

Engaging Young Minds with Philosophy

Educators use age-old questions to spark high-level thinking and discussion

by LAURA PAPPANO



Abigail Brenc, a senior at Mount Holyoke College, explains the ground rules for a philosophical discussion to second-graders.

No one mentions Aristotle. But when second-graders sit cross-legged on the rug at Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School of Excellence in Springfield, Mass., discussing “Dragons and Giants”—the story of Frog and Toad’s frightening encounters with an avalanche, a hawk, and a snake—talk turns to Aristotle’s concept of courage as weighing confidence and fear in the face of danger.

“Can you be scared and brave at the same time?” asks Charlotte Ljustina, a junior math and English double major and one of 19 Mount Holyoke students working in teams of three to help youngsters explore philosophical topics. This is the first of seven weekly sessions that bring students in Professor Tom Wartenberg’s “Teaching Children Philosophy” course to the charter school.

It is not easy work. Second-graders swing in a split second from superhero-like boasts of chopping snakes with swords to sober pleas to ignore fear and stop bullies. But then Trinity says that spotting danger is complicated. At times, you don’t know to be afraid “until you get more into it,” she says and argues, counter to several others, that you can be simultaneously scared and brave. Lorenzo, a slender boy with black-framed glasses, adds that you can have courage but not be courageous always. “I’m brave,” he says in concluding his point, “but I’m just scared of snakes.”

Philosophy and the Common Core

The question is not whether Kant can be taught in elementary school or if second grade is right for Socrates. Rather, the arrival of the new Common Core State Standards, which require a range of critical thinking, argumentation, and speaking skills, is spurring educators to consider a provocative idea: Might philosophy—the study of ideas about knowledge, truth, and the nature and meaning of life—help?

The aim is not to tackle actual writings of great thinkers but, armed with accessible texts like *The Rainbow Fish* or even news articles, to help students ponder philosophical staples like “How do you know what you know?” and “What is happiness?” Probing such questions, some educators argue, helps students build coveted higher-order thinking and reasoning skills.

“In elementary school, we tend to look for the right answers,” says Maria Arias Evans, principal of Washington Elementary School in San Jose, Calif., where a pilot program of monthly philosophical discussions led by a team of teachers, a local physician, community volunteers, and a philosophy professor at San Jose State University is in its third year. “This develops their creativity, their curiosity. It requires more of our students.”

At Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School, academic coordinator Matt Atwood says the weekly 45-minute sessions force students “to think about their own thinking and to justify why they think things.” Although some weeks are more successful than others in getting children to engage in complex thinking, he says, they always gain practice speaking, listening, and responding to each other’s comments—skills key to the Common Core, school success, and life. “Even seeing that different opinions are valid is a powerful experience for these kids,” he says.

The idea of teaching children philosophy is not new. While Piaget argued that children could not think abstractly until age 11 or 12, philosophers in the 1970s, notably Matthew Lipman and Gareth Matthews, challenged that belief, writing scholarly papers and books plus crafting methods for leading conversations with young children. Lipman, who died in 2010, founded Philosophy for Children (P4C) and the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State University. Wartenberg says Matthews’ work inspired him to create a curriculum for elementary students using children’s books as the basis for philosophical discussion.

The work has a worldwide following but has been a quiet education movement. The Common Core is now nudging it into the spotlight. Wartenberg, a soft-spoken professor whose students call him Tom, first became interested in using philosophy with young students when his son, now 20, entered school. He viewed it as a corrective to a curriculum narrowed by pressures to prevail on standardized tests.

Now, he says, “I read the Common Core Standards and it is really striking. They are almost a complete description of what we do.” As a result, Wartenberg is now busily revising his book *Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy Through Children’s Literature* (to be

published in 2014), has worked with a filmmaker to create lessons using film clips as the basis for philosophy-based discussions in middle school, and is updating his website, which offers lessons for teachers (and now gets 20,000 hits a month).

Indeed, from the English language arts standards it's apparent why philosophy appeals: Young children need to "follow agreed-upon rules for discussion," "elaborate on the remarks of others," sequence ideas logically, and explain how claims "are supported by reason and evidence." And that's just a taste.

Rooted in Real Philosophy

It's important to know that this approach is not vaguely "philosophical" but is explicitly connected to specific philosophical ideas and constructs like ethics, logic, and epistemology. "We are not trying to teach them a cartoon version of Kant," says Wartenberg. "We are trying to get children to reflect about the fundamental questions about their world and their lives."

In San Jose, Ali Bassiri, a local physician and community advocate, proposed the philosophy pilot to Evans, the Washington Elementary principal, during a Rotary Club meeting. (The Rotary has adopted the high-poverty school.) Bassiri, working with a team that includes a philosophy professor from San Jose State University, Evans, her teachers, and community volunteers, has created a very scripted program that this year is in one classroom each in grades 2, 3, and 4. It begins with small-group discussion based on a concrete question from the chosen children's book, followed by role-play highlighting a philosophical dilemma, and then a group debate. They finish with a "fishbowl" activity in which children take turns sitting in a chair to lead peers in a summary discussion about what they have learned.

About two weeks before the session, the team drafts a lesson plan to take a philosophical question in a children's book and cast it in terms young students can grasp. "With kids, you start with the concrete and go to the abstract," says Karin Brown, the philosophy professor who is part of the team.

For example, a lesson on Descartes and epistemology draws from *Morris the Moose* and starts with the query: "How can you tell the difference between a cow and a moose?" As students judge evidence, they move closer to Descartes' elemental question: "How do you know something is true?" (The approach works so well Brown used *Morris the Moose* in teaching Descartes to her college students.)

