The Place of 'Philosophy' in Preparing Teachers to Teach Pre-college Philosophy—Notes for a conversation

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Many teachers who encounter the idea of philosophy for and with children are engaged by the concepts of community, dialogue, questioning, and lived learning. In many cases they discover the idea of "doing philosophy for children" from a book, website, newspaper articles, or attending a workshop. These educators are well skilled in teaching and working with children. They understand the perspectives and needs of their children and young adults; they are versed in cooperative learning and integrative teaching which stress the importance of involving students in reflective inquiry. Teachers perceive themselves to be good listeners and facilitators of children's learning and philosophy seems like a natural extension of this relational model of education.

In many of these ideas they are correct. However, what many teachers *do* lack is sustained training in and appreciation for philosophic inquiry and this often derails their good intentions. Firstly we note that philosophy is not a required subject in many US colleges for any major. Those in teacher training programs often find their schedules so tightly packed that the luxury of exploring disciplines that do not directly connect to teacher certification is unavailable to them. For those who do take philosophy courses they are usually peripheral to their focused education studies and are often part of a general education core taken early on in their undergraduate career. While many teacher candidates are asked to write their own "philosophy of education" this usually takes the form of a declaration of dedication to children and closely aligns itself with the state education department certification requirements. Teachers abroad who have studied philosophy as part of their high school or teacher training program consider it to be a matter of recognizing the great philosophers and mastering their theories. Teaching philosophy means instructing students in the history of ideas.

In some cases interested teachers can participate in a workshop, such as those sponsored by the IAPC, the Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children and other centers around the country; these workshops can help them become more familiar with this way of parsing human experience. Teachers who have participated in such workshops often return to their schools as "experts" in p4c and are given the task of training other teachers in philosophic inquiry. However, with just a workshop acquaintance, they either present a version of p4c which heavily resembles whole language or literary analysis or they simply equate it with cooperative and discussion-based learning. Since many teachers consider themselves already well-versed in such methodologies, they easily dismiss the need to see the program as requiring careful and sustained apprenticeship in philosophical theory and methodology. In the United States, there is a general belief that philosophy simply means the having of opinions and beliefs and everyone has plenty of those. Philosophy is an activity that we all can do naturally (more about this notion in a minute).

These points help to explain how philosophy can start off strong in a school and then disappear. The teachers become disenchanted as it seems to lead nowhere and even the most enthusiastic lose their steam. Administrators and parents start to challenge the value of a subject that "bakes no bread." What has happened? I would propose that when endeavors like philosophy with/for children fail it is often because of the dissipation of the philosophical component in the hands of ill-prepared but willing teachers. Consequently the following questions

arise:

- What constitutes training in philosophy?
- What are some of the common problems encountered by teachers in implementing philosophy with children?
- How can we help a teacher come to a deep and sustained understanding of the nature of philosophical questions?
- How can we assist these prepared teachers in an on-going way so as to best support them in their continued growth as facilitators of philosophic dialogue?

Let us explore each of the above issues.

I. The dilemma of teacher education in philosophy

While there are many models of philosophical training, I would like to focus on the most sustained and well developed one. There are isolated texts available which introduce the idea of philosophy with children and young people and celebrate its enriching power but without a clear pedagogical path, these can serve as inspiration but can ultimately fail a teacher in the classroom environment.[1] If we take the IAPC Lipman model as a paradigm of one of the more sustained methodologies, we find at the heart of the p4c curriculum the materials and the classroom teacher. The program reaches from preschool through high school and focuses on building a community of inquiry that addresses problematic questions emerging from the students' reaction to a text. The program is designed for implementation by a teacher within his/her regular classroom. As preparation, a series of workshops is deemed essential. Run by well-prepared teacher-educators, these workshops guide the teachers through the content and methodology of the program. However, is this enough?

Traditionally, professional philosophers have been trained extensively with a careful reading and analysis of the historical philosophical texts—primary documents and commentaries. They tackle the problems in the recognized areas of philosophy such as epistemology, metaphysics, logic, politics, aesthetics, ethics, etc. And often they apprentice within a particular philosophic tradition that uses its favored methodology to view and critique all other approaches and ideas. Professional philosophers have often majored in philosophy in their undergraduate studies and gone on to complete extensive graduate work at the Masters or doctorate level as well as ongoing self education during and afterwards.

With much of the literature that discusses philosophy with youth there is little reference to any version of such a sustained study of philosophic issues. Philosophy is deemed a natural human activity to the point of being viewed as instinctive. This unfortunately is often the view proposed by well-meaning proponents of philosophy with children.

