

**Commentary on Matthew Lipman's 'The educational role of philosophy'**

Philip Cam

University of New South Wales

[p.cam@unsw.edu.au](mailto:p.cam@unsw.edu.au)

In *The educational role of philosophy*, the founder of Philosophy for Children, Matthew Lipman, argues against the traditional view that philosophy has no role to play in school education, except perhaps as an option in the senior secondary school. He claims that this view is based in part on the assumption that children are not ready to study such an abstract, highly theoretical academic discipline, ignoring the possibility—and indeed the fact—that children are perfectly capable of engaging in philosophy as a thoughtful discussion of ideas. Even young children can engage in philosophy in much the same way that they can play a game of rounders, while not being ready for A Grade baseball. Lipman also points to opposition stemming from the contrast between the conception of education as the transfer of knowledge and of philosophy as a discipline where nearly everything is a source of contention. Yet once we focus not merely on knowledge, but also on the development of understanding, reasonableness and good judgment as educational objectives, then philosophy has a great deal to offer.

In taking up this challenge, Lipman favours the Socratic educational practice of dialogical inquiry as opposed to the academic tradition of learning about philosophy didactically by means of teacher-talk and studying texts. In the Socratic tradition, one learns to reason and to think for oneself by engaging in 'reasonable conversation', which is the leading form of activity in what Lipman calls a classroom Community of Inquiry. It is on this basis that Lipman constructed his philosophical novels and teacher manuals to stimulate discussion and help to give it as much depth and precision as its participants can muster. The novels replace the expository text with a narrative that models the kind of thoughtful philosophical deliberation in which he wants children to engage, and the manuals assist the teacher to facilitate the students' enquiries rather than to transmit established knowledge.

Lipman realised that the future of his enterprise was far from assured. For one thing, it requires emphasis to be placed on the development of understanding, judgment and reasonableness, rather than simply on knowledge as narrowly conceived. Although there has been progress in furthering these objectives in the two decades since Lipman made these remarks, powerful countervailing forces continue to influence education. It may be hubris to think of the movement that has grown out of Lipman's pioneering efforts as ever producing the kind of educational transformation he envisaged, but it is arguably true to say that the worldwide Philosophy in Schools movement is these days more than a 'peripheral curiosity'.

**Original article**

**The educational role of philosophy**

Mat Lipman, Montclair State, NJ, USA

The history of the relationship between philosophy and education has been a long and troubled one. In part, this stemmed from the problematic nature of philosophy itself, but this difficulty was compounded by controversy as to the age at which training in philosophy should begin. Although Socrates seemed indifferent to whether he conversed philosophically with young or old, his pupil, Plato, was inclined to restrict philosophy to mature students, on the grounds that it made the younger ones unduly contentious. Since philosophers in those days had the reputation of being ‘friends of wisdom,’ and since being a friend of wisdom seemed to require extensive experience, it came to be taken for granted, generation after generation, that philosophy was not for the young. It has sometimes been made available, on a limited basis, at the secondary school level, but almost never to students in the lower grades. To the suggestion that this prevented children from having access to ideas, theories and abstract concepts, the stock response was that children were mired in the ‘concrete’ level of experience and had no interest in abstractions. To the report that very young children almost invariably greeted opportunities to discuss philosophy with joy and delight, the standard reply was that this proved that the children could not be doing philosophy, since the study of philosophy is a serious and difficult matter. The recent career of philosophy in elementary and secondary education has been a matter of overcoming precisely these objection and misconceptions. Unfortunately, a listing of the advantages to be derived by the young from the study of philosophy—its strengthening of reasoning and judgment, its fostering of concept-formation skills, its clarification of values and ideals—is likely to obscure the intrinsic satisfactions that children derive from their classroom communities of philosophical inquiry. But even here there are signs of change, and a new appreciation of the educational possibilities of philosophy is at last beginning to surface in the schools.

**1. Philosophy at the secondary school level**

There have been two prevalent forms of philosophy teaching at the university level: the lecture method and the discussion method. Despite the preference shown by Socrates and Plato for embodying philosophy in dialogue, it has been the lecture method that has historically dominated the presentation of philosophy in the colleges and universities. Teachers of philosophy in the high school, the *lycee* or the *gymnasium* have tended to replicate the mode of teaching favored at the time by professors at the university level. Lectures have been predominant, even though the need for systematic discussion has been generally acknowledged.