In working with the younger children, Brown says, "I have been surprised to what extent the kids can handle philosophical discussions." As they wondered one day what happiness is, she recalls, a second-grader offered a striking response: self-confidence. Observes Brown, "That is a very sophisticated answer."

Class Discussion as a Verbal Chess Match

Linking lessons in children's books to philosophical questions has a solid history, but Montclair State University professor Alina Reznitskaya, an educational psychologist, wants to sharpen student thinking by elevating class discussions—and not just around children's books (see sidebar, "Building a Better Class Discussion"). She wants teachers not to engage specific philosophical questions but to teach the skills thinkers use to buttress their beliefs.

Building a Better Class Discussion

Alina Reznitskaya, educational psychologist and professor at Montclair State University, is working with Ian Wilkinson at Ohio State University to develop tools so teachers can grasp and track the elements of a good argument. They have identified four characteristics of a high-quality argument and examples of prompts that teachers can use to facilitate discussions and keep speakers on track:

1. *Clear*. Teachers can help keep the argument clear in language and structure by asking questions like: "What do you mean by 'privacy'? I don't think it is the same as what Johnny is saying."
2. *Containing multiple perspectives*. The teacher is not the one responsible for moving the conversation forward; students share responsibility for creating the argument. But teachers may need to ensure that a variety of views are heard by saying, for example, "We haven't heard from anybody who doesn't have a pet yet."
3. *Well-supported*. The idea is to complicate the argument by thinking through evidence together, deciding the acceptability of premises and claims by asking, for example, "Do you really want to say 'always'?"
4. *Logical*. The major goal is the process, the building of the argument, but as you wrap up, what are the valid inferences to draw? Rather than a single conclusion, there may be conflicting ideas that can be picked up later. Some prompts that can help are: "What do we now know about this question?" and "Where do we stand?"

Reznitskaya says she uses "any text that has any kind of contestability," such as a news article that raises a question like "Should boys and girls play on the same team in sports?" Teachers then press students to construct arguments, weigh and value claims, and wrestle with contradictory ideas. What is acceptable evidence? Is the reasoning valid? How is the argument structured? Where do opinions fall?

She likens high-quality discussion to a chess match. "Every verbal move you make during a discussion has consequences," she says. Teachers spur students to react to one another's ideas, track arguments in real time, and think, "What can you do to improve the quality of the group conversation?"

“This requires a major shift in how classrooms are organized,” says Reznitskaya, who says that what passes for a typical class discussion is often little more than a teacher’s recitation followed by a question with one simple answer. Much like approaches that begin with a children’s book, the goal is to spur a student-driven intellectual exploration. Described as “dialogic teaching,” Reznitskaya’s approach takes the authority for the discussion out of the teacher’s hands and makes the quest for understanding a collaborative venture.

“It is a thoughtful shift because it’s not just a free-for-all, it’s not ‘Let them talk about whatever they want,’” says Amy Pacifico, a fifth-grade teacher at Pleasantdale Elementary School in West Orange, N.J., who has been coached and videotaped by Reznitskaya for over a year as part of a research project. Rather, she will have a student visually map the argument. “I’ll ask them, ‘Where are we now?’” she says. “I’m constantly pressing kids for clarification: ‘Why do you think that?’”

Some discussions are better than others, says Douglas Norrie, also a fifth-grade teacher at Pleasantdale Elementary, noting that a debate about whether kids should be on reality television sputtered while one on recess took off. Students, he says, considered, “What was the point of recess? Was the purpose exercise? To have a break? To socialize? We ended the conversation by saying that maybe we need a definition of what recess is.” That, he says, “I would not have come to.”

But Does It Change the Quality of Thinking?

Compelling class discussions are fun, but do they improve thinking? While it’s tough to quantify—you’re not assessing right answers but discovering if students have a better ability to consider and reflect—research does suggest that they can have an impact. In a 2009 article in the *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Reznitskaya summarizes four different studies she and colleagues conducted in which fourth- and fifth-graders were divided into two groups—one that engaged in “collaborative reasoning” discussions and a control group that received traditional reading instruction.

Students took a post-test requiring them to write a reflective essay based on a short story with a moral dilemma. Essays were graded by raters blind to which group students were in. Results showed that students in the first group “wrote essays that contained a greater number of satisfactory arguments, counterarguments, and rebuttals than the essays of similar students who did not experience CR [collaborative reasoning].”

In a September 2012 study published in *Developmental Psychology*, Wartenberg, with psychologist Ellen Winner and Caren Walker, found that second-graders who participated in 12 weekly philosophy classes organized around children’s literature—as opposed to a control group that had 12 weeks of art history class—made substantial gains on a recognized argumentation skills assessment. Both groups scored about the same on a pretest, but the students in the philosophy class showed larger gains. When the control group later participated in the philosophy classes, they, too, made gains identical to the first group.

The research jibes with what Pacifico sees in her classroom as high-quality talk seeps into written work. Essay responses often refer to other students’ points and describe changed views. Even in math, she says, “they will question each other more: ‘How did you get that answer?’ ‘Can you prove that?’”

When a class debate doesn’t go as well, Pacifico refers to it as a “popcorn” discussion: “Somebody brings up something and then somebody brings up something else. It pops over there, and we never build that reasoning to build something together.”

It happens. But Pacifico believes that using Reznitskaya’s approach has raised the quality of discourse in her classroom. “Even if it is not what I would consider a good discussion or it’s a little popcornish,” she says, “I still feel those discussions are deeper than anything we could have done before.”

Laura Pappano is a freelance journalist and regular contributor to the Harvard Education Letter.



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