On Philosophy in the Curriculum: A Conversation with Matthew Lipman

Philosophy is the best answer to the call for teaching critical thinking, says Matthew Lipman, because only through philosophy can we give students the experience they need in reasoning—experience that will prepare them much better than the limited knowledge of the disciplines.

Why do you believe philosophy must become part of the regular school curriculum?

There's a growing awareness that much of what schools teach young people is not particularly appropriate for the world we are moving into, that knowledge grows rapidly out of date, and that the most important thing we can do for children is teach them to think well. If we're serious about wanting to teach students to think, we've got to go about it in a responsible fashion. This means giving students practice in reasoning, through classroom discussion involving concepts that reach across all the disciplines rather than only those that are specialized within each subject. Only through philosophy can this be done effectively.

That's why you created Philosophy for Children?

Yes. Back in the early '70s, when my own children were about 10 or 11 years old, the school they were attending did not give them the instruction in reasoning that I thought they needed. I was teaching logic at the college level at the time, and I felt that I wasn't accomplishing very much with my students because it was too late;

they should have had instruction in reasoning much earlier. So I decided I would do something to help children at the middle school level learn to reason. I realized that the principles of logic would have to be presented in an interesting way, so I decided to write a novel in which the characters would be depicted discovering these principles and reflecting on how they could be applied to their lives.

Which was *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*?

Yes. I didn't know how it would work until I tried it with a group of 5th graders in the town where I lived. I got permission from the school to teach it for nine weeks, twice a week, 40 minutes each session. We pretested and post-tested both those children and a control group. And it seemed to work remarkably well: the experimental group gained 27 months in logical reasoning skills over the nine-week period, while the control group remained unchanged.

It was pointed out to me, though, that this trial had serious defects. For example, I had taught the course myself. It would have been a much fairer test if the course had been taught by a teacher I had trained.

Still, you showed that it could be done.

Right. I was also curious about whether the effects of the intervention would remain and if they would spread: would the students' improved thinking show up in their work in other school subjects? I was able to ascertain that the effects lasted for two years, but they didn't last for four years. I concluded that unless the results of such an intervention are reinforced, they'll wash out.

That's true of almost every educational approach.

As for the spread, we determined that in virtually every discipline except spelling (which is illogical, anyhow) the Iowa test scores of the students I had taught showed significant improvement. But once again those effects washed out after a few years.

So you saw a need for the program to be more continuous.

Yes. And that meant publishing books and preparing materials for training teachers. I spent the next four years trying to figure out how to do that and the next 14 years doing it.

Since that time, the program has been widely used. Just how widely?

I estimate that it can be found in about 5,000 school districts. Within those districts, it may be in one classroom or many. The materials are taught in other countries as well. They've been translated into about 15 different languages.

You mentioned development of materials for teachers. What have you learned about teacher training? Most elementary teachers haven't studied much philosophy.

We began with a one-semester course. Ann Margaret Sharp and I taught it for two and a half hours a week for 13 weeks. We would teach the teachers, who in turn would teach the same material to their students. When we tested the children, we found no significant improvement in reading or reasoning; and we concluded that the teachers had not been exposed to the material for a sufficiently long period. So the next year we doubled the time of exposure and we did get significant results—and they have been confirmed by other experiments.

So you continue to recommend a full year of inservice—not full time, of course.

No. Two and a half hours a week for a school year—or the equivalent. We now have a variety of teacher-training options.

What goes on in a Philosophy for Children class?

The teacher workshops and the children's classes are very much alike, because whatever the trainer does with the teachers, the teachers will almost certainly do with children. The trainer tries to create a community of inquiry, in which the teachers read the novel and discuss the ideas among themselves with the assistance of the trainer. Then the teachers go to their classrooms and do essentially what the trainer did: they facilitate discussion of the ideas the children find in the novel. From time to time, the trainer goes to the classroom and leads a discussion with the children, trying to show what is meant by a philosophical discussion.

What *is* meant?

It means that students discuss experiences all children have had, such as being embarrassed by not knowing an answer. They may have wanted to talk about these experiences, but not in a

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personal way. By discussing what happens to the characters in a novel, they can talk about things in the third person: somebody else is the one involved. They become accustomed to asking each other for reasons and for opinions, to listening carefully to each other, to building on each other's ideas. I've seen 1st grade children, when another student voices an opinion, call out softly, "Reason! Reason!"

In a nonphilosophical conversation, one responds to a question with an answer. But in a philosophical discussion, one often responds to a question by attempting to ascertain the meaning of the question. An example would be asking a child what time it is, and she replies by asking, "What is time?" One reason education is in crisis is that children do not understand what we are trying to teach them, and they lack a procedure that would enable them to reach for that understanding themselves. Philosophy provides such a procedure, by having students probe the questions and reflect upon the assumptions.

