

# Moral Reasoning as Part of a Primary School Programme

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Cath Milvain

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After the turbulent times of the 80s, research suggests a resurgence of the community's desire for ethical practice to become an integral part of a decision making process. To reach an ethical decision, an individual must first determine what is morally acceptable to self and to others. Investigation of the process of moral reasoning becomes a positive addition to a primary school curriculum in that it enhances the acquisition of life-long learning skills for each student.

## MORAL REASONING

Moral reasoning must be the cornerstone of all decision making for individuals who accept a responsibility to themselves, to the society within which they function, and to the wider world to which all humanity contributes. Given that society is in continual change, the individual must have the mechanism for evaluating and managing any changing standards. There is a responsibility to present children who will live in the unknown environment of the future with the tools which allow them to consider dilemmas and which promote rational, creative and moral thinking. The tool of moral reasoning is, I believe, too important to be achieved only as an incidental outcome of the 'hidden agenda' of a classroom; rather it should be a specific learning outcome of a planned curriculum.

By the term moral reasoning, I mean using cognitive skills to:

- endeavour to examine all facets of a dilemma
- evaluate this understanding of the situation against known experiences
- imagine, and deliberate upon possible avenues of action
- consider personal and societal effects and affects of actions, and then
- select the most appropriate behaviour from within this considered range of choices.

A school environment is an ideal place to help individuals begin to set their own standards of behaviour. Within a school community, children can no longer rely solely on rules set by adults, but must look towards establishing their own principles of conduct. Educators, therefore, have a responsibility to present children with curriculum which helps to develop their ability to think rationally, independently, creatively and morally. Existing theories of moral development as found in Kohlberg<sup>1</sup> and Gilligan<sup>2</sup> suggest that development can be stimulated by crisis, or conflict, or because of internal dissatisfaction forcing a change in behaviour. Kohlberg saw individuals operating at a certain level until their cognitive knowledge allowed them to discern flaws in their reasoning ... a state of dysfunction. A school curriculum could encourage students' moral development by incorporating an examination of feasible dilemmas as a means of acknowledging these perceived flaws in their reasoning and thereby stimulating a state of transition for these students.

However, providing primary-aged students with the opportunity to actively challenge their moral reasoning without providing a supportive environment to reason and rationalise the motives for their thoughts would be irresponsible, and an abjuration of the role of an educator's custodianship of these students. Philosophical dialogue within a community of inquiry is as an ideal method of allowing students to step outside their comfort zone to challenge the reasons for decision making, whilst, at the same time, ensuring that they remain within an environment which sustains them throughout this risk taking. Such an environment would also provide the

necessary opportunity to listen to the suggestions, judgements and beliefs of peers.

## PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

Philosophy, as a curriculum subject for primary aged children, is a relatively new addition to Australian curriculum. But the aims of philosophical inquiry e.g. an examination of thinking, an understanding of motives for actions, the capacity to analyse rather than repeat, and an ability to perceive the inter-connection of ideas are too closely linked to current curriculum goals to be ignored by teachers. A community of inquiry also can become an ideal vehicle for teachers to observe students who are practising, and effecting, the learning outcomes detailed in these curriculum documents.

A true philosophical dialogue will include more than just empirical questioning and statements of knowledge. It should contain more than anecdotal instances and exchange of ideas and opinions. Dr Laurance Splitter, (1994, p.3) identifies three major components of a philosophical discussion or inquiry:

1. reflection on, and evaluation of the processes of reasoning and inquiry, as shown in the language of the classroom community,
2. reference to general concepts which help our understanding and are regarded as contestable, and
3. questions and statements which reveal a search for connections that make for meaning. (p.7)

Socratic dialogue<sup>3</sup> engages inquiry to extend knowledge rather than 'learning' the thinking or works of other people. When Socratic dialogue is used to encourage philosophical thinking, a child is nurtured in the art of using questions to instigate discussion. While an open discussion session (where questions are posed and answered) allows a person to voice an opinion, a philosophical dialogue ensures the speaker fully clarifies any vague or unsubstantiated ideas, and allows these opinions to be tested against the views of peers and protagonists.

Listening to other peoples' conceptions of occurrences, and reflecting upon the judgement of others, gives the child the opportunity to test her own conclusions and decisions. The child is provoked to challenge her own thinking and to then articulate her own considered beliefs. In so doing, she becomes an active participant in the process of extending cognitive abilities ... taking the cognitive into the metacognitive. While thoughts can be emerging, wavering, developing, changing and re-forming, asking a student to vocalise opinions places upon her the necessity to gather together any loose or unsubstantiated ideas and actually organise, accept or reject, and to then process them into a stated belief. While this opinion is not always a finite stance, its pronouncement does imply that evaluation of choices has occurred.

## A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

Discussion is beneficial to all when it is conducted with a sense of respect and care for everyone's emotions and beliefs, in situations where each child is seen as a unique individual, and where any new ideas generated can enrich the knowledge of all. This is the atmosphere fostered within a community of inquiry.

