

Learning to Philosophise and to Argue

A THINKING SKILLS PROGRAMME FOR CHILDREN

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My purpose in this paper is to offer an account of a thinking skills programme which focuses both on the teaching of philosophy and of argument. The programme is based on three assumptions: (1) teaching critical thinking is essential to any adequate notion of 'education for citizenship'; (2) such teaching acts as a counter to certain kinds of indoctrination; (3) young children are willing and able to engage in philosophical discussion and debate. The central goal of my programme, 'Teaching Philosophical Thinking and Argument', is to promote the development of thinking, reasoning and argument skills through the discussion of philosophical issues. In what follows, I shall examine the theoretical underpinnings of the programme and how it is conducted, in practice, in the classroom.

My interest in the theory and practice of 'argument' derived from a prior involvement in the teaching of philosophy to young children. This, in turn, came about as a result of research interests I had in the philosophy of education - in particular the notion of 'indoctrination'. Having made a distinction between justifiable and unjustifiable indoctrination and argued that certain indoctrinatory outcomes of the teaching process are to be combated (Costello, 1987), I looked for an appropriate educational vehicle to accomplish this task. I became aware of Matthew Lipman's 'Philosophy for Children' programme through his *Thinking. The Journal of Philosophy for Children* and subsequently developed my own programme for undertaking philosophy with pupils of primary school age (see, for example, Costello, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1995a, 1995b). In Britain, the idea of engaging children in philosophical conversations or dialogues was relatively new and some justification for its inclusion in the curricula of primary schools was required (Costello, 1989). As a number of different approaches to the teaching of philosophy became apparent, I argued that this diversity should be welcomed by teachers, researchers and proponents of the various programmes (Costello, 1994a).

At the present time in Great Britain, the teaching of philosophy in schools has become the subject of critical scrutiny. Following the success of Jostein Gaarder's book *Sophie's World* (1995), a lengthy article appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper entitled 'Laura and Paul do Profundity'. In offering a critique both of some of the theoretical perspectives underpinning the teaching of philosophy in schools and of the practices that take place in its name, the author, Jenny Turner (1996) refers to the work of proponents and critics of such teaching. As regards the latter, Turner interviewed Professor John White of the London Institute of Education whom she reported to have said the following (p. 26): 'Obviously we want people to learn to think. And this stuff is certainly attention-grabbing and I daresay there are good things about it, but it isn't really philosophy. For it to be philosophy, [the children would] have to move on from simple questions and arguments to more complex and sustained ones. And I've never seen any evidence that they do.'

In his 'The Roots of Philosophy' (1992), White examines the claims of those he refers to as 'enthusiasts for children's philosophising' (p. 74). In doing so, he suggests, 'We need, first, to test whether the accounts that theorists give of what children do match the facts. A first issue here is whether children in fact say what they are alleged to say. Do young children typically - or indeed ever - ask "What are possibilities?" "What is my identity?" "What's value?"? Since we are given no further evidence we cannot judge, but it is rather hard to swallow' (p. 74). White also raises a second issue of concern, namely 'whether the descriptions theorists give of what children say are always well-grounded' (p. 74).

How might those who support the idea of engaging in philosophical inquiry with children respond to these legitimate concerns? The best way to do so, it seems to me, is to place at centre stage the role of dialogue in

the teaching and learning of philosophy. My own approach to such teaching, which incorporates short stories, samples of reasoning and diagrammatic representations, seeks to do this. Following Pritchard (1985) and Miller (1986), I suggest that, in order to convince the sceptic that what is taking place in the classroom is genuinely philosophical, there is a need to offer substantial transcripts of taped discussions (Costello, 1993). Furthermore, such transcripts require annotation. It is not satisfactory simply to adduce dialogues conducted with children as 'proof that (a) something worthwhile has taken place in the classroom; and (b) that this 'something' justifies the label 'philosophy'. Rather, it is necessary for teachers and researchers in this field to offer their own commentaries in the text. This should ensure that readers are able to judge how proponents of children's philosophising themselves view the work presented, in terms of its content and quality. If, as a result of this rigorous approach, differing perspectives are articulated concerning whether or not what is taking place in schools is genuinely philosophical, then at least the debate will be well informed by the evidence that has been gathered.

My programme differs from that offered by Lipman and his colleagues in terms of theoretical underpinning, content and classroom practice. As regards the first of these, a central tenet of 'Philosophy for Children' is the contention that it is non-indoctrinatory. To support this view, Lipman et al. (1980: 86) make a distinction between 'procedural' and 'substantive' values and suggest that only the latter may be indoctrinated. Procedural values, such as 'coherence, consistency and comprehensiveness' in one's thinking 'are appropriate to *the way* a person should think, not to *what* he should think' (p. 86) and so, argue the authors, it would be inappropriate to accuse teachers of indoctrination when they advocate them. However, as I have suggested elsewhere (Costello, 1994b), even if a distinction between procedural and substantive values can be maintained (which is itself a contentious issue), it is possible to show that Lipman's notion of a 'community of inquiry', the cornerstone of the 'Philosophy for Children' programme, espouses the latter. After all, to advocate a 'readiness to reason, mutual respect... and an absence of indoctrination' (p. 45), is surely to do more than to support 'procedural' values. My own approach to indoctrination views it as, to some extent, unavoidable in educational settings. Therefore, I argue, rather than to risk adopting a less than rigorous approach to the concept, it is preferable to offer open and justifiable commitment to certain values.

