed as a secondary theme. This year my 6th grade students discussed this problem with keen interest and expressed their firmly established solutions. I had learned this question only in my second year at university, in the “Epistemology” course. The interesting point is that the ‘mastery’ in the discussions at the university was also evident in my 6th grade class.

In conclusion, the novelties of the “Education of Thinking Course” brought to the Turkish education system since 2006 are as follows:

1- For the first time teachers feel freedom and responsibility. The course subjects and aims are provided, but the teachers will make contributions to the contents.
2- Philosophy is taught for the first time in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades.
3- The information/knowledge is not based on rote learning, but on the contrary, the course relies on a creative understanding that teaches students how to think. Actually, the “Education of Thinking Course” helps develop individuals who can form a personal tradition of thinking by using the basic thinking skills in the process of thinking, transforming this tradition into a life skill by establishing the language and thinking connection, and showing respect for different thoughts. It not only improves the skill of thinking in students,
but also provides them with the opportunity to realize the meaning and the cause of existence under living conditions and determine their own future.

Notes

*http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/molyneux-problem/

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Endnotes

1 This paper was first presented during AAACS Conference on 23rd of March, 2008 at Columbia University, NY, USA
Philosophy for Children in the Science Class:
Children Learning Basic Science Process Skills through Narrative

Louise Brandes Moura Ferreira

Abstract

This article reports on an empirical qualitative study on applying a Philosophy for Children (P4C) modeled science story to support the teaching of basic science process skills of classification, observation, and inference to a group of fifth-grade science students. The science story was written to model the skills for the children. From individual interviews with a focus group of 10 students, the findings show that the story modeled the understanding of classification, observation, and inference skills for the children as well as encouraged reflection on the meaning of inference. The majority of the students identified with the fictional characters, particularly regarding traits such as cleverness and inquisitiveness, and with the learning context of the story. Implications for the theory and practice of P4C are discussed.

Introduction

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is an internationally recognized K through 12 philosophical program that has been taught for more than 30 years (Montclair State University, 2007). In addition to opening up philosophical investigation for children, P4C has also been known as a “thinking skills” program (Adams, 1989; Lipman, 1985; Resnick, 1987, Trickey & Topping, 2004; Wilson, 2000) that aims to improve children’s reasoning abilities as they dialogue about concepts that are both found in everyday experiences and are recognized as meaningful by them.

The emphasis P4C places on the development of reasoning skills has motivated educational scholars to envision the application of its pedagogy to the teaching of other school subjects in which the demands for thinking are high such as mathematics (Daniel, Lafortune, Pallascio, & Sykes, 1996; Daniel, Lafortune, Pallascio, Splitter, Slade, & de la Garza, 2005; Splitter, 2001), language (Othman & Hashim, 2006), and science (Gazzard, 1993; Lipman, 1988, chap. 7; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980; Sprod 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1998).

Regarding science learning, Gazzard (1993) argues that P4C can help students examine how scientific knowledge is developed, due to the emphasis the program places on the cultivation of reasoning abilities that are central to this task such as looking for inconsistencies in thought, working with analogies, and constructing hypotheses. Along these lines, Lipman (1988, chap. 7) highlights that most of the cognitive skills needed in the science classroom are not different from the ones P4C teaches. Although such considerations offer a window into the contribution of P4C to the improvement of science education, they are of a theoretical nature and there is an almost total absence of empirical research conducted on the matter, with the exception of one study (Sprod, 1994). Rigorous empirical investigations are needed to provide further evidence that a P4C approach to science education can have a positive effect in strengthening children’s scientific thinking skills.

In order to address such a gap, the present article reports a portion of a larger study in which a science curriculum modeled on P4C was developed to teach both science content and science process skills (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1967) to fifth graders in a bilingual school (Portuguese and English) in Brazil (Ferreira, 2004). The curriculum, called a “dialogical science curriculum,” consists of three components: a six-episode science story written on the models of the P4C novels1, hands-on/minds-on (Lowery, 1989, 1992, 1998) classroom and laboratory activities designed to accompany the story, and classroom dialogue on the issues raised both by the story and the activities. I begin by examining the one prior empirical study that looked directly at the relationship between P4C and science education. Second, to provide a context to my own study, I describe the P4C curriculum and pedagogy, with an emphasis on the philosophical novels and their role on children’s learning as described in the theoretical literature. Then, I describe my research methods and present my findings.

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Empirical Research on P4C and Science Education

In the three decades of the existence of P4C, a number of studies have tested its effectiveness on a variety of intended learning outcomes (for a recent meta-analysis of studies on children’s cognitive development, see Garcia-Moriyón, Rebollo, & Collon, 2005; for a list of annotated studies on cognitive skills, affective and social skills, and methodological and theoretical aspects, see Garcia-Moriyón & Cebas, 2007; and for a systematic review of studies on several of P4C’s educational outcomes, see Trickey & Topping, 2004). Concerning the empirical studies that investigate the application of P4C to science teaching, Sprod’s 1994 study (reported in Sprod, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1998) stands as the sole research carried out up to now. It was a participatory research in which the author wrote short scientific dialogues in the P4C style and taught a regular class of seventh graders (11 to 12 year old children) (n=28) for one academic year in Great Britain.

The results of a pre- and post-test to measure acceleration in science reasoning showed that the experimental group had statistically significant gains in test scores (p< .05) in comparison to the control group. The qualitative findings support this result. The transcript analysis of classroom dialogue indicated growth in the children’s capacity to argue scientifically. The students showed not only the understanding of several science process skills but the ability to evaluate scientific facts/claims, find implications and conclusions, clarify terms and definitions, and test true statements, among others (Sprod, 1998, p. 472).

In what follows, I will highlight the dimensions of the P4C philosophical novels that modeled the significant aspects of the science curriculum used in this study.

The P4C Philosophical Novels

The P4C philosophical novels portray children and a small number of adults interacting in settings such as home and school. They talk and reason together about concepts that may be found in everyday life experiences as they try to make sense of the philosophical dimensions of their worlds. There are three main educational objectives of the philosophical novels (Lipman, 2003; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980): to initiate children into philosophical ideas and thought without therigors of a technical vocabulary, to model thinking skills by means of characters’ individual reflections as well as dialogues, and to model valuable classroom dialogical interaction among children and between them and the teacher by portraying a fictional community of inquiry. In what follows, I will draw examples from the P4C philosophical novel Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery (Lipman, 1974.)

Initiating children into philosophical ideas and thought without the rigors of a technical vocabulary

Though many aspects of the discipline of philosophy can be found in each P4C novel, one main branch is usually covered by each of them (Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980, p. 51-54). Despite this, the P4C novels do not contain explicit references to branches, citations to historical philosophers, or any mention of the scholarly elements of the philosophical activity. According to Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan (1980), the reason for not referring to philosophers, philosophical terms or branches in the novels was for the children themselves to begin to appropriate the many types of reasoning moves philosophy offers without having to be concerned about sources or right terminology, so that they could “come to grips with ideas and not merely with labels” (p. 84). In addition to not mentioning the elements of the tradition, the fact that the main characters are children was also intentional.

Modeling thinking skills by means of characters’ individual reflections as well as dialogues

A central feature of the characters in the P4C novels is that they are intended to serve as models of good reasoning. The thinking styles displayed by Harry and his classmates in Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery (1974) model a way to think and act rationally. As Lipman says, “the characters are designed to show the readers how the active use of reflective thinking can make a difference in what one says and does” (Lipman, 2003, p. 148). In the P4C novels, the types of reflections the characters engage in and the thinking skills they display in the course of the narrative are the same that can be found in the work of philosophers. In this way, the characters give voice to the arguments and ideas of philosophers and most of all, they demonstrate ways of thinking about the world based on philosophical principles that evolved in the course of the history of the discipline. In other words, the characters draw on the history of philosophy when they present philosophical concepts and they draw on the normative aspects of philosophy when they display procedures for establishing knowledge, that is, philosophical inquiry. Because of these two aspects, the characters “have more than cleverness, more than cognitive skillfulness: They have standards—standards for reasoning, standards for inquiry….It is these standards that liberate children from merely pedestrian thinking, or from unconstructive thinking, or from mechanical thinking” (Lipman, 1992, p. 9).
Modeling classroom dialogical interaction by portraying a fictional community of inquiry

The way in which the characters interact with each other in dialogue in the philosophical novel is purposefully designed to model a philosophical community of inquiry (Lipman, 2003). In Harry, as Mr. Bradley (the teacher), Harry, and his classmates talk about contestable philosophical concepts; they offer examples and counter-examples, seek consistency, and ask for clarifications, among other activities. These philosophical inquiry moves, both demonstrated and cared for by the characters, are intended to help the classroom children to reproduce them when interacting in dialogue with their peers. In other words, the characters show how philosophical inquiry can be conducted in community as well as how to think about philosophical concepts and issues, thereby inviting the children to do likewise.

