Does Philosophy for Children Belong in School at All?

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> *How can the bird that is horn for joy, Sit in a cage and sing.*
> *How can a child when fears annoy, But droop his tender wing,*
> *And forget his youthful spring.*
>
> -William Blake, from «»The School Boy,» *in Songs of Experience*

I want to talk about the relationship between philosophy for children and school. By school I am referring to kindergarten through high school, and I am thinking especially of public school in the United States (although what I have to say here will apply in other contexts as well). In particular, I am interested in the contrasts between the principles underlying philosophy for children and the predominant features of schooling.

Fundamentally, I think that the practice of philosophy for children and its community of inquiry is revolutionary; it challenges us to reevaluate our conceptions about both the function and the form of schooling. Ultimately, I believe, philosophy for children calls into question the very existence of school, by illuminating the ways in which institutional schooling fails to educate children. I am not at all sure, therefore, that philosophy for children belongs in school at all. Hence the title of this talk. The title is deliberately provocative; but it is intentionally a question, one about which I am quite puzzled and have been doing a lot of thinking.

I bring a particular perspective to this question. I run a center for philosophy for children in the Seattle area, and much of our work is in the public schools. I spend a good deal of time teaching in the schools or working with teachers, administrators, and parents to bring philosophy into classrooms. I also am the parent of three young boys. We have chosen not to send our sons to school, in large part because of the features I discuss here. Instead, they learn at home and out in the world. I lead a homeschooling philosophy class with a group of students ages 8 to 12, including my oldest son.

I will begin by discussing the three central differences between philosophy for children, as I understand it, and the institution of school in which philosophy for children is most often practiced. There are other differences, of course, but the following three are, in my view, the central ones.

First, it seems to me that school is essentially a coercive experience for young people. Few children and young people have any choice about whether to attend school and, in most cases, little or no choice about which school they attend. Once they are there, school tends to be rule-oriented, authoritarian, and hierarchical. Students are expected to follow the rules, which are designed by the adults who run the school and/or school system, and teachers are responsible for enforcing the rules. The adults are in charge, and the students have very little say about what goes on during the school day. With the exception of the content of some assignments (but not, of course, whether to do the assignments at all), students typically lack choice about virtually every aspect of the experience of school. John Taylor Gatto, a former award-winning teacher in New York City public schools, has said that school is «prison for kids.»

Although some schools put up colorful signs declaiming the importance of trust and respect, there is an almost complete lack of genuine trust in children. Trust that they will know what they need to learn and learn what they need to know, in the way we trust an infant to learn to nurse or laugh or walk. Students are understood by schools as undisciplined and requiring the authority of teachers in order to learn. They are not permitted to follow their natural interests and needs to experiment, but are required to follow the rigid path for learning set for them by adults.

Although I have never met a preschooler who was not intensely curious and interested in learning, by the time many children reach third or fourth grade they come to school bored and often disinterested in learning. They know that they are compelled to be in school and do the work required of them there. They cease to wonder, and their curiosity and desire for genuine understanding begin to shut down. Is it any surprise that many students are bored and angry? The need to emphasize «classroom management» in schools of education and K-12 classrooms seems to me a direct outgrowth of the passive learning approach demanded of children by schools.

It is helpful to remember that the institution of public school as we know it is a relatively recent development in the United States. It wasn’t really until the turn of the nineteenth century that public schools were established as compulsory, taking the place of the family in shouldering the responsibility for educating children. Until the late 1800s, most children received their education at home, where their individual needs and developmental paths were more easily taken into account.

Philosophy for children understands learning as natural and different for each individual child. In my view, inherent in philosophy for children is the belief that children do not need to be coerced in order to learn. Children are curious and exhibit great wonder about the world. In a philosophical community of inquiry, we count on that natural curiosity to create questions and develop an inquiry, and we seek to tap children's wonder to help them formulate and express their own points of view. It is the singularity of each child's experience that makes the coming together of perspectives in philosophical discussions so rich. Philosophy for children evinces great trust in children; we trust that they have natural capacities to wonder and think and imagine, and that these are the capacities necessary for genuine learning.

