The Place of 'Philosophy' in Preparing Teachers to Teach Pre-College Philosophy: A UK Perspective

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In a recent issue of this journal, Wendy Turgeon (2012) offers what she refers to as 'Notes for a conversation' about the place of 'philosophy' in preparing teachers to teach pre-college philosophy. In this article, I offer a response to her paper's key arguments from a UK perspective.

It is clear to me from reading Turgeon's paper that the American educational context which she describes has much in common with that which pertains in the UK. In Britain, trainee teachers and their more experienced colleagues tend to find the idea of undertaking philosophy for and with children appealing because they are actively engaged (or wish to engage) in forms of pedagogy that rely heavily on developing learners' thinking reasoning and argument skills (Costello, 2010a). On the whole, they see it as essential to their role as educators that they should engage children and young people in dialogue; that they should ask questions and explore answers in terms of learners' ability to provide reasons and evidence for the views they hold; and that they should develop what Lipman and his colleagues have referred to as a 'community of inquiry' (Lipman et al., 1980). In addition, not only do these educators ask questions but they are also keen to encourage those whom they teach to do the same.

In this context, when teachers are introduced to philosophy for and with children, it seems like a natural extension of what they are already doing in the classroom. Here, as Turgeon suggests (p.68), we meet an immediate obstacle: "... what many teachers do lack is sustained training in and appreciation for philosophic inquiry and this often derails their good intentions." In my view, there are two reasons why this is the case. First, some of the current literature which explores the teaching of philosophy in schools is less than helpful in assisting teachers to develop an understanding of the nature of philosophical thinking, which is a pre-requisite for successful teaching. Second, it is sometimes implied that philosophy 'just happens,' for example as a result of teachers asking questions. I offer the following example to illustrate this point.

In his book Teaching Happiness and Well-Being in Schools, Ian Morris (2009), devotes a chapter to the topic 'Philosophy and Well-Being'. In a section entitled 'Getting started with teaching philosophy', he makes a number of assertions. These will be examined and commented on in turn.

> Starting children off on philosophy is easy. A philosopher does not have to read every last
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> sentence written by Plato or understand every nuance of Kant, they simply have to start asking
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> questions. The process is so easy that even a 5 year old can do it, and indeed, there is a lot of
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> successful teaching of philosophy happening in UK primary schools, where children learn to
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> debate and help each other to form good arguments. (p.60)

Here we might ask: what evidence does the author offer for his view that "starting children off on philosophy is easy"? While it is certainly true that, in order to develop learners' philosophical thinking, teachers do not have to read "every last sentence" of Plato's works or "understand every nuance of Kant" (as if this were a realistic ambition in any case), simply to start asking questions is no substitute for critical engagement with philosophical literature. Indeed a good place to begin is to read introductory texts both on the nature of philosophy, of which there is now an abundance (Saunders et al., 2012; Finn et al., 2012; Arp and Watson, 2011) and on the history of the discipline, including its foremost thinkers and key ideas (Harwood, 2010; Law, 2007; Dupré, 2007).

> The first step is to stimulate questioning with the students and to do that you just need to give them something interesting to look at or do. You would be surprised at how simple the stimulus can be: a pine cone, a box, a photo of a boxing match, a watch – anything. The next step is to ask the students to come up with questions based upon the stimulus. They do need to come up with the right kind of questions though: the more open-ended the better. If you put a clown's shoe on the table and a student asks the question 'How do you spell shoe?', any discussion will be short. But if they ask 'Do clowns feel pain?' you may have a more open-ended debate. (p.60)

While I have no objection to utilising a broad range of stimuli to develop learners' philosophical thinking, indeed this is an important aspect of the pedagogical approaches associated with philosophy with children, nevertheless the author's view that "anything" may be used to achieve this goal requires justification. Again, this is part of an effort to assure would-be teachers of philosophy that the task facing them is a very simple one. However, it is not. As with any successful teaching, philosophy requires careful planning and preparation, as well as considerable pedagogical dexterity in the classroom.