In a community of inquiry, seating is arranged in a circle so that each person within the group is open to each other, and facial expressions and body language are equally visible to all participants. There should be no perceived 'leader' as no participant is of more or less importance than another. In the early stages of forming a community, a ball (or similar item) can be used to designate the speaker who should be allowed the courtesy of uninterrupted speech. (The teacher should ensure that this talk is 'on track'.) If the teacher is to see herself as part of this community, she must also sit and respond within the circle. All discussion must be free of the imposition of the teacher's personal values, and it must be conducted with a true sense of impartiality, as anything else is the antithesis of philosophical inquiry.

Issues to be discussed are raised by the children's own inquiry and are, therefore, authentic. These questions may be recorded for a later discussion or treated as they arise in the dialogue. To examine and pursue these issues, each child must feel secure - yet confident to take intellectual risks. During discussion times, children are encouraged to move beyond simple anecdotal contributions. 'Conversation' must transcend the normal aspects of discussion of events and characters to encompass the reason for action, the analysis of cause and effect, and yet allow participants to stay in touch with their own experiences.

Dialogue is encouraged to flow freely between the students and should arise from their responses to

each other, rather than didactic questioning from the teacher. Students are encouraged to support each other, question each other, build onto each others' ideas and opinions, or offer a counter-instance to points raised when this is suitable or justified. It is the reasoning which may be called into refute ... not the speaker. A major aim of dialogue is to allow children the opportunity, and the time, to become reflective thinkers, considering and evaluating the opinions of others as well as their own ideas. Dialogue is not just the passing on of information. Instead, emphasis is given as to how results were reached, and whether these are reasonable, responsible and reliable. There is excellent opportunity to discuss the narrowness of a biased opinion or one which simply reflects common stereotyping of people or emotions.

For such an intimate and protective environment to exist, the teacher must allow personal freedom, yet retain sufficient direction to ensure that there is opportunity for everyone who wishes to contribute and that no member of the community feels threatened. Unless sufficient time and encouragement is given to promote and develop this secure atmosphere, then the resultant group discussion sessions will not be a truly functioning community of inquiry.

### A CLASSROOM PROGRAMME FOR TEACHING MORAL REASONING

Just as children need practice in reasoning and performing in school subjects such as mathematics and physical education, they cannot be expected to be 'good' at making decisions based on moral reasoning without the opportunity to practise moral thinking. Alberto Knox makes an analogy for Sophie (Gaarder, 1995, p.98) "Common sense and conscience can both be compared to a muscle. If you don't use a muscle, it gets weaker and weaker."

To implement this practice, I therefore looked at establishing a classroom programme based on this need to present children with situations in which to test, and review, their criteria for solving a moral dilemma. My plan was to build on the previously mentioned theory that moral development can be encouraged by using the challenge of self-examination to create opportunities to encourage a sense of dysfunction. Support for such a programme is offered by Shweder et al. (Kagan and Lamb, 1987, p.7) when referring to Kohlberg's stages of moral development:

*He [Kohlberg] argues that with the development of processes of rational reasoning (for example formal operational reasoning as described by Piaget) and exposure to proper education (for example, engagement in Socratic dialogue), the individual will recognize the conceptual inadequacies of the lower level of understanding and adopt a higher, more rationally defensible conceptual level. The underlying assumption is that in a creature endowed with the capacity for rational thought, as that capacity is cultivated, the development of moral understanding will tend in the direction of what is most rational.*

Given my agreement with the above statement, I looked at establishing a classroom programme which combined elements suggested above:

- development of processes of rational reasoning
- engagement in Socratic dialogue
- recognition of the conceptual inadequacies of the lower level of understanding
- adoption of a higher, more rationally defensible conceptual level.

The aim was for students to explore realistic, or probable, circumstances depicted in picture story books through philosophical dialogue in a community of inquiry.

Picture story books were chosen for my work as I believe that this is an ideal medium with which to present a complete scenario suited to primary students' cognitive understanding. Modern picture story books have emerged as a viable method of introducing, in a concise text format, experiences which will appeal to children and leave room for reflection and wonder. The story line presents a contextual perspective which children can understand and which actively encourages their empathy with characters, yet allows them the privacy of investigating their own worries and misapprehension through the words and deeds of the characters.

In the selection of picture story books, I set for myself specific criteria:

- the books must be inviting to the child text must be well written and illustrations aesthetically

pleasing

- character and plot should be clearly identifiable to allow empathy to build between the reader and the author
- there must be a sense of wonderment within the story to enthuse the child to query further the issues raised within the text
- issues presented by the characters of the story must be relevant to the cognitive level of the child
- the contents of the book should extend the reader's knowledge of a specific theme
- the unfolding of the storyline should expand the child's understanding of herself and of her potential impact on others
- the author must present issues with a sense of honesty and, if required, a restraint which allows work to be appropriate to the age of the intended reader
- ideas presented within the story should induce further individual reflection
- within the range of books presented to the children, the story lines needed to represent a variety of other cultures, creeds etc.

