

## Philosophy for Children in a Democratic Classroom

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**ABSTRACT** In this paper the researchers examine the educational possibilities that Philosophy for Children can offer to the development of children's thinking and social skills in a democratic classroom. In the first part the researchers provide commentary on Mathew Lipman's three modes of thinking namely: critical, creative and caring thinking. The second part of the paper focuses on his pedagogy which he calls a Community of Inquiry and how it is seen as a democracy in action. In conclusion the researchers state that Philosophy for Children can transform people and how they can relate to the world.

*"There is no such a thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "practice of freedom", the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."*  
(Paulo Freire)

### INTRODUCTION

Education in a multicultural democratic society such as the one evidenced in South Africa faces many challenges, one of which is the implementation of education programmes and practices aimed at developing thinking skills, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a humane, non-racist and non-sexist social order. In addressing this problem, this conceptual paper reflects on Matthew Lipman's discussion on the different modes of thinking and also refers to a Community of Inquiry.

In doing so, the researchers take Matthew Lipman's discussion on the three modes of applied thinking and judgement, namely, critical thinking, creative thinking and caring thinking as a framework for exploring the educational possibilities of Philosophy for Children. A number of papers and book chapters have been published on Lipman's work by various researchers (Vansieleghem and Kennedy 2011; Murris 2014; Costello 2013) who argue that children should be taught critical thinking and reasoning skills in the classroom.

The researchers of this paper focus on Lipman's pedagogy of Philosophy for Children which is encapsulated in what he calls the "Community of Inquiry". In this pedagogy the researchers note that a deliberative and collaborative community should have the ability to foster critical, creative and caring thinking, and also

foster the ability for sounder reasoning, understanding and judgement. The aim of such a pedagogy is the transformation of persons and their perceptions of how a person relates to the world and to others. In doing so, this pedagogy equips future citizens with the capacity to be both more just and more reasonable.

### MATTHEW LIPMAN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THINKING

#### Historical Background

The American curriculum known as "Philosophy for Children" was created by Matthew Lipman in the 1970s to encourage children of various school ages to "philosophise" by turning the classroom into a "Community of Inquiry". Lipman argued that complex thinking - that is, critical, creative and caring thinking - is developed through philosophical dialogue in a "Community of Inquiry" (Lipman 2003).

Lipman made an important distinction between thinking and thinking well. Sprod (1995), for example, argued that good thinking has a holistic quality; to be good at thinking involves more than merely being good at a number of individual thinking skills. Lipman made use of the distinction between thinking and thinking well to argue that it is the school's role to encourage children to think better.

Lipman (1995: 64-67) commented on his trio modes of thinking as follows:

### *Critical Thinking*

Critical thinking is defined as skilful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgement because it relies on criteria, is self-correcting, and is sensitive to context. Teachers begin with the raw subject matter of communication and inquiry and cultivate all the skills that the mastery in such processes entails. In doing so, teachers will afford children the opportunity of learning through their own discoveries and thereby increase their intellectual capacity to acquire useful basic skills and learning techniques (Lipman 1988).

Critical thinking occurs when children construct meaning by interpreting, analysing and manipulating information in response to a problem or question that requires more than a direct, one-right-answer application of previously known knowledge. This process is characterised by specific core thinking skills, which can be developed in the classroom through instruction and guided practice. The list of applicable skills includes, but is not limited to: focusing, information gathering, referencing, organising, analysing, integrating and evaluation (Lipman 1995).

Critical thinking can be seen as a form of methodical thinking that examines a fact or principle to make an appreciative judgement (Daniel and Auric 2011; Letseka and Venter 2013). "Critical thinking is reflective and evaluative thinking oriented to think, to believe and to do. [It] implies not only complex skills (related to logical, creative and caring thinking) but also a critical spirit (related to social and dialogical skills and presuppositions)" (Daniel and Auric 2011: 420; see Letseka and Venter 2013).

To develop critical thinking in their classroom practice, teachers should therefore emphasise the critical reflection and evaluation of the process used in attaining knowledge rather than the knowledge itself.