Philosophy in the lycee or gymnasium has generally been part of the required course of study, and its curricula has largely resembled that of introductory philosophy courses at the college level. In high schools, in contrast, philosophy has been offered as an elective subject rather than a mandated one, because only a small minority of students were thought to be philosophically motivated or adept. Until about 1800, the teaching of philosophy at the secondary school level in most European countries was preceded by the teaching of Latin and followed by the teaching of more specialized subjects. The understanding was that philosophy provided a general orientation to human knowledge, and thus prepared students to think in the specialized disciplines. This judgment of the educational role of philosophy was in sharp contrast to the ancient view, prevalent in Greece, that philosophy was the culmination of the more diversified inquiries, and contrasted equally sharply with the modern view that philosophy was itself simply one more field of specialized study. It was only with the emergence of elementary school philosophy that there was a return to the more traditional view that the role of philosophy in education was introductory and preparatory, although this did not exclude the understanding that it could also serve in a culminating capacity. Thus, secondary school courses have been sometimes portrayed as helping students, at the end of their twelve years of grade school experience, reflect on what they have been through, so as to pull their thoughts together with some degree of wisdom. More often than not, however, secondary school philosophy has been alternatively labelled as 'pre-college philosophy,' with the clear implication that it would be of use only to those going on to higher education. This understanding has been contrasted in recent years by those who feel that philosophy is of value to all students—to those who do not go on to college as well as to those who do.

During the past two decades, the educational role of philosophy has again become controversial. The question, 'Who can benefit from philosophy?' receives a new meaning in an era of mass-education. If it is possible that all students, and not just a select few, can benefit from and actually need philosophy, then it becomes urgent that a working understanding of the nature of philosophy be available, so that practical decisions can be made about its curricula and dissemination. Based on this understanding of what philosophy is it will be necessary to proceed to the next question, which is 'Who can do philosophy?'

The remainder of this article will attempt to answer these three questions. In the process, it will concentrate on elementary school philosophy as well as on secondary school philosophy studied through dialogical inquiry.

## **2. What philosophy is and who is entitled to study it**

Philosophy is one of the disciplines that make up the humanities, and the works of those who have engaged in philosophy over the centuries comprise a body of knowledge and a variety of ways of understanding that have formed an important area of study for virtually all students in higher or tertiary education. Philosophers have been interested

in the construction of conceptual systems, in the perfecting of rational methodologies, in pinpointing and improving criteria, in the practice of criticism and the criticism of practice. Such matters are generally quite abstract. So long as these considerations were considered to be central to philosophy, and so long as children were presumed to have neither an interest in abstract ideas nor a capacity for examining them, the lack of philosophy in the elementary school curriculum was taken to be well-advised. Nevertheless, other considerations have been pertinent, even though most educators have preferred to ignore them. For in addition to the theoretical aspect of philosophy, a practical aspect must be acknowledged. Philosophy may begin in wonder and eventuate in understanding, or even, in a few instances, in wisdom, but along the way it involves a good deal of strenuous activity. This activity generally takes the form of dialogue. When one engages in such dialogue about traditionally philosophical matters—abstract or generic concepts such as truth and justice and friendship and personhood; methods and procedures of inquiry; criteria as the pinions of criticism or justification, and so on—it could reasonably be said that one is *doing* philosophy. Children are admittedly conversationalists, and many of them are a bit language-intoxicated, but could they reasonably be expected to do philosophy even in its dialogical form? Could they perform at those rarefied heights or meta-levels where the eyries of the philosophers are supposedly located? And have they an interest in philosophical ideas?

If one takes the position that a particular group of human beings—women, aborigines, children, whatever—is inherently incapable of engaging in a certain course of study, one risks being deemed prejudiced. The strategy often resorted to for circumventing this allegation of bias is to upgrade the standards of performance of the activity in question so that only professionals can be said to engage in it. Manifestly, however, this expedient will not work. One does not have to play a game expertly in order to be called a player of that game. Those who are inexpert or downright amateurish, but who nevertheless abide thoroughly by the rules of the game, are no less entitled to be considered playing it. Similarly, it can be said that those who engage in philosophical dialogue about philosophical issues, even though they do not perform with the acumen of specialists, are indeed *doing* philosophy, even if they are very, very young, so long as their performances conform to the rules or standard practices of the discipline.

One still has to face the final challenge: are children then philosophers? Caution requires answering this question in the negative, but not on the grounds that children do philosophy inexpertly. Rather, one should follow the example of professors of philosophy, even those in the universities, who are notoriously squeamish about calling *themselves* philosophers. Granted, they can no longer be said to ‘profess’ philosophy either: they conceive themselves as simply do it. But that is all that needs to be conceded with regard to children.

