

# Philosophy for children

*Critical thinking is important if we are to have a reflective citizenry in a democracy. I don't think you would like to have a soggy mass of citizens who just accept what they're told without reflection, you want them to judge what they are told in a critical way, not be uncritical. That's a terrible notion, a non critical citizenry. But conventional education is not delivering this reflective citizenry. (Dr Matthew Lipman)*

Are young children really capable of making any kind of profound contribution to areas such as the conceptualisation and evaluation of early childhood development (ECD) programmes? Do they have the powers of investigation, perception, reflection and analysis that seem necessary? Can their obvious creativity be employed usefully? Dr Matthew Lipman believes that the answer to questions like these is 'Yes!' and, for the last 25 years, he has been showing how these capacities and powers can be developed.

He takes the view that education should produce individuals who are intellectually flexible, resourceful and judicious, and who have the concepts and thinking skills that could be identified as being most likely to develop a democratic citizenry. If it is to do so, it must start with young children. Lipman therefore produced the 'Philosophy for Children' programme, designed to help children from preschool

age upwards to engage in critical enquiry, and creative and caring thinking. The programme emphasises the excitement of discovery, reflection and analysis through helping the children to create what he calls 'a community of enquiry' that allows children to explore and better understand their world, other people, and themselves.

The programme is based on age-specific sets of stories about everyday happenings in the lives of children. Storylines raise philosophical questions in the children's normal language, and in the ways that children might talk about issues and ideas. The first step is to share a story with a class of children by reading it aloud. The teacher then asks for comments and questions and the children choose an aspect of the story that is relevant to them and that they are really interested in talking about. The heart of the work is then a discussion between the children that the teacher helps them to generate and sustain by

asking questions and seeking answers among themselves.

The discussion may naturally meander, so the teacher has to keep it within the 'norms of philosophical enquiry'. In effect, these are rules and guidelines and, especially with young children, it is useful to explain the need for these rules and guidelines, to have them spelled out and to show children how they keep within them – or not. These rules/guidelines include keeping to the topic under discussion, questioning assumptions, giving reasons for opinions and ideas, relating their ideas to those of other children, and so on. At the end of the session, a statement is produced about where the children have reached in their enquiry, and the teacher may then follow up the discussion with complementary activities.

For the teacher, the work is supported by a manual that contains suggestions for

dealing with the kinds of questions that might be raised, and exercises that help children to explore the questions that interest them. The programme is flexible: for example, the stories can be rewritten – or new stories can be produced – to suit local cultural and physical realities; and the manual serves as a guide, not as an instruction book. It is also a long term programme: results are cumulative.

The examples that follow show how it has been implemented, and with what results, with three to six year olds in Iceland (page 36) and among six year olds in the USA (page 40). ○

Details about the Philosophy for Children programme can be found at <http://chss2.montclair.edu/ict> and obtained from

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# *Philosophy for Children in action: Iceland*

**Ingibjorg Sigurthorsdottir**

As an administrator in Foldaborg preschool in Reykjavik, Iceland, the author introduced a two year programme for all children aged from three to six years, based on the 'Philosophy for Children' ideas of Dr Matthew Lipman (see page 35). The programme was designed to help young children to exercise and develop their ability to engage in investigations, debates and discussions. The original point of the programme was to provide young children with the means to resolve conflicts amongst themselves. The specific goals were to increase children's respect for each other, thereby lowering the risk of persecution later on; to develop better relations between children; to increase creative and critical thought among them; to increase their understanding of themselves and their own thoughts; and to increase their respect for the opinions of others. Ingibjorg Sigurthorsdottir is now a preschool counsellor for 12 preschools in Reykjavik.

Foldaborg is one of 71 preschools operated by the city of Reykjavik. It is for about 90 children aged from one to six years old, and they spend between four and nine hours there, five days a week. As in all Icelandic preschools, only about 40 percent of the personnel are qualified teachers, the remainder are assistants.

When I got to know about Dr Matthew Lipman's ideas of using philosophy with young children, I saw it as a way to open up children's minds: too often they are told what to think and do but not why. The Philosophy for Children approach increases children's respect for others while giving them a chance to be listened to, in an environment in which their opinion counts – there is no right answer, so they don't have to worry about saying something wrong. In Foldaborg, we were specifically interested in helping children find better ways of solving their problems, and we

recognised that philosophy can help them to look into their own mind and search for their own opinions and feelings. We therefore developed the first Philosophy for Children programme for preschool children in Iceland.

