

Danish Problems

...and a Short Report from Iceland

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Per Jespersen wrote a problematic article in the November 1993 issue of *Analytic Teaching*. The article is problematic for several reasons. For one thing, it is more of a personal letter to fellow Danes than an article intended for international audience. The article also lacks accurate references, both in terms of sources and the subject. In this response, I want to clear some general issues and raise a few questions. Finally, I will give a short report on the experience of Philosophy for Children in Iceland, an experience which is quite different from the one reported from Denmark.

PHILOSOPHY, WHAT IS IT?

It is common knowledge that philosophy is not one thing but many. Within it are theories and schools with different methodological characteristics and great differences in technical language. Despite different methodologies all philosophers apply contemplation of

deliberation—or critical thinking—in their pursuit towards understanding the world and our position in it. In short, philosophy has a long tradition, both in terms of content and methods, differences and similarities.

The term “philosophy” is even more ambiguous when we approach everyday experience; most things and persons have or seem to have their own philosophy. A part of the explanation of such “philosophies” is the fact that many individuals have to come to grips with their opinions about the basic facts of life and their meaning or meaninglessness. Some apply critical thinking in forming their “personal philosophy of life”; others choose, or are forced to, ignorance or personal idiosyncrasies.

According to Jespersen “philosophy is the deepest of mankind’s thinking” and since it is so, “it is obvious that philosophy and children’s thinking must be combined in some way” (p. 69). The connection here is far from being very precise. If we accept the assumption that philosophy is the “deepest of mankind’s thinking” then it must evidently relate to everything that has to do with the actions of Homo sapiens! Unfortunately, this does not tell us very much. In Jespersen’s opinion children have their own

philosophy, they are “natural philosophers” and a teacher’s task is “to help them to put words to their deepest thoughts...by giving them the words and sentences, by listening deeply to them, and by reflecting their ideas back to them” (p. 69).

Jespersen’s approach to doing philosophy with children fits in with what I labeled as “personal philosophy of life.” If his approach is compared to the one by Lipman, great differences emerge. Two things are of most importance. First, Lipman has great respect for philosophy as a tradition both in terms of content and methods. It is traditional philosophy, in all its complexity, which is the storehouse of ideas for his curriculum: *Philosophy for Children (P4C)*. Lipman’s work is a philosophical revolt, even a revolution, from within philosophy itself; not in terms of content but in pedagogical presentation and appeal to an enlarged audience, i.e., children and the general public. It is through the tradition that Lipman approaches the everyday experience of children from a philosophical perspective. For him the relationship between philosophy and children is bidirectional; philosophy has many things to offer to children and they have many things to offer philosophy. Jespersen sees children as already being philosophers; they can do their own philosophy right away with a teacher who ‘gives them words and sentences.’ Jespersen’s approach has its roots in story-telling, not in traditional philosophy.

A second and related point is that Lipman does not consider children as natural philosophers. In fact, he finds it awkward to consider them “natural philosophers” but he would agree that children and philosophers worry about the same things (Lipman 1992). For Lipman the task of P4C is not to ‘give children words and sentences,’ the task is not to bring out the children’s own “philosophy of life.” P4C is a critical inquiry about human experience and conduct in the light of achievements from past generations.

A DANISH COMMUNITY OF SHARING EXPERIENCE

Jespersen states that “perhaps you need to be Danish to understand the differences between the Danish way of teaching compared with the teaching in other countries.” I am not a Dane but I do have some second hand experience of their way of teaching, both through teachers, parents and students who have attended Danish schools.

These acquaintances are, in general, very favorable. Icelandic teachers have great respect for their Danish colleagues and they visit them regularly to study from them.

According to Jespersen the Danes have it all. They have ‘philosophy, free method of teaching and Lipman’ but somehow everything is not okay (see p. 69). Jespersen traces the speciality of Danish schools to one man, Christen Kold (1816–70), who created a community of inquiry with children 150 years ago. It is rather surprising that Jespersen did not mention Christen Kold in his book *Filosofi med b-rn* (1988). It is also surprising to see the Dane, K. Groe-Sorensen, under much influence from Grundtvig, who is usually mentioned as the big name in the history of Danish education. Kold transferred, according to Groe-Sorensen, Grundtvig’s ideas to the elementary school and put the main emphasis on the living word (story telling) in studies of the Bible and Danish history.