Methods and Materials

This article reports a portion of a larger study on using the P4C pedagogy to teach basic science process skills to early middle-school children (Ferreira, 2004). It was a participatory, teacher research study, aimed at identifying what role the components of a science curriculum modeled on P4C (the dialogue science curriculum) played in the learning of basic science process skills by a class of fifth graders. The dialogical science curriculum consists of three components: the unpublished six-episode science story Mario Discovers Science written by me, hands-on/minds-on (Lowery, 1989, 1992, 1998) classroom activities designed to expand scientific concepts and reasoning moves shown in the story—also also designed by me on the model of P4C’s instructors’ manuals (e.g. Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1984); and thirdly, classroom dialogue about the issues raised both by the story and the activities. The school’s regular fifth grade science book (Holt, Reinmann and Wilson, 2002) was also used by the children during classes, laboratory activities, and for test preparation.

To support the interpretation of the findings and to provide some background information about the writing of the science story modeled on the P4C novels, I will describe the design of the story, its educational objectives, and some challenges involved in its writing.

The Science Story

As a science story modeled on P4C, Mario Discovers Science maintains some of the P4C novels’ characteristics and educational aims but is also innovative in that it is a story meant to be applied specifically in science teaching. In keeping with the purpose of the P4C novels, Mario Discovers Science was intentionally written to portray characters that serve as models of good reasoning and whose interactions are intended to form a community of inquiry. In particular, the science story was written to emphasize the science process skills of classification, observation, and inference to children. In this context, the characters “serve as models of good reasoning,” by showing their engagement in the making of classifications and observations, the drawing of inferences, and reflection upon these skills as they are applied to science. I should highlight that scientific content knowledge and its terminology were also important components of the science story, as opposed to the P4C novels that try to avoid stressing the terminology of the discipline.

Characters’ reflections upon the conceptual nature of the skills are mostly emphasized when observation and inference skills are presented to the reader. The story stresses that observation is an acute act of perception, and it highlights that one draws inferences based on observations. It also emphasizes the chance of jumping to conclusions when one cannot make complete and sequential observations of a cause and effect process. Given the theoretical nature of most philosophical reasoning, the majority of exercises and discussion plans in the P4C manuals engage students in thought experiments rather than empirical ones, though these thought experiments typically draw on the students’ lived experience and are potentially transformative of that experience. This poses a challenge for applying P4C pedagogy to the sciences, where observing and manipulating objects (either natural ones or artifacts) are at the heart of the learning experience. In the dialogical science curriculum designed for this study, the concepts presented in the readings were extended into classroom activities, giving children the chance to actively manipulate objects and use their five senses, which is called by Lowery “hands-on/minds-on curriculum” (Lowery, 1989, 1992, 1998). For science content validity, the story was reviewed by a science education expert with a background in the biological sciences. For the P4C elements, it was reviewed by a P4C scholar.

Site Selection and Participants

The study was conducted in a fifth grade science classroom at a private religious international bilingual school (Portuguese and English) in Brasilia, Brazil. I was granted access to the school after a semester of electronic and regular mail correspondence and conversations with both the school principal and the coordinator of English programs. Before the study began, it was reviewed and approved by an Ethics Research Committee at a Higher
Education Institution. This helped me to enter the site and get parents’ informed and free consent by assuring them that the study design was in accordance with the norms of research conducted with children and could contribute to the field of education.

In the larger investigation from which this study is drawn, all the 21 fifth graders enrolled in the class participated. There were 10 females and 11 males, aged 10 and 11 years old and coming from a predominantly middle and upper class social background. In this group, seven students were not Brazilians. Since I could not interview all the participants, I did so with a sample of eight randomly selected students, and two privileged “key informants” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 7), who responded particularly well to the teaching and could provide rich data to answer the research questions. This group of 10 students formed the focus group and were interviewed twice individually. The first round of interviews occurred between the third and eighth weeks of class, and the second was conducted in the two last weeks of the semester. The findings reported in this article are drawn from two structured in-depth interviews with the focus group.

Despite the fact that the 21 students had different levels of English proficiency, they were all capable of understanding, speaking, and writing in it for the purposes of the class. The study was carried out over a period of 19 weeks (the length of a regular school semester) and science classes were held two times a week, in one session of 1 hour and 40 minutes and another session of 50 minutes. Lab activities were conducted by both myself and a technician who was finishing his undergraduate degree in biology. At the time of the study my educational background was philosophy and I had taught P4C to middle-school students for about two years. I had also had graduate courses in P4C. When I was designing the dialogical science curriculum, I was helped both by a science education scholar and an experienced science teacher who assisted me with reference to the accuracy and appropriateness of the scientific content and its teaching.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected throughout the semester came from student class reflection sheets, written learning assessments, audiotapes of all class sessions, including whole-class and small-class group discussions, a videotape of one class session and two sets of student interviews with the focus group as described above. Here, I will only discuss the analysis of the interview data because they provided me with the most direct way to determine the roles that Mario Discovers Science played in the learning processes of the children. (Ferreira [2004] contains explanations of the various approaches used to analyze the other data sources to answer the research questions of the original study). The interview data proved to be rich for at least two reasons: Half of the questions in each interview protocol dealt explicitly with the relationship between the science story and the children’s learning processes. Secondly, when conducting the interviews, I asked the students often for clarification and exemplification (Lancy, 2001). I also asked the children probing questions to encourage them to give reasons for their statements and to search for consistency as they were answering. These procedures helped the children to make as explicit as possible their thoughts on the science story and delve deeper into the questions.

Qualitative methods of analysis were used to interpret the data. In coding the interviews, I developed categories using the “external/internal” code distinction (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 13) in order to delve deeper into the students’ understandings of science story and perceptions about it. External codes are deductive and guided by theoretical and conceptual perspectives related to the study or research question, while internal codes are issues and themes that emerge from the data. In this study, the external codes imposed on the interview data were directly related to the educational objectives of the science story. I created the codes and refined them into subsets, reducing them until a set of categories were established. I also asked more experienced peers to read the files as a way to validate the findings, using a technique known as researcher triangulation (Patton, 2002).
Results

The Science Story as Modeling Basic Science Process Skills

Even with the limitation that I did not collect interview data directly related to the skill of classification, the data show that some students did perceive the story as modeling the three of the science process skills. That is, the students perceived that the characters engaged in these science processes in the same ways they did.

Modeling classification

When, in *Mario Discovers Science*, Mr. Martins and his students classify and make sets, they seek criteria that distinguish one set from another and their reflections about classification involve discussion about the usefulness of those criteria to form sets. Four of the nine students interviewed\(^4\) in the first set of interviews perceived their classifying activities in the classroom as similar to the ones in the story. When I asked Eva whether she noticed any relationship between the story and the classroom activities, she said,

> Based on the story, we start to do many activities. Like, [in the same way as] the teacher in the episode about classification explained [to the students], you explained to us the classification of animals, plants and all living things. (Eva, Interview \([I]\) 1)

Erick also noted a similarity between the story and the class:

> Interviewer: How do you explain the relationship between the science story and the rest of the things we do in class?
> Erick: First thing we separate characteristics from one thing, like an animal, and in the story the teacher does that too.
> Interviewer: How so? I am sorry. I am not following you.
> Erick: The teacher in the story does the same thing as you; he separates one thing into common properties...he separates what is living from what is nonliving. (Erick, \([I]\) 1)

While Eva noticed the modeling aspect of the narrative when she compared Mr. Martins’ explaining classification to his students to my own explanation of the classification of living things to her and her classmates, Erick went further than she when he made clear that both the fictional teacher and the real teacher classified living and nonliving things based on their characteristics or “common properties” (Erick, \([I]\) 1). In other words, Erick was able to explain that to classify one has to make groups according to common criteria. However, by this comment alone, it is not clear whether the story helped him to understand the teaching or vice versa. What can be said from his remark, though, is that he recognized that both the story and the teaching emphasized the role of criteria in classification. For Erick, it seems that the story and the teaching functioned as a coherent whole, mutually reinforcing each other.

Though recognizing similarities between the act of classifying in the story and in the classroom, Ivo made a distinction between the story and the class activities the story is set up to model when he said:

> We talked [in the classroom] about living things, groups, classification, and the story is about these things but in a different way. In a different way because when you write [a story] you have lots of time to do this; if you are going to change something, if you are going to add something, you have lots of time to do that. And I think that when you discuss it with one another, it is much more faster. (Ivo, \([I]\) 1)

This comment suggests that Ivo captured the idealization feature of modeling classification in the story in the sense that the author has the time to polish the ways in which the characters go about classification, while in the classroom everything happens quickly and cannot always be planned.

Overall, these comments show that one of the story’s roles is that it provides explanations and descriptions of mental and dialogical acts involved in classification that parallel those that happen in the classroom, so the story’s emphasis on the need to set criteria to classify may reinforce the students’ understanding of classification when engaged in activities in the classroom and vice versa.