To properly prepare the classroom teacher to engage her students in philosophic reflection it is a disservice to overemphasize the naturalness of the philosophic perspective. The writings of Gareth Matthews may be easily mis-interpreted to suggest that children are naturally philosophic to the point that we need do nothing to encourage, promote or develop such inclinations. In such a reading, our job is to get out of the way of innate curiosity and philosophic proficiency. By extension, it might be assumed that the adult need only re-discover one's "inner child" to find a full-blown philosopher waiting to spring out and function in a thoughtful and critical manner. Of course, Gareth Matthews is not arguing this point and indeed, it is most unhelpful and confusing to both teacher and students to operate under these assumptions. The prevalence of fallacious reasoning in every

corner of the world bears out a genuine need for training in thinking skills. But initial enthusiasm can lead us in this direction and we must be cautious about over assessing the presence of philosophical inquiry in children and ourselves. "My philosophy of –whatever" is a common enough phrase that we tend to see philosophy as nothing but an open and enthusiastic expression of beliefs. "What I like about philosophy is that there are no right or wrong answers," I often hear.

The failure to prepare teachers to some level of basic competence in philosophy as a technical craft thereby runs the risk of losing the philosophic perspective and can ultimately result in the teacher's loss of interest and focus in using the particular materials designed for this educational experience. When teachers abandon the Lipman novels, for example, in favor of using regular literature it is often a reflection of an inability to recognize and sustain philosophic dialogue as much as it might be a dissatisfaction with the literary qualities of these novel/texts. The teacher thus reverts to familiar material, literature or topical issues from the news, and the discussions evolve into lively literary analyses or free wheeling opinion-sharing; captivating and vital though they be, such debates can be impoverished of philosophic astuteness. (Please note the qualifiers here: "often", "can"—there are, of course, exceptions and literature as well as news can function quite well as a catalyst for philosophic discussion.)

However, it would be impractical to insist that the teacher return to college to earn an undergraduate major or complete a graduate level program in philosophical history or problems before they are prepared to work in teaching philosophy in the pre-college classroom. Such expectations would be quite discouraging to the typical classroom teacher and would clearly lessen the appeal of any philosophy and children program.

Practically speaking, teachers and administrators are loath to commit to any program that requires an extended preparation since it is assumed that one's teacher training equips the teacher to work with any and all curricula and students. Teachers themselves quickly realize that the teacher certification process touches but the tip of the educational iceberg and are usually strong advocates of on-the-job learning. So both teachers and administrators are reluctant to support the idea of a formal program which might require that they learn an entire new discipline or way of teaching. This presents something of a quandary for the dedicated p4c educator. Specifically: With how much philosophy must an educator be familiar to initiate or support an authentic philosophic inquiry in the classroom? How much background knowledge, practice and on-going mentoring is necessary and practical?

Until philosophy is recognized as a legitimate elementary or secondary level subject area for teaching training, it is unlikely to find many teachers who have extensive undergraduate experience, much less any graduate study. However, the egalitarian nature of Lipman's program and some other recent writers on philosophy for children and young people that de-emphasize a role for sustained and deep learning of the discipline may be self defeating. Perhaps we have been too dismissive of the nature of philosophy as a discipline requiring such sustained training and experience?

II. Some common problems that teachers encounter in introducing philosophy to their students

Many teachers express confusion over distinguishing philosophy from garden-variety opinion and areas of human knowledge that are open to uncertainty. Teachers are often puzzled about what makes a topic a "philosophic" one instead of, for example, scientific. Exposure to and practice with philosophic questions will help them develop their "philosophic ear" but it is also helpful to directly address these distinctions. While it might seem easy to depict science as dealing with observable facts and philosophy as with unobservable concepts, it is not quite so simple. At the cutting age of science, theories struggle with other theories and philosophical thinking and science intertwine. Which questions can in principle be settled by scientific method and which ones cannot? This might serve as a beginning foundational lightning rod. Ethical discussions often become an exchange of legal fact checks or sociological descriptions of beliefs and practices. Learning to distinguish

descriptive from prescriptive claims and the various types of prescription (legal, prudential, ethical) is a needed skill to acquire.

When it comes to religion, teachers are even more confused and reluctant to engage their (public school) students in such discussions. This is a difficult area: philosophical considerations of God and religion are not simply historical reviews, not are they theological foundations of beliefs. But such subtleties can be difficult for the neophyte philosopher. Until children have acquired some experience in critical thinking and philosophical distinction making, they might be ill-prepared to approach the topics of God and religion. That is not to discourage or forbid such discussion but rather to recognize that it is fraught with potential misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Once children have achieved such tools of inquiry (into their secondary educational level) then it would be appropriate to engage them in such reflections. At the same time, it must be remembered that not all religions or sects see a role for rational thought in comprehending the religious experience. That itself can be open for discussion. At the very least our educational system should be doing more to educate our children on the meaning of religion in its doctrinal senses and its impact on our global community but that is apart from a philosophy of religion.