An astute selection of picture-story books is essential for the honesty of the suggested programme of developing moral reasoning. At the same time, it must be stressed that it is equally important that the development of moral reasoning should not be the only criteria for selection of literature presented to students; nor should it be the sole means of presenting literature experiences to students.

## RESEARCH INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TEACHING METHODOLOGIES

In my investigative research, I compared a teaching technique of incorporating philosophical dialogue in a community of inquiry, with the discussion techniques used by three other teachers. I endeavoured to have only one controlled variable i.e. the method used for discussion of the dilemma presented in the text. The research involved fifty-eight children from across a year three and a year four class at the same school. Each class was randomly divided into two groups - one group working with a philosophical dialogue (Teacher A) and the other group responding to the direction of the classroom teachers and an emergency teacher (Teachers B, C and D). At the end of eight lessons (four at each class level), written and audio-taped transcripts were analysed using the following four criteria:

1. whether the flow of dialogue between participants of each discussion session showed active participation by the students,
2. whether the amount of discussion time was equitably distributed between the participants of the discussion e.g. students and teacher
3. whether student responses were spontaneous (voluntary) or whether these comments were only given as responses to teacher questioning (either open, or directed)
4. that within the discussion dialogue, students were encouraged to take intellectual risks and offered independent ideas; that their responses showed a reflective dimension; and that they recognised an empathy for characters in the selected dilemma,

Each session was further analysed to establish whether moral reasoning was evident in sessions taken by other staff to the same degree as in the discussion sessions incorporating philosophical dialogue.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

### 1. Pattern of dialogue

The flow of dialogue was graphically interpreted by drawing lines between people as each participated in the discussion. (See Figure li-iv) In all instances, these lines indicate that discussion sessions taken within a community of inquiry (Teacher A) allow students to discuss ideas within the group - suggesting the beginnings of an active involvement in a democratic process. In all sessions taken by the other teachers, this inter-connecting

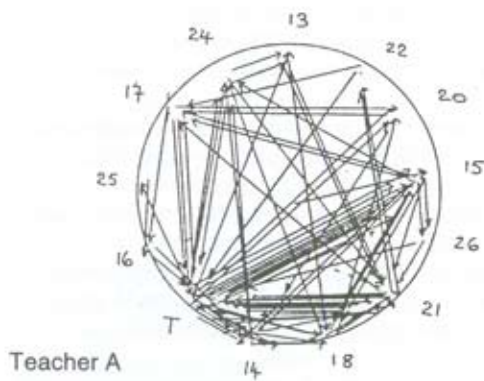


Figure 1i

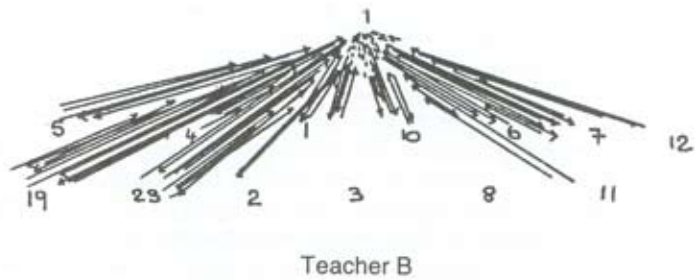


Figure 1ii

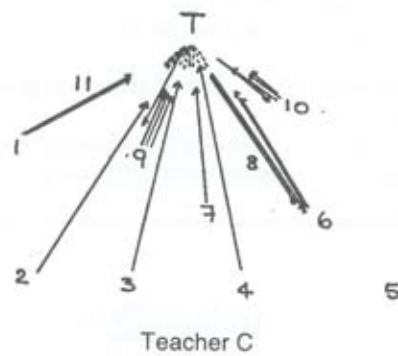
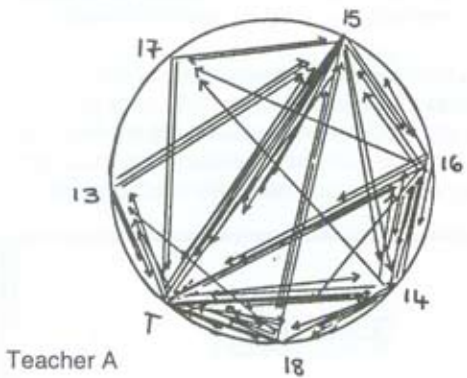