The 'fixed lesson plan' approach which student teachers are encouraged to adopt and adhere to at the very beginning of their training is likely to have little success in the philosophy classroom. Here effective teaching requires that practitioners should be able to 'go with the flow' of the discussions, dialogues and debates that take place and to alter the focus of the lesson as appropriate. Having observed a student teacher teaching philosophy to seven-to-eight year olds very successfully for an hour, I asked her in the conversation which took place afterwards how she felt the lesson had gone. She replied: "Very well, I think, although I covered hardly anything on my lesson plan. I had to change direction because they [the children] kept coming up with new ideas." In philosophy, this counts as a successful outcome, because it demonstrates that the student is reflective in terms of what she has tried to achieve and has ended up achieving, and because she has been able to adapt her lesson appropriately to ensure a successful outcome.

The pedagogical approach adopted by Morris is also questionable. He is at the same time both non-directing (asking learners to devise questions—he does not appear to want to ask any himself) and narrowly focused (wanting learners to ask "the right kind of questions... the more open-ended the better." Again we are not given a rationale as to why open-ended questions are to be preferred: this is just assumed to be the case. To his credit, the second question proposed by Morris is a philosophical one; however, like the question that precedes it, "Do clowns feel pain"? it may, at least on one level, be regarded as closed, since it admits of a 'yes or no' response. Finally the objective of this lesson appears to be simply to engender open-ended debate among the learners. However, this begs the question: with what end in mind? If the aim is simply to encourage a debate in the classroom, what makes this philosophy?

Once the question is asked, the debate can begin and this is where the philosophy can happen,

because the students will begin to construct arguments. As soon as we have arguments on

the table, we can start the process of refining arguments and making them more and more

successful. (p.60)

From this extract it would appear that Morris regards both debating and the construction of arguments as essential to philosophy. However, once again no reasoning is provided to support this view. In any case, neither aspect is sufficient to distinguish a philosophy lesson from say, a politics or a history class. For example, history teachers might ask their students to engage in a debate on the question 'What were the causes of the Second World War?' They could invite the students to work in groups and to develop a set of arguments, which would be presented to the class as a whole. A decision as to which group presented the best arguments could be arrived at by means of a vote. However, these features, by themselves, do not constitute a philosophy lesson. In the context of Morris's book, Turgeon's comments (p. 69) are apposite:

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.

With much of the literature that discusses philosophy with youth there is little reference to...

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 overemphasise the naturalness

of the philosophic perspective.

In contrast to using isolated texts to introduce philosophical inquiry, Turgeon refers to Lipman's Philosophy for Children (P4C) program as a paradigm of what she refers to as "one of the more sustained methodologies" (p.69), since it incorporates a broad range of teaching materials that may be used from preschool to high school. In addition, would-be teachers of P4C undertake a series of workshops that focus on the program's content and methodology. Yet, even in this case, Turgeon (p.69) asks "... is this enough"? She refers to the extensive training undertaken by professional philosophers, both at undergraduate and postgraduate level, involving close study of the key areas of philosophy: epistemology, metaphysics, logic, ethics etc., and argues that "The failure to prepare teachers to some level of basic competence in philosophy as a technical craft... 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." (p.70)

I agree with this view and it pertains also in the UK. So what is to be done and how can we make progress, given that initial teacher education and training (ITET) programs are so full of prescribed content that there appears to be little room for anything more than, if students are lucky, a seminar or two on teaching thinking skills (which may or may not include the teaching of philosophy for and with children)? In my view, there are a number of fruitful avenues to explore and I will discuss five of these.

Educational resources to support the teaching of philosophy in schools

To begin with, when considering curriculum issues with students (this is, after all, a substantial aspect of ITET programs) teacher educators need to utilise to best effect opportunities to introduce and discuss the many educational resources that now exist to support the teaching of philosophy in schools. For example, in the UK, the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education (SAPERE) (http://sapere.org.uk), Dialogue Works (http://www.dialogueworks.co.uk) and the Council for Education in World Citizenship – Wales (http://cewc-cymru.org.uk), offer training courses and resources for teachers. The success of these organisations is linked, in part, to the increasing attention now being paid by policy makers to developing children's thinking skills. In the context of a revision of the school curriculum, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has implemented a 'Developing Thinking and Assessment for Learning' programme, in partnership with schools and local education authorities. In its document Why Develop Thinking and Assessment for Learning in the Classroom?, WAG (2007, p.4) suggests that 'Metacognition (thinking about thinking) is at the heart of the learning and teaching process' (Costello, 2010a; WAG, 2008a; 2008b; 2008c).

