

Bringing Philosophy to the Classroom

Thinking & Talking Through Literature: Using the Philosophical Inquiry Approach in the Middle Years of Schooling S-8

Colleen Abbott & Susan Wilks Cheltenham, Victoria:
Hawker Brownlow Education, 1997, pp. 79, ISBN:
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reviewed by Sarah Davey

Upon reading the first page of *Thinking and Talking Through Literature*, it is obvious that dedicated educators who have had extensive experience in the classroom wrote this book. They have coupled a respect for children's ability to learn and acknowledgement that they already have some prior knowledge with the inquiry based pedagogy of Matthew Lipman's *Philosophy for Children*. This combination has delivered a book that gives teachers who wish to use philosophical inquiry in the classroom a 'How To' introduction followed by a teaching resource.

Abbott & Wilks introduce children's novels already in print as the basis for their teaching resource. In this way, philosophy can be incorporated into the curriculum through the key learning area of English. Not only do children develop their reading skills, but teachers can also extend on their current or existing literacy programs by incorporating philosophical inquiry as an educational pedagogy to discuss the various issues raised in the novels. As the current Australian school curriculum does not provide space for philosophy, linking inquiry to English gives teachers an opportunity to be innovative in their teaching practices.

Thinking and Talking Through Literature acknowledges the pressures of teaching, and is a practical guide for teachers, thus making it a very accessible resource. Dot points emphasise important information, and further reference points are supplied for those with little or no previous knowledge in philosophical inquiry. This is evidence of the sensitivity of the authors as they recognise different stages of the readers, providing further reading for those who may need more explanation than that which is offered. This is also reflected in their acknowledgement of children's different stages in learning. Throughout the resource section of the book, the main points covered in the introductory chapters are summarised and repeated at the bottom of each page, to act as helpful reminders of what to keep in mind.

There are many examples used by Abbott & Wilks to illustrate philosophy being put into practice in the classroom. Most teachers will easily relate to these situations occurring in their own classrooms. The examples are then followed by a running record of dialogue that might occur, emphasising the important role of the teacher as facilitator in children's inquiry. Teachers unsure of how to facilitate discussion in a Community of Inquiry can model themselves on these case studies.

Showing what teachers may expect when facilitating a Community of Inquiry is not the authors' only concern. Children may encounter many problems when beginning their inquiry, and this is addressed throughout the book. For example, some children may find it difficult waiting for their turn to speak_ This book offers teachers guidance on how to overcome obstacles to beginning inquiry. It also recognizes, as mentioned previously, the different stages in which children learn. Instead of dividing the topics into timeframes, the authors use 'levels' to distinguish the rate at which children's learning progresses. The 'issue questions' are provided to spark philosophical discussion, progressing in complexity through each stage.

This leads onto the teaching resources written for use in the classroom. It is evident that the writers have been concerned with finding a diverse range of books focusing on many cultures; books ranging from German Occult to a Muslim community. The novels are also diverse in issues - each topic lending itself to other issues discussed later in the book in *Thinking and Talking*.

Perhaps most important for effective philosophical discussion in the classroom is the connectedness of the themes and concepts to children's lives. For example, questions such as: «Are we owned by our parents?» or «To what extent do we own our pets?» are indicative of philosophical questions that are raised from the novels. These questions can stimulate discussion that can be potentially meaningful to students. Furthermore, such questions give children the opportunity to imagine, express their own views, and consider consequences, and therefore linking discussion to the children's own interests and experiences.

Activities for the classroom are also carefully thought out, with a variety of individual, small group and class activities. For example, in the chapter 'Existence, Reality and Identity', one activity, which would be popular in the classroom, resembling 'celebrity head', an undeniably popular activity in the classroom, explores the topic of 'identity' through the game 'Guess Who'. One person describes a member of the class for the rest to decide who owns this identity. An activity such as this in which children can have fun through participation enhances their understanding of the concept being explored.

Some of the novels focus on events in history. For example, the novel *Friedrich* find as one of its themes, the Holocaust. This, and the many other social and ethical themes raised in this novel are directly relevant to the social education curriculum, or civics and citizenship education. In Australia, it is particularly relevant to the key learning area of Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE), which emphasizes four key values (democratic processes; social justice; ecological and economic sustainability;

articulated as key elements across the syll conceptual strands (time, continuity, and ch place and space; culture and identity; and syste resources and power).

Thinking and Talking Through Literature is a valuable resource for any educator looking to incorporate philosophy into what is often described by teachers as ‘an already overcrowded curriculum’. Although this book is especially applicable to Australia, it would be beneficial to any English course. Combining a platform of philosophy and practical experience, this book would be particularly helpful to teachers who may be just beginning to incorporate philosophy into their classrooms and to those who have not considered linking inquiry to curriculum, using existing literature.

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