Of course, there will always be those for whom the study of philosophy involves the learning of such precepts as ‘Know thyself’ and ‘The unexamined life is not worth living’ and ‘Moderation in all things.’ For those of this persuasion, teaching children philosophy would be a matter of getting children to accept such precepts, if necessary by genial

indoctrination. It is obvious, however, that such children would not be engaged in philosophical inquiry at all, for the ends at which they might have arrived by their own efforts would have been given them in advance, and there would be nothing to discuss.

At this point, a quite different type of objection emerges. Granted that children can do philosophy, is this sufficient reason for inserting philosophy into the elementary school curriculum?

How this question is to be answered hinges upon the aims of education one adopts. If one conceives of the educated person as merely knowledgeable, then the need to incorporate philosophy into the curriculum is proportionate to its contribution to the whole of human knowledge, and such a claim would have to be admitted to have only a modest degree of force. But if the educated person is conceived of as one who combines knowledge, understanding, reasonableness and judgment, then the claim of philosophy to be a mandated part of the curriculum is a powerful one indeed.

Philosophy is not concerned merely to ascertain the principles, criteria and standards of good reasoning and sound judgment; it is concerned to establish a context in which those principles, criteria and standards can be put into practice. Much has been made of the importance placed by many philosophers upon argument construction. But such construction is only a part of the larger process of philosophical deliberation. Dialogue in which all participants aspire to rationality in turn helps build a reasoning and reasonable community of inquiry. This commitment to reasonable practice on the part of the community is then internalized by each participant. Yet, even if philosophy were found to be entitled to a share of the elementary school curriculum, such entitlement would be worthless if it were to be found that the mode of presenting philosophy in the traditional course offering of the university were incompatible with the academic readiness of children to do philosophy in just that manner.

Since this is indeed the case with most children, it seems obvious that the curriculum and pedagogy of philosophy must be drastically redesigned if it is to be made accessible to children. Such a redesign has now been carried out, and what follows is an account of its background conditions as well as its curricular and pedagogical components. It is now a noticeable part of the educational scene in dozens of countries and is to be found in all populated continents. What remains to be determined is whether, in each of these countries, it will remain as a peripheral curiosity, or whether it will penetrate more and more deeply into the educational process until that process is itself redesigned. Present evidence suggests that both of these alternatives are viable.

### **3. The historical background**

The early 1970s saw the first stirrings of efforts to introduce philosophy as a systematic discipline into elementary-school classrooms. Over the next decade, what had begun tentatively and experimentally had become established as an accepted discipline and had expanded into every American state as well as into many other countries. Parents

and administrators seemed to base their approval on the significant bettering of children's academic performance that resulted from the sharpening of their logical skills. And children, responding readily to the opportunity to discuss their concepts, values, and ideals in an open and objective manner, also appeared favorably disposed.

Some consideration needs to be given to the historical sources of so intriguing and so unexpected an educational development. It will be recalled that Greek philosophy underwent a drastic change during Plato's lifetime. Previously it had been literary—aphoristic, poetic, dramatic- and in practice conversational. Indeed, so nontechnical and dialogical was it that Socrates, apparently with little difficulty, could converse philosophically with children. The earlier phase of philosophy, in consequence, was nonacademic and exoteric. But by the time the Academy had been established, it had become customary to present philosophy in lectures and to write it in expository prose.

Within a generation, it had become esoteric and academic. Ever since, philosophy 'proper' has been the academic philosophy of the college and the university, only occasionally seeping down, in somewhat popularized versions, into the upper reaches of the secondary school, the lycee, or the gymnasium. One senses in Socrates the conviction that philosophy is thinking at its best, and that to educate children is to provoke them to think well, from which it follows that philosophical activity must be central to the educational process. The emphasis here is upon philosophy as an activity—a dialogical, self-monitoring, self-corrective activity—rather than upon the products of such an activity: those distinctions, canons, theories, and systems which proceeded to become the content of philosophy as an academic discipline and an historical tradition. It is within this perspective that philosophy for children can be viewed as the reawakening of something long dormant rather than as a transient and momentary educational mannerism.