Then there is the issue of critical thinking skills. We would like to assume that all teachers have already achieved a high degree of proficiency in thinking skills such as constructing sound and strong arguments, recognizing and avoiding fallacious reasoning, using logical patterns of reasoning in ethically astute ways, etc.. However, we recognize that this is not always the case. Familiarity with Bloom's taxonomy, De Bono's thinking skills or Piagetian stage theory does not constitute a rigorous and sustained ability to think clearly, compassionately and creatively within a philosophical context. Of course, such skill acquisition and practice are on-going projects for all of us. But how might we best introduce or nurture our teachers in the conscious awareness of and focused development of these aspects of thinking? Perhaps some version of Lipman's *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* is crucial as a course in informal logical thinking for the teacher as well as for the student. Another text that might be worth perusing is Anthony Weston's *A Rulebook for Arguments*. Catherine McCall argues persuasively for the importance of some formal training and practice in logic in her recent text *Transforming Thinking*. In this work she offers numerous examples of conversations with children and young adults and carefully analyzes the quality of the dialogue as philosophical or not, indicating ways in which a teacher might assist his students in developing reasoning skills. Teachers could read these transcripts and practice analyzing them against McCall's standards. The construction of a genuinely philosophical dialogue requires some sense of concept development or articulation and ultimately the conversation must move forward, even if only to reveal further complications and complexities. This is far more difficult to achieve than one can imagine. A lively interchange of ideas is not as such philosophy, nor is a rigorous debate. Peter Worley, also of the UK, argues for logical rigor in any philosophical dialogue and offers models for teachers to practice and implement in their own classrooms.

In *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Lipman, Sharp, Oscanyan) and in Sharp's and Splitter's *Teaching for Better Thinking* there is an excellent discussion on guiding teachers into a better appreciation of the differences among types of inquiry. For example, one of the most difficult challenges for a teacher is using anecdotal examples productively. The tendency is to glory in these personal accounts to illustrate a concept and lose the concept in the process. Adults are just as guilty as children here—witness the faculty meeting. The teacher must learn to make a concerted and conscious effort to monitor discussions for such digressions so as to use them productively. This is critical since a successful philosophic discussion must move forward to some degree. That is, a better understanding (albeit, even if "better" here means only more complicated) of the topic must be sought. A self-conscious focus on the nature and role of examples facilitates the development of a conversation into a philosophic inquiry.

Too often philosophy in pre-college classrooms manifests itself in one of two ways: either is it a sharing of opinions, all equally valued and accepted or it becomes a debate with one side pitted against the other, a blood sport if you will. Philosophers such as Susan Gardner in Canada, Clinton Golding in Australia, Oscar Brene-

fier in France have all argued persuasively for better training in logic and in the construction of meaningful dialogues. This is far from an easy task. Collectively they challenge us to examine what we do with children and young people and encourage us to ask, "Yes, but is it philosophy?"

III. What ought models of teacher education in philosophy offer?

Based on some brief observations of typical pitfalls we could conclude that a solid knowledge base and an active and self-aware use of philosophical tools are necessary for the teacher to be successful in her implementing genuine philosophical inquiry into the classroom. Let us begin by proposing the following knowledge and skills base for teachers who wish to engage their children in philosophical inquiry:

1. the ability to recognize philosophic issues and problems and distinguish them from other types of inquiry and meaningfully use materials such as stories, news, anecdotes, dilemmas, philosophical writings in the promotion of philosophical inquiry.

2. the dispositions, skills and techniques needed to assist children in acquiring and developing their critical thinking skills, specifically the developing ability to note logical structures in living dialogue and the skill to assist the children in honing their own thinking techniques. Examples might include distinguishing forms of arguments/disagreements and comprehending the epistemology of philosophical inquiry: facts, opinions, theories, ideas. In addition, we want to nurture creative thinking which responds in novel ways to the puzzles at hand.

The first requires a cache of ideas and problems that can be recognized as philosophical in the comments and questions of the children. This ties into knowledge of the history of ideas and sensitivity to topical categories but it also references the skill of seeing philosophical issues and questions within the concrete comments and examples of the children and any materials that are being used. The second speaks to the need of methodological techniques to facilitate the sharpening of children's tools of inquiry and creative response.