SAPERE is an educational charity that was founded in 1992, with the aim of advancing "education for the public benefit, in particular amongst those young persons up to the age of 16 years, by the promotion of the development of their skills in logical thinking and other philosophical techniques so that their personal and social lives are enriched" (http://sapere.org.uk). SAPERE provides P4C courses at three levels, as well as in-service training for schools, local education authorities and other organisations. Members of SAPERE receive a regular on-line bulletin, containing details of courses, conferences, resources, calls for papers for academic journals and news items. I would argue that this range of provision goes at least some way to meet the requirement for systematic training and on-going development in philosophy for which Turgeon argues.

Developing critical thinking skills

Second, let us now turn to the issue of developing critical thinking skills both in ITET programmes and continuing professional development courses for teachers. As Turgeon (p. 71) suggests:

> 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...But how might we best introduce or nurture our teachers in the conscious awareness of and focused development of these aspects of thinking?

Turgeon offers two suggestions for appropriate texts to use with teachers (Weston, 2009 and McCall, 2009) and these are also recommended by lecturers in university Education departments in the UK. I would also wish to commend Morrow and Weston's *A Workbook for Arguments: A Complete Course in Critical Thinking* (2011), Bonnett's *How to Argue* (2011); Moseley's *A to Z of Philosophy* (2008) and Baggini's *Philosophy: Key Themes* (2002) in this context. Undergraduate students in the UK, across a range of academic disciplines,

are introduced to study skills at the beginning of their programs of study and Stella Cottrell's *The Study Skills Handbook* (2008) and *Critical Thinking Skills* (2011) are widely used. In addition to McCall's book, contributors to the discussion about developing philosophical inquiry in the classroom include Bowles (2008), Haynes (2008), and Hannam and Echeverria (2009).

These publications have at their core a concern that schools and other educational settings should provide an appropriate environment in which learners' thinking and valuing processes may be supported and enhanced. Hand and Winstanley's *Philosophy in Schools* (2009) offers a sustained and convincing theoretical justification for this endeavour. The book is divided into two parts, which are entitled 'Meeting the Objections to Philosophy in Schools' and 'Making the Case for Philosophy in Schools'. Having asked 'Is it time to put philosophy in the school curriculum?' (p.x), the editors suggest that the contributors to the volume "...are united in the conviction that exposure to philosophical ideas, questions and methods should be part of the basic educational entitlement of all children." (p.x)

Although this is an interesting collection of essays, written from a variety of educational and philosophical perspectives, its main deficiency is that it omits teachers' accounts of their own experience of teaching philosophy. Given the book's title, and that the teaching of thinking skills in schools is now being undertaken in the UK with the active encouragement of policy makers, and within the context of an increasingly substantial literature base, it is both surprising and disappointing that practitioners have not authored (or co-authored) some of the chapters. This is especially the case since the idea of developing teachers' research into the teaching of thinking skills in the UK (for example, through Best Practice Research Scholarships in England and Teacher Research Scholarships in Wales) is well known (Costello, 2010b).

Professional Learning Communities

Third, and returning to the need for on-going development in philosophy, which Turgeon argues for and which I have referred to above, the rise in the UK of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) has the potential to make a significant contribution to this endeavour. For example, the Welsh Government (2011, p.5), in its guidance document Professional Learning Communities, offers the following definition of a PLC: "... a group of practitioners working together using a structured process of enquiry to focus on a specific area of their teaching to improve learner outcomes and so raise school standards." Having outlined a national model for PLCs, the Government suggests that such communities "have the potential to make a positive difference to learner outcomes as well as enhancing the quality of professional learning." (p.5) Furthermore it is suggested that: "If PLCs are to make a real difference to school performance and learner outcomes, the participants need to engage in collaborative and interdependent learning. They need to:

- have the responsibility to try new learning and teaching strategies in order to extend their own professional development and learning;

- enquire as a group in order to generate new professional knowledge and understanding;

- implement the most effective learning and teaching solutions." (p.5)

In the UK, the Imaginative Minds Group (IMG) (2012) publishes a number of professional journals for teachers, including *Creative Teaching and Learning*, one of the focuses of which is to develop children's critical thinking skills (including philosophical thinking). IMG offers an on-line PLC package of magazines, journals and e-newsletters, subscribers to which also have access to an archive of thousands of professional development articles, as well as to a 'knowledge bank' of themed collections of papers. The archive contains over 500 articles on developing thinking skills and creativity in the classroom.