### *Creative Thinking*

When he turns to the nature of creative thinking, Lipman (1988) is careful to note that creative thinking and creativity are not identical. While creativity can be important in thinking,

creative thinking is central to philosophical inquiry. The construction of meaning through ethical claims involves creative thinking, he argues (Lipman 1988).

Creative thinking occurs when children develop ideas by themselves and where the ideas they develop are not predetermined. It would be incorrect to see creative thinking as a sub-category of aesthetic criticism. Aesthetic criticism cannot function effectively without appealing to reasons, criteria and standards and therefore certainly does involve critical thinking. Creative thinking may employ reasons and criteria without appealing to them (Lipman 1995).

### *Caring Thinking*

Lipman (2003: 52) argues that a form of thinking that we can describe as caring thinking does exist. "There is such a thing as caring thinking, and that it is the third pre-requisite to higher-order thinking, along with critical and creative thinking. It is based on the contention that emotions are judgements: the emotion is the choice, it is the decision, it is the judgement. And it is this kind of thinking that we may call caring thinking, which has to do with matters of importance." On this basis, we can refer to emotions as a form of thinking, since emotions produce judgements.

This raises the question whether children can be taught to consider the appropriateness of having the emotions they have. Lipman (1988: 46) maintains that this is indeed possible.

"... [T]he answer is fairly obvious: in their upbringing of their children, parents and siblings constantly contribute to the shaping of the young child's emotional outlook. By reward and reproof, they let the child know which emotional expressions are deemed appropriate in a given context and which are not. Their rationale might be fairly idiosyncratic: laughing at funerals is often reproofed, but not crying at weddings. But if there can be an education of the emotions in the home, then there can be an education of the emotions in the school and, indeed, there already is .... Consequently if we can temper the antisocial emotions, we are likely to be able to temper the antisocial conduct."

The researchers note that emotions include some content, because they express judgements. At the same time, however, emotions have to be educated, as does any form of thinking. This is true even when we take into account the appar-

ent arbitrariness of emotions, which is often socially and contextually determined. Just like opinions, emotions must be examined, evaluated, and criticised of they are to be modified and distinguished from each other as more or less desirable. There is no particular reason why they should be trusted more than any other contents of the human mind.

Lipman (2003: 52) writes about caring thinking as follows: "Thinking in values is always intentional ..... in the sense that one who values is always directing his or her thinking at something. Thus thinking that values person is respectful thinking. Thinking that values what is beautiful is appreciative thinking. Thinking that values what is virtuous is admiring thinking. If it values what is sentient, it is considerate thinking. If it values what needs to be sustained, it is cherishing thinking. If it values what suffers, it is compassionate thinking. If it values the fate of the world and its inhabitants, it is concerned thinking. In general we can say that thinking that values value is caring thinking."

Like critical thinking, then, caring thinking is a practice that implies a certain attitude - a simultaneous desire to engage the other and oneself and at the same time to sympathise with him or her. It also implies the development of certain skills.

#### **MATTHEW LIPMAN AND APPLIED THINKING**

From the above discussion of the three modes of thinking, it will be evident that all three modes can be taught in the classroom. The researchers' contention is that children should be introduced to thinking and social skills at a very early age.

The following assumptions of Lipman's Philosophy for Children programme as it relates to critical, creative and caring thinking are important (see Higgs and Higgs 2001)

- Philosophy for Children is best presented as narrative - in the form of novels, short stories and/or comic strips. Engaging children in a Community of Philosophical Inquiry (see next section) using a fictional approach presents them with models of reasoning and feeling, of evaluating and valuing, of inventing and discovering that encourage them to combine critical, creative and caring thinking.

- The skills cultivated by doing philosophy include inquiry skills, reasoning skills, concept-formation skills and translation skills. They are vital for early education.
- The Community of Inquiry pedagogy provides a framework within which children can do philosophy. The cognitive practices outlined in a fictional model can be put into actual practice in the classroom.
- The classroom community of philosophical deliberation can be a preparatory microcosm both for further stages in formal education and for later life as a participating member of a democratic society.

