

Philosophy for Children

(or Thinking Together)

As all teachers know, there are several routes to developing critical and creative thinking in our students, eg. via de Bono, Marzano's Dimensions of Thinking, etc.. For the very young, one such route, implemented successfully in Canada, the US, Central and South America, Australia and now in England, is that of *Philosophy for Children*.

1. What is *Philosophy for Children*?

It is an educational programme that was started in the early 1970s with the publication

Next year, STU hopes to offer a series of workshops for teachers on the *Philosophy for Children* approach under the rubric of *Thinking Together*.

of Matthew Lipman's philosophical novel for children called *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. In this novel for children, Harry (the main character in the story) and his classmates puzzle over questions of the nature of thought, reality, right and wrong, fairness and unfairness, etc. In this mode of getting children to think through issues embedded in stories, the vocabulary of philosophy is not used and even the word "philosophy" does not appear at all. Through the story, the child reader begins to wonder about things. The focus is on this faculty of wonder in children, which we, as adults, have not fully appreciated.

For teachers, the most attractive feature of *Philosophy for Children* is the promotion of the classroom as a "community of inquiry", in which students openly exchange ideas (in a kind of "dialogue"), accept the ideas of others and, if necessary, modify their own ideas. The educational intention is to develop children's potential for reasonableness.

Readers familiar with Jostein Gaarder's now well-known novel, *Sophie's World*, first written in Norwegian, may ask whether *Philosophy for Children* is another version of *Sophie's World*. It is not (as explained in **Box 1**), because the approach is different. *Sophie's World* was written largely for adults, taking

Box 1

The sub-title of *Sophie's World* is *A Novel of the History of Philosophy*, and it provides the central focus of the story. Here, Sophie, a 14-year-old Norwegian schoolgirl, began to realize that much of the discussion around her was about trivial things.

***For the first time she (Sophie) began to feel that at school as well as everywhere else people were only concerned with trivialities. There were major problems that needed to be solved Why couldn't they talk about what a human being is – or about what the world is and how it came into being?* (p. 10)**

the reader through the history of western philosophy, but the questions for philosophical reflection in the novel are presented from a young girl's point of view. That girl is

Sophie Amundsen. Strikingly, a few of her questions are not too dissimilar from those asked by our own school students in the *Philosophy for Children* classes conducted in Singapore in the mid-1990s (see Lim, 1998).

Philosophy for Children does not really deal exactly with those lofty questions that troubled Sophie (see **Box 1**). Nonetheless, it encourages philosophical curiosity about things. It provides stories and words that stimulate children to come up with their own questions and ideas. The essence of *Philosophy for Children* is to encourage students to ask questions for themselves and also, equally important, to check ideas with others. With children learning to ask their own questions, the teacher's role becomes that of facilitator, creating conditions where such questioning can take place. Under such conditions, intelligent inquiry can take place with students of all ages and ability – the gifted, the average and even the under-achievers. The key words are really *thinking together*, *dialogue*, and *community of inquiry*.

2. Has the *Philosophy for Children* programme been tried out in Singapore?

Yes, the programme was tried out in 1992 initially (in Pandan Primary School and Bedok South Secondary), then in 1993 (in Henry Park Primary and Raffles Girls' Secondary) and later also in Nanyang Primary (in 1995). These school-based efforts were initiated by the *Philosophy for Children* Project based at the former



Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE), NIE, developed and directed by Dr Lim Tock Keng, with funding from NIE. Except for one school, all the other four schools remained in the Project until 1998.

2.1 How was the programme received?

Early attempts to use this so-called Socratic method of teaching were described as "difficult" because teachers and students were used to a procedure in which a teacher asked a question and a student answered it or was directed to give the expected answer. It was "hard" getting a "real dialogue" going, as reported by one teacher initially (as reported in Lim, 1998) –

Sometimes we are at a loss, we ourselves, we do not know. It's tough. We let them wander around and sometimes when we do that, the point [of it] all is forgotten. We do not know whether we need to change to another topic (p. 5).

Eventually the situation did improve with one primary teacher giving this feedback --

Now it's not such a conscious effort – it is quite natural for us to just ask them about their feelings and guide them on from there although not as a facilitator but guide them on from there (p. 5).

At two other schools, however, the initial reactions of students were very positive indeed (see the comments

reported in **Box 2**). These remarks from our own students would remind readers of the questions that Sophie asked herself, as noted in **Box 1** above. However, it would be unrealistic to expect a "Wow" reaction from most students initially. It

takes time for teachers and students to get the feel of a Socratic dialogue or inquiry and to gradually appreciate the value of it.

Box 2

What Two Students said

Philosophy for Children enables us to think more about things which we have never thought of before and not accept facts just because that's the way things are. We inquire and through the inquiry, learn more.

I learn to think more of some things that I did not notice before, like, I didn't go so deep into the word "thinking". I was just wondering: why do we think? I mean, why? Yes, we said in class that we wonder, imagine, think to satisfy our curiosity, etc. But I still do not understand why we think so much, so often.

(Source: Lim, 1998, p. 7)

2.2 What were the other outcomes of this programme in Singapore?

Besides anecdotal evidence as selectively reported above, the Singapore programme was carefully evaluated empirically through the use of certain instruments. In the summative evaluation, one such instrument was the AH2/AH3 – the AH2 was used for pre-testing and the AH3 as a post-test, consisting of verbal, numerical and perceptual items -- designed to assess the general effect of the programme on students' thinking skills. **Box 3** displays a small portion of the data. What **Box 3** shows is that on the verbal, numerical and perceptual components of the AH3 Test, the students who underwent the *Philosophy for Children* programme had on average much higher scores than those not in the programme, although the difference in average scores in the perceptual component was not large enough to be statistically significant. The absolute differences in the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in the verbal and numerical components were statistically significant.

Box 3

Post-Test Scores of the AH3 Test at One School

		Experimental Group	Control Group
Verbal	Adjusted Post-Test Mean	19.73 (0.68)	14.41 (0.78)
Numerical	Adjusted Post-Test Mean	21.44 (0.75)	15.89 (0.87)
Perceptual	Adjusted Post-Test Mean	20.10 (0.95)	19.76 (1.10)

(Source: Lim, 1998, p. 30)

- Notes: 1. The means have been adjusted for the pre-test scores.
2. Each figure within brackets is the standard error of the mean.

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