Do all teachers need special training to teach philosophy? Don't some teachers already teach that way?

Some teachers need relatively little training; others need quite a bit. It takes a special kind of teacher to teach philosophy: a teacher who inspires trust, so that there's an openness in the classroom; a teacher who is thoughtful and reflective; a teacher who can be critical of students' logical reasoning but who always cites the criteria on the basis of which his or her criticisms are made, so that it's a responsible kind of criticism.

Does the experience of teaching philosophy carry over to the way teachers teach other content?

It often does. And when it does, the results are electrifying. When both teacher and students identify with the methodology and engage in spontaneous and stimulating thinking throughout the school day, you see achievement skyrocket. That's the optimum. But of course some teachers restrict their use of the Socratic approach just to philosophy.

You've collected a great deal of data over the years about the effects of teaching philosophy. Some of it is quite revealing. Without such an intervention, young people's logical thinking seems not to change very much through the years.

Well, it improves a little each year up to about the age of 12, and then it generally plateaus at about three-quarters of full efficiency. Without training in logical reasoning, most elementary and secondary school children get only about three out of four logical problems right. We have to do better than that. You can't do college-level work if you are reasoning at a C level.

That brings up another point. I get the impression that some people think philosophy might be ap-

propriate for especially able students, but not for the others.

Philosophy is very appropriate for the whole range of students. I don't think that ordinary children are incapable of thinking about complex matters. Kids who may be doing badly in school can argue with the manager of a professional baseball team about whether a player should have been suspended or whether somebody should have been sent up to hit. They can cite the batting averages, fielding averages—the kind of criteria that a manager uses to make such decisions. Children do that sort of thing very well when there's sufficient motivation and incentive.

When you see slow learners or disadvantaged students drilling and drilling, when you see the monotony and the drudgery, you begin to think that nobody cares about making school interesting for these students, that nobody cares about having them voice their opinions or enjoy learning. But if you talk with them—ask them about fairness or friendship or why the world is the way it is—you discover that they've been mute and inarticulate all this time only because nobody's ever taken the trouble to consult with them.

In fact, it's often the students identified as gifted who are uncomfortable with philosophy, because it doesn't have ready answers they can recite, and it doesn't have the convergence they're used to. But it does have logic, which they generally enjoy. Unfortunately, with the emphasis on short right answers and factual recall, we fail to prepare children for the ambiguities of life.

Some educators are wary of discussions of controversial issues because they think it's not the business of the school to influence children's ideas in that way, and because they don't want to get in trouble with people in their community.

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And they're right that it's not the business of educators to implant their personal opinions in their students. That would be indoctrination. On the other hand, there's a danger that if nothing is done—if teachers are always neutral about everything—schools are really indoctrinating relativism without acknowledging that that's what they're doing. What must be encouraged is rational inquiry: children should be inquiring into moral issues as a community and coming to experience firsthand the range of community perspectives on these matters. When children belong to a classroom community of inquiry that is thoughtful and considerate, they are likely to become thoughtful and considerate themselves.

But some parents say they don't want their children to be reflective on such matters. They want them to believe what they're told to believe until they're old enough to decide for themselves.

There are some parents who would prefer to reserve some aspects of education for the home. Controversies of this kind are inevitable, and rightly so. These are profoundly serious issues. Go back to the disputes that took place when compulsory education was initi-

ated: "Why do we do this? How can we justify requiring students to go to school?" If we feel that education for reasonableness is needed in order to preserve democracy, and that the alternatives to democracy are unacceptable, then we have a mandate to require that all children be educated for reasonableness. A reflective education should include teaching children to read and write well, to speak and listen well, and to exercise good judgment. Without these skills, students will be ill-prepared to confront the responsibilities of citizenship and the problems of life.

You're saying, then, that philosophy offers an answer to the call for critical thinking in education?

I think it is *the* answer, because it provides all that critical thinking approaches can provide, and a great deal more besides. Instead of teaching isolated, dismembered skills, it concentrates on systematically connecting the skills to one another so that when one thinks about the subject matter of a discipline, one does so in an organized and thorough way. It's of little value to possess individual cognitive skills if one lacks judgment as to when such skills should be applied. The aim of philosophy is to develop thinkers, and that cannot be done by merely teaching skills. Moreover, in Philosophy for Children, our objective is not merely to sharpen students' capacities for dry analysis but to dramatize the life of the mind so that students will develop critical dispositions as they discuss ideas of mutual concern in a community of inquiry. It is through such thinking together that children become reasonable and independent thinkers.□

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