Modeling observation and inference

Seven of the 10 students interviewed for the second set of interviews were able to recognize modeling features of the story for observation and inference skills. Of those seven students, four perceived that the characters engaged in the making of observations and the drawing of conclusions in the same way that they did, and three noticed that Mr. Martins and his students reflected about these two processes.

When I met the students for both the first and second interviews, I made sure I had a copy of the episodes of *Mario Discovers Science* that were read in class visible and readily available for their consultation. Hermerico browsed the story and as soon as he finished reading it he said,
Hermerico: We did this in the class.
Interviewer: What do you mean?
Hermerico: We did the same process as the students in the story (Hermerico, I 2).

Jorge also made a similar comment when I asked, “How do you perceive the relationship between the activity about observation we were doing in the class the other day and what the kids were doing in the story?” He answered, “It was almost the same” (Jorge, I 2).

In her second interview, I asked Maria Elisa: “Think about what you would have learned about observations and inferences if we read the story but did not do the exercise with the candles. Do you think your learning would have been different?” She replied, “Because we read the story I know the difference, and we did the same exercise [activity] that Mr. Martins did in the story and I would understand the same way if we haven’t, if we didn’t do the exercise.” (Maria Elisa, I 2)

Her comment shows that she felt that the story sufficiently explained the skill for her without the reinforcement of the class activity. In other words, it provided her with enough conceptual explanation and dramatic description so she could understand the difference between skills even without performing them in the classroom. This perception, however, seems to be applicable to her only, for the other children usually perceived the story and the activity as complementary to each other.

Erick was able to articulate his perception that the characters in the story not only modeled the basic science process skills of observation and inference, but also provided the reader with examples as they engaged in making observations and inferences. As I was finishing inquiring about the story, I asked him the question, “Is there anything else you want to talk about related to the story?” Erick answered emphatically, “…the teacher clearly says what’s observation, but they also did experiments with observations. It explains clearly” (Erick, I 2). Later on he said, “They told you what inferences are. I mean, this [classroom] activity is better but they wrote down an experience to show you [italics added] what inferences are, and also they put it in bold words” (Erick I 2).

Reflecting about observation and inference skills

As I previously mentioned, one of the ways I intended the story to model observation and inference for the students was by showing the characters engaged in reflecting about some conceptual aspects of these skills. When I asked Ivo, “Did the story help you understand what observations are?” he answered:

It helped me see what observations are because they said that [a complete] observation is when you see the whole process, and then I understood. First I thought that observation was only to see something and that was O.K. But the story tells that you have to observe and then you can make an inference. (Ivo, I 2)

Eva’s answer shows that she captured from the story the idea that inferences that are based on a limited number of observations “may be right or wrong,” which is correct understanding of the limits of inductive inference.

These remarks demonstrate that with reference to the characters’ reflection about the two processes, these two students (Ivo and Eva) interpreted one of the roles of the narrative as helping them understand observation and inference—specifically, that inferences are based on observations as well as that inferential reasoning is limited when a restricted number of observations are available.

Children’s Identification with Characters

Character construction in the P4C novels and their impact on learners are rich topics that need further inquiry. There are many anecdotal records amongst P4C teachers and scholars that children do identify with some characters, specially the protagonists. However, up to now no empirical study has looked at characters roles in the classroom to find out what children think about them. In this study, the majority of the children, seven of the 10 students interviewed, identified with the main character. For example, most of the children thought that Mario realistically portrays a young person—one who wanders off from the topic of the discussion when he is not supposed to do it and is curious and full of questions. The following comments by Ivo and Laura from their interviews illustrate this finding:

Ivo: The story is about Mario, it takes place in a science class. Mario has lots of doubts, just like me. Sometimes he imagines things. Mario asks the questions that we ask—that any boy my age would ask….The story is cool.
Interviewer: What is there in the story that you think makes it cool?
Ivo: Because when you read the story, it is a story about someone who is like us and wants to know lots of things. It is cool to learn a story like that. (Ivo, I 1)

In the same way as Ivo, Laura thought the story was “cool.”
Laura: They [the characters] are cool, too. They make the story more interesting. They ask something and Mr. Martins answers them.

Interviewer: What kind of questions do they ask?
Laura: The kind of questions that I would ask if I were in this story. I am sure I would ask the same questions. (Laura, I 1)

It seems that for both Ivo and Laura the characters draw their attention to things about themselves, such as their own capacity to raise questions.

When I first interviewed Erick, he said that he loved reading the story and that the episode about living things was his favorite. I asked him, “What do you find interesting about the story? Why was that episode your favorite?” At this point our dialogue went as follows:

Erick: The favorite part also is how it represents what every life would have represented. I mean, repeating our lives probably.
Interviewer: In which way?
Erick: I mean, every kid, every four-year-old kid who is curious would ask those questions. Maybe you did ask those questions while you would [were a child], that not just put those questions in our mind but it can remind us that we can do that on our own. I mean, that we can be that curious. (Erick, I 1)

The distinction Erick makes between the story as “put[ting] those questions” in his mind and “remind[ing]” him that he has the capacity to question himself illustrates another meaning of identification—the validation of a self that is questioning, curious, and clever.

In what follows, both Eva and Erick echo Laura’s statement above. However, they went a step further when they mentioned the fictional teacher and compared not just themselves to the fictional students, but the teaching system in the story to the one in their classroom. When I asked Eva the question, “How would you explain to an imaginary new classmate the relationship between the story and the rest of the things we do in class?” she seemed hesitant for a moment but finally answered:

We read the story and it is like you are Mr. Martins—please, don’t take me wrong— you are Mr. Martins and the students are us. They are discussing to learn things and so are we; this is something in which we are related. (Eva, I 1)

Erick said to me that the story “is showing a science classroom that was you and the kids in the classroom, the false kids in the classroom to the teacher...It [the story] is representing a classroom, so I say it is like a classroom inside a classroom” (Erick, I 1).

Maria Elisa spoke about the fact that sometimes both the fictional and the real students would ask the same types of questions. However, when I asked if she perceived any differences between the characters and the real students, she had a different perception than Erick’s and Eva’s. She said, “Everybody [in the classroom] wants to understand and give right opinions. So, it is different.” I asked her, “In the story it is not like that?” She replied, “No... Most of the time the students don’t understand anything and Mr. Martins has to explain again and again” (Maria Elisa, I 2).

These comments show that the students identified with the fictional children, when they perceived them as behaving similarly and asking the same kinds of questions as they did. For some children the characters reinforced their belief that they had certain personality traits such as curiosity and cleverness. One student, however, found she and her classmates eager to understand and “give right opinions” and the characters relentlessly lost in confusion. Some children not only drew comparisons between themselves and the fictional children but also noticed that the classroom interactions between the fictional teacher and students and between their own teacher (me) and them were similar.

**Discussion**

This was a small scale study, with a small, heterogeneous sample of children whose language of instruction was not their mother tongue. Further research needs to be carried out to confirm the transferability of the findings. However this study makes the following contributions to the practice and theory of Philosophy for Children.

The findings presented here support the findings of Sprod’s study (1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1998) by showing that an application of P4C to science education is feasible and helps children learn some processes of scientific reasoning. Along these lines, it strengthens the claim that just as the P4C program is successful in teaching thinking skills, it can also be successful when a curriculum modeled on P4C is applied to the teaching of science process skills.

One of the theoretical claims of P4C is that in the novels the characters model thinking skills for children. This study, which included a science story modeled on the P4C novels, provides some empirical evidence to support this claim. The majority of the children interviewed pointed
out that when learning observation and inference skills they engaged in the same processes as the fictional characters in the story. This indeed does suggest that the characters were perceived as models by the children. In this study, the narrative story Mario Discovers Science modeled the basic science process skills of classification, observation, and inference. Learning about basic science process skills involves understanding their meaning in a deep sense. In this study, the meanings emphasized were that every classification act or system involves the application of some criteria and that inductive inferences based on a limited number of observations are tentative. The characters in the story modeled performance of the skills as they engaged in making classifications, observing and drawing inferences. They also modeled conceptual understanding as they reflected about the meaning of these three processes.

Because this was a qualitative study, it captured what happened during the processes of instruction when these fifth graders were in contact with the science story. Thus, it gives P4C scholars and instructors a deeper understanding of classroom processes when a curriculum modeled on P4C novels and the community of inquiry that is focused on certain thinking skills is taught.

References


Endnotes

1 I am using the expression “P4C novels” to refer to the ones published by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children.

2 With permission of both author and publisher, chapter 1 of Harry Stottlemeyer’s Discovery (Lipman, 1974) was used in this study as episode 1 of Mario Discovers Science. From episode 2 on, the setting was kept the same as well as the characters’ personalities, especially the leading ones—Harry, the protagonist; Mr. Bradley, the science teacher; and Lisa, Harry’s best friend. With their original names changed, in the story Mario is Harry, Mr. Martins is Mr. Bradley, and Lara is Lisa.