I have no reason to doubt that Kold created an atmosphere of sharing, but although that is one of the necessary characteristics of community of inquiry, it takes more to create a philosophical community of inquiry. What was it that made Kold’s classes communities of inquiry? Are there maybe communities of inquiry at work in all Danish classrooms? Philosophical? According to Jespersen, Danish “schools are surprisingly different from the English, Australian, and American schools” (p. 69). What is so different about them?

Jespersen mentions another great Dane, J.H. Campe (1746–1818), who told us “how to teach children to think with their souls and not their brains” (p. 69). Jespersen evidently agrees with the assumption: if we would think with our souls, but not our brains, we would not have all the problems we have today. Groe-Sorensen (1966) does not mention Campe’s achievement in teaching children to think with their souls. He does mention Campe’s sources—Rousseau, Defoe, Locke—and gives him credit for his version of *Robinson Crusoe*. What does it mean to think with the soul? (Although the brain is a necessary biological organ, I thought that most persons used their minds to do their thinking.)

It seems to me that Jespersen is discovering important historical figures in the history of Danish education. I am sure that Danes, as well as non-Danes, are eager to know more about these underestimated educators and their importance for the contemporary educational scene.

PHILOSOPHY FOR AND WITH CHILDREN

Jespersen informs us that he started to spread philosophy with children almost 15 years ago (cf. p. 70). The international reader should be careful not to connect this work with *Philosophy for Children* by Matthew Lipman. "The idea of philosophy with children came up parallelly in Denmark and USA" states Jespersen in the very opening of the introduction to *Filosofi med b-run* (1988 p. 9). He even gives Lipman credit for being the first one, outside of Denmark, to realize

the need for philosophical curriculum for children (1988, p. 80).

According to the above, Jespersen started his work about 10 years later than Lipman (or around 1978), so it is at least questionable to say that the idea of philosophy with children appeared parallelly in Denmark and the USA. That point, though, is of minor importance. Perhaps the credit should be given to Kold? The fact is that Jespersen has created his own program in philosophy with children. The program consists of at least eight short textbooks for children in grades 2–9. The first one was published in 1981 — *Kim og Marianne for 2. & 3. klasse* — and the

bulk of the program was published before 1986. Each textbook is short and some are accompanied by an even shorter handbook for teachers with teaching suggestions. Jespersen has not only created his own philosophy series, he has also translated Ron Reed's *When we talk with Children* and Gareth Matthew's *Philosophy and the Young Child*. Jespersen obviously deserves credit for his industrious activities.

However, the curriculum by Lipman and Jespersen is not comparable in scope, content and quality. The two curriculum sets have hardly anything in common but the reference to "philosophy." Lipman outshines Jespersen in any professional comparison between the two. This is not to say that Jespersen's work is of no value. That is for the Danes to judge! Jespersen states in many places that any philosophy with children in Denmark has to be suited by Danes for Danes. It cannot be imported from abroad, especially not from America (see f.ex. 1988 pp. 53–55). Is this conclusion symmetrical? Is it unwise to export Danish philosophy since it is unwise to import philosophy to Denmark? What then about the stories that Jespersen has



been sharing with us in *Analytic Teaching*? What about the translations of the IAPC curriculum? Does Denmark not share our Western philosophical roots?

Jespersen is stuck in the trap of constantly comparing his curriculum to the one by Lipman. My advice to him is to stop comparing that which is not comparable. Although Lipman is a pioneer there is no reason to consider his work as the final version of philosophy for children nor is it the only standard that other materials should be compared against.

Jespersen's judgements on Lipman's work are quite unfair and some of them show little respect for telling the truth. For example, how can Jespersen state that 90% of Lipman's curriculum builds on logic and omits other areas of philosophy? (1988, p. 55) Why does Jespersen state that the Lipman manuals are "500/600" pages (1988 p. 80) when the average length is 450 pages? The exact numbers are 384, 390, 396, 414, 474, 500 and 589. Of course there are upper limits with length of written work, but what is so horrible about these figures and why are they exaggerated so grossly? Why does Jespersen state that Lipman's novels are "60/70" pages of length (1988 p. 80) when the range is 77–148 pages? Apart from *Elfie* the exact numbers are 77, 86, 96, 98, 100 and 148.