This leads me to the second primary difference between the principles underlying school and those supporting philosophy for children. It seems to me that the primary purpose of school is to inculcate students with what is understood as «knowledge.» The timing and framework for learning is standardized for all children in school; classroom content is invariably teacher-driven, with the curriculum imposed on all students regardless of their developmental levels or interests in a subject. That is, at 7 a student is required to learn to read, at 8 it's time for him to start learning «multiplication facts,» at 14 to study biology.

Students are considered to have «learned» things when they can answer satisfactorily questions on an examination, and they are characterized as «better» students when they achieve high grades on these tests. No one asks whether these students have forgotten by the day following the test whatever it is they memorized in order to do well on it. Or whether they ever felt confident that they «knew» anything about the subject at all.

Young people who succeed in school figure out that what matters is how well you can do on the examinations and papers, not what you genuinely understand, and those who don't succeed often decide that learning is boring and meaningless. We pretend that most students finish school with a great deal of knowledge about the world, but in fact (as Howard Gardner has noted[1]), this knowledge is quite fragile. Most people finish school with a lack of confidence that they have anything resembling genuine knowledge about literature, history, mathematics, science, and other academic subjects.

Philosophy for children takes an entirely different approach. It is founded on the notion that what is crucial in education is to acquire *meaning*, for students to make sense for themselves of the world and human experience. *Philosophy in the Classroom*, Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan declare that what is essential in education is that it be meaningful to young people. They assert that «[i]nstead of insisting that education is a special form of experience that only the schools can provide, we should say that anything that helps us to discover meaning in life is educational, and the schools are educational only insofar as they do facilitate such discovery.» They insist that it is crucial to help children to acquire meaning for themselves out of their own experiences. This requires enabling children to *think for themselves*[2] Self-knowledge is understood as the basis of learning.

Thinking for oneself is a central aim of philosophy for children. This is the opposite of indoctrinating students. Thinking for oneself involves working out one's own beliefs and the reasons for them, developing clarity about one's ideas, values, and point of view.[3] Philosophy for children begins with each learner and moves out from the individual students to create an intellectual community. Each child is understood as contributing something essential to the classroom. The adult facilitating a successful philosophy discussion with children is mindful that the children have their own interests and ideas and will find their own paths to inquire about them. The role of the facilitator is to guide students in this search, and not to direct it.

Philosophy for children seeks to assist students and teachers in appreciating the richness of the unsettled questions that permeate our lives. The teacher does not know at the beginning of the session where the discussion will lead the group, and is not in control of where the class ends up at the conclusion of the session. It is understood in a philosophical community of inquiry that all of the participants, including the teacher, are fallible, and that changing one's mind about one's views is often part of the process of philosophical thinking. Instead of the teacher being the great repository of wisdom at the head of the room, she becomes a co-learner, a fellow inquirer.

Thus, the relationship between children and adults in a philosophical community of inquiry is very different from the relationship demanded by the institutional school setting. This is the third central difference between philosophy for children and the principles underlying school. A sharp, fixed distinction is made between teacher and learner in school, with the adult teacher in the position of the person who possesses knowledge and the young person understood as needing to acquire that knowledge. The blurred edges of this distinction are not acknowledged by schools. It is taken for granted that there is a big difference between teachers and students, adults and children, and the lack of clarity about what makes an adult an adult and what makes a child a child is generally not seen as an appropriate subject for dialogue. In school, teachers do not learn from students, and students do not teach teachers.

«Imagine Mrs. Halsey saying *she* learned something from us! I never heard a grown-up say that before. Whenever I ask Daddy or Mommy anything, they've got an answer ready before I've even finished with my question. It's funny - the moment Mrs. Halsey said that, I felt like more of a person. I felt as if I knew who I was a little better! I wonder why?»[4]

Philosophy for children seeks to avoid the imposition of a rigid distinction between adults and young people. Although there is not unanimity among us about the proper role of the teacher in the classroom and what degree of authority she rightfully holds, there is agreement in the philosophy for children community that in many respects teacher and students are co-learners. The fact that you are the adult in the classroom does not entitle you to control the discussions. While a teacher's status as the person in the group with greater experience may allow him to assume a leadership role, the ideal is a classroom in which teacher and students are equal members of the community of inquiry.