3 Also known in English-speaking countries as Institutional Review Board.

4 Given that the majority of participants of this study were English language learners mistakes in both written and spoken English occurred. I edited the data so that the students’ comments could be understood by the reader. However, at the same time, I wanted to preserve the students’ words as much as possible. For this reason, I decided not to include the standard form “sic” to denote errors.
An Experience in P4C: Some Observations on Philosophy for Children with Iranian Primary School Children

Saeed Naji and Parvaneh Ghazinezhad

Abstract

To investigate the effect of philosophical thinking on the development of reasoning skills and behavioral performance among Iranian primary school students, we conducted a qualitative method study with ten fourth grade students (including boys and girls) selected from different primary schools in Tehran. We also study the reactions of children and their parents to this new method of education, which thoroughly differs from the method practiced in our schools now. This study was carried out in the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, as an extra class once a week for twenty sessions. Data collection strategies of this study including the authors' observations during sessions, children's parents' observations and reports, and interviews with children and their parents. Our research result shows that reasoning skills enhance communication skills by enabling children to express their ideas more persuasively. We also found that children act more confidently and independently.

Introduction

Philosophy for Children (henceforth P4C) is a new paradigm of education “to help children learn how to think for themselves” (Lipman, Sharp, Oscanyan 1980: 53). To be more precise, the main aims of P4C are: improvement of reasoning skills, development of creativity, development of personal and interpersonal growth, development of ethical understanding, and development of the ability to find meaning (ibid). Developing such skills, and therefore P4C, is becoming more and more a necessity in the world, partly because, as Fisher (2001: vii) points out, people realize that the increasing rate of change in societies demands such skills. Nowadays, children encounter large amounts of data via the internet, mass media, and their peers from early stages of their development, and they experience different forms of life. To use and organize this data, they need more skills than the traditional education system provides for them. They need to learn how to think creatively in order to be able to live in this complicated and changing world. To reinforce the new P4C method, and in the hope of encouraging more schools to include it in their curriculum, it was decided to write a comprehensive report of our class. This paper will briefly report our experience in doing philosophy with a group of children and present some results.

Our Community of Inquiry

Our P4C class consisted of 10 fourth grade students who were randomly selected from different primary schools in Tehran. The class was held in the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, Tehran, Iran. Our main goals were: (i) to investigate the effect of the P4C community of inquiry approach on the development of reasoning skills and behavioral performance, and (ii) to study the reactions of children and their parents to this new method of education, which thoroughly differs from the method practiced in our schools now.

Our first session was held on December 16, 2007 and our class continued for 10 weeks. Every week we had a two-hour session, with a fifteen-minute break. We used Lipman and Sharp’s methodology, but not the material. Instead of using Lipman’s books, we used Thinking Stories I: Philosophical Inquiry for Children, edited by Philip Cam. More precisely, we used, “Linda and Clara”, “The Bird’s Nest”, “Tommy and The Time Turtles”, and “The Knife”. It should be mentioned that we changed these stories into ones that were more compatible with our culture, so that the children could understand them better.
Research Method

This report is based on our observations, children's parents' observations and reports, and interviews with children participating in the program. In each session, we carefully registered any difference made in the behaviors of every single child. We had four two-hour sessions with parents. In the first meeting we introduced P4C and its goals, and asked parents to report their observations: the change in children's behaviors at home and at school (through the teacher's reports). Moreover, we requested that parents hand in their reports, so that children did not notice anything, because otherwise their behaviors would be affected and obviously the results would be unreliable. In the following sessions, we gathered their observations and reports, and answered their related questions. Each child was interviewed and asked their opinion about the class.

We chose this more qualitative methodology, rather than a quantitative one, since we think this method can help parents and other people, including schools' managers, to see how P4C can improve children's skills. After all, although quantitative methods have a great use, especially for experts, a concrete conversation can impress ordinary people more than a simple statistical analysis (several tables full of numbers). Moreover, this method provides an opportunity to improve the practice of P4C by considering children's points of view about the class.

Our Observations

After a few sessions, we noticed the following characteristics significantly improved in children:

1. Children came up with their own questions, which were challenging to them.
2. Initial conversations were transformed from monolog into dialog.
3. Children's reasoning skills improved dramatically.

Let us discuss the above issues in more detail:

1. During the first and second sessions, children responded to questions using some clichés based on what they had already learned from their textbooks, their teachers, and their parents. They simply parroted the ideas which they believed would eventually be the winners. They tried to win the argument rather than expressing what they really believed. They often answered in a way that successfully convinced others. This manner is exactly what they learned in their school: listening to their teachers, memorizing their lessons, and then repeating the same things in their exams, in order to get better scores. However, in the Lipman method, debate is replaced by deliberation. As he points out “[d]eliberation can usefully contrasted with debate, inasmuch as deliberators need not try to get others to accept the position they themselves may believe, while debaters need not believe in the position they are trying to get other to accept” (Lipman, 2003:96).

After some sessions, we observed that the community of inquiry had altered the children's attitudes. They gradually tried to avoid answering questions in their previous manner, that is, by using clichés. They started to express their own opinions and welcomed other's criticism and comments. As mentioned before, in the first few sessions, neither the children's questions nor their answers were relevant, but as they engaged in conversation, they started to think carefully and, therefore, they encountered substantial questions which became their main concern, and they really wanted them to be discussed in the community of inquiry. Splitter and Sharp emphasized this aspect of P4C; they wrote “[i]t encourages students to develop into, and build upon, ideas, concepts, and problems that they themselves choose as both interesting and important” (Splitter, Sharp, 2005: 126). Also, they gradually became able to analyze proposed answers and express their own opinions and criticisms. The following examples, one from children's conversation in the first session and another from the fourth session, illustrate this significant change.

In the first session, when we read the “Linda and Clara” story, in the final part Clara told Linda “you look so beautiful” but Linda did not believe her. The children asked questions about lies and truth. Following their discussions we raised a general question about whether telling a lie is good or bad, and why they think so. The children's answers were as follows:

Arash: Lying is bad since lying is a sin.
Sepehr: It is bad since my mom says so.
Nikee: It is not good because God doesn’t like it.

In fourth session, we read “The Knife” story, and a similar question was raised, this time about stealing. Here are the children's responses:

Alireza: Stealing is bad since no one trusts a robber and no one becomes his friend.
Sepehr: Stealing is bad since I become sad when something is stolen from me. Since, I think every one else is just like me, stealing cannot be good.
Arash: I think stealing is bad since when someone steals something he becomes uneasy, and he always worries that others might notice, and even he is afraid that police might capture him.
It seems that P4C gives the children the chance to express their own ideas and helps them to understand that their ideas are valuable and, therefore, leads to such a remarkable improvement in children.

2. In the first session, conversation rarely occurred among children in the community of inquiry; they just answered the questions addressed directly to them, often with predetermined answers, and they did not express their opinions about answers proposed by others. Thus, conversation did not continue smoothly. It was more a short conversation between the teacher and each child rather than a real dialog among children. This behavior was, perhaps expected, since arguably the current educational system in our country is a teacher-based and textbook-based system. This system makes children become dependent on their teachers and their books, and decreases their confidence. Therefore, not only do they not believe in their own ability to think, but they also do not respect other’s answers as being worthy of further discussion and debate. Arguably, in the existing system, the opinions of children have little or no weight compared with the opinions of teachers and other authorities. As a consequence, they are never asked to express their own ideas, and, typically, they are simply required to memorize their lessons. As a further result, children do not learn how to express their ideas, how to articulate their arguments, or how to face contrary ideas and criticisms. No wonder they cannot participate in a real conversation since they never practice it.

However, practicing philosophy in a community of inquiry gradually helped children to realize that their own ideas are of great importance and are worthwhile for them. This fact not only increased their self-confidence but also encouraged them to engage actively in dialog with their peers, express their own ideas, listen to others, analyze proposed answers, criticize them, and face objections reasonably. Therefore, after a few sessions, the initial short conversation transformed into a real dialog among children as characterized by Buber (1974), and, equally important, they started to enjoy practicing philosophy to the extent that they wanted to continue the discussion even when the time was over, and they asked us to expand the session time and to increase the number of sessions.

3. One significant and confirmed result of P4C is an improvement in children’s reasoning skills. There is considerable research confirming this result. Marashi (2007) studied this effect of P4C in Iran. In our class, too, practicing philosophy improved children’s reasoning skills dramatically. Children’s dialogs and conversations are prime indications of this improvement. The following examples chosen from children’s conversations in our community of inquiry can illustrate this point.

One of the children, Arash, who was impressed by his mother’s opinions before attending our class, one day asked us to allow him to discuss a problem in the community of inquiry: “One day my mom talked to her friend on the phone, I was there and heard. She advised her friend and proposed a solution for her problem. Afterward, I asked my mom “would you yourself accept such a solution if someone else proposed it to you?” Arash, then, continued, “My mom got so angry and told me I should not involve myself in such discussions which have nothing to do with me. Now, what do you think? Shouldn’t I ask such a question?”

