SOME THOUGHTS ARISING FROM DISCUSSIONS WITHIN THE RESOURCES SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE VICTORIAN PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN ASSOCIATION
Victoria, Australia

What's So Special About This Story Anyway?

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Over the past three years, Philosophy for Children in Australia has developed from a movement comprised of a collection of individuals who were inspired by a strange curriculum initiative originating from the United States, to a series of state and regional associations that now come together under the umbrella of the Federal Association of Philosophy for Children. The Victorian Association was officially launched in November 1990, and the Federal Association in July 1991.

About eight months prior to the establishment of the Victorian Association, we — that is, all of us who were interested and/or active in Philosophy for Children in Victoria — held a preliminary meeting to discuss what we hoped to achieve through establishing a state association, and what we would want such an association to accomplish. At this point in the meeting we broke into a series of working parties to focus on the concerns and interests of those present with the idea that these groupings (where appropriate) would develop into ongoing committees within the Victorian Association when it officially came into being in November.

I have started with this background because it was through this process that the Resources Committee of the Victorian Association came into being. One of the "hot" topics up for discussion that night revolved around the question of resource materials for Philosophy for Children. The "resources" issue had been around for a while and this seemed like the ideal opportunity to bring our collective minds to bear on it in the hope of coming to a better understanding of the issues involved. The question of the suitability of the IAPC materials for Australian schools, teachers, and students, had been both a concern and interest for some time (to some it was a concern, to others, an interest). Every now and again the call would come for the provision of "additional resources" — the question was whether such a call was a matter of heresy or enthusiasm. Were additional resources wanted because people thought the IAPC materials unsuitable for Australia, or was it a matter of augmenting these materials with more, and if so, what sort of resources were wanted?

At this point it becomes important to understand a little about education in Australia, and particularly, the types of curriculum changes

that had been occurring in Victoria (and, to a greater or lesser extent, in the other states and territories) over the past 10 years.

1. **Integrated Curriculum** was in, especially in primary schools. Pursuing disciplines in isolation, especially via a single set of resources, or one textbook, was out.

2. **Encouraging children to read "Good Literature"** was in. "Readers" were out. Children should be offered variety and be able to develop their own tastes in literature.

3. **"Reading for meaning"** was in. "The cat sat on the mat" was out.

4. **Australian settings** were in. American settings (***especially*** American settings) were out.

"Good literature" was seen as literature that was enticing to children — literature that would provide a model for the development of their own writing and that they would **want** to pick up off the shelf and read. Quality illustrations, book size, type of binding, ease of expression and good grammar were looked for along with a plot that would hold students' attention — and that generally meant lots of **action**.

With this in mind, it is easy to see why a linear set of American "Readers" consisting of unattractive lines of type with no illustrations, grammatical mistakes, skeletal character development and plot, were met with scepticism (and/or the jitters) by Australian teachers. A lot of energy was spent convincing teachers that the IAPC materials were not intended as "good literature," but as provocative and philosophically rich stimulus materials for philosophical inquiry, and that the Americanisms within the stories were largely irrelevant as the themes were universal and the students would quickly substitute their own examples. Some were convinced by the rhetoric, some were not — they loved the pedagogy ... but, well ... couldn't **any** material be used to initiate philosophical inquiry? (especially good children's literature!) ... what was so special about these stories, anyway?

But not all those who were calling for additional materials were new initiates who might have associated the IAPC curriculum with the old style "Readers." Voices also came from amongst some of the strongest advocates of Philosophy for Children, people who were committed to the concept of children's philosophy and thought the program wonderful. Many had been actively teaching it for years and had no problems with the existing materials. Yet, they also were advocating additional resources. What type of resources did they have in mind?

The people who came together to first explore the question of resources in 1990 quickly came to realise the ambiguity and complexity of the "additional resources" refrain. The following passage taken from the minutes of that first meeting (March, 1990) maps out the possible meanings the cry could have. It is reprinted here because I feel it still sets the agenda in relation to work that needs to be done in relation to the creation of supplementary resources for Philosophy for Children in Australia (and possibly elsewhere).

Create a list of additional resources that could be utilized.