Those who prepare the groundwork for the introduction of philosophy into the elementary school appear few and far between in the earlier phases of the modern era. In Renaissance France, Montaigne sees the readiness of the child for philosophy, but the philosophy he has in mind is the philosophy of the adult tradition. A century later, Locke advises parents and teachers that children treated with respect and without condescension will be able to engage with little difficulty in reasonable conversation. Still another century passes before Richard and Maria Edgeworth break fresh ground with their *Practical education*, in which they recognize in the child's ability to reason philosophically the foundation of the educational process. Yet one more century must go by before John Dewey brings the wheel around full circle by proposing that educators must set as their primary goal the fostering of thinking rather than the acquisition of knowledge, and that the school as an institution be judged by its effectiveness in getting children to think for themselves.

Meanwhile, other twentieth-century developments help set the stage: the emergence of the philosophy of language with special attention being given to ordinary language and to nonformal logic, as in Wittgenstein, Austin, and Ryle; the recognition of the social and

cooperative impulses of the child, as in G.H. Mead, Piaget, and Vygotsky; the spotlighting of the educational importance of analytical or 'metacognitive' skills, as in Bruner and Flavell; and the growing awareness that if the 'acquisition of knowledge' approach to education stressed the learning of terms (of which isolated facts would be one example), then the 'thinking' approach to be devised would have to stress relationships: logical, social, geographical, aesthetic, geometrical, ethical, arithmetical, and so on.

#### **4. Reasoning and dialogue**

Philosophy for children always has dialogue at its core, whether the children are 15 years old or in kindergarten. To provoke the dialogue, there must be a classroom experience which models and expresses the involvement of children and ideas, and which can be reflected upon and analyzed in the ensuing discussion. This initial experience can be provided by the children script-reading an episode from a specially written philosophical novel, or by a puppet performance, or by the reading of a poem—anything that will dramatize the interplay of ideas in the life of the mind. As the conversation brings one or another philosophical notion into focus, the teacher is able to draw upon the resources of instructional manuals which provide discussion plans, reasoning games, and other philosophical activities, so as to lend further structure and direction to the discussion, with the aim of converting the classroom eventually into a community of inquiry.

Needless to say, most teachers require extended and intensive education before they can properly hear the philosophical implications of children's conversations, and before they can effectively orchestrate classroom dialogue so as to follow the ideas where they lead. Another factor which contributes to the success of philosophy in the elementary school is the mobilization of the reasoning skills which are among the philosopher's most characteristic stocks-in-trade. The adroitness with which philosophers demand reasons, draw inferences, seek definitions, and ferret out underlying assumptions is evidence that they are highly practiced in the very analytical skills which interpenetrate every area of learning. Little wonder that contemporary educators find it profitable to study the moves philosophers make in the course of their discussions, for it is when children learn to make such moves that their reading and writing becomes more meaningful. Nor should it be surprising that educational research has shown, on repeated occasions, that the introduction of philosophy into the elementary school, when taught by properly trained teachers, produces significant improvement not only in reasoning, but in the established educational disciplines as well.

#### **5. Curriculum and pedagogy**

In traditional academic philosophy, as presented in the typical university classroom, professors lecture on assigned philosophical texts, explicating and interpreting them to students who will later be tested on their recall and grasp of what they have heard, read

and discussed. Elementary school philosophy eschews lectures and tests. It prefers instead to convert the classroom into a community of philosophical inquiry in which students collaborate in a search for shared meanings. What has made this possible is the radical redesign of the discipline's curriculum and pedagogy. This has involved a reconceptualizing of the nature of the text, the role of the teacher, and the relationships of the students to the text, to the teacher and to one another.

**a. The text:** John Dewey has argued that perhaps the greatest blunder of traditional education has been its insistence on replacing direct, immediate experience as the subject-matter of inquiry and reflection with the sterility of the secondary text, in which experience has already been analyzed and codified so thoroughly as to do all the cognitive work for the readers, leaving them little to think about for themselves. For Dewey, every classroom session should begin with a cognitive/affective experience that prompts students to reflect upon it, and to be prepared to reflect upon that process of reflection. In the redesign of philosophy, thinking has been given the highest priority, and it is precisely this concentration upon thinking that makes philosophy invaluable to education.

Since thinking, according to Dewey, consists primarily of the instituting as well as the discovering of relationships, elementary school philosophy encourages children to discover and invent perceptual, logical, classificatory, action-sequence, means-end, part-whole and other such connections. But it also denotes itself to helping children think about what relationships themselves are, and why they are so important.

The traditional academic text is organized either historically or logically and analytically. The historical basis of organization provides little motivation for getting early elementary school students to do philosophy, and the pre-masticated materials of the analytical approach provide still less. Much more promising is the alternative that makes use of narrative. Children are born story-lovers. Indeed, the way a story offers a beginning, a middle, and an end corresponds to the child's effort to construct a self that contains more than immediacy or presentness, and reaches out to establish connections with its past and its future. Children need stories as a maturational impetus, as an opening to the experiences of others so that they need not be limited to learning only from their own experience, and as models of grace and effectiveness in the use of language.

