

Problems with Philosophy for Children

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In the April 1992 issue of *Analytic Teaching* there was an essay by Jen Glasser from Australia dealing with the problem of materials with which to do philosophy with children. Although Australian and Danish education are very different, we share some of the same problems raised in the essay. So I feel inspired to share with the readers of *Analytic Teaching* the problems we have in Denmark with the American texts by Lipman, and our ways of doing philosophy with children.

Since philosophy is the deepest of mankind's thinking, it is obvious that philosophy and children's thinking must be combined in some way. Children are natural philosophers; however, a teacher needs to help them put words to their deepest thoughts in order for them to improve their language and thinking. In other words, we have to teach children to think on a higher level by giving them the words and sentences, by listening deeply to them, and by reflecting their ideas back to them.

This approach to teaching is close to the Danish way. Danish schools are special in many ways — perhaps you need to be Danish to understand the differences between the Danish way of teaching compared with the teaching in other countries. It all derives from one man, Christen Kold, who lived some 150 years ago. He lived for three years on a farm two miles from the village of Randerup, and here he taught some ten children from the farms all around. With these children he made his magnificent discovery: that children can think on their own, and that the best way of teaching them is first

of all to listen to them to learn their world of thinking, to tell them about the most marvellous stories of their world, and after that, to discuss ideas in the stories with them. He created an atmosphere of sharing — a community of inquiry 150 years ago!

The parents of his students were happy — they saw their children growing and becoming more mature. Later, they became extremely frustrated with this man. Christen Kold was thrown out of the village because of his teaching. The administrators of the farm-school did not want his methods — to their minds, teaching was learning by heart without independent thinking, and Kold's teaching was a great threat to them. Kold left for Turkey, where he spent some years working as a bookbinder. Years later he returned to the middle of Denmark and started to form new private schools. Now children and youngsters came in crowds to be taught by this magnificently thinking man. Slowly the Danish public schools changed to his methods. During the next decades the Danish method of teaching changed so much that our schools now are surprisingly different from the English, Australian, and American schools.

Christen Kold might have been aware of a small Danish book which was published in the year 1790 — a tiny little book telling how to teach children to think with their souls and not their brains. The author, I. H. Campe, wished children to be taught about conscience, soul and body, perception, causality, imagination, open-mindedness, and psychology. In 1790!! And here we are, in the 1990s, 200 years later, still having problems! But we have philosophy, we have the free method of teaching for Danish teachers, and we have Lipman. Everything should be okay — but it is not.

I have been working to spread philosophy with children for almost 15 years now, and finally, four years ago, something happened. There were experiments in teaching going on all over the country — teachers and headmasters went to the administrators of the schools to get money for philosophy with children, and they got it! Even the minister of education was aware of the value of the program. Something good was happening. These program experiments went on for four years, and many of them were evaluated in a book which was published recently. In this book you can read about different teachers' joys about philosophy and some teachers' difficulties with it. Honestly and frankly they spoke out — this worked and this did not. But they all agreed about one thing: Lipman's novels do not work. They are impossible to work with in this country. There are several reasons. One of them is that the texts and manuals build too much on logic — and Danes are not trained in logic — or rather, as a teacher put it, we have passed that point. We do not need logic anymore, and we are unable to teach from a huge manual in which you are more or less told what you are supposed to reach: a certain result — THE right answer, THE way of thinking, THE way of philosophy. It is so far from the Danish way that is simply does not work.

Some teachers are quoted as saying, "We have enjoyed reading Lipman's manuals, but we cannot work with them in the classroom, and we cannot work with his novels." Some teachers see the novels as being far from literature — they find grammatical failures in them — they find them uninspiring and boring for the kids — they find them too long and too American.

So there is a huge lack of texts for philosophy with children. Many teachers had used existing novels and short stories written by Danish writers, some had been using painting and children's drawings, some had been using films and videos or just what happened in the classroom.

And there is a value in using whatever is at hand because philosophy is always there — ready to be picked up. In every single happening, every small event — it is always there. But the teacher also has to be there, anxious to find what sometimes hides itself in the middle of a conversation. Many teachers express their difficulties with this problem: when you teach small children you only have a few seconds, or less, to decide what to pick up. Because of this, doing philosophy with children is an act of art more than it is a method of teaching. That is what makes it so difficult — and exciting. The process of exploring the world of thought together with chil-

dren you love — that is so exciting and marvelous — but it is difficult to identify the philosophical content within these moments.

In Denmark we have a lot of legends, myths and fairytales. Many teachers have been using these magnificent texts as a background for doing philosophy. That is exactly what Kold did 150 years ago. These stories contain the Danish way of thinking — our way of experiencing the world and ourselves — which is the path to real teaching. If you use the Lipman material, you kill the way Danes think. As a teacher put it: These texts take life out of language and spirit out of a story!

Most teachers here use Danish-produced short stories, but what we need is philosophical manuals to these texts. Many teachers are a little shy — they are hesitant about going into deep discussions with their students without having a manual as a support for their teaching. There are special texts here, worked out especially for philosophy with children (some of them have been published in *Analytic Teaching*) and many teachers do use them. But they all agree that manuals to old myths, legends, and fairytales is what we need. And that might be what every culture needs.

There are, unfortunately, other reasons why Lipman's materials do not work here. Only some of them have been translated into Danish, and the man in charge of these materials in Denmark is not willing to share them with teachers and students in the colleges where philosophy with children is now being taken seriously. The teachers are often met with arrogance, so they dare not touch the texts. This is a pity because Lipman's manuals in particular are aids to improving the way of doing philosophy with children.

Philosophical manuals, however, can not be used effectively without good stories. Texts for philosophy with children have to be narrative — you have to enjoy a good story together with your students first — really enjoy, saying: this is really a good story, let us hear it again, let us dramatize it, let us imagine it all over again. When this first phase of the experience has passed you can eventually start to use some of the methods of philosophical inquiry presented in the Lipman manuals.

Or do it the Barbara Brüning way: start with a talk about everyday things and events and then have the children draw about these events. After finding the stories that are hidden in the drawings, you have piles of materials for raising a philosophical discussion.

Last winter I spent some time in Russia — now a free country wishing to learn the Danish

way of doing things. What I experienced in this marvellous country was a very deep experience: in this culture one has to use the Russian way of thinking in order to get started on a philosophical discussion. It is of no help to introduce texts from abroad unless they are Russianized — the students have to experience them as Russian, written in Russian, as being a part of their own culture.

It is the same everywhere. You have to know your own culture — your own way of thinking — your own way of living. There is no other way, because if you do not do it, you spoil the students' experience of philosophy as being a magnificent and exciting tool for understanding oneself and others.

So my advice to teachers in this country and abroad who wish to start doing philosophy in their classrooms is the following: read Lipman's manuals, read the Danish evaluations, read the Swedish evaluations, and read Barbara Brüning's books. Then you will feel ready and might be able to write your own texts or work from novels and short stories you already know.

Philosophy is a wonderful art. What they did in Greece in Antiquity was a marvellous way of thinking. Do it with children, and you will help them for the rest of their lives!

REFERENCES:

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