

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: A CURRICULUM APPROACH

Before showing how philosophy can be taught through the curriculum in the elementary school, it is important to illustrate how “philosophy” is being used in this context. The concepts, “philosophy” and “philosophical thinking,” refer to the process of evaluating statements and arguments. An operational definition would consist of all the skills used in the evaluating process. These include (1) linguistic skills: defining key terms, recognizing vague and ambiguous words, distinguishing factual from emotive language, and analyzing clichés; (2) empirical skills: distinguishing a fact from an opinion, using evidence to test beliefs, recognizing and justifying inferences, and seeking explanations; (3) methodological skills: judging the reliability of common sense, faith, authority, intuition, and the scientific method of inquiry; and (4) logical skills: judging whether statements contradict each other and recognizing the multitude of logical fallacies.¹ How can these skills be mastered within the curriculum of an elementary school program?

Language Arts

In the study of the English language, students often encounter words that have multiple meanings. Are all men created equal? Some people have contended that all men are not born equal. They have different abilities and opportunities. Others have maintained that all men are equal before the law. They should be treated equally regardless of any physical, social, or economic differences. Different definitions of the term “equal” are being used in this argument. Students can be taught the importance of defining key concepts in order to resolve issues.

Stories in readers, newspaper articles, and student remarks can be used to elucidate linguistic skills. A few years ago a student in a sixth grade class in Kansas City, Missouri, reported that he found inconsistencies among three books concerning the seating capacity of the Roman Coliseum. He asked me which one was the correct answer. My first reaction was to suggest an authoritative source, such as, the Encyclopedia Britannica. However, in this context the term "seat" is vague. Since stone slabs were used as seats, it would be difficult to determine the exact number of seats, unless one knew the size of the bodies that occupied them.

Literary works are excellent sources for the development of philosophical thinking. In Antoine de Saint Exupery's, *The Little Prince*, there are numerous passages that can be used to foster reflective responses. For example: (1) An astronomer dressed in a Turkish outfit presented evidence of a discovery to an international congress. It was rejected. The following year he presented the same theory dressed in European clothes and it was accepted. This is an example of the *ad hominem* fallacy. It is the evidence to support one's claim and not one's dress that should determine truth or falsity. (2) When the little prince inquired about the geography of the planet, the geographer responded that this can only be answered by the explorers of this planet. But his planet has no explorers. Can you have a geographer, if there are no explorers on this planet? (3) From the top of a mountain, the little prince observes that the planet is dry and forbidding. He concludes that the entire planet is this way. The little prince has made a hasty generalization.

In Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, various remarks also lend themselves to critical thinking. For example: (1) Tom was begging and there were severe penalties for begging. Is it reasonable to have a severe penalty for begging? Should there be any laws against begging? (2) The prince believed that learning softens the heart and breeds gentleness. Is this always true? What are some counter-examples of this belief? (3) A doubt is expressed as to whether the prince is an impostor or whether he has gone mad. What criteria can be used to make this distinction?

Reading

The teaching of reading primarily involves the recognition of words and an understanding of their meanings. The application of

philosophical thinking to reading would entail the use of certain skills in evaluating reading materials.² One approach that can be used is the analysis of stories used in readers.

In “Adventures in the Swamp,”³ Johnny says to himself that there is nothing frightening in the swamps. Is this belief true? Does convincing oneself of something make it true? Johnny believes that if Henry can catch an alligator, so can he. Is it true that if someone can do something, you can also do it?

In “The Spelling Bee,”³ a classroom in 1770 was described as dreary, without pictures and bookshelves. Can a student learn in this kind of classroom? Does one learn more in a classroom that is beautifully decorated with wall maps?

In “A Barber’s Discovery,”³ the barber contends that it is absurd to give advice to nature. Nature knows what is best for the world. What is being assumed in this belief? When an earthquake destroys a city, is this good for the world? Is it good for man to change the ways of nature?

