

# An Interview with Matthew Lipman

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The following article is translation into English of a Barcelona, Spain, interview of Matthew Lipman (approximately five years ago) by Eulalia Bosch, then Director of the Catalonia Center for Philosophy for Children. Translation is by Manuela Gomez.

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**E. Bosch:** *What do you think the expression «philosophy teacher» means nowadays? What does «to be a philosophy teacher» mean?*

**M. Lipman:** It means to help children think philosophically, making access to philosophical thinking easy for them. Naturally, the next question would be: what does philosophical thinking consist of? And I would say that it consists of trying to think reasonably about certain concepts that philosophers have always discussed, the nature of which is very general. Since these concepts do not belong to any specific discipline, no discipline deals with these ideas. Concepts such as truth, justice, freedom, relationship..., are not limited to specific disciplines, and, therefore, if you lead children to reflect, to analyze, to discuss and argue about general concepts, then you are leading them to think philosophically. But, immediately you could ask: What does reasonable mean? And I would say that reasonable thinking is critical and creative at the same time. However when someone is being critical or creative or both, she may not be aware she is doing this. I mean that there are a few people who are aware of their thinking processes, and who say to themselves «I am being critical», when they think critically, or «I am being creative» when they think creatively. It would be ridiculous. However, if we had to do it, we could establish the criteria that make critical thinking critical. In this way, I think that teaching this is an initiative in favor of rationality. It is not magic, as when a magician takes a rabbit from the hat. I think also that we are finding the way to do it and I am convinced that this already constitutes an essential part of education. Actually, I do not think it is possible to speak seriously about education without philosophy as a component.

**E.B.:** *Has it always been like this or is this a specific situation of our times?*

**M.L.:** I guess that there have been times when it has been like this and times when it has not. If philosophy feels itself excluded from education, it encloses itself in a ivory tower, and it also loses its interest in education. In such a situation nobody wins. And that has been the case for a long time. Education has washed its hands of philosophy and vice versa. Education has an obligation to the community, and philosophy has an obligation to education, and these obligations must be taken into account.

**E.B.:** *What is the reason that Philosophy for Children has spread all over the world?*

**M.L.:** I think Philosophy for Children, compared with other educative programs, has a particular vision in relation to its international character. Educational projects are more and more aware they must help young people acknowledge other cultures which exist in the world. This means they

have to facilitate the understanding that their way of life is not the only one, that there are many people who have different values, different interests, religions, ways of behaving, artistic manifestations..., and that this situation is mutually enriching. But, at the same time, one can be surrounded by so many cultural riches that perhaps a young person can think there is no connection between them. In other words, there is multiplicity but no integrity. And, in this context, I think that what philosophy can offer is a system of inquiry which can help identify a unifying element which is common to all cultures, a thread running through all of them. But, unless an insistence upon commonality exists, this link with the cognitive traditions we all share will be lost, along with its associated richness and multiplicity.

**E. B.:** *Why is Philosophy for Children presented through narrative novels?*

**M.L.:** In this way philosophy is more accessible, because stories are easier to read than philosophy textbooks. Narratives create a particular momentum that makes you want to read the next page, something that never happens with a textbook. On the contrary, one's eyes get tired, one's mind goes away... Textbooks do not allow that. Textbooks always add more and more information, while novels have an organic unity. Every element works simultaneously in order to create a characteristic moment of inquiry. The fictitious children in the novels are exploring, they are investigating and inquiring. They try to discover the meanings they need. In this sense, the text is important as a tool which facilitates the inquiry. Children, of whatever age, may want to learn and maybe they do not know how to do it. They need to learn how to learn, and, maybe, for that, they need to be in front of a model which shows this clearly. If the book shows this process, it may be easier, once in the classroom, with real children, that everybody will be able to start to think by himself. And the model, understood in those terms, is an emblem, a standard to which one can refer because it shows and explains and does not just try to tell.

**E.B.:** *How do you see, from a philosophical point of view, all those programs that try to emphasize «thinking strategies», « thinking skills», «critical thinking»?*

**M.L.:** From the point of view of the process and focus, philosophy is, in many senses, opposite to the others. Those programs, in considering the problem of how to make children think, all agree that children have to be stimulated to think. They deal with the problem of familiarizing children with thinking tools, but they are very vague when showing how to use those tools. They propose exercises to develop thinking skills, but how are those skills to be orchestrated? What kind of inquiry, what kind of project do they have to motivate children to use those skills? I mean that it is not possible to show people how to use knives and bandages unless you teach them the necessary skills to manage knives or to put on bandages. But this does not mean to teach them medicine. Here there is not a group of values, as with the Hippocratic oath, according to which someone commits himself not to damage, to help the patient and not to cause harm, for example. I mean that you, as a doctor, are free to use the knife as you want, because you have been taught to use it in a good way, which means in a proper way. But without the values, without the criteria and norms, without responsibility, you can use the skills in a very bad way, as Aristotle showed. For this

reason what philosophy does is involve children in a philosophical conversation from the beginning. In this way the problems related to values, conceptual comprehension, etc., appear immediately; the context is settled from the beginning and everything that is said is settled in the context of the discussion that goes on. In this sense what we frequently have is what we call an approach «from up to down» and not in the opposite way: «from down to up». They try teaching the skills from the base, hoping that they will be found on the top, but frequently they become lost. We locate them on the top, all together from the beginning, and the skills will arise by themselves. They will appear naturally, with great spontaneity.