Figure 1iii

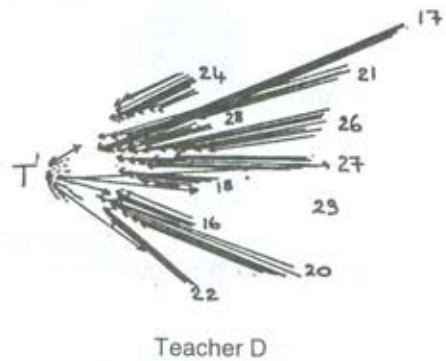
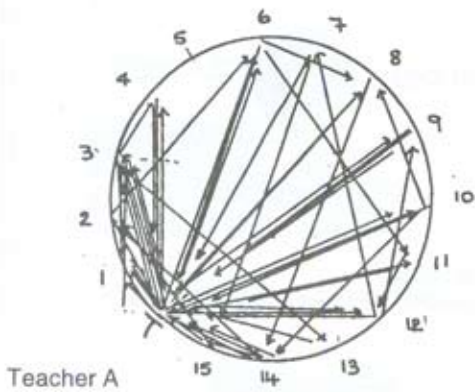
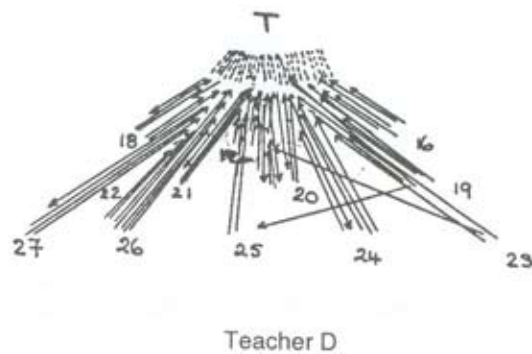
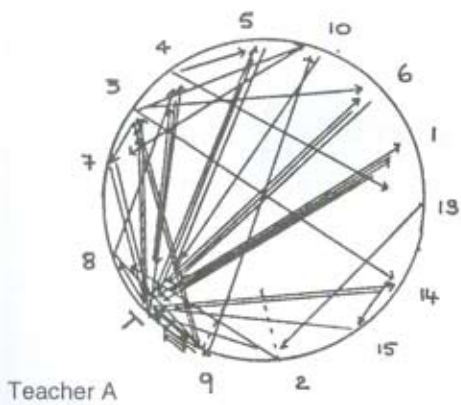


Figure 1iv



pattern was not observed. Instead lines of dialogue were consistently from teacher to student, or from student to teacher.

## 2. Distribution of dialogue time

The proportion of time given to each teacher's speaking (apart from story reading), and the time occupied by students' dialogue during the same session, was taken from the audio tapes of each session. These amounts were shown as a percentage of the entire dialogue time. As there were fifteen students and one teacher participating in most discussion sessions, it is important to remember that student time shown in the following figures is a combination of all student dialogue. Each graph indicates that in the philosophical dialogue sessions taken by teacher A, there was increased opportunity for students to vocalise their ideas and opinions than was evident in the sessions which followed the teaching styles of the other three teachers in this research.

## 3. Comparison of the type of responses given by students

Oral responses given by the students during each discussion session were analysed to determine the factor which influenced this response i.e. was it voluntary, or was it teacher instigated. Responses fell across three categories:

**voluntary** - when the student, independent of the teacher's prompt, contributed to the discussion session. It is this area of responses one would expect to form the largest proportion of participation of a discussion session

**open** - when the teacher posed a question to the class which could then be answered by any student in the group who wished to offer a solution, or

**direct** - this type of response was given as the result of a teacher's question being directed to a particular student.

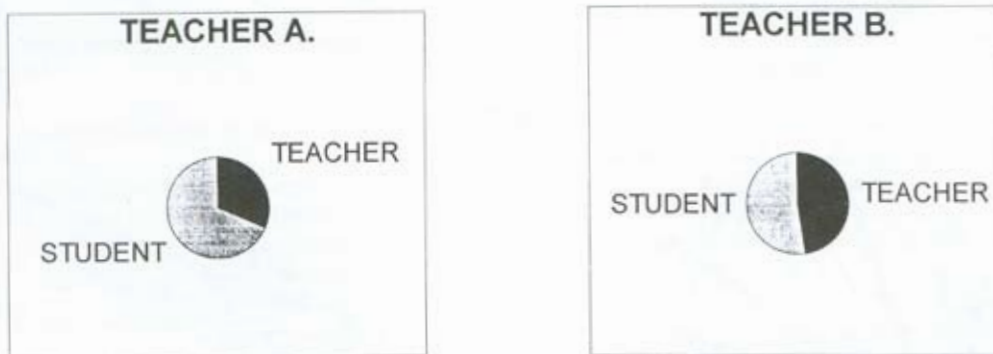


Figure 2i: Session 1. Lessons 5 and 7.

Comparison of the proportion of time given to student discussion with that given to teacher.