While doing consultant work in the Wyandanch, New York public schools, I had the opportunity to develop philosophical responses to *West Side Story*. In this play, Bernardo insulted Tony. A fight ensued that resulted in Riff hitting Bernardo, Bernardo killing Riff, and Tony stabbing Bernardo. If someone insults you, does this warrant your hitting and stabbing him? What other things could have been done? It was claimed that it is inevitable to have a rumble when you have two opposing gangs. Is this true? What are some examples of things that are not inevitable and things that are inevitable? Tony and Maria foresee a place where they can be free of prejudice. What is prejudice? Is there a place in the world where there are not any prejudices? If there were not any prejudiced people, what kind of a world would it be?

Social Studies

Historical events present the student with situations that can be analyzed philosophically. Should the South have seceded? Was it right for the colonists to destroy English property during the Boston Tea Party? Was President Andrew Jackson right in refusing to enforce the Supreme Court decision requiring the return of certain

lands to the Cherokee Indians? These normative questions will give students practice in establishing criteria, seeking evidence, and justifying standards. Weighing the evidence presented by different authorities will also enable students to judge historical events more accurately. Was John Brown justified in attacking Harper's Ferry? The use of biographies, newspaper accounts, reference books, John Brown's speeches, and Thoreau's defense of John Brown would expose them to different accounts of this event. Logical analysis can then be applied to these interpretations.

There have been some experiments testing the effects of using a reflective method of teaching social studies.⁴ The skills emphasized in these experiments included defining terms, drawing logical implications, identifying assumptions, and recognizing logical fallacies. Some of the conclusions presented to the students for analysis were:

The discoveries made by explorers of new lands will always benefit the nation they represent.

If man becomes physically soft, his civilization will collapse.

If there is a major national issue (Civil War) which has two distinct groups, these groups will be divided along sectional lines.

There is a set of filmstrips in American history that emphasize the decision-making process. Some of the best filmstrips in this series for developing philosophical thought are: *The Witches of Salem, Massacre and Propaganda, Loyalists and Patriots, Freedom of the Press, and Harper's Ferry*.⁵

Mathematics

Mathematics provides an excellent source for understanding that conclusions are based upon certain assumptions. Does $1 + 1 = 2$? Given certain assumptions, this statement is true. But with a set of different assumptions and definitions of the number system, (base 2 system) we can conclude that $1 + 1 = 10$. In geometry, we derive different conclusions from the assumptions of Euclid, Lobachevsky, and Riemann. In Euclidean geometry, the sum of the angles of a triangle equals 180 degrees, while in Lobachevskian geometry, it is less than 180 degrees and in Riemannian geometry, it is more than 180 degrees. This clearly indicates to the student that assumptions are not

self-evident, and that the validity of the conclusion is dependent upon the validity of its assumptions. Some students assume that all mathematical problems are solvable. An exposure to unsolvable mathematical problems will assist students to eliminate this unfounded assumption; e.g., If the distance from New York to Boston is 225 miles, and from Boston to Albany is 175 miles, how far is it from New York to Albany?

It is my contention that the curriculum approach is the most effective way of teaching philosophy in the elementary school. What is needed in the schools is a curriculum that stresses the application of philosophy to the learning process. This would require teachers who are trained in philosophical thinking, and the use of materials and books that would foster logical thought. New textbooks need to be written in language arts, reading, social studies, mathematics, science, and other areas emphasizing the use of philosophical thinking within the curriculum.

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FOOTNOTES

¹For a more detailed account of these and other skills, see E. D'Angelo, *The Teaching of Critical Thinking*. Amsterdam: Gruner, 1971, pp. 8-15.

²For various suggestions about applying evaluative skills on different reading levels, see E. D'Angelo, "Critical Thinking in Reading," *Elementary English*, December, 1971.

³W. S. Gray and others, *More Times and Places*, Chicago: Scott Foresman, 1968.

⁴B. G. Massialas, (ed.), "The Indiana Experiments in Inquiry: Social Studies," *Bulletin of the School of Education, Indiana University*, May, 1963,

⁵*Critical Thinking Aids*. Modern Learning Aids, 1212 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York.