One of the joys of discussing philosophy with children is how much there is to learn from them. When I facilitate a school philosophy session, I understand the relationship between the students and me as a partnership. I may bring a greater conceptual and philosophical sophistication to our discussions, but they generally bring a wider sense of the possibilities for inquiry and a greater willingness to try out what may seem to be far-fetched ideas. It seems to me that the ideal philosophical community is one in which all of the differences among the participants - age, level of education, perspective, sex, race, family background, ethnicity, etc. - serve to enrich the inquiry and not to divide the participants along various hierarchical lines.

Philosophy for children emphasizes the unique thinking and ideas of each child, creating a collective community out of this multitude of individual voices. It values independent thinking, questioning, inquiry, and dialogue among students as the richest sources of learning. Each child is encouraged to think critically and creatively, to question prevailing ideas, and to develop her own views and the reasons for them. This approach is deeply antithetical to the nature of our school systems.

I have been through 25 years of formal school. One of the surprises and gifts of my family's decision to have our children homeschool has been the reevaluation of the role of school in my own life and a much deeper look at what is involved in authentic learning. Shrugging off the paradigm of learning as requiring experts, tests, standardized achievement, degrees, grades, and institutional proof that you know something, I have come to understand that we human beings learn as naturally as we breathe, eat, and sleep. Forcing a child to learn to read at age 7 or to multiply at age 8 is as unproductive, ultimately, as telling your one-year-old child that it's time to walk and then scheduling daily practice sessions for her. The extent of control over children's lives in school is one of the features of institutional schooling that for me strikes most discordantly against the core of what philosophy for children is all about.

Is there, then, an inherent conflict between philosophy for children and the structure of school? Does philosophy for children have the potential to change the way schools operate? Or is it more likely that the structure of school will alter philosophy for children, by requiring it to fit within the standardized boundaries with which school defines learning? Sometimes people talk about philosophy being required in school in the same way literature or mathematics or science is required. Would we want philosophy to be another subject that all students are compelled to study? Should we who love to talk about philosophy with kids be working within the schools at all?

On the one hand, one might argue that the introduction of philosophy for children in schools, by bringing in an approach to learning that emphasizes self-knowledge and thinking for oneself, will serve only to bolster the schools but not to change them in any significant way. The nature of school, with its standardized curriculum and division by grade level, is largely coercive and authoritarian. I have had several teachers tell me that they believe that school by definition involves a standardized curriculum (that is, without such a curriculum it is not school at all). Public schools are set up to emphasize teacher-led classes and a standardized structure, and the school system is relatively intractable and resistant to systemic change.

One might claim, therefore, that although bringing philosophy for children into schools might improve in a small way the experiences of the children who participate in the program, in fact what we do is to shore up a failing institution by making it a little easier to bear for its victims (the students). Moreover, we are often pushed to turn away from the revolutionary character of philosophy for children in order to get it into the schools, by, for example, requiring it of all students, or grading the students on the extent of their participation, etc. Perhaps we would do better to work to abolish altogether schools as we now know them, and instead establish voluntary community institutions of learning, working with homeschooling families and young people and other alternatives to school. We would then confine our efforts to introducing philosophy for children to young people through such alternatives and through clubs, camps, library programs, and other voluntary activities.

On the other hand, for most children school is a dominant reality of daily life. As an institution, school is not likely to be abolished any time soon, and it is there that we can reach most children. It is possible that bringing philosophy into schools eventually will have a transforming effect, with classrooms becoming places of excitement and delight instead of boredom and coercion. Philosophy for children has the potential to help children to bring meaning to their experiences and perhaps enable them to think for themselves about the experience of school and the ways it might be transformed.

I have had the experience a number of times of watching participation in philosophy sessions transform the way a student saw herself. Seeing for the first time what he had to contribute to an intellectual community, understanding that the questions that she had dismissed as fanciful or silly really were important and worthwhile, sensing that the way he perceived the world was unique and interesting. Bringing philosophy into the lives of young people can be very powerful. We know that. And perhaps changing a small number of classrooms and students by helping them to experience genuine learning communities is a way to begin changing the overall system of schooling. That is my hope.

NOTES

1. Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 5-6.

2. Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, and Frederick S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 6, 13.

3. See Ibid., 42-43.

4. Matthew Lipman, *Harry Stottlemeir's Discovery* (Montclair: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1982), 53.

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