It was seen that the term 'additional resources' was actually quite ambiguous and was being used by different people in different ways. These then needed to be clarified so that each could be addressed. The following meanings were identified:

1. Additional resources to be utilized within the Philosophy for Children Curriculum:

a. Resources that would replace the traditional (IAPC) stories and manuals. (Australian stories, 'better' literature)

b. Supplementary materials to be used alongside the existing IAPC materials (to extend a theme, introduce other media — poetry, songs, stories selected from 'good' literature, new stories especially written to explore themes not covered — e.g., environmental issues, issues to do with technology, etc.).

2. Resources that would be useful in addition to those used specifically within Philosophy for Children classes:

a. Philosophical resources that can be used in classes within other curriculum areas. (Thereby encouraging philosophical dimensions to be dealt with when and where they naturally occur in other subject areas — philosophy across the curriculum.)

b. Philosophical resources to support teachers teaching Philosophy for Children. (e.g., A bibliography of books and articles such as

Growing up with Philosophy, introductory texts in philosophy, philosophy for teachers, etc.). The need for a good ***cross-referenced*** index of manual exercises (cross-referenced both within programs and across programs) was identified.

3. The Australianization of the novels and manuals: (This later became known as the **'Oz'ification** of the existing curricula.)

This raised the following issues/questions:

To what extent do you modify? Is the time and energy put into 'Oz'ifying the materials worth it given the similarities between American culture and Australian culture? Would we be doing it primarily for political expediency (given the negative feelings toward exposing our children to even more American educational materials), or is the American material genuinely hard for our children to identify with? Would the material be more meaningful if it took place in Australian settings and contained Australian idioms? Is the material middle-class? Should it relate to the Australian ethnic mix and social/political framework?

As we talked further it became increasingly clear that in order to really discuss the viability and desirability of questions 1a, 1b, and 3 above, we needed, as a group, to become more familiar with the distinctive style and features of the existing materials. What aspects were purposefully chosen, and which were a reflection of Lipman's personal style? Did we agree these aspects were significant and worth preserving if we were to venture into the task of writing new materials? And, in selecting supplementary materials to augment the existing curriculum, what features should we be looking for? We realised that we did not have a clear understanding of Lipman's intentions in writing in the style he had chosen, and felt that this needed to addressed so that we could address the "larger" issues from a basis of knowledge (thereby acknowledging the ancient wisdom that states that you had better know why something is the way it is before you decide if and how it needs changing!). There seemed to be no easily accessible statement outlining why the materials were in the style and form they were, and we felt that if we had such a statement it would help people to understand what made the criteria for the selection of good philosophical stimulus material (to be used for the development of "good thinking") distinct from criteria used for the selection of "good literature."

We felt "additional resources" called for under 2a and 2b were also essential — but the task here seemed to be of a different type. 2a certainly raised a controversial topic regarding the integration of philosophical inquiry across the curriculum, and while we supported this, we agreed that our energy was primarily committed to promoting philosophy as a separate discipline within its own "community of inquiry" setting. Item 2b was also seen as essential — especially when the teachers were crying out for it, but this could be done concurrently and involved no real debate.

At the following meeting we formulated two questions that were to guide our inquiry for the next year (July 1990 - July 1991). These were:

1. What were Lipman's intentions when creating the stories?

2. What principles should we keep in mind in regard to the generation of new materials? What is our direction and intention regarding curriculum? Which of Lipman's ideas/principles did we feel worth preserving when writing our own materials? Were there things we were committed to that we felt the existing curriculum did not address? (e.g., sexism/gender stereotyping, working class settings, social problems/ stigmas).

We didn't know quite what we had let ourselves in for! Many hours (...weeks ...months) later, we finally tried to put our emerging understandings down on paper, and realised we had actually come a long way. What we offer here is an attempt to make explicit some of the ideas on which we understand Lipman's materials to be based, and some of the literary features that they capture. We did not set out to "defend" Lipman's materials, but to come to a better understanding of them. Yet, with that understanding came a renewed respect for their form and literary style.

The next task undertaken by the subcommittee was to develop from these earlier understandings of the Lipman material a more general list of desiderata for classroom materials for Philosophy for Children. This, we hoped, would help us to address the issues and tasks set out above.