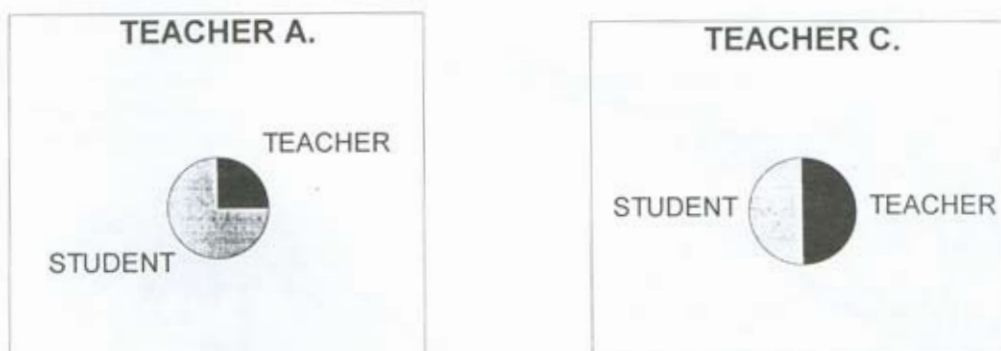


Figure 2ii: Session 2. Lessons 1 and 3.

Comparison of the proportion of time given to student discussion with that given to teacher.

Given that directed questioning can be instrumental in including all members of the class, this style of discussion does not readily allow students to raise issues either important or interesting to them; nor does this method give students the opportunity to test their ideas against the opinions of their peers. While any student may answer a question posed to the class in general (open), and the technique of open-ended questioning can allow students to offer their interpretation, this method of conducting a discussion session has a major complication. In the actual posing of the questions, whether these are directed to specific children or are open to be answered by any student, or open-ended enough to allow the child to offer a personal interpretation, the teacher is still selecting the question and, thereby, is determining the path of the discussion. Unless these questions are posed with the Socratic ideal discussed by Fisher (e.g. to encourage philosophical inquiry), the students are given little opportunity to pursue their own concerns or ideas of the topic under review, or to challenge another person's ideas, or to reflect, and vocalise, upon their own personal opinions and beliefs. The following pie graphs (Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6) show the preferred discussion technique of each teacher. They also specifically highlight that, in my study, the students' participation by offering their own ideas and opinions (voluntary) is consistently more noticeable in lessons conducted in the community of inquiry established by Teacher A. This would indicate that a base is being prepared for participation in democratic living, and that there is the beginning of an understanding of the mores of society - the society wherein the child functions i.e. that of the students' peers.

#### 4. Frequency of the occurrence of 'philosophical' thinking

'Effectiveness' is often a subjective judgement. In this investigative research, effectiveness of responses is based on the type of questions posed and debated by the students, their ability to demonstrate reflective thinking and evidence of the practising of democratic behaviour. It was important that participation, or eloquence, should not mask lack of substance in the students' contribution to the discussion.



Figure 2iii: Session 3. Lessons 2 and 4.  
Comparison of the proportion of time given to student discussion with that given to teacher.

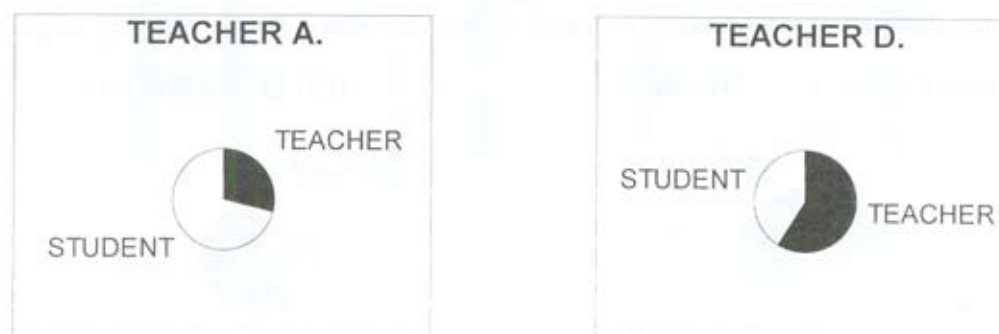
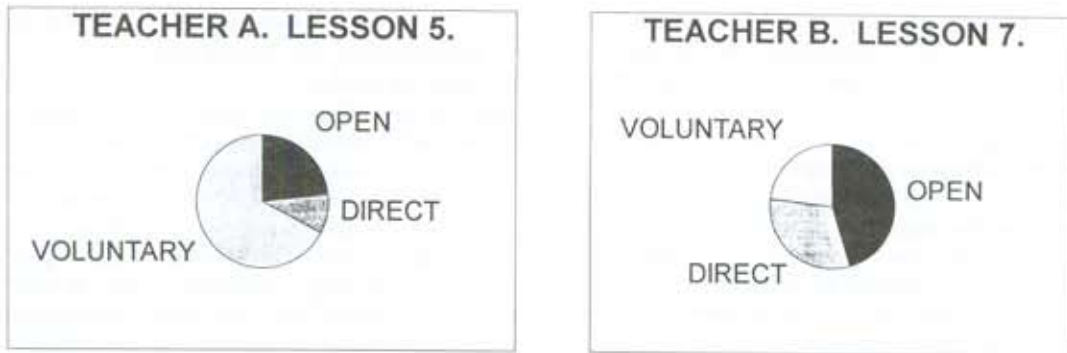
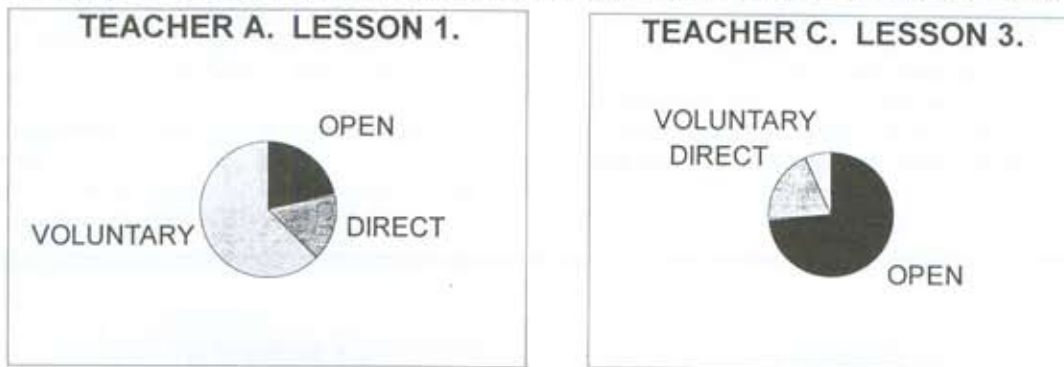