The modelling role of the text is of enormous importance. If our aim is to get children to do philosophy, then the text should provide a model of children doing philosophy. If our aim is to get children to reason together, explore concepts in an illuminating way, build on one another's ideas and strengthen their judgment through thoughtful deliberation, then we must provide texts that depict children doing these very things. If we think it important that children's opinions, values and enactments be well-reasoned, then we should have them read and discuss stories in which fictional children aspire to and work towards precisely these outcomes.

The philosophical text as story provides a fictional model of children reasoning together. They do not do this gratuitously: they do it because they find their experience problematic or incomplete, and must join forces with one another if they are to pursue understanding successfully. At the same time, the comments of the fictional characters frequently embody ideas derived from the philosophical tradition. These ideas, selected because of the likelihood that children will find them relevant and provocative, may represent any philosophical domain whatsoever—ethics, metaphysics, logic, aesthetics, epistemology, or any of the myriad of *philosophies of*, such as the philosophy of education, the philosophy of art or the philosophy of science. Children who pore over these fictional models have a tendency to emulate the modes of thought and utterance they find in them. This is the production of matching behavior that is termed, in the psychological literature, ‘observational learning.’ The corpus of Plato’s writings provides a plethora of such models. (It may be significant that Socrates did not employ them, but neither was he very successful in getting those he discoursed with to be reasonable.)

**b. *The response to the text:*** In a typical elementary school philosophy session, the students and the teacher read an episode from the text aloud. (They may simply take a paragraph apiece, or they may script-read, with selected individuals playing selected roles.) This collaborative reading enables the students to acquire a sense of ownership of the text and its implicit as well as explicit meanings. It also helps bind the students and teacher together in a community based upon shared experience and collective understanding. Once again, the procedure is Deweyan, in the sense that the direction in which subsequent activity moves always is mindful of and capitalizes upon student interest. To the extent that student interest is lost, then to that extent and length of time, the educational venture has failed. Consequently it is important that the agenda be established by the students themselves. They proceed to nominate questions, problems or concepts for discussion, and the dialogue that ensues is based upon these nominations.

**c. *The teacher’s role and the teacher’s manual:*** Classroom philosophy teachers are conceived as facilitators of philosophical inquiry rather than as authoritative sources of philosophical knowledge. The guidance of a philosophical discussion is an art that requires great tact, skill and judgment. Students must be deftly guided towards re-examining their assumptions, clarifying their terms, and studying the implications of their assertions. On the other hand, teachers must be careful not to indoctrinate students with their personal philosophical opinions. This explains the adage that teachers of elementary school philosophy should be ‘pedagogically strong but philosophically self-effacing.’ The teacher’s manual corresponds page for page with the children’s readers. The philosophical ideas sprinkled through the lines on any given page of the fictional work are taken up individually in the manual. Exercises and discussion plans are provided for each idea, so that teachers are never at a loss for ways

of operationalizing philosophical concepts in the classroom. To be sure, these exercises and discussion plans consist totally of questions: in a 600-page manual, there may be thousands of questions and not a single answer. But this is how philosophy operates: it proposes questions which (a) lack answers, (b) lack decision procedures for finding such answers, and (c) nevertheless deal with issues that students find intensely meaningful. These are fundamental conditions for generating student interest and student thinking.

## 6. The future of elementary school philosophy

If we accept Bruner's dictum that 'anything can be taught at any level with integrity,' and if the elementary school curriculum is to be defined by what the university curriculum takes to be important, then it seems difficult to justify the omission of philosophy from the subjects mandated at the elementary school level. A university without a philosophy department, a university education without a philosophy component- these are, or should be, unthinkable. Philosophy on the campus provides a clearinghouse for ideas, a source of norms for reasoning, and a methodology for inquiry into the methodologies and languages of the other disciplines. In addition, philosophy provides a creative, speculative dimension, knitting together fragmentary understandings so as to form a more comprehensive vision. If it can do this at the university level, it can also do it in the elementary school.

Before this happens, however, there will have to be a shift in the goal of elementary school education. The conception of the educated child as a knowledgeable child will have to give way to one in which the educated child is conceived of as knowing, understanding, reasonable and judicious. Once these values are incorporated into the projected goal of the educational process, the appropriateness of mandating philosophy will be much more readily recognized.

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