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# Book Review

## *Thinking in Education* by Matthew Lipman

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Lipman, Matthew (1991). ***Thinking in Education***. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. Pp. ix + 280. ISBN 0-521-40032-5. Cloth US $54.95. ISBN 0-521-40911-X. Paper. US $19.95.

A friend of mine, an exile from Franco Spain, managed to publish books in that country during the waning years of Franco's rule by concocting erudite footnotes to add to editions he had previously published in Latin America. Apparently Franco's censors assumed that scholarly works could not be subversive.

They were wrong, of course. And any prospective reader of Matthew Lipman's *Thinking in Education* who looks at all the footnotes, learned quotations, and fancy diagrams, and concludes that this book is not radical, or even subversive, will also be wrong.

Matthew Lipman has done more than any other educator of our time, and perhaps any other time, to promote the teaching of philosophy to children. Beginning with his innovative philosophical novel, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (1971), which is, among other things, a logic text for kids, Lipman has produced a series of imaginative curriculum materials for instructional purposes. Through his Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children he has trained elementary and secondary-school teachers of philosophy in countries all over the world.

In *Thinking in Education* Lipman seeks to place his philosophy-for-children program within the context of recent educational theory and especially within the recent movement to identify critical thinking as a key educational objective for primary and secondary education. The context he provides in this book is, however, much more extensive than that. This book is studded with quotations from, and allusions to, a full panoply of educational theorists and philosophers from Socrates down to the present.

Lipman is fully candid about his aims in writing this book. Already in his Introduction he identifies the most important claim to be put forward in what follows as his assertion that philosophy's capacity, when it is properly taught, "to bring about higher-order thinking" is "significantly greater than the capacity of any alternative approach" (p. 3).

Closely connected with the claim that philosophy is the best way to teach higher-order thinking skills is Lipman's support for what he calls the "community of inquiry" as a structure for philosophical learning. Lipman not only thinks that establishing such a community is the best way to do philosophy with children; he also advocates it as a "methodology for the teaching of critical thinking, whether or not a philosophical version if it is being employed" (p. 3). I shall return to emphasize this feature of his proposal.

Although Lipman's position is richly laid out in this book, with countless references to other participants in the ongoing debate to which it so effectively contributes, Lipman shows himself to be refreshingly modest about what he takes himself to have accomplished. He says he regards this work as no more than a "prologue" to the case that needs to be made for philosophy for children.

What questions would one like to have answered in a prologue to the case for philosophy for children? For starters, one might want evidence that children, or children at such-and-such a grade level, are actually capable of doing philosophy. Although the success of Lipman's program in many different countries of the world would, I am confident, provide ample evidence that children from kindergarten all the way through high school are capable of doing philosophy, and even doing it well, no such evidence appears in this book.

A second question we might want answered is whether there is any empirical evidence that teaching philosophy to first-graders, or fourth-graders, or whatever, improves their higher-order thinking. On this point Lipman refers to a relevant study (p. 29), but the reference is passing and it is clearly not the point of this book to lay out empirical evidence for Lipman's claim. Of course any putative evidence on this matter would presuppose an understanding of what constitutes higher-order thinking, as well as agreement on what test or tests would show in a reliable way that such thinking had been achieved. Although the matter of reliable tests is not discussed in this book, the question of what to understand as higher-order thinking is, indeed, a major question that the book does address.

Lipman tells us that current definitions of critical thinking focus on the *outcomes* of such thinking and, in particular, on *solutions* and *decisions* (p. 115). Here he cites Robert Ennis's definition of 'critical thinking' as "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on what to believe and do." Changing the emphasis from outcomes to process, Lipman himself 'defines critical thinking' as "thinking that (1) facilitates judgment because it (2) relies on criteria, (3) is self-correcting, and (4) is sensitive to context" (pp. 116, 25).

To fill out our understanding of this definition Lipman offers two chapters on criteria and one on judgment. Then, in the next section of his book, he moves on to discuss *creative* thinking as something that, along with critical thinking, must be included in the higher order thinking that he supposes philosophy for children teaches, and teaches best. The chapter on creativity is followed by an imaginative and helpful discussion of texts, including stories, and how they can be important for modelling both rationality and creativity.

The last two chapters of Lipman's book, before the rather brief conclusion, are devoted to "the nature and uses of the community of inquiry." It is, I suggest, the idea of a community of inquiry and the uses to which Lipman wants to put that idea that make his proposal a radical one.

Anyone who undertakes to teach philosophy, especially to children, must face the fact that, over the centuries, many different answers have been given to each philosophical question we might want to include in the syllabus. Some people say that philosophical questions are questions to which there are no answers. The fact is that there are too many answers. What to do? One response is to teach the history of philosophy. Lipman doesn't propose doing that. Another is to choose one answer or family of answers, and so to teach Platonism, or Existentialism, or Thomism, or Pragmatism. Lipman doesn't propose doing that either.

What Lipman proposes is the reflective consideration of questions traditionally identified as philosophical within a classroom that has constituted itself as a "community of inquiry." Making a classroom into such a community means rejecting the

model of instruction that dominates our schools. According to the dominant model, the teacher is assumed to have knowledge and skills sufficiently superior to those of her students that her job can be to pass on, as efficiently and effectively as possible, some appropriate part of what she already knows. The idea that she should think of herself as another inquirer – not just when she takes graduate-school classes in night school, but even in the elementary or secondary class she teaches – is foreign to the way most of us think of children and their teachers.

How can it be anything other than a phony "liberal" pose for an elementary-school teacher to cast herself in the role of a genuine inquirer in her own classroom? The only way she can do that authentically, I think, is for her to appreciate how philosophically problematic even the most basic and ordinary concepts are.

A child complains that frogs and toads don't have a language and so, in real life, they can't talk the way Frog and Toad do in Arnold Lobel's delightful accounts of their adventures. "How do you know animals don't have their own language?" another student asks. "What is real life?" asks a third.

The teacher is unlikely to have good answers ready for such questions. Who does? So what should the teacher do? If she has constituted her class as a community of inquiry, she will find time in the classroom to see if she and her students together can come up with answers to them. No doubt it is visionary, as well as radical, and even subversive, to suggest that elementary and secondary-school teachers adopt the "methodology" of the community of inquiry – both for a class explicitly "in philosophy" and for the consideration of philosophical issues that arise in the other "language arts," in science, or in mathematics. But we are all in Matthew Lipman's debt for his having done so.

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