The rest of this article is a track through our thinking as it developed over the year. We hope that these thoughts may be useful to those wishing to reach a better understanding of the literary qualities of the existing stories, as well as to anyone who may be interested in looking for, or writing, other stories for use in philosophy.

STAGE 1: FOCUSING ON THE LITERARY STYLE OF THE STORIES

Preamble ... or a foray into literary intentions and understandings.

These understandings of Lipman's intentions, when writing the stories around which the Philosophy for Children program is based, come from our reading of "The Creative Curriculum" by Matthew Lipman. (Part of the transcript of ***Thinking and Education****, 1992.)*

According to Lipman, the Philosophy for Children stories should not be considered "novels" in the traditional sense, nor should they be seen as textbooks. Rather, he sees them as a genre he calls "story-as-text." This genre walks a line between the more literary novel (what we would see as "good children's literature") and the authoritative didactic textbook which purports to tell us of "the way things are" (often in an authoritative impersonal third person style). Lipman sees narrative as a model of creativity: it involves the construction of a reality which "comes into being" for the reader as it unfolds and it engages the imagination and provides us with models of thinking, feeling and acting. Narratives are based in the experiencing of things, whereas textbooks are based on exposition. Stories are creative, they unravel and thereby remain dynamic — each new happening or piece of knowledge affecting every other. Stories contain ambiguity, irony, and mystery, and deal with the problematic. Textbooks are critical, they pass on a fixed picture of reality and are thereby essentially static. They value clarity over ambiguity, and reasoned argument over emotion.

While Lipman sees the narrative tradition as being ideal for philosophical inquiry, he is quick to point out that not just any narrative will suffice. If the aim is to improve higher order thinking skills, the stories must model the rational processes involved. They need to model thinking skills in all their complexity: "The text that kicks off the thinking process must itself be a model of the thinking process." Characters should, amongst other things, provide a model of rationality and inquiry — ideas need to be studied, taken apart, and interpreted; they need to move from example to generalisation and from "doings" to "knowings." This is the "line" between narrative and text that he defines as the "story-as-text" genre. Thus, within Lipman's books there is often a transition from first person observation to third person generalisation, and from observation, through discussion, to the construction of conceptual frameworks. Yet within these stories, the truths and insights which evolve remain open to question rather than being imposed by the author as "the Truth" (such as we might find in the objective, or generalised, "Truth" offered in traditional didactic textbooks).

Having looked at Lipman's intentions as he wrote his stories, we went on to ask ourselves what aspects of the stories we saw as significant.

What are some of the positive features of the existing stories?

1. They are inquisitive and speculative.

Within them, characters interact and share their puzzlement and wonderings and build understandings together. The form of dialogue between characters provides a model of a community of inquiry at work.

2. They personalise/intensify involvement.

Being written in the form of dialogue helps remove the omniscience of third person narration. It reverses the distancing effect and allows opinions/perceptions to be questioned. It places everyone on an equal footing (characters, children, author). This is further supported by the variety of points of view expressed by the characters.

3. They invite engagement with the ideas and characters in the text.

Students transfer the community of inquiry in the story into the classroom where there are two dialogues going in tandem — the dialogue in the story and the dialogue about/derived from the

story. This brings the characters (and ideas) into the classroom and sets up a constant flow between them.

4. They present different perspectives.

This allows for different ideas and perspectives to emerge, different models of/ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

5. The dialectic nature of fictional dialogue.

Using dialogue is psychologically clever — it builds on a certain psychological intimacy associated with dialogue, and yet creates a psychologically "safe" environment for classroom discussion because the dialogue comes from fictional characters.

The following points relate to some of the positive features we saw associated with the stories when used in a lesson held according to the "traditional" format (i.e., reading around [turn reading], posing questions, exploring issues).

6. Reading dialogue

The reading process sets the communal agenda. Children identify with (take on) different characters and ideas as they read the dialogue — different from reading narration.

7. Commitment

In the story the children are discussing what is important to them and what is relevant to their context. If the children in the classroom take it up then it's because it also interests them and then the context is the classroom context. If, on the other hand, the teacher introduces the topic, the topic is not bound to a context or necessarily interesting to the children — it's just a "problem" to be worked on — there is no psychological progression, no commitment, no sense that it matters.