Lipman's Philosophy for Children is compatible with Dewey's ideal of truth, which enables the "facilitation of care, empathy and open-mindedness, which are essential for reflective thinking and democracy" (Bleazby 2011: 464). Children learn to be open to others' opinions because they acquire a sense of respect for others' viewpoints as being useful and meaningful.

By participating in a Community of Inquiry, children develop a capacity for reasonableness. They learn how to listen to others attentively and with empathy, and to change their own minds when moved by others' ideas. They also learn how to articulate their own viewpoints to convince others of their own ideas (Bleazy 2011). "Respect means taking other ideas seriously by critically reflecting on them and making an informed judgement about their truthfulness" (Bleazby 2011: 465).

Philosophy for Children encourages children to apply the three modes of thinking. In the researchers' view, it is therefore crucially important to use these modes of thinking in teaching children to care for fellow citizens and to respect their viewpoints in culturally diverse democratic countries.

#### **COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY**

Matthew Lipman defines the concept of Philosophy for Children as thinking that is taught through verbal exchanges between peers with adult guidance, using the three modes of thinking as a framework.

In a pragmatic sense, Philosophy for Children can help to improve personal and social experiences within a group. This process occurs through philosophical dialogue in a Community of Inquiry (Daniel and Auriac 2011; see

Letseka and Venter 2013). Philosophy for Children as introduced by Lipman and Sharp integrates “the methods and content of philosophy and the pragmatist ideal of the Community of Inquiry in order to facilitate critical, creative, caring, and communal thinking skills, as well as the social skills and attitudes necessary for democratic citizenship” (Bleazby 2011: 453; see Letseka and Venter 2013: 114).

Lipman rejects the notion that knowledge is fixed (in Lyle 2000). Children should learn to subject ‘knowledge’ to careful scrutiny. They need to question why their world is the way it is and how it could be improved. According to Lipman (Lyle 2000: 58; see Letseka and Venter 2013: 117), human beings are essentially storytellers. “Narratives reflect the structure of human existence and help people enter into the lives and experiences of other; stories have the power to generate imaginative thinking” (Lyle 2000: 58). The dialogue generated through these narratives occurs within ‘Communities of Inquiry’ (Lyle 2000). This kind of dialogue uses “complex cognitive and social skills in search for meaning, valid justifications, appropriate arguments and constructive criticism” (Daniel and Auric 2011: 422; see Letseka and Venter 2013: 117).

The Community of Inquiry is like a micro-society in which learners discover that social life consists of different people with a variety of viewpoints. They learn that by thinking together, they can come up with alternative solutions to common problems. By participating in a Community of Inquiry, children learn to share ideas, not to take sides and to be objective when offering criticism. They learn to be considerate of other people’s feelings and beliefs. They also learn to respect differences (Daniel and Auric 2011; Letseka and Venter 2013).

Teachers should receive training in helping children to engage in philosophical dialogue as a way of resolving their everyday issues. This dialogue should be inclusive and collaborative, and even more so in diverse classrooms. The dialogue usually starts with students’ experiences and questions within the context of a narrative. It is very important that neither the teacher nor the children should have pre-decided positions on, arguments for or solutions to the problems discussed during a Community of Inquiry (Golding 2007).

Getting children to engage in philosophical discussions in the classroom involves them in a

Community of Inquiry. Specific techniques must be employed to enable openness to evidence and reason. The procedures that are developed and used within the Community of Inquiry should eventually become the reflective habits of the individual in solving everyday problems (Lipman and Sharp 1978).

Certain conditions should be met before children are invited to participate in a Community of Inquiry. It is very important that there is a “readiness to reason, mutual respect (of children towards one another, and of children and teachers towards one another), and an absence of indoctrination ... [W]ith respect to the give-and-take of philosophical discussion, the teacher must be open to the variety of views implicit among students” (Lipman and Sharp 1978: 88).

A Community of Philosophical Inquiry always has a set of basic rules. Perhaps the most important of these is that the teacher acts as a facilitator whose role is to clarify and coordinate the ideas emerging from the dialogue.

