

# A Response to Morehouse and Bellows

*The following is a response to Bellows' and Morehouse's comments on Children, Philosophy and Democracy. This article was originally a panel presentation at the Learned Congress held at Brock University in Ontario in June of 1996.*

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I would like to thank the two reviewers for their careful and detailed commentary which I am sure will help to continue to bring philosophy for children within the wider spectrum of the disciplines of philosophy and education. I will, however, comment briefly on some aspects that the reviewers raise. I do this in the spirit of extending the discussion.

## MOREHOUSE

The following is one of Morehouse's major claims about the book: «each author is left to develop her thinking about the topics on her own, and no attempt is made to pull these very diverse essays together. ... it also represents a lost opportunity for presenting the common elements of this diverse movement.» As Morehouse indicates, our aim, as editors, was to represent the diversity that exists in philosophy for children.

While he agrees that we have achieved our aim of representing such diversity, he worries about the lack of explicitly identifying the common elements - he refers to this as a «lost opportunity». There is no doubt that there is a lot of diversity in philosophy for children. And from our perspective, this is positive for several reasons: first, it shows that philosophy for children does not suffer from the cultist element that may be present in some movements and which philosophy for children itself may have suffered from in its initial stages; second, it shows that those who are attempting to develop philosophy in schools are aware of the importance of taking the diversity in contexts seriously rather than assuming that one style ought to apply to all in the same manner and with exactly the same intentions.

What are some of the diverse elements in philosophy for children? (a) The philosophers, philosophers of education and educationists associated with philosophy for children have reflected on or held diverse philosophical perspectives; (b) Diverse views are held and practised with regard to teacher preparation, methodology, and materials one could use to develop philosophical discussions; and (c) diverse views are held with regard to the issue of whether philosophy ought to exist as a separate subject in the school curriculum.

Most of this diversity is represented in the collection. This may be most obvious in the third section in which practising teachers describe diverse ways, both with regard to method and content, of how one could develop philosophical discussions, as well as the benefits that have emerged in their own specific contexts. Although all of these teachers were inspired by Lipman's work and curriculum, all of them focus on the use of other material beyond that developed by the IAPC. (With regard to Section 3 I am surprised that Morehouse thinks this section written by practising teachers, «will be less useful to teachers familiar with the Philosophy for Children corpus». On the contrary, given that none of the teachers in this section focus on the use of the «orthodox» philosophy for children corpus, I would expect this section to be most useful to such teachers!)

Section 1 which focus on the «character» of philosophy for children, raises diverse issues that arise when philosophy for children is compared to other educational perspectives: soft liberalism (San MacColl), postmodernism (Reed), rigid developmental psychology (Matthews), and whole language (Portelli/Church). Even section 2, which deals with the `community of inquiry' (an aim and concept so dearly held by all proponents of philosophy for children), presents diversity: each of the essays connects the notion of a community of inquiry to different educational aspects: peace education, Peirce and feminist theory, Dewey and school reform, multiculturalism, and critical theory.

My focus on diversity may give the impression that I fully agree with Morehouse's characterization as explained earlier. This is not the case. While it is true that the kind of explicitness demanded by Morehouse (re: the identification of common elements) is not present in the book, there are several instances (including the introduction and some of the essays) that highlight quite explicitly the major elements or views held by those involved in philosophy for children. The connection between Lipman's work and that of Dewey is obviously stated in at least four of the pieces; the critique of rigid developmental theory is also quite explicit (See: Pritchard, Matthews, Portelli/Church); the connections between philosophy and the development of democratic values and attitudes is present in almost each of the essays. Yet Morehouse expected more perhaps because as he put it «my sense is that there are only 2 or 3 basic educational frameworks.» Following Dewey's caution with the dangers of either/ors, and his plea to go beyond the either/or dichotomy, we preferred to include the diversity that exists, state some possible common elements, and yet allow for other frameworks to emerge or for the possibility of different frameworks to work in tandem. Dare I say that implicitly such a move may be suggesting that we need to question the very notion of «the superstructure»?

While Morehouse acknowledges the crucial and inspiring work of Gareth Matthews for the development of philosophy for children, he feels that his work «leaves the role of the teacher undefined and status of the teacher undervalued.» While it is true that Matthews has not focussed explicitly on the role of the teacher, it is quite obvious to me, both from the essay included in this collection as well as Matthews' other work, what position he would hold about the role of the teacher. Matthews' message is that teachers need to have the philosophical acumen to be able and willing to identify philosophical issues the children raise and to help them develop such questions or issues further. He is promoting the development of the kind of work he himself has done with

children and which he describes and comments on in his work. Hence Matthews does not undervalue the status of the teacher; the teacher is central to **the development** of philosophical attitudes and ideas in children. As Matthews has shown, the teacher who looks at children from the Piagetian framework or from a certain rigid interpretation of the Piagetian framework, will not be in a position to enhance the philosophical element in teaching.

Unfortunately many teaching education programs and teaching practices are still heavily influenced by such a rigid framework. What one can do with a philosophical question and comment, depends not only on who raises the question, but on what those surrounding the child or adult think about such questions.

Matthews' own work with children offers a refined model for teachers to follow, and a solid counter-argument for the prejudices held about philosophy and its relation to children.

## BELLOUS

What sort of philosophical experience are children encouraged to have? This is the central question Bellous raises. She doesn't answer the question explicitly, yet she elaborates on the notion of experience inspired by the work of Hegel. And her analysis and discussion is refined and helpful. At the end of her response Bellous raises four questions to help us reflect on the possible connections between the concept of experience she defends and philosophy for children. I am not sure whether or not these questions are meant as a subtle criticism of certain aspects of philosophy for children, or whether they are meant as inquiring/exploratory questions. At any rate, some very brief response to these questions should bring some further clarification.

**Question 1:** How does this view of experience relate to philosophy for children? It relates very directly especially through the aim of developing the class into a community of inquiry.

**Question 2:** How does learning to be reasonable in the social and changeful way that the authors propose include the sort of relation between experience and learning laid out above?

The relation should be very clear if one holds that there is no learning that does not arise from some experience ... tension. As Dewey clearly argued, all education is based on experience but not all experience is necessarily educational. Likewise, philosophical endeavours are based on some experience but not all experiences necessarily lead to philosophical endeavours. Moreover, the community of inquiry - or even the very attempt to establish some semblance of a community of inquiry - ought to help develop the relation between experience and learning as seen by Bellous. How? By being present to the conversations of a community of inquiry - conversations which ideally should be based on the second, positive notion of conversation identified by Bellous; by reflecting on the very actions that take place in a community of inquiry; and by developing conversations of the second type.

**Question 3:** How do we teach children to observe in this way without persuading them that there is something bad or inadequate about their values? Is Bellous implying that it is not appropriate to

tell children that there is something inadequate in their position? The tension implicit in question 3 is one that good teachers of philosophy for children are aware of. See, articles by Palermo, MacColl and Sharp.

**Question 4:** Will reading a text in a group develop the skill of observation required by skepticism and practiced by Emile? Is reading the same as observing for the child?

No. The 'reading' is only a starting point. It depends on what one means by 'reading'. In some instances the starting point is an experience, a lived text. The CORE is the discussion/ conversation - which ought to provide the child ample opportunity for «observing» in Bellows' sense which is similar to Freire's reading the world.

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