**E.B.:** *Is this the sense that your book «Looking for Meaning» has?*

**M.L.:** Yes, this is one of the aspects behind this title. I think that «looking for meaning» is what children do when they go to school, when they learn to speak, when they learn to read. Why do they want to learn to read so much? Because it is an activity that gives meaning to them. Many times their lives have no meaning, whereas the books they read have. The same applies to the will to communicate with the family. We learn to speak because there is so much meaning we can accumulate if we learn to speak and if we speak with people around us! For the same reason we go to school.

**E.B.:** *Philosophy, understood from this perspective, will probably have an important capacity of transference in school. Is it possible that «Philosophy for Children» could be introduced in a school but not affect the rest of the academic life?*

**M.L.:** I am afraid that this is a situation that happens. Obviously the possibility exists that a child could transfer the skill of questioning, characteristic of the philosophical activity, to another class, and even that this philosophical attitude was welcome in other classes and the investigation kept on. But we must accept that this is at an extreme end of the spectrum. And there is a long way to the other extreme.

**E.B.:** *Can you see some relationship between a university philosophy class and the philosophy class of a teacher who uses «Philosophy for Children» in 4th grade?*

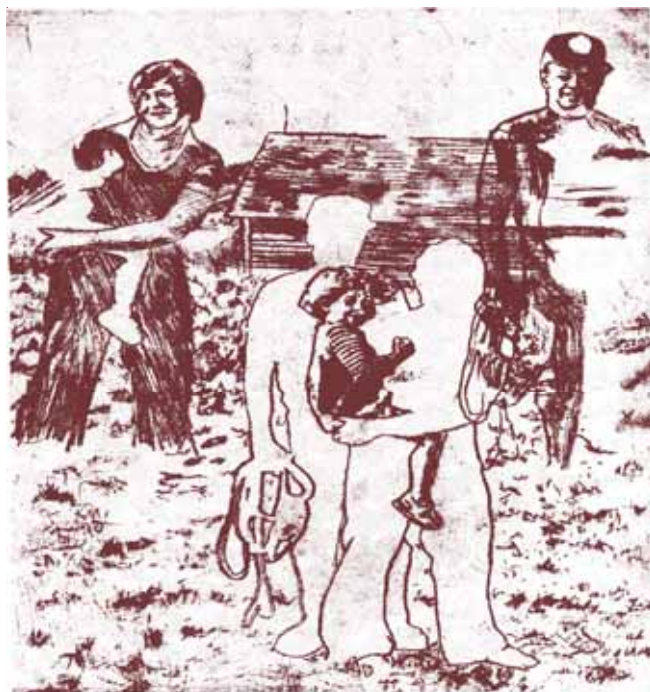
**M.L.:** Both teach philosophy in the context of different designs. In the same way that there are different designs of houses or cars..., there can be different designs of subjects and even within the same discipline, there can be different designs. If the question is: What is the difference between the «Philosophy for Children» class and the traditional philosophy class?, I feel tempted to say that the first is the traditional philosophy class turned inside out. The core of values that is at the heart of philosophy, and to which traditional philosophers never arrive, comes to be in the exterior part, and the small hard bark, generally around the core, in this case, is inside. The philosophy, as Stottlemeier says, has been inverted, in such a way that experience goes first and knowledge goes after, that is, that values are first and reasoning is auxiliary.

**E.B.:** *What would be your evaluation of what happens today in the «Philosophy for Children» domain? What is common to the people who come to «Philosophy for Children», to yourself to the IAPC?*

**M.L.:** Every day more people ask us to explain the Philosophy for Children project, and every day their level of qualification is higher. This circumstance rapidly accelerates the process of development and clarification of the project. Nowadays people know Philosophy for Children all over the world, and this was not the case fifteen years ago. We have survived, but this is a very complex question. The field of education is covered by a cosmetic layer where changes are produced. It is like the sea. There is great agitation on the surface. But the sea is very deep, and possibly there are levels where nothing moves and those are much more comparable to the education field than the ones that are on the surface. The deeper you go, the less movement you find, everything is more monumental and monolithic, using the grandiloquent language of stones. But if you can go into the movement, even if it is the surface movement, and you can be seen, people pay attention to you. Maybe they do not move immediately, maybe they spend their whole life before they move, but that introduces a change of attitude here, an inflection there, a different position follows the continued self-questioning, and things change. Probably nothing changes as fast as we would like. It always upsets us to see so many possible things that are not being done, but we should not worry too much about this. It is better to think how long we have been going and try to make things in a better way to attract a number of people: they exercise an influence and catch the imagination of more people.

**E.B.:** *Would the last goal of Philosophy for Children be to attain a better cognitive level or to attain a better life?*

**M.L.:** A better life. There is no doubt. Knowledge is not an end. We want to build human life, human



experience, so that it will be richer, more pleasant, more appreciated. Why does knowledge have to be an end? This is another problem that teachers have inherited from the university professors. Professors have been seen as the great savants, and it is known that they have dedicated their whole life to the accumulation of knowledge and that seems to be enough reason for us to do the same. Why? Why do we have to imitate professors? They are just distributors of information. Sometimes they are magnificent, they give brilliant lectures that are real art works, and all of us listen to them with our mouths open because they are beautiful. But there are so many beautiful things in the world that we do not consider as models to which to adjust our lives. They give us better means to live the kinds of lives that we have chosen to live.