Focusing on the presentation of the materials: Should the stories be illustrated?

We discussed whether the materials would be enhanced if they were illustrated. The unanimous decision was "no" to any literal illustration of the text, but mixed responses to the idea of abstract or non-specific illustrations (eg., sketch of a tree in episode about a farm). All endorsed the following points:

1. Creating a coherent imaginary world — a literacy issue.

The ability to create coherent (imaginary) worlds when engaged in reading is a skill that underlies/enhances literacy. It is an effort, requiring thought and judgement (avoiding inconsistencies, etc.). For today's "TV children," images are presented for them in a manner that requires little effort or scope for the imagination. By not illustrating the text these skills are encouraged and nurtured.

2. It is non-prescriptive.

It refrains from putting boundaries on the way that children think about the characters and their problems. If the text were illustrated, this would be a narrowing experience — Pixie would have an identity as a boy or girl, would have long hair or short of a certain colour, etc. — long before children had had an opportunity to discuss who Pixie was (a person? a giraffe?) or what he/she means when she says she can turn herself into a pretzel. Even minimal illustrations can interfere with the child's creation of their own "Pixie story" (and if it is heavily illustrated, they may not take the effort to make an image of it at all).

3. It allows greater imaginary freedom — less authoritarian.

This greater freedom of interpretation and imagery makes the program less authoritarian and more democratic — the children are empowered to create the imaginative reality in their own way.

4. It is not a traditional "novel."

This is not a problem for children because it is not used as a "novel" — it is a springboard for their ideas. This is in keeping with seeing the story as "story-as-text" genre.

5. Allows the "everyday" to be seen as mysterious.

Because the fictional "reality" is not presented to the reader it allows the reader to puzzle over it — to see something that's been simple all your life as complex. A romantic notion — "seeing mystery where you haven't seen it before" (Egan).

Format of the books: Quality of presentation

While illustrations were "out", certain improvements were "in."

1. The books could be a better size for small children (three-quarters of present size).

2. The printing could be more attractive (abstract border pattern? abstract illustrations?).

3. Improved binding and paper.

Improved quality (and recycled paper) would help give it an enhanced sense of importance and improve durability.

Americanisms — Do they matter?

We asked ourselves the following questions:

1. Do the Americanism stop the children from responding to the philosophical dimension of the text?

We felt "no." The concepts and ideas are not alien, they are part of the western tradition we have in common.

2. Do the Americanisms stop the children from responding to/identifying with the characters ?

We felt that children don't feel alienated by American idioms (they get enough via television).

Since the stories are only a springboard for ideas, once children start talking about the issues they use their own language, transfer ideas to their own context.

We acknowledged that this is a contentious issue to which people have different responses. The question is, however, broader — it encompasses the predominantly middle-class setting of the stories, etc.

3. Is it a problem for teachers? Or for the greater acceptance of the program in Australia?

Yes. Undoubtedly not good on the political score. The issue of the Americanisation of Australian culture is one that arouses great passion in people — people who are both for and against the existing materials!

STAGE 2: RECOMMENDATIONS

The creation of this (**very** tentative) list had two main motivations. In the first place, we hope it will be useful for anyone undertaking to write new materials for Philosophy for Children. Secondly, we hope it will assist teachers who are interested in supplementing the existing materials in their philosophy classes. Here it could serve two purposes: (1) as a way of evaluating potential inadequacies in supplementary materials — inadequacies that can then be compensated for by the teacher in the classroom, and (2) as a filter with which to exclude materials which simply fall too far short of the ideal. It is **not** intended as a "definitive" list, but as a way of opening discussion about resources issues.

In principle, anything might be grist for the mill: stories, poems, plays, films, songs, games, chance events in the classroom, the subject matter of the various disciples, and so on. To suggest otherwise would be to raise doubts about a central claim of the whole Philosophy for Children programme, namely that the skills and dispositions acquired are transferable to all intellectual inquiry. Yet in practice it seems some resources work better than others in stimulation philosophical inquiry. "The following is an attempt to try to spell out some features of stories we felt to be most likely to help philosophy in the classroom (especially a classroom and teacher embarking on the experience for the first time) to be successful. Once again, the list is tentative and represents to some extend an arbitrary cutting-off point in our thinking. The discussion continues. I welcome your response in order to continue our inquiry.