In developing my own programme for teaching philosophy to elementary school children, I have sought to adopt an approach that offers teachers opportunities both to initiate and to sustain children's interest in the subject. In order to do this, I suggest that it is necessary to present philosophical ideas through a number of media, and so my programme focuses in particular on short stories, samples of reasoning and diagrammatic representations. At the end of a course of study, I always ask pupils for feedback about the work they have undertaken (and, in particular, about which aspects of the programme they liked best and which parts they would wish to change). Positive comments tend to report satisfaction with the three-fold approach to philosophy, although there are usually some children who say they would have preferred more stories, or samples of reasoning or graphic illustrations.

As regards teaching methodology, either I (or members of the class) begin by reading aloud a story or example of reasoning. With diagrammatic representations, pupils are asked to look at a picture or drawing and to describe what they think is taking place. A range of possible scenarios is then discussed. It is important to say something here about the role of shared reading as a precursor to philosophical discussions. While I accept the arguments of those who suggest that this activity is an important aspect of what Matthew Lipman and his colleagues have referred to as a 'community of inquiry', yet the problem of poor readers is one that constitutes a significant obstacle to success in the classroom. How then are we to overcome this difficulty and to enable pupils to focus on what is, in my view, the central task of a philosophy session, namely the discussion and development of ideas? My own response, where a significant number of the group would have difficulty in doing so themselves, is to read stories to children (who follow the printed text). The ensuing discussions focus on ideas that both teacher and children regard as being of interest and concern. Such an approach is important since practitioners need to be able both to counter criticisms made by those who suggest that they are abdicating responsibility for *teaching* subject matter, while at the same time ensuring that pupils' own views as to what they regard as important are respected and treated seriously.

One aim of this programme is to develop certain philosophical skills with specific reference to the generation of ideas and hypotheses, as well as to the clarification, justification and application of children's own thinking and that of others. In assessing their work, there is a strong emphasis on oral reasoning and

argument in the form of taped dialogues which are transcribed and analysed. This focus on the importance of speaking is, perhaps, one aspect that distinguishes philosophy from other subjects at the elementary school level. Transcripts are annotated to incorporate a commentary on the philosophical aspects of the conversations and a similar approach is adopted to children's writing.

The 'Teaching Philosophical Thinking and Argument' programme has been further developed as a result of a research project, which I co-directed with Richard Andrews, a colleague at the University of Hull, England. We were awarded a grant to explore ways in which the quality of argument in children aged from 5 to 16 years might be improved. This project, which took place over two years, was funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Charitable Trust and focused on work undertaken in ten primary and ten secondary schools. In our final report (Andrews *et al.*, 1993: 16), we offer the following stipulative definition of 'argument', suggesting that it is 'a process of argumentation, a connected series of statements intended to establish a position (whether in speech or in writing), sometimes taking the form of an interchange in discussion or debate, and usually presenting itself as a sequence or chain of reasoning'. One outcome of the project was a schema for assessing students' progress in argument (see Andrews *et al.*, 1993: 47-8), based on the work of one of the teachers involved in the research, John Adamson (Appendix 1).

From an examination of this schema, it will be evident that the teaching and learning of argument is central both to formal programmes for teaching thinking as well as to all academic subjects and disciplines. Whether the forum for teaching is a specific thinking skills course such as Lipman's 'Philosophy for Children', Richard Paul's Critical Thinking programme or Edward de Bono's CoRT *Thinking Programme*, or a particular discipline such as history, science or philosophy, a fundamental pedagogical principle underlying such work is that students should be encouraged to reason and to argue well. If one advantage of the schema is that it may be used to traverse disciplinary and subject boundaries, then a second is, I suggest, that it is not age-specific: in other words the criteria suggested are ones which might be referred to in elementary, secondary and tertiary education.

At the conclusion of the Esmee Fairbairn project, an international conference was held at the University of York, England, one aim of which was to disseminate both its findings and those of another piece of funded research concerned with teaching and learning argument in sixth forms and higher education (see Mitchell, 1994). Subsequently, two books on the theory and practice of argument were published (Andrews, 1995; Costello and Mitchell, 1995). The latter is a collection of essays which examines topics such as: 'Situating the Teaching and Learning of Argumentation within Historical Contexts'; 'Narrative in Argument, Argument in Narrative'; 'Argument as a Key Concept in Teacher Education'; 'Argument and Science Education'; 'Extending Children's Voices: Argument and the Teaching of Philosophy' etc.