Education Studies programs

Fourth, I would argue that we need to consider the role of undergraduate programs in Education Studies in promoting a knowledge of philosophy and of philosophical inquiry. Although such programs do not carry with them the award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), over three years of study they do afford students many more opportunities to explore the theoretical perspectives that underpin pedagogical practice than are available to their peers who are undertaking Education degrees with QTS. In the UK, students who complete an Education Studies degree successfully are eligible to undertake a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education to obtain QTS.

Earlier this year, I presented a paper on the theme 'Education Studies and the Foundation Disciplines: A Critical Evaluation of the Philosophy of Education' at the British Education Studies Association Annual Conference. I began by exploring some historical themes from a UK perspective and discussed the following quote from Bartlett and Burton (2012, p.5):

> As a result of political and economic pressures in the 1970s and 1980s the theoretical study
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> of education as part of teacher training courses fell into disrepute. Teacher education was
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> criticised as being too removed from the classroom. It was perceived as largely ignoring the
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> practical nature of teaching while also promoting progressive ideologies of education. It was
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> from the 1980s onwards that the nature of teacher education changed drastically. With the
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> emphasis becoming firmly placed on training, any traces of academic education(al) studies were
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> removed from Initial Teacher Training programmes.

Again commenting on developments in educational policy in the UK, Oancea and Bridges (2011, p.55) refer to "... the movement towards more school-based and practice-oriented training, reinforced by a national curriculum for teacher training, from which philosophical work was effectively excluded."

Against this backdrop, I examined the current context concerning the teaching of Education Studies, having reviewed the content of ten undergraduate programs from universities across the UK. The findings were interesting, since all the Education Studies programs included some teaching about the philosophy of education. Six institutions had infused it into the curriculum as a whole; two offered whole modules on this theme (one in year one and one in year three); one had introduced it as part of a year one module, where it accounted for twenty per cent of the subject matter being taught; and one had included it as part of a module entitled 'Theoretical Foundations of Education.'

In making a case for the inclusion of the philosophy of education within Education Studies courses, I argued that, given the following module titles from across the ten programs reviewed, some knowledge of the content and methodology of philosophy was an essential prerequisite for students:

Year 1 modules

- Making sense of education

- Values, attitudes and prejudice in education

- Introduction to eco-education

- Learning in a social and cultural context

- Critical engagement with equality and identity in education

- Human development

Year 2 modules

- Education and society

- Social policy and learning

- Education and equality

- Creativity in education

- Theory of Multiple Intelligences

- International and comparative perspectives in education

- Educational research: theory and practice

Year 3 modules

- Education and citizenship

- Experiments in radical education

- Education and the inclusive society

- Globalisation and education

- Education and social change

- Informal learning

- Gender and difference

- Research project

    Similarly, I suggested that a grounding in philosophy was important in terms of: (i) developing students' critical thinking, reasoning and argument skills in higher education; (ii) developing students' reflective practice; (iii) enabling students to evaluate current educational policy.

The role of professional philosophers

Finally, I suggest that we need to explore the extent to which professional philosophers can be of assistance in helping to promote philosophical inquiry in schools. Turgeon (p.73) refers to the role of what she calls "the philosophical community" in assuring "the quality of the philosophical inquiry by both children and teachers" and again I would agree with this. As indicated above, Turgeon refers to the extensive training undertaken by professional philosophers. Given this, I would argue that universities should encourage much closer collaboration between their Philosophy and Education departments, in order to promote the effective teaching of philosophy in schools. This work could include: (i) the provision of training workshops by philosophers for their colleagues in Education, as well as for students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Education; (ii) joint teaching projects in schools, where philosophers and Education staff teach classes together; (iii) making collaborative research bids. As regards the latter, lecturers in Education departments have tended to be much more successful than their counterparts in Philosophy in acquiring substantial research funding and so this type of co-operation would be beneficial to both parties, as well as to their universities.

Endnote

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