Review of "Academic Philosophy: An Uncommonly Creative, Imaginative and Challenging Curriculum"

Richard Morehouse

Question Mark (110 pages)
Perfect bound - $30
Saddle stitch - $ 25
Teacher Manual, Level A, Philosophy Curriculum (34 pages)
$ 12.50
Theo Rising (111 Pages)
Perfect bound - $30
Saddle stitch - $ 25
Teacher Manual, Level B, Philosophy Curriculum (34 pages)
$ 12.50
Mark and Theo make their case (110 pages)
Perfect bound - $30
Saddle stitch - $ 25
Teacher Manual, Level C, Philosophy Curriculum (29 pages)
$ 12.50
Xperiment (58 pages)
Perfect bound $17.50
Saddle stitch - $12.59
Level D, Philosophical (Guidebook 25 pages)
$12.50
Finding Faith (74 pages)
Perfect bound $17.50
Saddle stitch - $12.59
Level E, Philosophical Guidebook (26 pages)
$12.50
Will Power (77 pages)
Perfect bound $17.50
Saddle stitch - $12.59
Level F, Philosophical Guidebook (29 pages)
$12.50

Sharon Kaye, Author
Jordan Novak or Christopher Tice, Illustrators
Roya Fireworks Press: Unionville, NY, 2017

This series of books and accompanying guides as a group are labeled "Academic Philosophy: and Uncommonly Creative, Imaginative & Challenging Curriculum" in the promotional brochure. Sharon Kaye is the author of the series but there are two different illustrators. Jordon Novak illustrates *Question Mark*, *Theo Rising*, and *Mark and Theo make their case* and Christopher Tice illustrates the rest of the series. The first three sets of teacher materials are labeled Teacher Manual, while the last three sets of teacher materials are called Philosophical Curriculum Guidebooks. Each set of materials for the teacher is also labeled levels, A through F. As the included brochure states, the alphabetic labeling is provided for flexibility when using these materials in different grade levels, for example A (ages 5 and up), B (ages 6 and up), and so on.

The front covers of each book are similar in appearance though it is quite easy to see that they are illustrated by two different artists. The books are attractive and inviting. Each book comes with support materials, i.e., Teachers Manual for A, B, and C, which lists the theme of each book and includes a summary of the story, philosophical bases, discussion questions, and activities for each chapter. The Philosophical Guides for books D, E, and F have an activities section and suggestions for further exploration. The teaching material also has a statement about the central philosophical skills to be developed in the first three books. Books D, E, and F teacher material have themes or questions to be explored. The philosophical themes to be developed in *Question Mark* (Level A philosophy curriculum) are questioning, doubting, and certainty. *Theo Rising* (Level B philosophy curriculum) is about theorizing; posing an inquiry, examining competing theories, and using criterion for theory evaluation. *Mark and Theo make their case* (Level C philosophy curriculum) addresses the philosophical skills of identifying a problem, making an argument, and making objections.

The next three books make a shift in appearance and content. They become less about an open-ended sense of wonder and more about developing specific philosophical skills. This is not to say that the first three books do not engage students as philosophers, or that the last three books do not instill and enhance a sense of wonder, but to this reader, there is a noticeable shift in tone and spirit between the first three books and the others in the series.

The philosophical skills to be developed in *Xperiment* are selective rule-breaking, engaging thought-experiments, and proposing alternatives, and the book's theme is focused on the classical philosophical problem, What is Justice? *Finding Faith* is intended to develop the skills of following a complex argument, suspending judgment, and having the courage to stand by your convictions, while its theme is exploring arguments for and against the existence of God. *Will Power* works to develop the philosophical skills of making careful observations, defending a position, and tolerating ambiguity. The theme of this final volume is "the gripping and ongoing debate between fate and free will" (Kaye, 2017, p.1).

With that quick overview, I would like to place these works in a larger context before going into details about the books in this series. It is widely known in many education circles that Matthew Lipman[1] and others began developing a curriculum in the late 1960s with the first publication of the novel, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* published in 1969 with the aid of a small grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since that time, the teaching of philosophy for children has spread around the world and its original formulation has morphed into many modified and/or parallel

versions, including that of Gareth B. Matthews[2], and those who started and modified Lipman's approach and content, including Joanna Haynes[3], Karin Murris[4], Laurence J. Splitter & Ann M. Sharp,[5] Susan Gardner[6], Susan Wilks[7], and Walter Kohan,[8] to name a few.

Any of these books would provide a helpful guide to a teacher wishing to use "Academic Philosophy: an uncommonly creative, imaginative, & challenging curriculum." A careful reading of *Teaching for better thinking: the classroom community of inquiry* (Splitter & Sharp, 1995), *Picturebooks, pedagogy, and philosophy* (Hayes and Murris, 2012), or *The Socratic classroom: reflective thinking through collaborative inquiry* (Chesters, 2012) would provide a beneficial aid for anyone using this curriculum. I recommend these books before a teacher leaps into the teaching of philosophy. For myself, I began teaching Lipman's *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* with little knowledge of philosophy for children; however, I had the *Harry* manual as a tool for teaching as I began this experiment in the late 1970s, and so I recommend the "Academic Philosophy" series with the assumption that those who use it will have additional support materials, or at least will be familiar with PFC teaching techniques. Armed only with *Harry* and the manual, the support of several classroom teachers and school administrators, my incursion into philosophical inquiry with 5th grade students was successful enough to sustain my interest and increase my scholarship in Philosophy for Children and Community of Inquiry over nearly four decades. So while I do not think extended training in teaching philosophy to young children is required to make good use of Sharon Kaye's materials, I do think that some knowledge of philosophy and how it might be best taught in elementary and middle schools is essential.

