

# Philosophy in Education: Questioning and Dialogue in Schools (Jana Mohr Lone & Michael D. Burroughs)

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Review of

# *Philosophy in Education: Questioning and Dialogue in Schools*

by Jana Mohr Lone and Michael D. Burroughs. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016

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For several decades philosophers and educational theorists have advocated for the inclusion of philosophy into the K-12 school system instead of reserving it for the post-secondary context. Lone and Burroughs' *Philosophy in Education: Questioning and Dialogue in Schools* avoids extensive philosophical considerations about the nature of philosophy or philosophical education, though much emerges implicitly through the activities they present. Instead, it is more of a practical handbook, guidebook, or reference. While Lone and Burroughs outline dozens of simple and effective ways to engage students of younger ages in philosophy, the book is more than just a "how to": the authors present several compelling arguments that can be used to persuade students, parents, administrators and the general public that philosophy is worthwhile for those of younger ages.

Recent years have seen a boom in literature arguing that philosophy in schools is both possible and worthwhile. Even the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy now has an entry for philosophy for children.<sup>1</sup> Early founders of P4C include Matthew Lipman and Gareth Matthews, who helped its establishment in the northeastern US in the 1960s and 70s. Examples of recent scholarship include *Philosophy in Schools: An Introduction for Philosophers and Teachers* by Goering, Shudak, & Wartenberg (2013) which is divided into distinctive approaches for elementary and secondary contexts. Its editors provide a convincing and thorough description of the merits of including philosophy in schools. Hand and Winstanley's *Philosophy in Schools* (2008) includes consideration of some distinctive features of the UK context. Perhaps the most comprehensive overview of the historical emergence, current trends, central debates and foundational theories is the *Routledge International Handbook of Philosophy for Children* (Chetty, Gregory, Haynes, & Murriss, 2017). Often such books combine advocacy with scholarship in the sense that, while they examine histories, debates, trends, and theories, they also provide rationales for inclusion of philosophy in schools, critiques of its opponents, and strategies for its application.

Against the backdrop of this new enthusiasm for school-based philosophy, philosophical questions persist about who is ready to undertake philosophical study. Should philosophy be the exclusive preserve of universities? Many current initiatives claim 'no' and aspire to take philosophy beyond the academy and educational institutions. "Philosophy for all" (Steinbauer, 1998), "The School of Life" and "Public

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/children/>

Philosophy” (Sandel, 2006) all promote engaging in philosophy in public places, with the public, or with regard to ‘public’ issues. Elitists and traditionalists might balk at such attempts at popularizing philosophy, more fearful of corrupting philosophy than corrupting the young. But let’s not forget that Socrates himself didn’t limit his questions to those serious and scholarly souls found on the modern campus today.

Should philosophy be preserved for the older and more mature? Here, elitists and traditionalists are joined by educational psychologists in hostility to P4C. Assumptions about cognitive development that became dominant in educational psychology following Jean Piaget were based on the notion that the abstract character of philosophy exceeded the cognitive capacities of most children (Piaget, 1959). But more recent scholarship argues that it is possible that the young might be able to engage in some form of philosophical thought and discussion. While children may not be able to read complicated primary sources or write elaborate essays, growing scholarship suggests that their persistent curiosity, capacity for abstract thought, and sense of wonder at the newness of being a person puts them in a good position to engage in philosophy. It is in this context that training programs and research about philosophy at the pre-college level have proliferated internationally.

Many books on P4C could be grouped into the ‘but how do I do it?’ category, aimed less for scholars and advocates and more so at practitioners looking for concrete and specific strategies that can be readily used in the classroom. Examples include *Philosophy for Kids: 40 Fun Questions That Help You Wonder about Everything*, which is organized into sections titled ‘Values’, ‘Knowledge’, ‘Reality’, and ‘Critical Thinking’, and includes activities, teaching tips, and a glossary (White, 2001). However, while this work presents many interesting questions that could provoke discussion with students, there is very little guidance about how to effectively incorporate them into the classroom. Lone and Burroughs add to this discussion in a very practical manner: while they consider the literature briefly, their emphasis is on practical strategies that K-12 teachers can use to promote philosophy in their classrooms.

Lone and Burroughs describe chronological or historical approaches to teaching philosophy, which, they argue, together with the traditional lecture format, teach *about* philosophy instead of *how* to philosophize. While chronological approaches presented in a lecture format may introduce students to the content of philosophy—what philosophers have said—they may not necessarily promote independent philosophical thinking. That’s not to say that students aren’t “doing” something when they are being lectured to, or when they are reading philosophy; there is much going on as we sit quietly. Instead, the authors advocate for the actual *doing* of philosophy with students. What’s called for with younger ages is something more interactive, participatory, inquiry-based and dialogical. While much of P4C in the last 40 years has called for this approach, there has been a need for practical hands-on guidance and suggested activities.

They begin by asking “Why introduce philosophy to young people?” They build some very strong arguments for its inclusion in schools and critique many common objections. Part II explores guiding principles relevant to the unique conditions of working with younger people by describing Learner-Centered Education and the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoI). These could be considered ‘best practices’ for philosophical work with young children. A highlight of this section is the chapter titled “Philosophical Sensitivity” which describes philosophical sensitivity as an “awareness of the philosophical dimensions of daily life, a feeling for the perplexities that lie behind much of what we say, do, and think.... a capacity to identify abstract questions in the most ordinary aspects of everyday experience... a keen attentiveness to the specific details of situations” (41). Perhaps akin to something like ‘aesthetic sensitivity’, the cultivation of philosophical sensitivity responds to the question: “What

makes a question a philosophical?" This, in turn, helps promote an ability to think thoughts that might otherwise go unthought. This sets a helpful objective for teaching philosophy.