In order to illustrate ways in which argument may be taught and learned in different contexts, I offer two brief examples. The first refers to the idea of teaching philosophy to young children which I mentioned above. Here the argument schema is useful because it draws our attention to certain procedural considerations with which children should be acquainted in order to enable them to reason and to argue as *activities in themselves*. For example, when participating in a philosophical conversation or dialogue, children should be able to listen and respond to others' points of view, express a point clearly, give reasons, make comparisons and so on. In addition, the schema is important because it helps teachers and students to focus on a particular kind of argument (in this case, philosophical). So, for example, encouraging a child to show a degree of logic in the development of an argument, to give appropriate reasons, or to evaluate evidence may have a meaning in the context of philosophy which differs (sometimes quite markedly) from paradigms evident in history, science, theology etc. Therefore, one of the first tasks of the philosophy teacher is to elucidate the notion of 'philosophical argument' as a means to establish the disciplinary boundaries within which his/her students are to work (Costello, 1995b).

As regards extending the 'Teaching Philosophical Thinking and Argument' programme, the schema has been utilised in two ways. First of all, I use it as part of an in-service Master's degree module for teachers, entitled 'Thinking, Reasoning and Argument in Education', to illustrate those processes of argument that teachers should be seeking to promote and enhance as part of a philosophical thinking skills course. Secondly, the assessment procedure referred to above has been expanded to include within the commentary on oral or written work specific instances where pupils have demonstrated competence in particular aspects of the schema.

My second example of a context in which it is important for argument to be learned and taught is taken from courses of teacher preparation offered in universities and colleges of higher education. Here our concern as teacher educators is to improve the quality of student teachers' arguments as a means both to enable them to perform better as students (in relation to the theory of education) and, consequently, as beginning teachers (in relation to children, schooling and the educational process). Our supposition is that if we encourage student teachers to reflect seriously on the aims and purposes of education, on the arguments offered by educationalists and others, and on their own role as emergent teachers in the classroom, and if the students, in turn, develop their own reasoned (and perhaps competing) perspectives, then teaching is likely to become increasingly concerned with open enquiry in which children will themselves be encouraged to think critically, to reason well and to argue skilfully and fairly. In order to facilitate these developments, the teacher educators' role is of the first importance. Students need to be acquainted with the theory and practice of argument, to understand its significance in their lives as teachers and, crucially, to be aware of its importance in developing the minds of those children in their care. I believe that the argument schema outlined below offers an excellent starting point to any discussion in which student teachers reflect both on their own academic work and on that of children in elementary and high schools.

In conclusion, I suggest that the teaching of thinking, whether accomplished through programmes devised specifically for the purpose, such as my own, or undertaken through the traditional subjects of the school, college or university curriculum, is inextricably linked with the teaching and learning of argument. An approach to teaching thinking which views argument as central is to be welcomed, not least because it should enable educators to focus on what specific programmes have in common rather than on what sets them apart.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING AND ARGUMENT

Developer: Patrick J.M. Costello

Goal: To promote the development of thinking, reasoning and argument skills through a structured educational programme that focuses on the discussion of philosophical issues.

Sample skills: Developing ideas and hypotheses; clarifying, justifying and applying one's own thinking and that of others.

Assumptions:

- Teaching critical thinking is essential to any adequate notion of 'education for citizenship'.
- Teaching critical thinking acts as a counter to certain forms of indoctrination.
- Young children are willing and able to engage in philosophical discussion and debate.

Intended audience: Elementary school children.

Process: Teacher/children read and discuss short stories, samples of reasoning and diagrammatic representations. This is followed by a discussion of key issues raised both by teachers and children. Assessment involves analysis of taped transcripts and/or children's writing.

Time: One-two hours per week.

Source: Centre for Applied Educational Research, The North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, Plas Coch, Postal Point 36, Mold Road, Wrexham, Clwyd, LL11 2AW, Wales, U.K.

The programme structure adopted here is taken from Costa (1991). *Developing Minds: Programs for Teaching Thinking*. Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.

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NOTE

1. An expanded version of this paper will appear in my forthcoming book, *Liberating Children's Minds: Education, Citizenship and Critical Thinking*, Clevedon, U.K: Multilingual Matters.

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APPENDIX 1

Assessing Progress in Argument**Processes of Argument**

The pupil is able to:

1. express a point clearly
2. take a point of view, express an opinion
3. make a personal value statement
4. express a preference
5. give an example
6. give several examples
7. give appropriate examples
8. make a comparison
9. draw a contrast
10. use an analogy
11. use supposition
12. use persuasive language
13. give a reason
14. give a variety of reasons give appropriate reasons quote evidence
15. weigh up evidence
16. refer to own experience to support arguments
17. appeal to authority (of various kinds)
18. stick to the point, be relevant
19. show a degree of logic in the development of the argument
20. repeat an argument in another form
21. take into account others' points of view

Specific to Oral Argument

22. listen and respond to others' points of view
23. sum up the progress of a discussion or argument
24. speak at length, linking several points together
25. avoid diversion
26. speak with authority, and without hectoring or aggression

Specific to Written Argument

27. vary the structure of written argument
28. write in various forms (e.g. letter, dialogue, essay)
29. use appropriate connectives (e.g. although, nevertheless, on the other hand)
30. introduce and conclude well (if necessary)
31. write in a lively, readable way
32. be sensitive to the purpose of the argument, and to the audience

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