Figure 2iv: Session 4. Lessons 6 and 8.  
Comparison of the proportion of time given to student discussion with that given to teacher.



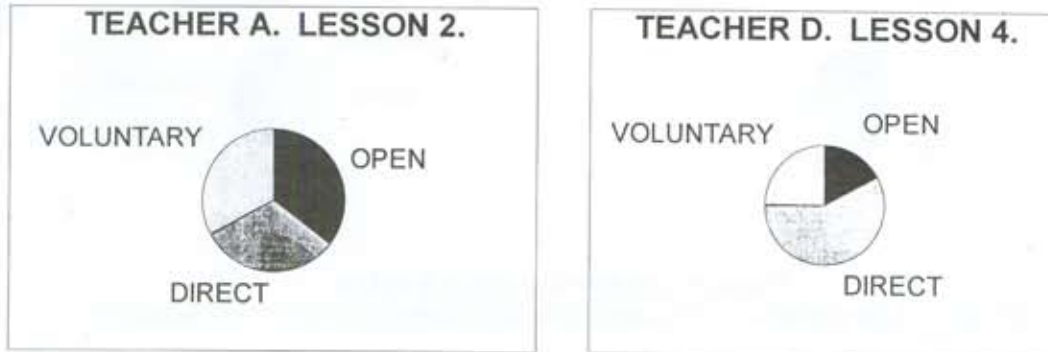
**Figure 3.**

Proportion of student responses given as a result of the discussion technique of Teachers A and B in Session 1.



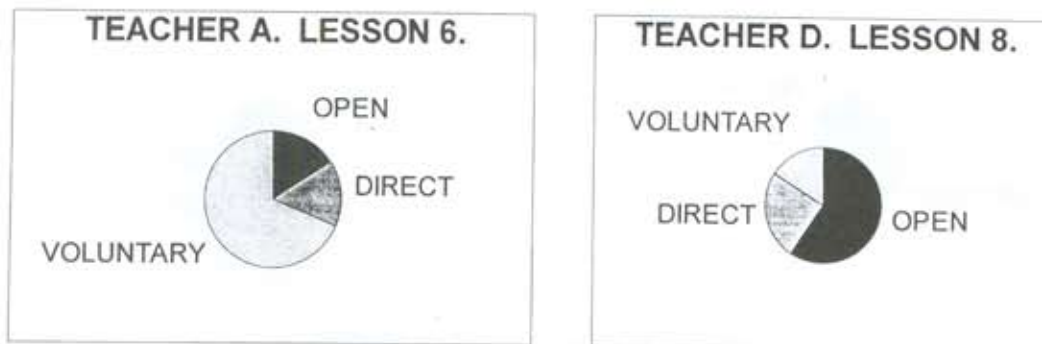
**Figure 4.**

Proportion of student responses given as a result of the discussion technique of Teachers A and B in Session 2.



**Figure 5:**

Proportion of student responses given as a result of the discussion technique of Teachers A and D in Session 3



**Figure 6:**

Proportion of student responses given as a result of the discussion technique of Teachers A and D in Session 4.



Student responses were analysed to establish the frequency of factors which I judged to be indicative of a philosophical dialogue. These were:

#### F1. intellectual risk

these responses showed that the student had listened to the discussion and offered a point not yet discussed, or introduced a new topic which still demonstrated a link with the original discussion.