Here is an excerpt of childrens’ conversation stimulated by Arash’s question:
Anashe: Children are curious; it is your right to ask your questions.

Naghme: But I think we should not ask any single question.

Sepehr: How can I know what kind of question I can ask?

Naghme: I think there are two ways: First, we can ask our mom “would you mind if I ask a question? Second, we can first think about our question, then ask it.

Mehryar: I am opposed to both Naghme’s solutions. First, how our mom can know what we want to ask her in order to tell us whether she gets angry or not. Second, when we think about our question, we can just know our own opinion, not our mom’s.

Naghme: I am opposed to Mehryar’s second response since we can guess whether our mom gets angry or not regarding our previous experiences.

Here is another example which shows children trying to find a counterexample:

Arash: I think chance doesn’t exist; what we called chance is a law of nature, but these natural laws in ordinary people’s opinions are represented as chance.

Anashe: But I think there is chance. Once I played a game about which I did have no information but I won. All of children including myself were surprised.

Fateme: I think chance exists. In some situations, our effort has no effect. For example, when we throw a die, the result does not depend on our effort but it depends on our chance. We might several times get six or some times no matter how much we try we might not get even one six.

Here is another illustration that shows how children articulate their arguments.

After reading a story in our community of inquiry, almost all the children were convinced that if all people become robbers, it leads to anarchy, and lots of people might be killed. However, Sepehr, unbelievably, argued that all people will die in this case and supported his claim seriously.

Sepehr argued that “sometimes people cannot steal what they want; in this case they will fight with each other to get what they want by force. They will kill each other. These fights continue, and many will be killed. It is obvious that women will be killed sooner since men are stronger than women. At the end, only two men will survive and the stronger one will kill the other finally. The one who survives is the strongest man but he cannot deliver a child by himself. He will die eventually. Therefore, all people will die.”

Parents Reports

The following is a brief report of the results of our meeting with parents, which will be supported by their quotations. It is worth mentioning that the changes observed in children’s behaviors have not occurred simultaneously and equally.

1. All parents, without exception, asserted that the number of questions and the rate of their contribution in the discussions have increased incredibly.

- “Recently, Niki asks a lot of questions. I do my best to answer them but some of the questions are so complicated that I cannot answer them properly and that gets me really frustrated.”
- “Fatemeh used to talk rarely but now she has become a talkative girl. She non-stop asks questions about everything. This has been remarkably illustrated in her teachers’ report.”

2. Most of the parents spoke about the increase in the rate of their children’s collaborations with their family and friends, at home and at school.

- “Pooya used to do his work just by himself. But recently, he has become interested in a group so that he has asked his teacher to let him prepare wallpaper with his friends.”

3. Four of parents mentioned that their children’s writing ability has been enormously improved.

- “Niki had never written her composition without her father’s help. Niki’s mother continued: ‘One day, I asked her: shouldn’t you write your writing? She responded ‘I have already written it.’ That was surprising. I asked her to read it for me. That was great. I could not believe Niki could write such a wonderful essay for the first time.’
- “Interestingly, Anashe’s father and I noticed that Anashe was expressing her objections towards our decisions by writing some letters where she asked for some precise explanations. That was surprising for us since she was not strong in writing and she had never written letters before.”

4. Most of the parents believed that self correction in children has increased.

- “After one of the sessions, on the way back to home, he suddenly reminded me of a discussion that had already occurred 1 month ago. I couldn’t
imagine that Alireza ever talks about it because it was too hard for him to accept his faults. But I was dead wrong. He logically analyzed the previous scene and came to this conclusion that I was right and he shouldn’t insist without good reason.”

• “Sepehr rarely changed his views no matter how much it was sound but now he carefully pays attention to other views and even some times accepts them as the better ones. He straightforwardly says that “your idea is far better than mine. I had no idea of this. I will accept that.”

5. The majority asserted that children became much more patient. And this was especially observed in their behavior towards little kids.

• “Arash is very patient now. But he used to lose his temper very soon. Furthermore, his reactions to what his little brother does have been more reasonable. For example, one day his brother threw a pen towards him but he reacted completely different. Arash explained calmly to him how much it could be dangerous. He mentioned all the possible consequences and asked him not to that again.”

• “Alireza has a better relationship with his sister. He easily forgives her faults. He tells her all the stories read in the class, and they exchange their views.”

6. Six of them said that children became more accurate. They pay more attention to their environment and studied their lessons more precisely.

• “Alireza had some problems in dictation. Often, he missed some letters of words. To solve this problem, I had consulted with several consultants. Although their advice improved his dictation, his problem was not solved completely. P4C, however, solved this problem. That was so amazing that his teacher asked me what I had done to solve this problem.”

• “Fatemeh gets better scores in mathematics simply because she doesn’t make her previous tiny mistakes out of carelessness.”

7. Three of the parents were surprised that their children have become extremely interested in reading novels.

• “Sepehr cannot stop reading novels so that I had to schedule for him to be able to do his homework as well. Recently he tends to buy several books.”

• “Before, Arash only read scientific books but now novels attract him far more.”

8. Parents did speak for and against the incivility of their children. All of them except one were happy that children are able to decide by themselves.

• “Now I am not worried about the decisions Pooya makes independently.”

• “I am worried that, one day, children will become too independent and do something irrecoverable.”

Parents were surprised by the results of this class. Some of them told us that the behavior of their children had improved enormously and asked us to continue these classes.

Children’s Opinions

In our final class, we wrote the following questions and asked the children to answer them.

1. What have you learned from the P4C class?
2. Would you like to have this class at your schools, like the other important lessons?
3. Did you like the selected stories?
4. What are your suggestions to improve our classes?

Our aims in asking them questions were:

1. To know whether they themselves are aware of the changes inside.
2. To know how much they are interested in the class.
3. As the stories play an important role in our program, we wondered if the stories were interesting enough to them or not. Their ideas would help us to choose more suitable stories.
4. We wanted to know the strengths and weaknesses of the class and apply their opinions to make our classes enthusiastic.

The following are the answers of children to the questions we asked, and a few comments made by them:

1. All of them without exception replied that they have learned to think by themselves.
“We learned to think properly, talk better, listen carefully and ask our questions clearly.”

“I learned that there might be more than one answer to a question which I am not aware of and I should think of other possibilities.”

“We might reject what we already had accepted without a doubt by hearing a new point of view asserted by others. Now I can think and decide wisely.”

2. All trainees without hesitation answered in the affirmative.

“The class was the best I have ever had. I wish we had this class in our school.”

“I love this class. I get the whole energy of the week from this class.”

“This class had a friendly atmosphere; we could freely express our ideas. To my idea, we could learn a lot of things without forcing to do disastrous homework. I wish all students could experience this class.”

3. All students liked the stories.

“I loved the stories because through reading them we often come up with novel solutions.”

“The stories were very attractive. That would be great if I could have them for myself to be able to read them again.”

4. All of parents requested to have more sessions. They wanted us to extend the time of the class. They firmly insisted that these classes should not be canceled. Some of the students suggested that in some sessions, we introduce them to a topic in advance so that they could think or possibly write about it.

Conclusion

The research project allowed us to directly observe the effect of applying this method in educating Iranian children. This methodology, in practice, involved parents, children and teachers. The contribution of these three groups has had very striking results. Children act more confidently and independently. They express their ideas logically and become more communicative. As mentioned above, many old problems that parents have not been able to solve, using usual methods, were removed. On the other hand, we had this opportunity to find out the strong and weak points of our class. Above all, the results were so remarkable that we were confronted with a huge number of requests from other schools to apply this method, and now there are many parents who keenly want us to make this an opportunity for their children as well. This project has motivated us to continue the previous class and start new ones.

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Lipman, Matthew (2003), Thinking in Education, Cambridge University Press
Sprod, Tim (1997), ‘What is community of inquiry?’ Journal of Critical Thinking Across the Discipline, 17(1).

Endnotes

1 The class on which the article is based was held in the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies(IHCS), Tehran, Iran by Saeed Naji (as facilitator) and Parvaneh Ghazinezhad (as assistant).
2 Primary author
3 The co-authored paper
4 These written observations are available in the P4C Dept. of IHCS
5 These verbal reports tape are available in the P4C Dept. of IHCS
Canadian psychologist and philosopher Michael Schleiffer locates the motivation to write this book in his own childhood, when discussion of sensitive issues such as divorce and illness was avoided at all cost. Enriched by his own conversations with his three grandchildren, this ‘how-to-do’ book sets out to offer advice and guidance to parents and educators to talk about sensitive issues (in particular, but not exclusively) with children in the 0 to 5 year age range. Even when they cannot speak yet, we simply cannot assume that they do not understand us, Schleiffer observes. His journey through current discussions about the role of emotions in moral education also contains many examples and exercises more suitable for the older primary child (up to the age of twelve).

