

Let's talk about children and philosophy

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"Philosophy" might sound like a sophisticated thing, a realm of deep thinking and grandiloquent wordings exclusive to senior, aloof, and usually spectacled seniors of the society.

But proponents of the Philosophy for Children Movement, which was founded by Matthew Lipman in early 1970s, argue that children at very young ages are capable of some sorts of critical and philosophical thinking. Moreover, the movement, known as P4C, encourages parents and teachers to nurture seeds of deep thoughts and questions in the young children.

The movement has gained much traction in Iran, as well, and received cautious approval and encouragement from officials, which was not surprising after all, because a precursor of sorts had been established in Iran in 1965, i.e. the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, which, among other things, has tried over the years to procure cognitive and critical development tools for Iranian children. And right now, many 'special' schools across the country pay due attention to 'unorthodox' educational methods, including P4C.

As everything else about the delicate being of young children, however, the work of P4C should be done properly with utmost care. There are pitfalls to be avoided, misunderstandings to be cleared up, and best practices to be followed. More specifically, there are less or more legitimate concerns about the whole idea of working philosophically with children that parents or educators might have.

In an exchange with Robert Wilson, professor of philosophy at the University of Western Australia who has extensive experience in the field, I raised some of the pressing issues in regards to the P4C. His insights into the matter will be published in four consecutive parts in Iran Daily.

Robert Wilson on Philosophy for Children:

P4C builds on children's natural curiosity

PART I

EXCLUSIVE



Robert Wilson is professor of philosophy at the University of Western Australia.

What is Philosophy for Children (P4C) essentially about? What is its significance?

I think what's especially important for parents about the Philosophy for Children program and the methodologies that it invokes is that it provides a way for their children to develop their curiosity in a very natural way while becoming members of these communities of inquiry, and seeing themselves as having ideas and capable of developing them, together with others, in ways that matter to them. Once they've got that idea, which in some sense should be happening in classrooms and throughout children's lives very naturally but often doesn't, they can transport that into all sorts of areas: How they read novels, how they approach mathematical problems, and how they look at scientific experiments.

The kids who come out of such classrooms are often incredibly enthusiastic, realizing they've got much more potential than they thought. They're excited and sometimes even surprise their parents.

So, it's quite a general set of skills that you develop if you get used to this kind of dialogical mode of inquiry. This makes it always okay to ask why, to expect that others will engage you, and to be interested in their ideas and why they think about things maybe in the same way or maybe in different ways. Why does this sort of evidence count? How does what was going on here connect with something else? Each individual will make their own connections, and having that free space, your kids can do this. It's a matter of creating spaces and inculcating confidence in them.

There is a concern among some parents that having young children do philosophy might be overwhelming or otherwise exhausting for them. What's your take on that? Yeah, I don't think so. Because I think this kind of

curiosity that you build on is very, very natural. So, it's very student-focused. I think where kids can feel too much pressure is when they're confronted with something that feels very alien and is imposed on them. So, if they had to do some abstract mathematics or they have to read a complicated piece of reading, which might be relevant but they can't see the point of it because it's a bit removed from their experiences, that's where kids can freeze up, I think, and feel a little overwhelmed. But crucial to the kind of methodology that we have in building these communities of inquiries is to have it very student-centered, but also to make it not egocentric, so that it's not focused just on them. Rather, it's getting them to realize that they're part of a community and they have got to be sensitive to other people's ideas. They

have got to be as inquisitive about others as they are about themselves.

What about the concern that such a work might be "too mature" or "too challenging" for the kids? What if the kids lose their interest in such intellectual endeavors altogether? I don't think I've really seen that. What I see is kids coming out of these classrooms or other informal settings where this methodology is employed, being incredibly enthusiastic, realizing they've got much more potential than they thought. They're excited about the ideas. They can see applications in their real lives. They can become quite challenging, and sometimes parents are surprised, "What did you do to my kid?" Not that they'd say that in a bad way, but more like, "Wow! They've got all sorts of stuff inside of them. I just

About the Book:

A Teacher's Guide to Philosophy for Children

Published by Routledge in 2019, this book provides educators with the process and structures to engage children in inquiring as a group into 'big' moral, ethical and spiritual questions, while also considering curricular necessities and the demands of national and local standards.

Based on the actual experiences of educators in diverse and global classroom contexts, this comprehensive guide gives you the tools you need to introduce philosophical thinking into your classroom, curriculum and beyond. Drawing on research-based educational and

psychological models, this book highlights the advantages gained by students who regularly participate in philosophical discussion: From building cognitive and social/emotional development, to becoming more informed citizens. Helpful tools and supplementary online resources offer additional frameworks for supporting and sustaining a higher level of thinking and problem-solving among your students.

This practical guide is essential reading for teachers, coaches and anyone wondering how you can effectively teach philosophy in your classroom.