To provide a full critique of each of the books and accompanying support material would require an extensive and overly lengthy review, and so my goal is simply to highlight some important points about the different texts. The first three books are closely linked to themes introduced in the first work, *Question Mark*, in that each of the three works builds on questioning, which leads to theorizing, and problem-solving. The next three volumes are also thematically linked. These works focus on the relationship between competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The interrelationship between these three themes is present in all three volumes, though each volume has a slightly different emphasis.

Both for reasons of personal interest and the conceptual development of the themes within these two sets of volumes, I have chosen to focus my comments on the Level A volume, *Question Mark*, and Level D volume *Xperiment*. The author states at the beginning of the Teacher manual of Question Mark, "As the instructor, you can think of this volume as a single picture book with fifteen chapters or as a series of individual picture books that build a storyline" (Kaye, 2017, 1). The manual for *Question Mark* is divided into three parts: questioning, doubting, and being certain. The even pages of the manual are organized under the following titles: Summary, Philosophical Basis, Discussing Questions, and Activities. The Summary is straightforward and is made up of three sentences. The section "Philosophical Basis" contains four short paragraphs. Kaye relates this chapter to Plato's Allegory of the Cave from the *Republic*. The sections focused on "Philosophical Basis" are troubling for this reviewer, not just because they are too short to explain much about the philosopher's ideas, but also because the teacher/facilitator (or at least this reviewer) is left unclear how references to specific philosophers, for example, "Kierkegaard's ideas about 'Who am I'," helps the teacher or students better understand the text. Perhaps its purpose is to encourage students (five and six-year-old pupils) to think more deeply on their own and how we "create who we are through

personal choice and commitment" (Kaye, 2017a, p. 8), but it is not entirely clear if that is the goal. That said, *Question Mark* (the picture book) does an amazing job of raising intriguing questions, but other than stimulating the teacher's appetite there is not sufficient concrete direction provided for the teacher to build on the activities. I think encouraging young children to explore questions like 'who am I' and 'what is the nature of reality' can enhance and deepen what children may already think, but how does knowing a little about Søren Kierkegaard help the teacher or the students know how to address these big questions. What is the likelihood that the teacher of this picture book will have the training and background to dig into *Fear and Trembling*9 and productively translate these ideas into a useful format for young children?

Volumes D, E, and F begin with a different type of philosophical wonder. If the first three volumes are about child-like wonder that expands the mind, stimulates the imagination, and challenges assumptions in playful ways, the second set of volumes are more focused on thematic examinations that challenge the early adolescent mind. Adolescence is about constructing systems and theories (Morehouse, 2011, p. 10). "What is particularly surprising is [the adolescent's] facility for elaborating abstract theories … The majority talk only about a small part of their personal creation and confine themselves to ruminating about them intimately and in secret, but all of them have systems and theories that transform the world in one way or another" (Piaget, 1986, p.61). These volumes allow and encourage adolescents to make some of their ideas public, and Kaye is to be commended for her efforts in this regard.

Xperiment is a fine example of how adolescent inquiry on meaning-making can become a part of classroom discussion. The story revolves around a group of kids, a school playground, a neighborhood junkyard, some territorial disputes, and an adult who guides them by raising questions. In the process, justice and self-governing are explored. The story is captivating and the guide using Bloom's cognitive taxonomy to aid student discussion is helpful. This and the other two volumes (*Finding Faith* and *Will Power*) provide equally compelling stories that examine important themes relevant to young adolescents who are already privately ruminating about life, and coaxes them into discussing these issues openly amongst their peers.

My biggest concern with using these texts is the lack of material they provide on the pedagogy of teaching philosophy to young people. I would recommend that after familiarizing themselves with the series, prospective teachers should carefully read up on some material specifically focused on teaching philosophy to children. The first on my list is *The Socratic classroom: reflective thinking through collaborative inquiry* (Chester, 2012) followed by *Thinking in education* (Lipman, 2003). I recommend Chester as the first read as it looks to a broader range of philosophic material for children, and Lipman second because his work is both pioneering and continues to be useful to anyone who might teach philosophy with children.

There is no doubt that "Academic Philosophy: and Uncommonly Creative, Imaginative & Challenging Curriculum" is a great series of books that will challenge young people and the adults who work with them. The texts are best seen as supplementary material to help facilitate philosophical discussions rather than teach people how to do PFC; provided teachers are up to the pedagogical challenge of enacting philosophy with students, the series looks to be of great help.

Endnotes

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[2] Matthews, G.B., 1976. Philosophy and children's literature. *Metaphilosophy*, 7(1), pp.7-16.
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[5] Splitter, L. J. & Sharp, A.M. 1995. Teaching for better understanding: classroom community of inquiry. Melbourne: ACER.
[6] Gardner, S.T., 2008. *Thinking your way to freedom: A guide to owning your own practical reasoning*. Temple University Press.
[7] Wilks, S. 1995. *Critical & creative thinking strategies for classroom inquiry*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
[8] Kohn, W.O. 2014. Philosophy and childhood: a critical perspective and affirmative practices. New York: Palgrave
[9] Kierkegaard, S., 2013. *Kierkegaard's Writings, VI: Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (Vol. 6). Princeton University Press.

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Morehouse, R. 2011. A Developmental Perspective on Creativity, Critical thinking, and Problem Solving: Toward a Framework for Educators, Part two. Education Today. *Education Today 61*(1):7––13.

Piaget, J. (1967). *Six psychological studies*. D. Elkind (Ed.). Random House.

Address Correspondences to:
Richard (Mort) Morehouse, PhD
Praxis
115 5th Avenue South, Suite 409
La Crosse, WI 54601
remorehouse@viterbo.edu