When I first discussed this idea in a staff meeting, most members of staff were very excited although some were scared – mostly, I think because it was called philosophy. But as soon as we started the preparation everyone took part with joy and excitement. As we started the preparation, we introduced the idea to parents who were also very excited. We didn't introduce it to the children until we were ready to work with them.

## **Preparing the staff**

We decided to use a whole year to prepare the staff. We needed to know

more about philosophy and methods of introducing philosophy to children and about working with them in philosophical ways. At the personal level, we needed to open our own minds and become more capable of communicating in a philosophical way. Last but not least, we also needed to practise leading discussion groups with children.

To help us on these matters we got in touch with a philosopher called Sigurdur Bjornsson. He was just as excited as we and worked with us both during the preparation year, and throughout the whole two years of the operation of the project. Right from the start we decided that we did not want to depend only on the discussion groups, although these are very important. Instead we wanted to change the whole environment of our daily work in Foldaborg and base it on the philosophical approach. This meant that

everyone had to be aware of how to talk with children, how to handle conflicts, how to encourage the children to seek answers for themselves and how to ensure that everybody respects each other's opinions.

Sigurdur led a two hour training session every two weeks and also two full days of further training and preparation. There were two areas in which we needed training: 1) in philosophical thinking generally, and in the Philosophy for Children programme – this was for everyone; and 2) in leading discussion groups – this was for a group of eight preschool teachers.

After the training, staff found that they needed to keep on discussing philosophy among themselves, so personnel in each class met one evening a month in their homes to do this. This was their own initiative, in their own time and it was unpaid.

As an administrator and the co-leader of the project along with Sigurdur, I was very pleased with this interest and commitment from the staff.

When the preparation time was over, and before starting the work with the children, we introduced the project properly to the parents. They were still excited and remained very enthusiastic throughout. In the beginning I was concerned that they would find it hard to deal with their children asking them the kinds of questions that necessarily arise in the Philosophy for Children approach – for example, questions about reasons and justifications for what they should do and should not do. But I never heard a parent express any negative reactions to the programme or to Philosophy for Children. On the contrary, parents often came to me to say how pleased they were with the progress that their children were making.

#### **The discussion groups with children**

Every child from three to six years old participated four times a week for 30 minutes each time. They were split into seven groups of between eight and ten

children, with a teacher and an observer. We thought it was very important that they stayed in the same groups with the same adults because it would increase their comfort, trust and sense of security. We had certain rules such as raising a hand when they wanted to make a contribution, sitting still, listening to other children, waiting their turn and concentrating; and we also had rules to keep the discussion on course.

Every discussion time started the same way and ended the same way. The children sat in a circle along with the teacher, and they would hold hands and say something like ‘Welcome to discussion time’ (the actual welcome varied from group to group). Then the teacher would introduce the topic for the discussion. This was usually drawn from a story called ‘Bullukolla’. This was written by Sigurdur Bjornsson for the project, and it is built up along the lines developed by Matthew Lipman in his series of books for the Philosophy for Children programme in the USA. That is to say, it tells a story in a way that highlights situations, events, problems and so on, and allows them to be analysed and discussed by children so

that they can develop their powers of critical thinking, bringing in their own experiences and ideas as they do so.

Bullukolla is an Icelandic story about an Icelandic girl, and we use it because it is culturally more appropriate than a translated American story. The story is about a girl of five years called Gudrun – a very common Icelandic name – but she is called Bullukolla (the nonsense girl) because she is always asking strange questions, making peculiar statements and wondering about various things in life. The story is divided into short chapters, each of which is followed by questions and exercises related to the story that the teacher can use to help to develop the discussion.

When using ‘Bullukolla’ we started the session by reading a chapter to the children. Then we asked them if they found anything strange or funny in the story and if they had a question to ask. Each question was written on a board on the wall along with the name of the child who ‘owned’ the question. When everyone had asked the questions they wanted to, we started to work on each question, trying to get every child to

express to the others what was in their mind: what interested them; how it related to their own experiences; what questions it provoked in them; and so on. As this happened, other children commented on what had been said, and, with the help of the teacher, a discussion developed. As well as Bullukolla we also used other material to encourage children towards creative critical thinking and discussions – for example, pictures, plays, things that had happened in the school or in their homes. Before ending the discussion, the teacher helped the children to sum up what they had said. At the end of the session, all the children held hands again and together said something like ‘Thank you for the discussion’.

The children asked many hundreds of questions during the project. These included:

*Is it possible not to know anything?*

*Is there something that never changes?*

*Is it possible to know if one really exists?*

*What is it that controls us?*

*What is living?*



Iceland: *Obeying the rules helps proper debate among young children*  
photo: Ingibjorg Sigurthorsdottir

We worked with the children on these questions, getting them to think about them, to form an opinion and argue their case. The children could disagree – we were not searching for one particular answer – and they also learned both to accept a valid argument and protest at a weak one, and to accept the right of others to have their own opinions.