The Community of Philosophical Inquiry in Philosophy for Children is in line with the Socratic ideal of communal philosophical dialogue, which is important for discourse about authentic democracy (Kennedy and Kennedy 2011). If a society needs to strengthen democracy, Philosophy for Children can give children the opportunity to learn what democracy entails and at the same time practice it in the classroom setting. “Children are educated through communities of philosophical inquiry in order that they be shaped into the democratic citizens that society needs” (Kohan 2011: 341).

Teachers can take the following steps to facilitate a philosophical session amongst learners with the help of Lipman’s materials:

- i) read a novel about everyday life that involves some ambiguities and paradoxes and open a discussion about it;
- ii) collect questions from learners regarding the story for dialogue amongst peers; and
- iii) elicit responses from group members on how to handle the issues discussed in a Community of Inquiry about the topic (Daniel and Auric 2011; Letseka and Venter 2013).

If learners do not spontaneously engage in asking questions about the story or narrative the teacher should ask them Socratic questions to stimulate them to think critically about contentious issues and formulate their own opinions (Daniel and Auric 2011).

### Contextualisation in a Democratic Country

In a Community of Inquiry, ideas will be tested within various contexts and exposed to a 'multitude of subjectivities' (Bleazby 2011). According to Dewey (1938), communal inquiry gives rise to common truths through the integration of the understandings of various people involved in the process. The ideal of objectivity as *inter alia* involving commonality and intersubjectivity implies that the "more diverse multicultural and inclusive that a community of inquiry is, the more objective the truths verified in it will be"... [t]hus culturally diverse communities provide opportunities where our harmonious interaction with the world can be disrupted. This disruption initiates self-reflection and inquiry as a means to re-establish harmony" (Bleazby 2011: 460).

Philosophy for Children can thus be expected to flourish in a heterogeneous classroom with children from different backgrounds and value systems who are speaking from a variety of experiences and a plurality of thinking styles. Philosophy for Children with its method of Community of Inquiry is an ideal way of teaching in a plural democratic society such as South Africa with its variety in cultures, languages and belief systems. Children could learn to listen to and learn from others, but also to voice their own opinions about contentious issues. Cultural tolerance could be substantially fostered in this way.

A Community of Inquiry can be seen as democracy in action. The method is "invaluable for achieving desirable social and political ends through educating for democracy. Underlying this viewpoint, is the idea that education should empower children to be thoughtful about the way they conduct their lives ..." (Burgh and Yorshansky 2011: 436).

According to Sharp (1993: 343), a Community of Inquiry means "political commitment even on the elementary school level. In a real sense, it is a commitment to freedom, open debate, pluralism, self-government and democracy ... It is only to the extent that individuals have had the experience of dialoguing with others as equals, participating in shared, public inquiry that they will be able to eventually take an active role in the shaping of a democratic society".

Democratic countries require people who are able to think in a humane and democratic way. In newly democratic countries such as South Africa, the method of Community of Inquiry could contribute toward the sense of inclusivity among cultural groupings, enabling participants to see themselves as members of one nation.

### CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explore the educational possibilities that Philosophy for Children can offer to the development of thinking and social skills in the classroom.

The researchers have looked at Lipman's analysis of the complex nature of thinking, as evidenced in critical, creative and caring thinking, and the framework provided by his concept of a Community of Inquiry. With these two elements in mind, we conclude that Philosophy for Children can provide children with the necessary mental flexibility and thinking skills (critical, creative and caring) by helping them to develop thinking and social skills in the classroom.

Our view is that children will need these skills to survive and flourish in a rapidly changing world whose future is by definition uncertain. In their classroom practice, teachers can enable them to discover how to analyse, synthesise, make judgements, create new knowledge, and to apply these skills to real-world situations.

By developing children's thinking and social skills in the classroom, Philosophy for Children, will enable them to make rational, creative and caring commitments in a relativistic world, and thereby contribute to transforming the world into a better place.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers make the following recommendations:

- All teachers need training in Philosophy for Children
- All teachers need to learn how to put together a Community of Inquiry
- Children need to learn how to argue in a constructive, creative way
- Critical, creative and caring think should become part of children's everyday life
- Children should learn thinking as well as social skills to engage in narratives about their democratic country

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