He starts by discussing what values are; he explains their epistemological status, and continues with a range of definitions of concepts relevant to moral education, i.e., ‘objective’, ‘subjective’, ‘ambiguity’, ‘fact’, ‘universal’. Then in chapter two he moves onto into the complex relationship between judgement and reasoning. He claims that, unlike the kind of reasoning involved in solving moral dilemmas, judgement requires emotions such as uncertainty, doubt and confidence. Dr Spock, the fictional character from the television series Star Trek, is given as a good example of someone incapable of making practical judgments in the Aristotelian sense. Spock cannot fall back on his intuition, experience, or common sense, and is not sensitive to context.

Unlike other similar self-help books for parents, the author focuses on two key concepts, judgement and empathy. He offers ten ways to develop good judgements including various thinking skills activities, and examples rich in ambiguity. These provide opportunities to reflect on the meaning of language and guide parents in adopting a more risk-taking attitude, one that is less authoritarian, but still authoritative. Schleiffer leaves advice about child-rearing issues and extreme problem behaviour in our youngest people to another Dr Spock. According to Schleiffer, his own book complements Spock’s popular classic by offering more than brief ‘recipes’. Part Two is entirely dedicated to elaborate discussion of what he regards as the main three core values: honesty, politeness and responsibility. Other values are also covered, but Schleiffer does not offer a persuasive account of these priorities. For example, it is not clear why ‘politeness’ is more basic than say ‘respect’ of which it is an expression. The choice may have something to do with the emphasis throughout the book on correct behaviour and carers giving the right messages to children such as apologising (and ensuring they choose to look in the adults’ eyes, p 73), no public burping or flatulence, no stealing or cheating and no violence. There seems little space for either the unexpected in these conversations, or the fresh perspectives children can bring to them. What his readers have in common, Schleiffer claims, is that they want “to help children to become good” and “happy”, and to “help them in choosing to do the right thing” (p13). Adults have more certainty about matters of morality, he claims, and should use their expertise to talk to children.

His decision to collaborate on this book with clinical psychologist Cynthia Martiny was deliberate, as both academics acknowledge that confusion about basic emotions often causes mental distress and anguish. The voice of the book is Schleiffer’s, although he sometimes uses the ‘we’ form. Schleiffer and Martiny see morality and emotions as intertwined. Like well-known philosopher Martha Nussbaum, Schleiffer sees emotions as evaluative judgments, but he disagrees with her “general thesis that emotions are individualised by their cognitive component” (p 153, footnote 25). She regards emotions as neither fixed entities, nor feelings ‘inside’ our ‘selves’ that need to be managed or controlled, but as informative expressions of and responses to dynamic social relationships. In a detailed and interesting analysis, Schleiffer disagrees with Nussbaum on three counts. To begin with, he explains that moods, temperament and subjective feelings are important for understanding emotions. Moreover, neuro-physiological research suggests that for there is a distinct neural network for every emotion. Finally, other research suggests that recognition of facial expressions is universal and cross-cultural. It has been argued though that the particular interpretation of the Aristotelian golden mean rule to which he (and many others, including Daniel Goleman)
subscribe misunderstands Aristotle in a profound sense. This is crucial; the central tenet of the third part of the book depends on it. According to this rule, the desirable middle is always between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency. For Schleiffer this involves ‘controlling’, ‘handling’ and ‘managing’ one’s emotions and as such reintroduces Platonic dichotomies between emotion and cognition. In contrast, for other Neo-Aristotelians it simply means that the extreme emotions simply will not be felt as such. It means infusing the emotions with cognition, rather than policing them from above with cognition.

In the last part of the book Schleiffer discusses sensitive issues, including death, illness and touching. His drive to discuss such topics stems from a well-intentioned concern about children’s health and welfare, although the line between moralising and moral education is frequently crossed (“All we can do is point out the risks and consequences of drug use”, p 14). At other times, he takes an unexpected and extreme liberal stance, for example, by stating that even a racist view should not be silenced, or the person making it humiliated (p 28). As Schleiffer assumes that talking about emotions and values is a good thing, his stance on what some critics call the ‘rise of therapeutic education’ (see for example Frank Furedi and more recently Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes) would be interesting. In brief such critics claim that too much talk and concern about emotional welfare in schools may not reduce pupils’ anxieties and unhappiness, but actually cause them.

Schleiffer himself locates his book clearly in the P4C tradition. Like other P4Cers, moral education is seen as more than values-clarification, as some positions are better justifiable and provide more insight than others. Schleiffer wants children to think for themselves, and holds that integrity should be modelled by adults and underpinned by good thinking. However, the book’s aim to provide an up-to-date consensus based on research on values and emotions seems out of place in the P4C tradition of valuing dissensus to provoke the giving of better reasons and independent thinking. One suspects that the frequent use of so-called ‘persuaders’ will not sit comfortably with some readers. For example, “the consensus in 2006” (p 56), “as we know” (p 58), and “In 2006, there can be no doubt…” (p 70).

The suggested activities and exercises resemble the Philosophy for Children programme; it is a format familiar to readers of this journal. An example that has been taken up in the Appendix is an episode written by Marie-France Daniel which has the outward appearance of Lipman’s Elffe. In contrast to the programme, however, Daniel makes use of certain literary devices, such as talking animals (anthropomorphism). This is an interesting philosophical departure from Lipman’s deliberate choice of creating novels that model children building a community of enquiry and wonder about the world as it is without resorting to the fantastical realm of literature, which may distract (according to Lipman). Of practical relevance is that, apart from some recommended films, it is not clear how much of what is in the Appendix could actually be used with 0-5 year olds.

Throughout, Schleiffer emphasises that in developing good judgment in children, adults will themselves develop better judgments too, and need to be educated in the emotions. On the whole, the book contains many insufficiently justified prescriptive comments and suggestions, far too many exclamation marks and ‘telling devices’ suggesting an adult who knows more and better. Although Schleiffer is not dogmatic, he is a clear realist and is optimistic that, through reasoning, children will discover fundamental (though not absolute) universal values for themselves. In a Neo-Aristotelian manner each situation needs to be explored on its own merits, and he suggests the use of the following amended Biblical ‘Golden Rule’: “Do onto others […] taking into consideration the differences and similarities between them and you, and between situations” (p 65). In his rejection of postmodernism it is not clear how his beliefs differ from those who agree with Richard Rorty that it is more useful to talk about ‘justified true beliefs’ than truth. After all, what is objective, Schleiffer says, is “that which surpasses personal taste or opinion” (p 27). Dichotomisation between objectivity and subjectivity is unhelpful and increasingly seen as simply irrelevant in contemporary philosophy.

A clear effort has been made to appeal to a wide readership. Physically the book is attractive and colourful. Headers of sections are pink and cartoons are included to make it more user-friendly. Schleiffer’s aim to reach a large audience is laudable but always a difficult project when there are so many different points of view that inform a particular academic field. However, research findings are frequently used in this book as answers to pertinent questions and to convince the reader of the rightness of the authors’ position. This is unfortunate. Also, it is not always clear how research supports a particular claim such as when he states that “Children are already naturally kind” with the explanation that researchers “have documented kind behaviour at very young ages, with 6 month old children helping other children in distress” (p 85). The child’s environmental influences post- and pre-birth seem to be completely overlooked; if not, then further explanation is required. Modelling P4C practice one would expect the reader to be taken as a participant on an enquiring journey and to be involved in a philosophical investigation rather than being presented with ready-made answers. Schleiffer misses the opportunity to engage the reader dialogically with second-order philosophical questions that his statements easily provoke in the reader, such as ‘What are the limits of tolerance?’, ‘Is it possible to dislike a world without violence and who decides what the world should be like?’, ‘Who decides what proper behaviour
is?’ and ‘Why do adults insist children share their toys when adults do not feel obliged to share their car or house with a stranger?’.

The change Schleiffer wants to bring about is to support children in doing the right thing, because they believe it to be right and therefore choose to do it. I agree that talking about values and emotions is in and by itself insufficient to change people’s actions. Moral education is very complex; simply demanding that children should obey rules is never sufficient. By necessity rules are general and cannot capture the rich detail and uniqueness of each individual and the facts of his or her situation. With his interest in practical judgement, and his concern that children need to practice making good moral judgments, the reader might expect more practical guidance on how to engage young people in democratic philosophical practice beyond the educational resource material found in the Appendices. For instance, it would have been invaluable, to include pedagogical advice on how spaces can be opened up to practice ethical decision-making and how virtues such as courage can be cultivated in a democratic laboratory such as a community of enquiry. Crucially what is missing in this book is sensitivity to the political dimension of moral education and this book would have benefited from reflections on children’s rights and, more generally, power relationships between adult and child.

The substantial recommended further reading, the wealth of everyday examples from North American culture, passages from the history of philosophy, and quotations from literature may be of use to lecturers of ethics at universities or teachers of philosophy in secondary schools. Throughout this book, the reader will find useful references to an interesting spectrum of research in philosophy, education and especially psychology.
The avowed aim of this edited book of twelve chapters appears in the first line of the editor’s introduction: to make the case that it is “time to put philosophy in the school curriculum” (page x). It is only fair, therefore, to judge the book on the basis of how well it contributes to the achievement of this aim. Before coming to a judgement, however, I shall outline some of the main features and themes of the book.