#### Monitoring progress

We held staff meetings every month to discuss general progress, and the job of the observer was to help monitor the progress of each child in each group. We found that the children showed great progress in most areas. For example, only 38 percent participated in the discussions at the beginning of the project but that grew to 95 percent; and, while only 2 percent of the children

could argue their case at the beginning, 71 percent were able to do so later on. The observer also monitored how well the children kept to the rules – something they actually did very well. In the beginning some children were insecure about asking their own questions – for example, they said they wanted to ask the same question that another group member had done. At first we just added their name to that question, but after a few weeks we insisted that they came up with their own questions if they wanted their names on the board.

The only area where children made little or no progress was in generalising: they couldn't do that by themselves but the teachers did this at the end of some discussions.

We assembled our overall conclusions about the effects of the project on children under the different headings set out below.

#### *The children improved their skills in asking questions*

The ability to ask relevant questions is a very important skill in the comprehension of every subject. In a philosophical discussion, children are encouraged to ask questions and are

helped to formulate their questions by the teachers and their peers if they have problems. This questioning process appeared to be fruitful because at the end of the year, the children expressed their doubts in direct questions that were much more easily comprehended by their peers. In the beginning it always took some time to figure out what the children were really asking.

#### *The children stated their opinions much more easily*

Most of the children put their shyness behind them and became very competent at saying what they thought. Some were very shy in the beginning and did not want to participate but got to enjoy the discussions by the end.

#### *The children improved their ability to find reasons*

Reasons are the cornerstones of philosophical discussion. In the beginning the children had difficulties in finding reasons but after the philosophical training they improved their ability to support their judgements with reasons.

#### *They disagreed with each other*

In the philosophical discussion we put emphasis on the interrelations between the children themselves. The idea was

to move from child-teacher to child-child discussions. Therefore the children were encouraged to speak directly to the one they agreed or disagreed with. After a while, this kind of communication happened frequently and the children started to settle their disagreements by themselves.

#### *They started being able to correct themselves*

One of the main characteristics of critical thinking is that it corrects itself. In the beginning of the training the teacher had to point out the disagreements and contradictions but as the children became more used to the process they started to correct themselves. Frequently, children raised their hands and said that they had changed their mind and, after a time, they could even say why. Often, this was because they had listened carefully to their peers.

#### *They became more tolerant and involved in the discussion, and their concentration as they listened to their peers became much better*

To start with, many of the children lacked tolerance and were easily carried away from the subject. They didn't know what the discussion was about and expressed views that were

not related to the subject. Very often they raised their hand to say something but had forgotten what it was by the time it was their turn to speak. Later they could concentrate better and follow the discussion more easily. They listened more carefully to each other and they could wait longer to express their own views.

### *They became more ready to help each other in the discussion*

One of the ethical aspects of discussion is the readiness to help others to express their views and find reasons for them. This was a focus in the discussions and children developed the desire to help each other. Their help might be in the form of interpreting an idea that was unclear, finding reasons for an opinion or finding examples that threw light on the opinions of others. In this process the children learned the joy of helping others and also learned to accept the help of others.

### *Discussion became a tool for conflict resolution*

Both staff and parents reported that the children became much more ready to give reasons for their opinions or wants; and seemed more able to use discussions to settle differences with other children.

### *Differences in participation between boys and girls decreased*

A very interesting factor is that the difference in the participation between boys and girls almost disappeared. In the beginning the boys were much more active than the girls but in the end the girls had caught up.

### **The views of the parents**

From the beginning we were anxious that the parents were with us, so we also discussed with them what changes they had observed in their children. Generally parents felt that their children talked with them in a different way. Many explained further:

- *She is more open-minded and realises that her opinion is not always the right one.*
- *He speaks about everything that frightens him or that he finds beautiful; he talks about everything between heaven and earth.*
- *He is better able to talk about things and argue his case, and he demands the same from others.*
- *She doesn't like answers like 'maybe' or 'possibly', she wants*

*clear answers and reasons for everything.*

### **Conclusions**

Introducing the Philosophy for Children programme was difficult in the beginning because staff members were handling situations that were new to both them and the children. But progress was obvious after a very short time and that was a constant reward and stimulus. The responses from the parents were very rewarding also: most of them were very excited about the project. We also had very positive responses from outside Foldaborg preschool, including a lot of phonecalls and visits from teachers and other people who wanted to know more about – and see – what we were doing.