The bulk of the book consists of Part III, "In the Classroom", which moves through Elementary, Middle to High School, and provides detailed lesson plans for each context. For example, elementary lesson plans include "A Question Board" with the broad objective of helping promote reasoning skills. Students are asked 'would it be good or bad if...?', followed by any number of possible scenarios. Authors provide 'chocolate rain' as an example. Children are provided with sticky notes that can be placed on a board divided into two options: 'good because' and 'bad because'. The authors provide some sample questions that can be asked after students have placed their sticky notes on the board: "what would be good about that choice?", "what might or might not happen if that was the case?", "do you think everybody would like that?" In other words, this activity requires that children not only make a choice but also justify their views and defend their position.

An activity for high school students that is likely of even greater interest than others, as it not only deals with philosophy but also education, applies social contract theory to creating an inclusive classroom. Students argue positions to their classmates regarding how a classroom should be run, creating a class constitution. They learn about consent, contracts, compromise, negotiation and how to make an argument. Students fill out an anonymous questionnaire regarding their views on teachers, students, and the classroom, which are shared with classmates. Aspects of social contract theory are explored, and students are encouraged to imagine they are currently in a state of nature. The questionnaire is used to generate three components of the class constitution, which are then discussed and voted on. Sample class constitutions are provided in the book. A large study of high school philosophy courses in Ontario found that students enjoy such interactive and creative activities (Bialystok, Norris, & Pinto, 2019)

The final section of the book articulates how to address power and privilege and other specific social and political issues in the philosophy classroom, including the need for respect for children as themselves a marginalized group, and the possibility of empowering children by putting their voices at the centre of inquiry. These issues can in fact be made into central topics for philosophical inquiry in the classroom.

### **Critiques: Philosophy as Facile and Prefabricated?**

I raise two critiques. First, the book construes philosophy as rather benign. Perhaps this is essential in order to make it uncontroversial enough to appeal widely and simple enough to be unthreatening. But Socrates shows us that philosophy can be corrosive and disruptive and often unwelcome. The book closes with a series of rather bland descriptions of social and political issues that philosophy might address, but leaves out more sensitive but engaging topics like racism, sexism, torture, abortion, euthanasia, environmental issues, etc. Philosophy can turn your life upside down and dislodge what has been previously taken for granted, and that may be a deeply unsettling experience, not simply an exercise in cognitive discipline. In other words, what the book overlooks is that philosophy has a long history of disruption. After all, Socrates was not particularly welcome in Ancient Athens! Philosophers since then have been in deep tension with religious faith, political power, social convention, and sometimes even scientific claims. This disruptive and unsettling character of philosophy is perhaps closer to how Socrates described his aim to serve as a gadfly. Emphasizing this aspect of philosophy may in fact help draw young students to it. After all, what better way to appeal to young students today than by suggesting that

philosophy is subversive, non-conforming, dangerous and disruptive? That's not to give young kids *carte blanche* or encourage them to disrespect all and any authority, but to recognize that one way to promote philosophy is to suggest it is a way to participate in something subversive and even empowering.

My second critique concerns the very notion of preformed and prefabricated activities. While a "History of Philosophy" reader, so common in first year philosophy courses, is certainly not going to work with young people—nor teachers without philosophical training—my critique would be that a book that provides lesson plans suggests that anyone can teach philosophy as long as they've got the right handouts, activities and instructional strategies (Bialystok 2017). Being a good philosophy teacher requires more than that (Bialystok, 2017). How can a teacher with weak 'philosophical sensitivity' use these preset activities to promote philosophical sensitivity in others? Activities must be coupled with sensitivities and training or philosophy becomes something that anyone can teach. But that's not to say that planned activities aren't worthwhile; after all, every philosophy teacher starts class with a plan of some sort. And a philosopher without examples, questions, prompts and provocations will make class rather dull. I am just identifying the possibility that such pre-set activities imply that expertise and content knowledge is not central to teaching philosophy.

### Conclusion: A New Direction for Philosophy of Education?

Echoing a claim I made earlier in this journal, philosophy in schools may provide a tremendous growth opportunity for philosophers of education (Norris, 2015). While philosophy of education courses are less frequently required in teacher education programs, there may be new growth opportunities in working with teachers and teacher candidates interested in promoting philosophical thinking among students. Perhaps in addition to encouraging teacher and teacher candidates to be philosophical *about* education, we can promote philosophical thinking *within* education. Teacher education—or even graduate—courses in philosophy in schools, philosophy for children, or philosophy across the curriculum, may draw interest in conjunction with traditional philosophy of education courses. This might help make classrooms more philosophical.

Alternately, teacher education courses in promoting 'critical thinking' can be designed in such a way that philosophy is placed at their heart. After all, most boards and ministries emphasize the importance of critical thinking. While this term is often vague or narrow, there are opportunities for philosophers of education to present broader approaches. If we think of critical thinking as the ability to assess arguments, evaluate reasons, defend claims, clarify terms, and judge the merit of evidence, one could argue that there is no better way to cultivate critical thinking than philosophy. And no one is better situated in faculties of education and the field of education more broadly to make this argument than philosophers of education.

In closing, while I've raised many criticisms, this book is an invaluable resource for anyone looking for practical strategies to begin incorporating philosophy into K-12 classes.

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