If we assume that some systematic training is needful and profitable for the teachers, what sources might we recommend? One approach would be to develop a series of self-study guides or "curricula" that teachers could use to assist them in their own learning. There are numerous introductions to philosophy written for undergraduate courses and general reading. Such introductions should be well-written, not assume a vast store of knowledge of ideas but also rich and meaningful to adults—the teachers.[2]

While academic texts abound which function as primary source readers or secondary accounts of historical philosophy, one trade source is Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*. Gaarder's account of the history of philosophy may be deemed sketchy and slanted to some degree but it is easily read and thereby less likely to intimidate someone new to philosophical ideas. It could serve as an excellent and quite engaging introductory platform upon which to build a more sustained and nuanced appreciation of some of the ways in which philosophers parse the world.

Reading the primary sources is always to be desired and finding beginning to intermediate reading lists of philosophical classics is a fairly easy enterprise. One can also use collections of questions both to promote philosophic dialogue with students and to assist the teacher in developing their "philosophic ear." Finally, news stories, literature, curricula materials can also be plumbed for philosophic dilemmas but may need modeling in order to distill the philosophical potential. Roger Sutcliff and his associates in the UK have developed a rich array of materials for using these commonly found resources.[3]

Another approach is for colleges to offer teachers a formal survey of philosophers and their ideas. For example, a course dedicated to a survey of Western philosophy could provide teachers with a sustained and

guided reading within a community of fellow teachers of the classic works. This might be a fruitful enterprise for colleges to consider—offering courses which teachers can take as non-majors or perhaps developing certificate programs in the discipline of philosophy. This could offer an opportunity to expand a philosophy department's perspectives beyond the General Education course offerings and/or the traditional graduate school preparation models. For example, my college, St. Joseph's College, has a proposal up in the NYSED to offer a concentration in philosophy for child study majors. This would prepare elementary teachers directly to work within the discipline of philosophy as part of their educative mission.

IV. Supporting the teacher in on-going philosophic development

Once the teacher has had an opportunity to encounter philosophic ideas and issues, they then begin to practice philosophical inquiry within their classes. Whether they use formal curricula, such as Lipman's, specially written stories such as those by Phil Cam, Karin Murris and others, or self-developed curriculum materials as a springboard, they must begin to lead their children in the development of critical and creative thinking, reflecting on the issues of importance as chosen by the children. Together the class forges a community of philosophical inquiry. But what happens then? To what extent can a practicing teacher continue to be successful in implementing a philosophy and children curriculum with the preparation of one or two courses, workshops, self reading or even sustained academic training? What kinds of ongoing development should be encouraged? Should further "refresher courses" be stipulated as essential or, at least, recommended as helpful? Should we work towards a formal shared certification program for the teaching of philosophy that can offer teachers and their students a greater degree of success in their enterprise?

To answer these questions it can be instructive to examine further the patterns of success and failure in the implementation of philosophy and children. We can also analogize the development of a p4c practitioner with the development of practitioners in other fields. What sorts of support are needed to continue to develop as a doctor, engineer, psychologist? What resources should be available and encouraged for the new elementary/secondary school teacher of philosophy? Some possible activities/ideas could include:

- school or district wide discussion groups of teachers
- on-site philosophers or visiting philosophers who can participate in and comment upon the course of classroom discussion in a helpful, constructive and supportive manner
- internet discussion groups devoted to teachers interested in philosophical education
- a journal or newsletter of philosophic material designed for teachers
- organizations such as the newly formed PLATO sponsored by the American Philosophical Association which invites pre-college teachers to become involved as a community as well as to participate in the APA meetings around the country.

I would suggest that the successful pre-college philosophy program continue to nurture the development of its teachers as well as its children. The educational world is beginning to accustom itself to the idea of renewing certification or updating skills as a necessary part of teacher maturation and development. Such programs do not imply a lack in the teacher but rather echo the need for personal and professional growth in every field. Perhaps the philosophical community should begin to formally address this aspect of on-going support systems to assure the quality of the philosophical inquiry by both children and teachers.[4]

Endnotes

1. In recent years more and more of these texts are appearing. See, *Values education in the Schools* by Mark Freakley, Gilbert Burgh and Lyne Tilt MacSporran (Australia: ACER, 2008); Mariette McCarty, *Little Big Minds* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2006); Catherine McCall, *Tranforming Thinking* (London: Routledge, 2009); Thomas Wartenburg, *Big Ideas for Little Kids* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).
2. Two short but quite supportive texts are Thomas Nagle's *What Does it All Mean?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Roger Scruton's *An intelligent person's Guide to Philosophy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).
3. See Dialogueworks in the UK- http://www.dialogueworks.co.uk/index.php/home.
4. A version of this paper was read at the APA-Eastern division meeting in December 2009.

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