It is interesting that the editors have chosen to structure the book by starting with four essays (by Michael Hand, Richard Pring, Gareth Matthews and Stephen Law) that largely address objections to the teaching of philosophy in schools, before making the positive case for philosophy in eight further essays (by Harry Brighouse, Harvey Siegel, Carrie Winstanley, Robert Fisher, Karin Murris, Lynn Glueck & Harry Brighouse, Judith Suissa and James Conroy). Curiously, this is contrary to the usual order in philosophical discourse, where arguing one’s case precedes defending it. I wonder why the editors have chosen such a defensive approach. In this review, I shall follow tradition, and briefly survey the positive case before the objections.

This collection of essays contains much that is of use to the advocate of philosophy in schools: a number of contributors make nuanced and detailed cases. Many claim that children are natural philosophers, or at least have a natural inclination to raise and want to explore questions with philosophical implications. Several contributors question models of childhood that deny children’s capacity to be philosophical. Gareth Matthews, claims that philosophical inquiry is not only good for children, but also good for we adults, in that it helps build relations of mutual respect, and alerts us to the fact that children have capacities we may have lost. He characterizes childhood as not merely a time of deficit: apart from philosophical wonder, he instances language learning abilities.

A common theme in the essays is that philosophical inquiry can strengthen and systematize capacities that children already have, albeit in a relatively undeveloped form. Moral reasoning (Brighouse), critical thinking (Siegel, Winstanley), philosophical intelligence (Fisher) and meaning making (Murris) are amongst the capacities discussed. Many of the authors provide very useful examples of materials and approaches that can be taken.

One frequently heard objection to teaching philosophy in schools, particularly in the primary or elementary school, is that it is just too difficult a subject for young children. It is not surprising that quite a few of the contributors have something to say about it. Hand approaches the problem directly, arguing that philosophy in the early school years is preparatory, and Glueck & Brighouse agree. Hand would have school philosophy concentrate largely on conceptual clarification, where arguing one’s case precedes defending it. I wonder why the editors have chosen such a defensive approach. In this review, I shall follow tradition, and briefly survey the positive case before the objections.

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**Making the Case**

Tim Sprod


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Dr. Tim Sprod has taught in Australia, Papua New Guinea, the Bahamas and the UK. He has taught philosophy to students from early childhood to university. He is past President of the FAPSA (Australia) and past Secretary of ICPIC. His books include *Discussions in Science; IB Prepared: Theory of Knowledge (with Antonia Melvin); Philosophical Discussion in Moral Education; Books into Idea; and Places for Thinking (with Laurance Splitter).*

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One frequently heard objection to teaching philosophy in schools, particularly in the primary or elementary school, is that it is just too difficult a subject for young children. It is not surprising that quite a few of the contributors have something to say about it. Hand approaches the problem directly, arguing that philosophy in the early school years is preparatory, and Glueck & Brighouse agree. Hand would have school philosophy concentrate largely on conceptual clarification. Both essays are surely right in pointing out that school level preparatory studies in many other disciplines also lack many features of the mature approach to that discipline. In defending the claim that philosophy is better placed for improving thinking capacities than more empirical subjects, Winstanley points out that philosophical inquiry does not give a ‘conversation stopper’ edge to the most knowledgeable.

Fisher goes further. In claiming that Howard Gardner’s Existential Intelligence is at base philosophical, he draws a distinction between formal and informal philosophy. The latter, he says, is “discursive or dialogical engagement with conceptual problems and questions of existential concern without recourse to the specialist resources of academic philosophy [and]… the encounter with and exploration of those same concerns prior to engagement with the philosophical canon” (100). This, he says, is a highly useful precursor to the formal study of canonical texts.

A second worry that opponents of philosophy in school often air is that it will lead to relativism and skepticism. Hand identifies one variant: the ‘no-right-answers’ myth. If it were true that there are no right answers in philosophy, then this worry would seem to be well grounded. It is not surprising, then, that quite a few contributors grapple with this issue. Pring carefully points out that there are questions that do not have *certain* answers: we collectively (or even individually) have difficulty coming to the settled conclusion that a particular answer is the correct one. This implies
neither that there is no right answer, nor that all answers are equally good. He adds, insightfully, that schools largely avoid such questions, despite their considerable importance. Murris blames such avoidance on the teachers’ fear of uncertainty, which clashes with their need for control. Law points the finger at comparative religion courses that avoid making truth claims for any particular religion lest they offend the others.

As Siegel comments, many students are at least vaguely aware of the incompatibility between their strongly held, and their relativist, views, but they are given no opportunity to explore this. For him, philosophical critical thinking assumes the falsity of relativism. Yet he admits that this view depends on several contentious claims, particularly that justification, rather than truth, is fallible. Some educational exploration of epistemology is required, he claims, so that students can handle such contentions, including a reflexive look at the presuppositions of philosophical inquiry. Brighouse also claims moral relativism is false, and argues that philosophical inquiry allows us to seek a reflective equilibrium.

So far, so valuable. However, I have some concerns about the last two essays in the book: Suissa’s critique of the philosophy in schools movement from a Deweyan perspective, and Conroy’s call for the reading of great books. While both make some reasonable and positive points, their critiques of the philosophy in schools movement betray a lack of knowledge of that literature. In attacking ignorance of Dewey and his emphasis on meaning making, Suissa cites very few sources. She is clearly unaware of the deep influence of Dewey’s thought on Matthew Lipman, Philip Cam, Anne Sharp and Laurance Splitter. These P4C theorists, and many others, strongly emphasize meaning making – as, in this present volume, does Murris. Although such blatant inconsistency between authors is perhaps an inevitable feature of collections of essays such as this, it is annoying nevertheless.

In attacking what she sees as an undue emphasis on self understanding through philosophy, which she paints as solipsistic, Suissa ignores the heavy emphasis on the Deweyan notion of community as the route to self understanding in the literature. While she advocates a role for philosophy as space to reflect on the questions of meaning arising within the disciplines, she fails to note the most prominent of informal philosophy courses with such an aim: the compulsory Theory of Knowledge course within the International Baccalaureate Diploma (a course that is cited in the book’s introduction).

Conroy makes a good case for the importance of reading and reflecting on important books but, like Suissa, he does not pay sufficient attention to the distinction between two major forms of philosophy in schools: the P4C approach which is strongest in earlier years, and the formal philosophy taught mainly in the final years of schooling. He rightly notes that the call to read the canonical books is less applicable to the earlier years, but ignores the fact that senior curricula, such as A-levels, the International Baccalaureate Diploma and those of various continental countries lay considerable emphasis on reading the classics of philosophy. And, again, Murris and Gleuck & Brighouse have already emphasized the importance of children’s literary classics. Further, when Conroy lays the charge that “conversation is to be preferred to reading, and argument appears more attractive than rumination” (148), he ignores the Vygotskian point repeatedly made by P4C theorists that the developed capacity for the latter of each of these pairs depends on prior exposure to the former.

Let’s now turn to consideration of how well this collection of essays addresses its avowed aim. Firstly, in a comment that may give us pause, Gleuck & Brighouse warn that philosophy in schools might indeed lead to relativism and skepticism if it is not taught well. This worry is real: I cringe when I hear students or teachers – and, regrettably, occasionally teacher trainers – praise the fact that, in philosophy, there are no right answers. In a book that is advocating that philosophy ought to be central to the curriculum, the possibility that too many teachers will not have the background (and possibly lack the desire) to be able to run philosophy lessons competently needs to be addressed.

While none of the essays make this a central concern, it is encouraging to see that a number at least implicitly acknowledge the problem. Murris makes this a central concern, it is encouraging to see that a number at least implicitly acknowledge the problem. Murris and Gleuck & Brighouse warn that philosophy in schools might indeed lead to relativism and skepticism if it is not taught well. This worry is real: I cringe when I hear students or teachers – and, regrettably, occasionally teacher trainers – praise the fact that, in philosophy, there are no right answers. In a book that is advocating that philosophy ought to be central to the curriculum, the possibility that too many teachers will not have the background (and possibly lack the desire) to be able to run philosophy lessons competently needs to be addressed.

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of teachers with expertise in these subjects, especially at the primary/elementary level. Nevertheless, advocates of universal philosophy in schools must take it seriously. Many programs that show great promise when taught by knowledgeable, enthusiastic teachers turn to dross when in the hands of the ill equipped and unmotivated. It is a pity that this book, in advocating philosophy for all students, neither grapples with this issue satisfactorily, nor suggests how it might be overcome.