Personally, I found that working on this project was very demanding but at the same time very exciting and rewarding. I wanted to be as much involved in the work with the children as I could so I had my own discussion group to lead. It's a great experience to see a girl who in the beginning hardly said a word, or a boy who always took the word of others and had difficulties in sitting still, become active and confident members of a discussion group that is

dealing with important and complex matters.

The teachers in Foldaborg are still working on philosophy with the children, and are doing very well. Nowadays it has become a very natural, important part of the curriculum and the school is well known for this work, both by parents as they select schools for their children and by professionals. Also, since the project in Foldaborg I have given many lectures introducing Philosophy for Children and it has now been taken up by other schools with similarly impressive results. ○

*Some parts of this article originally appeared in the article 'Philosophy for Children in Foldaborg; Development Project in Foldaborg, a preschool in Reykjavik, Iceland, for children from 1-6 years' by Ingibjorg Sigurthorsdottir, first published in OMEP International Journal of Early Childhood, Volume 30, No. 1, 1998; OMEP World Organisation for Early Childhood and Education, DCDPE Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1A 0HH, England.*

## *Philosophy for Children in action: USA*

In 1996 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) made a film that included work with young children in Tuscon School, New Jersey, USA, called 'Socrates for six year olds'. It was produced and directed by Anne Paul. The film catches fascinating scenes of open dialogue between six year old children. For example, just five months after the introduction of the programme, it shows children's ability to address an individual's sense of self, and relate that to the location of thinking in the body. It also shows that young children can sustain dialogues between themselves with minimal intervention by their teacher. In this example, the teacher's interventions are in italics.

- Elfie always thinks a lot, that's why she doesn't talk a lot.
- I agree with Joanne, because your brain is for learning and it's powerful.
- *So you don't agree with Clarissa who says it's you who thinks, and not your brain? That's an interesting*

*thing to say Clarissa.*

- I disagree with Clarissa, because if you didn't have a brain, you wouldn't be even thinking of the words that I am talking right now. So, it would be impossible without your brain.
- I think it could be possible because you have a heart, and a heart can beat, and it could think it's beating.
- I disagree with Teresa, because if your heart beats, that's just your heart beating. You don't know if your heart thinks.
- *You don't know if your heart thinks?*
- If you have your brain like we do, you know all the thoughts.
- I agree with Teresa, because you think and your brain stores your thoughts.
- *So, it's really you who's doing the thinking?*
- Well, if you didn't have a brain, you would say, What's that? What's that? What's that?
- How would you know what's happening? And how would you know how to spell the word if you

didn't think about the word?

- You wouldn't know anything, so you wouldn't know what you are saying, so you don't know it.
- It's like, well, I don't even know what that is. And you don't even know where you are.
- You couldn't even talk, because you don't know what the words are.
- If you didn't have a brain, you would die. Because if you wouldn't have a brain you would keep falling down, and you would really go into the street and you would get run over. So, you would be immediately dead if you didn't have a brain.
- I disagree with Christian because you could walk ...
- ... your brain wouldn't tell you that you can walk. I am thinking that I've got to talk and if I didn't have a brain, then I wouldn't be talking. If I didn't have a brain, I couldn't hear you and I wouldn't be here and I wouldn't be at school and I wouldn't be doing anything. I wouldn't be alive.
- When people grow up, get really old

they wouldn't know anything, because they've used up all of their thoughts.

- *Lauren do you agree with Patrick that you can use up all your thoughts when you're young and wouldn't have enough anymore?*
- You can use up all your thoughts because sometimes I have thoughts and I forget them and I don't have anymore for the rest of the day.
- I disagree with Lauren because you always have thoughts and everybody has thoughts. There's never no thought or only one thought in the world.

In the BBC film, Catherine McCall, the teacher of the Philosophy for Children programme in Tuscon School, explained the approach:

*You create a situation in which the child generates philosophy. It's the children who create the ideas they find interesting, not the ones that the adults find interesting – and that is*

*tremendously exciting for children. They are not nearly as frightened of the risk of intellectual adventure as an adult is.*

This demonstration of the capabilities of six year old children invites the question 'What next?'. In practical terms: how do preschools and schools acknowledge these, develop them further, build on them? What impact should such abilities have on the ways in which children are regarded, on how childhood is conceptualised? What impact should such abilities have on how programmes are devised, operated and evaluated. ○

For details of *Socrates for six year olds* and other BBC programmes and publications please contact:  
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USA Alabama Day Care Services project: *Fully engaged*  
photo: FOCAL