This author thinks philosophers can learn from philosophy for children which attempts to recapture the spirit of the Socratic dialogue.

Why philosophy for children?

by Darrell R. Shepard

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"Philosophy for children" catches the imagination as much as "Tom Swift: Boy President." But while there may be few arguments for the latter, there are some very powerful arguments for the former.

But first let us be very clear what we mean by philosphy for children. We may mean dealing with philosophical questions; or we may mean dealing with questions philosophically—in a dialogical, critical and cumulative search for answers and awareness of alternatives. We would seldom mean dealing with the pronouncements of philosophers as such. While the child could undoubtedly be trained to spew back such pronouncements, I am at a loss why we should want him to do so.

We should also be very clear that philosophy already permeates our child's curriculum—sometimes by its presence, sometimes by its absence. Social studies, now understood simply as the study of man, must deal with the question "What is man?" by answering it or by ignoring it. More obviously, moral education has always had a place in the curriculum. The valueless classroom has never existed. The issue is not whether philosophy shall have a place in the curriculum, but whether the hidden curriculum will become the open curriculum, whether we can do it better by doing it consciously.

Let us then consider some reasons for doing it consciously.

Surely it is obvious that if Johnny can't reason, Johnny can't read. Reading without understanding defies analogy. But, understanding requires grasping fundamental logical relationships and the development of imagination. It is a source of continual amazement that educators who have been so suspicious in recent years of the transference value of foreign languages for English and of psychology for social development still trust to transference when it comes to reasoning. "If we teach the child to reason mathematically, scientifically, creatively, etc., then the child doesn't need to think about thinking." It is interesting to note that in a recent field test of a philosophy for children curriculum, sharp increases in reading scores occurred.

It is also an obvious pedagogical point that one begins any instruction where the student is and with the questions the student is asking. Many of the questions asked by children are philosophical questions dealing with issues such as justice, death, where the world came from, etc. To ignore these questions, hoping they will go away, diminishes either the child's respect for himself, or for the school, or both. To treat these questions haphazardly is sophistry and violates the integrity of both the child and the teaching profession. It is dubious whether the child need recognize his questions as "philosophical," but because such questions require special handling, it is essential that they be recognized as "philosophical" by parents and by teachers.

Today we bemoan the sense of anomie and meaninglessness which is seen in students and teachers alike. While the observations of sociologists regarding the fragmented nature of society may contribute to the pathology seen in the schools, it is hardly the whole story. The curriculum itself may be partly to blame. Children, as their art reveals, have a very comprehensive point of view. They seek connections—meanings. Contrast this propensity of the child with the curriculum which is divided into unconnected segments. When Dewey spoke of philosophy as the method of education, he may have had in mind logic which gives structure to the various disciplines, or he may have had in mind the integrating nature of philosophy which Charles Sidgwick felt was so important. Or, Dewey may have been reflecting upon the fact that each of the disciplines rests upon philosophical presuppositions which, among other things, establish the point of the discipline.

If our worry with meaninglessness is in the larger sense, that of the meaning of life, the curriculum is still of little help to the child. Meaning in this sense still requires connections which the child has little practice in making. Moreover, if the connections are made for the child, we are indoctrinating rather that educating. As Matthew Lipman has noted, these meanings must be discovered by the child for himself. But where is he to look? What opportunities does the curriculum afford the child for such discovery? It is also interesting that schools which have established philosophical reasoning programs have seen a heightening of enthusiasm and a decrease in dropouts.

Even before Watergate, parents, educators and employers were concerned with the value crisis. Into the gap stepped moral education, now mandated in several states. Students have had their values clarified or their development from theoretical stage encouraged. But as ethics, normally thought of as a part of philosophy, has been presented as a separate part of the curriculum in a package empty of philosophical content, the problem has intensified and psychological harm has often occurred. Students are now pronounced as being at Stage 4 or Stage 5 who still cannot distinguish between an "ought" and an "is." Indeed, it is extremely dubious pedagogy to offer such courses as separate ingredients in the curriculum, thereby indirectly suggesting that ethical dilemmas come into our lives with signs hung around their necks reading "Alert! I am an ethical dilemma." Effective moral education can only take place when the moral dimensions of problems are probed on the home territory of the problem in question.

Because moral education has become a part of the curriculum even in states where it is not mandated, the issue of indoctrination has arisen as it has not since separation of church and state was guaranteed by the Constitution. Whose values will be taught, teacher's, parent's, society's or Kant's? Many have seen philosophy for children as the best protection against indoctrination whether it be in the area of value theory, political theory or mathematical theory. This is because philosophy is often characterized as a search for and an awareness of alternatives. Furthermore, the recognition that X *is* a logical alternative will not allow us easily to disregard or to demean the person who believes X. In other words, the search for alternatives may simultaneously promote respect for persons.

Perhaps we philosophers have much to learn from philosophy for children which often attempts to recapture the spirit of the Socratic dialogue and to inculcate the virtue of thinking for oneself. The dialogue, as amply illustrated in the *Meno*, builds—is cumulative—with logic as its structure. How different from the bull-sessions in which we and our students participate—"Now let me tell you what happened to me!" As the dialogue builds, the questioner becomes the one who is questioned, and all parties assume responsibility for the conclusions which they draw.

Again, the questions dealt with in the Socratic dialogues were as often addressed to Socrates as by Socrates. They were questions in the minds of his questioners. This, perhaps, also speaks of the pedagogical relevance of philosophy for children for philosophy begins with thoughts which all children have. Not every child has had the experience of grandfather's farm to share with his classmates, but every child does have his own idea of what is fair and his own idea of his own thoughts. The realization of this ever so fundamental level of commonality has prompted claims to be made for philosophy for children as a builder of camaraderie and respect within the school as well as the promoter of the ideal learning environment where all participate as equals.

But suppose we step back from all these arguments for a moment and attempt an historical survey of the curriculum. Is it not the case that our curriculum has become more and more specific, particularized? Compare a reader of today with a *McGuffey Reader*. Today college entrance examinations testify to the inability of the young adult to generalize properly or to handle abstractions. Our conclusion must be that they have been trained, but not educated—able to handle situations in which they have found themselves before, but unable to handle situations slightly or greatly divergent although related by principles. Our answer to this inability has been anything but pedagogically sound, but it has been self-fulfilling. We have further particularized and specialized instruction, catering instead of challenging. Sure enough, our efforts have been vindicated. Abstractions and generalizations are hard and all of our efforts at specialization and particularization have not succeeded in developing the ability to abstract or to generalize properly.

To the extent that philosophy is that discipline which fosters this ability to generalize, to assume responsibility for one's decisions, to connect ideas which otherwise remain unconnected, to respect the ideas of others and to understand, the case for philosophy for children has been made.