Jespersen reports that many program experiments have been done in Denmark and the results published in a book. What book is that? Were the experiments on the programs by Jespersen or Lipman or something else? How many teachers and students participated in the "program experiments" using what programs? Did the teachers try using the novels with children before coming to the conclusion that "Lipman's novels do not work?" (p. 70) Were the teachers trained by philosophers before doing philosophy with their students? There is no information in Jespersen's article about any numbers, but it would be very interesting for the international reader to have the following questions answered: Approximately how many teachers have been trained in doing philosophy with children in Denmark? How many of Lipman's novels have been translated? How many children have been in P4C classes? What are the comparable figures for the Jespersen program or for other Danish philosophical programs?

Jespersen evidently has serious misconceptions about the place and nature of logic in P4C which is perhaps no wonder if Jespersen is correct when

he claims that "Danes are not trained in logic" or as one of his trained (?) teachers said:

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 it simply does not work (p. 70)

I am beginning to suspect that the Danes are referring to texts and manuals by some other author than Matthew Lipman, director of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. I also wonder at what point Danes passed the point of needing logic? How did that happen? In what century? Do Danish philosophers agree that Danes do not need logic? Is it maybe a case of being free from logic when it is stated that the manuals tell you everything? In the suggestions for using *Philosophical Inquiry* the manual to *Harry Stottlemeir's Discovery* the first point is to warn teachers against compelling "students to follow the order of "Leading Ideas" given in the manual, rather than the order dictated by their own interests." (p. i) Point 14 advises against "insisting that students discuss a question until they arrive at "the answer." (p. i). When it comes to suggestions about what to do the authors state:

While it seems to us that there are some practices that are clearly wrong, it is more difficult to tell a teacher exactly what to do that is right. This is because teaching itself is an art which requires sensitivity, discretion, judgment, coordination, organization, and respect for children. There is no simple recipe for teaching (p. ii).

It does not take much logic to extract the authors' meaning from the cited text above. It is clearly written and unambiguous. I wonder if the Danes can state clear examples to support their claims that the manuals tell everything. Or is it the case, when you are free from logic, that you can decide for yourself what words mean?

MORE QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Apart from too much logic, Jespersen complains that Lipman's novels are "far from literature" they even have "grammatical errors" (p. 70). Are the grammatical errors in the original or the translated versions? Could we have some examples? What is literature? Are the Danes talking about "fine" or perhaps just "Danish" literature? Lipman's novels are philosophical caricatures, which is a branch of philosophical literature. The Danish complaints about the Lipman curriculum, are also surprising due to the fact that "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 taken seriously" (p. 70). Who is this man? Is there any need to translate more novels if Danes already know they do not work?

Towards the end of his article Jespersen informs us that in Russia "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" (p. 71). It would be very informing if Jespersen could give us a detailed example about the difference between the Russian and Danish way of doing philosophy? Are the Russians beyond logic too? What prevents Danes from "Danishizing" text from abroad?

In the translation of the P4C curriculum different translators have used different approaches. In Spain, Felix Garcia Moriyon does minimal changes to the text; all names of original characters, titles and situations are kept unchanged. Why don't the Spaniards complain like the Danes? Others, for example Peter Yang in Taiwan, adapt the original text and I believe most translators adapt the American versions. Lipman has always recognized the need for localized versions of his materials. It is not clear whether the Danish versions are localized. I am sure that if Danes would get to it, they could produce a fine Danish version of Lipman's curriculum. It may very well be that a word-for-word translation, where the truth (and hopefully the meaning) of the original text is conserved, is not appropriate for the Danish culture.

Perhaps an idea-for-idea translation, where the meaning (and hopefully the truth) of the original text is conserved, would suit them better.

Jespersen seems to think of Denmark as a unique island in the currents of international philosophy and culture, needing even more isolation. I am not sure about Denmark, but I thought it was a basic dilemma for any nation to preserve its cultural identity while also preserving the roots they have in common with other nations. For this task any nation needs a lot of localized and international philosophy.

A SHORT REPORT FROM ICELAND

The experience in Iceland has been quite different from the one that Per Jespersen reports. I started offering courses to children on the open market in 1987; i.e., I put an ad in the newspapers offering philosophy courses to children. The number of students has increased and for the past three years I have been making a living on this operation. For each twelve week term we have two teachers who have altogether approximately 80-150 students, age 5-14, divided by age into groups of 8-12 individuals. From the very beginning I have used the novels by Lipman with good success. Of course, I have had students who have claimed that the novels are boring, but to these kids most things are boring. Whether boring or not, there is general agreement among my students that we do need to read the novels to find ideas; to set the scene for the dialogue that follows. The novels are the best springboards we know for dialogue—an inspiring and joyful dialogue.