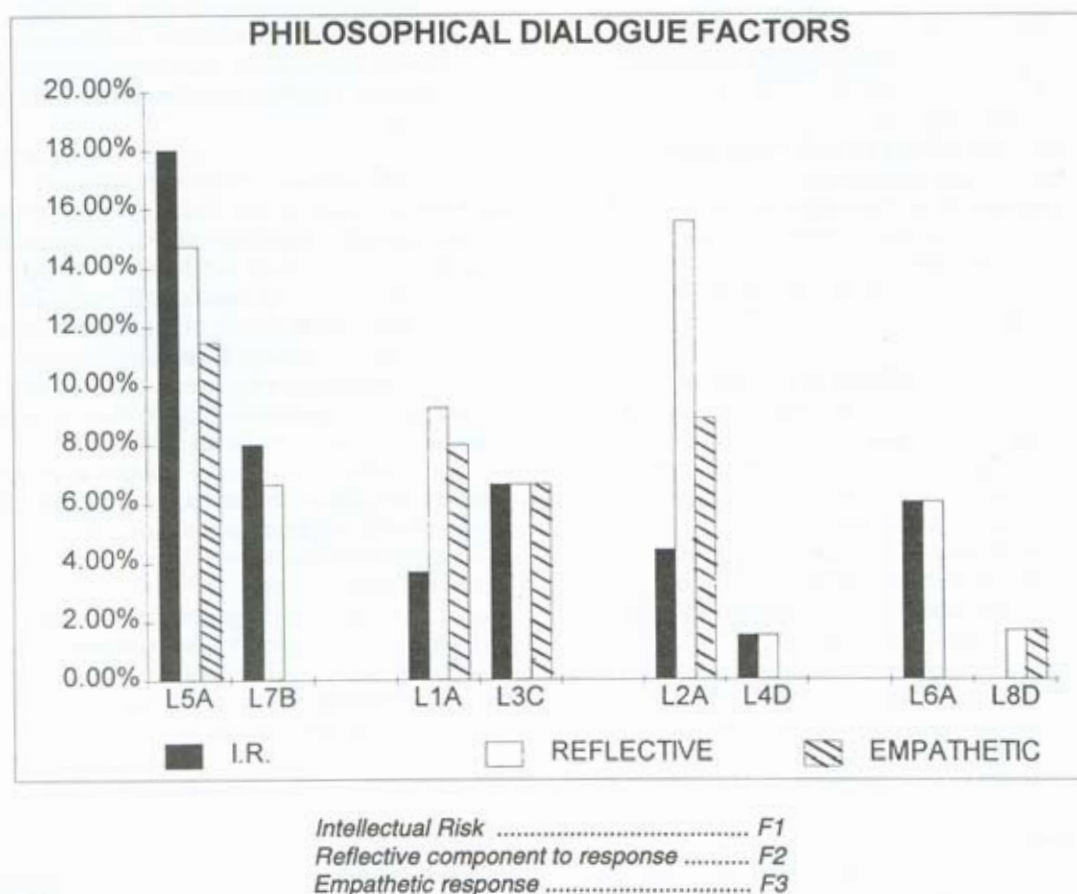
#### F2. reflective:

these responses showed that the student had listened to discussion, and gave a new dimension to the point under review.

#### F3. empathetic:

these responses drew upon a relevant personal experience to explain a point. (By the term empathetic, I am emphasising empathy, rather than the relating of a personal tale)

The graph below shows the distribution of the above factors which I regard as containing a philosophical dimension. These responses are tabled as a percentage of all responses during each lesson, as not all student responses fell into the categories previously indicated. The continual higher occurrence of these factors in lessons with Teacher A indicate that such a discussion session is actively challenging the students to consider, reflect and offer ideas and opinions which increase the group's knowledge of the dilemma, or which offer a new and rational perspective to the discussion.



**Figure 7:**

A comparison of all lessons to show the consistency of the incidence of the previously identified factors within all philosophical dialogue lessons taken by teacher A.

Together with the factors detailed in Figure 7, I see the pattern of communication (See Figure Ii-iv), the increased time for students to vocalise their ideas about points of a discussion (See Figure 2i-iv) and the consistently high instances of volunteered responses as shown in Figures 3-6, as clearly indicating that philosophical dialogue within a community of inquiry does provide opportunity for students to initiate and discuss issues with a moral dimension generated by the selected text.

If an objective was to establish if a particular teaching technique advanced students' cognitive skills of reasoned judgement, then I would judge the students' responses by examples of:

- gaining an overview of a dilemma
- acknowledging the different perspective of peers,
- encouraging the child to clarify, and then articulate, her reasons for reaching a decision on a topic under discussion.

## THE OCCURRENCE OF MORAL REASONING

An aim of this investigation was to observe instances of moral reasoning which arose from the reading of literature suited to the development of the child, and which presented moral issues in a context readily understood by a primary aged student.

If an aspect of moral reasoning takes into account listening to others in society, then I would look for:

- when children took heed of others by reference to another child's comment, or built upon this, or offered a counter-instance
- children talking to each other without the need of direction from the teacher
- preparedness to change ideas or opinions because of a point raised by some-one else
- projection of self into characters, or situations.