Here are the features we felt warranted thinking about. They are followed by brief comments by way of explanation.

FEATURES TO THINK ABOUT IN RELATION TO WRITING AND SELECTING RESOURCES FOR PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY WITH CHILDREN

Do the selected materials:

1. Provide a model of rational inquiry within

community which embodies the following points:

- Ideas are studied, taken apart, and interpreted in the process of moving between individual experience and objective understandings/ generalizing principles;
- The dialogue is motivated by curiosity, puzzlement and inquiry, and is guided by a shared interest in getting at the truth;
- The ideas of other members within the community are taken seriously — they are built upon, elaborated, criticized, and so forth;
- The interaction of members of the community shows respect for persons;
- Within the community intellectual risk-taking is encouraged and supported;
- The interaction within the community is essentially egalitarian.

NOTE: This is of very considerable importance, and it is the feature most likely to be missing from materials not written especially for Philosophy for Children. Commitment to the ideal of free, rational and cooperative inquiry does not seem to be something that comes naturally (at least not in classrooms), and we doubt that it is effectively promoted by simply describing it. A fictional community of inquiry invites transference into the classroom.

2. Deal with the problematic.

The material should be sufficiently rich in matters of philosophical concern to give some bite to the first two conditions above.

3. Model the complexity of the contexts in which philosophical issues arise.

The various aspects of the philosophical content should not be isolated from the "story" or from each other and set up as artificial exercises in problem solving.

NOTE: The contrast here is with the circumscribed, contextless exercises often found in clear thinking or critical thinking texts.

4. Provide a diversity of ways of thinking, feeling, and acting which allow for different ideas and perspectives to emerge.

NOTE: Notwithstanding points one and four under recommendation number one, without this second requirement the model of rational inquiry could still be quite limited in its content. A group of thoroughly like-minded people could constitute a community of inquiry, but as an example, they would be no stimulus to the readers to explore and play with new thoughts and new styles of thought. It could give the misleading impression that there is only one way to be a thoughtful person.

5. Develop in a way that encourages the persistent reevaluating of what has gone before.

NOTE: This could as well be dealt with as a sub-heading of recommendation number one. The idea is to encourage the realization that much of what we believe is tentative and subject to re-evaluation in the light of new discoveries and ideas. The growth of knowledge and understanding is not a steady accumulation of facts once and for all established and filed away.

6. Remain open-ended.

The material should be so structured that the children in the classroom community of inquiry will not be limited in their thinking by any judgement imposed by the author as "the truth."

7. Provide the opportunity for children to create their own imaginative reality.

In other words, to construct their own coherent imaginary world. The materials, for example, should not be illustrated in any way which thwarts or inhibits this process.

NOTE: The committee was at first inclined to proscribe illustrations entirely, but this is perhaps unduly restrictive. The general feeling was that illustrations of the characters and of the episodes in the stories would result in a diminution in the imaginative freedom allowed to the readers.

However, some sorts of graphic material, tactfully handled, could be an advantage, such as Impressionistic images; images of a general nature such as trees or animals; geometric patterns, representations of the interplay of ideas rather than 'world' of the story; illustrations drawn by characters in the stories themselves as non-linguistic communication of their story/narration, or of their own interpretation of events or expression of feeling.

8. Provide for richness in such literary devices as ambiguity, irony and mystery.

NOTE: This is a point about richness in the text which goes beyond the bare necessity to provide stimulus for "intended" philosophical discussion. Apart from making the text more interesting, less mechanical, it will provide an extra dimension for imaginative exploration.

I would like to stress again that these reflections represent a track through our thinking over the past year. It does not represent the end of a journey, but merely a stop on route. We are not all unanimous in our thinking in this area (and, indeed, even about the worth of the exercise as a whole). This article is my interpretation of the process we have undergone and the tentative suggestions we have reached, and I take full responsibility for the views it expresses. It is offered in the hope that it will initiate further dialogue on the issues involved.

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Brian Freisinger, *brush and ink*, 1992