In the year 1992-93 Siduskoli was the first elementary school in Iceland to offer philosophy to the 5th graders on a regular basis. Siduskoli is located at Akureyri, a town of 15,000 in Northern Iceland. The program began with a one week workshop at Siduskoli in late August 1992. Twelve teachers attended the workshop and six of them were the regular classroom teachers of the 5th graders. On the average there were 22 students in each class and for the philosophy project the teachers decided to divide each class in two groups. For reasons of organization the 6 teachers worked in three pairs; while one was doing philosophy with half a class the other worked with the other half plus his or her regular class. The philosophy classes met once a week for two continuous 40 minutes lessons with no break between lessons.

Results of this experiment were extremely

positive and will be reported in *Thinking*. In terms of reasoning, as measured by the New Jersey Test of Reasoning Skills, the 5th graders improved their correct answers, from fall to spring, from 47% to 63.8% or by 35.7% while 6th graders, who had no philosophy, improved their score from 53.8% to 59.4 or by only 10.4%. In the fall of 1993 the students answered a questionnaire "How did you like philosophy?" Of the 17 questions the first question was:

I thought that philosophy was:

Fun..... 1 2 3 4 5Boring

Example or explanation:

In Iceland we usually use a grading system of ten points, giving the highest grade for the best performance. In this questionnaire it was vice versa. In the example above the children circled one of the numbers and then they were free to offer examples or explanations. The average for this question was 2.3 ranging from 1.73 to 2.83. The students gave various examples to support their choices, for example, they stated "My teacher" in support for options 1 as well as 5. A student who circled number 2 stated: "It was boring reading the book but yet I want to read it more." A student who circle number 3 stated: "It depended on whether I was tired or not." A student who circled number four wrote: "One had always to give reasons for everything."

Question 13:

The story we read was:

Fun..... 1 2 3 4 5Boring

Example or explanation:

The average here was 2.66 ranging from 2.15 to 2.9. An example of the support for the chosen numbers follows:

1: "I like exciting and funny stories." 1: "One could think and speak more clearly." 2: "I liked it very much but yet I understood not everything but some of the things that were in it." 3: "It was not exciting." 3: "I learned a lot but the story was not especially funny." 4: "It was often boring." 4: "Because it was never the same." 5: "It was so much of stupid imagination," this was the only support given for number 5.

The results from question 1 and 13 show that the Icelandic kids were positive towards philosophy. Philosophy and the novel about Harry Stottlemeier did certainly work although it

was not a source of constant joy. One of the things to keep in mind was that the teachers were surprised to discover how poorly their own students read. *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* was a difficult reading for the 5th graders; they could handle the thinking, but too many students had difficulties with the reading. (A 12 year old Icelander has over 3,000 fewer hours of school than a 12 year old American student.) Another thing to keep in mind was that this was the teacher's very first attempt to do philosophy and it must have been difficult to engage the students in a continuous 80 minute fun-philosophy session.

Question 14:

I recommend philosophy in more schools:

Definitely..... 1 2 3 4 5 ...Definitely not

Example or explanation:

The average here was 1.93 ranging from 1.28 to 2.5 Fifteen of the students who circled number 1 supported their choice most in the spirit: "Because philosophy is so good and full of understanding." There were only seven more comments on options 2-5. The most negative ones: "Philosophy is boring." "Philosophy is tiresome."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Jespersen's advice to teachers in "this country and abroad" (p. 71) is to read; "read Lipman's manuals, read the Danish evaluations, read the Swedish evaluations, and read Barbara Bruning's books. Then you will feel ready and might be able to write your own texts or work from novels or short stories you already know" (p. 71). This advice is both unrealistic and unwise. Swedish and Danish are not popular languages on the international scale; for the advice to be practical we need at least an abstract in English of the evaluations. For those of us who do read Swedish and Danish we need exact references to be able to order or locate the evaluations.

The advice is unwise because experience has shown that reading alone is not sufficient to prepare the ordinary teacher to do philosophy with children. In many places channels are opening in teacher education where the inexperienced philosophy teachers are given first hand experience of a philosophical dialogue within the setting of a community of inquiry plus

the supporting theory.

I urge Danes to share their experience with the rest of us. I hope no one needs to urge them to learn from others where appropriate.

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