If I define independence of thought as an indication of the setting of personal goals, then I would look for examples of

- risk taking - where children change direction or introduce a new approach to a point under discussion
- the offering of a counter-instance
- moral issues issuing from the child's desire to know, rather than the teacher leading the child to know
- the teacher allowing children to practise moral reasoning by pursuing discussion on issues raised by the children
- opportunities provided for children to express their own responses to the narrative
- that discussion will transcend the normal aspects of discussion of events and characters to encompass the reason for action, the analysis of cause and effect.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When moral issues arose in lessons with Teacher B, C and D, opportunity was not taken to pursue these points with the students, nor were these ideas fully developed by the teacher.<sup>4</sup> The development of the moral issues, of interest and pertinence to the students, is improved by the atmosphere inherent to a community of inquiry.

*a social climate characterised by freedom of thought and communication that encourages discussion and tolerates dissent is expected to create a climate where moral reasoning is facilitated.* (Sridhar and Camburn, 1993, p.730)

If literature can add to the cultural and aesthetic scholarship of a child, and also be used to build an understanding of the development and practice of moral values, while encouraging empathy for another person's position and feelings, then surely this is to the advantage of that child and to society. Literature helps to "open" these societies and advances universal knowledge and understanding. When this study of a literary work is linked with a philosophical discussion which is reflective and probing, then I believe evidence has been documented that this approach will heighten appreciation and understanding of the moral dilemmas presented within the text.

It is my subjective judgement that in the philosophical discussion sessions in this study, dialogue went beyond the realm of 'open discussion' to that of philosophical discussion - if Splitter's indicators are used as a criteria of assessment.

Certainly this is the aim of an education for life, one which will assist students, when they are ready, to make sound and responsible decisions to empower them to control their contribution to their own life, to live effectively and productively within a community and allow them to confront the many new dilemmas that progress of mankind must always bring.

#### RECOMMENDATION THAT MORAL REASONING BECOME PART OF A CLASSROOM PROGRAMME AND OF A PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Attunement with society is too important to be left to 'incidental' teaching, and should become part of a primary school programme. The philosophy of such a programme is not to 'teach' values, but rather to allow children to understand why a functioning world society needs to set certain criteria for behaviour between the people of this world.

As Gilbert (1988, p.6) advises, these concepts:

*should not be taught as abstract and objective definitions, nor as doctrines which can be authoritatively imposed, but as guiding principles for human conduct and decision-making whose meaning must be decided in particular situation.*

The four comparative sessions held at each class level to gauge consistency of findings, I acknowledge, are a small sample. A more extensive comparison involving an increased number of students across a wider range of schools and classes, would allow for a more comprehensive overview.

The research I undertook showed that moral reasoning skills (see p. 1) are being practised when a philosophical dialogue is the teaching technique being used. This suggests that such a teaching style, when combined with the contextual advantage of literature, is an effective way of introducing primary school children to confronting and working through dilemmas with a moral dimension and could therefore benefit their life now and in the future. This belief that children are capable of reasoning morally is evident in this statement from Matthew Lipman:

*Children who have developed the capacity for sizing up situations, having insight into their character, having imagination as to what can possibly be done to improve their unsatisfactory aspects, and having the courage to act on alternatives that seem to them most reasonable and plausible .... are already morally responsible. Lipman, 1980, p.77*

Educators have a moral responsibility to provide the opportunity for children to practise these skills. Adequate training in the method of conducting philosophical dialogue within a community of inquiry should be available to teachers who perceive in this methodology, valuable opportunities to increase and enhance the living skills of their students. Inclusion within a teacher training curriculum would be of benefit to teachers and to students, as this method of nurturing a student's natural sense of wonder and inquiry, could be implemented within each of the learning areas designated by current curriculum documents.

#### NOTES

1. Lawrence Kohlberg is a major theorist in the domain of moral development. His research has led him to identify three levels of moral development which he sees as cognitive and rigidly sequential, and very much based on a person's understanding and implementation of the sense of justice.

2. In *In A Different Voice* Carol Gilligan emphasizes the value of care and concern for the feelings and well-being of others as an equal criterion when evaluating and individual's moral development. While mainly observing this caring attribute in the thinking of women, Gilligan states this characteristic to be relevant to the judgement of the moral development of both male and female.

3. This view of Socratic dialogue was presented by Rob Fisher in his paper "Socratic Education - a new paradigm for philosophical enquiry" which was presented at the 7th annual ICPIE/FAPCA Conference, Melbourne. July. 1995.

4. This seems to support the principle of the VPCA that the teaching style of certain teachers allows for open discussion, but teachers need specific training to be able to perceive, and then to develop, philosophical issues which arise within classroom discussion.

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Address correspondence to:

**Cath Milvain**  
**Toorak College**  
**P.O. Box 150**  
**Mount Eliza. 3930**  
**Victoria**  
**Australia**