Secondly, the essayists all appear to believe that a careful exposition of the theoretical advantages of teaching philosophy in schools, backed up by anecdotal evidence, will be sufficient to convince policy makers of the strengths of the case. Experience makes me pessimistic about the likelihood of success of this approach. Educational policy makers are increasingly obsessed with numbers and testing. If you can’t measure it, as far as they are concerned, then it doesn’t exist. In light of this, a book with the aim of this collection ought to have contained essays that highlight empirical, quantitative research. There is no such essay, and I can find only two passing references to the existence of such research: Fisher states that research shows gains but cites few studies, and Murris mentions the work of Trickey & Topping. The book would benefit immensely from an essay from the latter pair, and from a survey of published quantitative research.

Finally, I must question the geographical spread of the book. In their introduction, Hand and Winstanley survey philosophy in schools around the world. They mention compulsory philosophy in the curricula of France, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Brazil, Norway and the International Baccalaureate Diploma, and optional philosophy courses in many countries, including Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, and several in Latin America. Yet the contributors to this volume come exclusively from the UK (8) and the USA (4). I would like to have read essays addressing why philosophy has proved so popular in schools in Brazil, for example, or why in many continental European countries, exposure to philosophy is taken as an obvious need.

In summary, then, this is a welcome book for those who are already convinced of the need for philosophy in schools. They will find much of value in many of the essays. Yet I cannot help feeling that it preaches to the converted. I do not see it converting many more to the cause, especially the educational policy makers of the world: those most in need of conversion if the book’s self stated aim is to be achieved.
Tim Sprod is a well-known scholar in P4C environments and within this Journal, which has published a number of articles and reviews by him, the last one a review of Philosophy in Schools, edited by Michael Hand and Carrie Winstanley. In addition to having implemented the philosophical (and scientific) community of inquiry in different schools at various levels of education, he has been involved in local, national and international associations who aim to foster the dissemination of the educational approach of philosophy for/with children: The Association for Philosophy in Tasmanian Schools, The Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Associations and ICPIC.

In 2001, he published a splendid book on moral education in which he made a strong case for a model of moral education that distanced himself from Kohlberg and Values Clarification by offering a theoretical and practical proposal based upon Matthew Lipman (Ethical Inquiry and Deciding what to do), in dialogue with Habermas and the ethics of virtue (MacIntyre) and character education focusing on moral character (Lickona). This book was based on his PhD thesis. I wrote a long summary of that work in Spanish to make it known in Spain, because I found it a solid presentation of the theoretical principles and basic practical guidelines of moral education.

In the book, Discussions in Science, Tim Sprod addresses a topic that he has devoted many years of his professional career to. He has mostly taught secondary science and philosophy, and has been interested in transforming his classes into actual communities of inquiry. In addition, his Masters from the University of Oxford offered valuable research on the efficacy of the community of inquiry in science teaching, and resulted in a very interesting paper based on the results of that research, “Nobody really knows: The structure and analysis of social constructivist whole class discussions”1. He presented the results of that study as follows:

The results of this study can be briefly summarized by reference to the research questions as follows:

3.21 Students participate in the inquiry more as the community builds, responding more to each other, making more structuring moves, identifying more problems, questioning more, taking more responsibility for their assertions and becoming more aware of the thinking expressed in the dialogue. 3.22 The students become more aware of epistemic games, increasing their initiation and sustaining of episodes and utilizing games previously modelled by the teacher. They link their thoughts to previous experience more and engage in more exploration, clarification and connection of ideas. 3.23 Engaging in a community of discussion led to significant gains in science reasoning, with a suggestion that girls gained more than boys. An unanticipated result of the study was the suggestion that triggers based on stories may be more effective in encouraging student reasoning about science than those based on ‘surprising’ experiments2.

Some years later, and following the study’s recommendations that, “science stories can be used successfully as triggers for discussions on the nature of science”, Tim Sprod accepted the challenge and wrote a book containing 18 short stories aimed at helping teachers interested in implementing an alternative model of science education. The stories are varied and relatively short, one to two pages long involving teenage students discussing issues of everyday life and explores problems usually addressed by science. The first story, “Magic” discuss scientific explanation and asks students discuss how magical explanation is different from scientific explanation, in order to help them gain a deeper understanding of how science works. Two discussion plans about Acid and Alkalis, and Science and Magic offer some ideas to assist students in exploring ideas surrounding these topics.

In story number 10, “Experiments”, we find the students discussing whether scientists ever “prove”

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anything. The dialogue starts just after a science class. The children deal with the problem by doing experiments and draw conclusions about human wonder and curiosity. By the end of the story, the children are left with more questions than answers. The discussion guides offered by the author deal with basic science concepts like: induction and science, doing an experiment, hypothesis and when is a test “fair”.

“Magic”, “Shadow play”, “Are Scientists Mad”, “Lizards”, “Back to the Caves” and “ Reaction Times” are some of the puzzling titles of the 18 stories published in the book and are available for printing or viewing at http://www.acer.edu.au/discussions-in-science. Some stories are accompanied by activities to do before or after the discussions, others by a brief outline of the scientific topics included in the dialogue the characters have. All the stories are followed by discussion guides or leading ideas that help teachers, especially those who don’t have a sound philosophical background, to discover the intricacies of philosophical discussion. These guides are reflective of the traditional style of presenting didactic materials in philosophy for children and maintain its unique approach to the improvement of teaching.

From my point of view, the value of this book extends beyond what I have summarized thus far. The real value of the book is in how it approaches a problematic topic: how to introduce philosophical discussion in other subject specific areas. Almost invariably when I have conducted a workshop for teachers who want to learn more about Philosophy for/with Children, I receive the following comment: “this is impossible in my sciences classes or in other academic disciplines”. One of the most important arguments against the practice of philosophical dialogue in other disciplines is the fact that most of the issues children have to learn in those disciplines are technically settled. Rather than opening up concepts, teachers have the responsibility of handing down scientific knowledge to children in a way they can understand and use to solve problems. Tim Sprod accepts these criticisms, but he points to their solution in a very precise and clarifying introduction just 20 pages long.

Sprod goes right to what we call “hard” sciences (physics and chemistry, that is, the mathematical and precise sciences) to answer the call for clear and practical lessons, although there are also some stories in this book that deal with problems from the “soft” sciences. From my point of view, this is an overly schematic and simplistic classification of scientific territories. The distinction between so called “hard” and “soft” sciences are not as clear as some might suggest. In fact all of the sciences are made up of questions existing along a continuum that runs from more open questions, less amenable to precise description or quantification, to those that can be answered in more precise and measurable ways. Even within Philosophy, as an academic discipline, you can find questions that are more open in nature (“What can we know?”) along with those one might consider closed (“Did Kant accept that Metaphysics was a science?”) leaving some answers more appropriate than others.

Sprod is not in favor of introducing a new discipline, Philosophy of Science, neither is he advocating a systematic study of the Philosophy of Science. He upholds offering students the opportunity to discuss philosophical issues that arise in any science class, during the regular teaching of the discipline. This is a crucial thesis for those committed to the implementation of philosophical dialogue in compulsory school either as a separate program for implementing philosophical dialogue, or as a supplement to the existing curriculum in the other disciplines. There have been various projects in support of the latter including a research project (in which I participated) granted by the European Agency toward developing some practical and theoretical materials to introduce philosophical dialogue in all the disciplines (http://nk.oulu.fi/menon/).

As Tim Sprod shows us, there are a number of strong arguments in favor of bringing philosophical discussion into science. Philosophical discussion in the scientific disciplines offers an opportunity to overcome three very important problems science teachers face: integrating “school knowledge” into daily events and lives of students; developing a clear understanding of scientific concepts and connecting them with our other forms of knowledge; and “accurate understanding of what science can and cannot do; its methods, strengths and limitations”. No doubt teachers have the responsibility to ensure that students leave school with an adequate and meaningful understanding of current scientific knowledge and findings. Philosophical discussions can help them to achieve this goal.

In can also help solve another very important challenge that scientific and technological development currently poses. As we are living in societies that pretend to be democratic, we need a scientifically literate public who can place scientific research and technological advances under strong scrutiny. Students, as members of our democratic societies, need to leave school with a sound critical attitude toward science. We want our students able to appreciate its strengths and weaknesses, while remaining sensitive to the ethical problems posed by science; just because science can do it doesn’t necessarily mean is should.

Discussions in Science clearly presents these problems and offers a sound teaching model, supported by a long tradition of philosophical dialogue transforming classrooms into communities of philosophical inquiry. Even more, it gives us a number of effective stories, accompanied by activities, science supplements and discussion guides. It is, therefore, a solid contribution based on deep reflection and extensive practical experience. Sprod not only explains to us
what we should do in our classes but he goes the extra step and shows us how to do it. This practical guide, together with the empirical evidence presented in his other books, show us that the scientific community of inquiry really works.

Endnotes


2 Sprod, T. (1994) Developing Higher Order Thinking through Whole Class Discussion in a Science Classroom. Unpublished MSc dissertation, Department of Educational Studies, University of Oxford. I quote from the electronic copy of this document he friendly sent to me.
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