

# Questions

Philosophy For Young People Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2001

## Welcome to *Questions*

Philosophy, the “love of wisdom,” begins, as Plato and Aristotle both noted, with wonder about the world. We express this wonder by asking questions. The philosopher Abraham Heschel suggested that philosophy is the “art of asking the right questions.” It is those unsettled, speculative questions of human existence, and young people’s interest in them, that led to the formation of this journal.

*Questions* began as a project of the American Philosophical Association’s Committee on Pre-College Instruction in Philosophy. We were interested in furthering on a national scale the work that is being done to bring philosophy into young people’s lives, and we wanted to draw attention to the value of philosophy and philosophical thinking for young students.

People often comment that young people like to ask “big” questions. At four or five years of age, children start asking what are often called the “why” questions. Parents and teachers can feel stymied by such questions because there are no clear explanations readily available to answer them. But these questions don’t call for explanations. They are invitations. They invite us to dip into thinking about fundamental mysteries, about which philosophers have debated for centuries and for which there are no ready answers. The questions invite us to wonder. This is the core of philosophy. It is our belief that many young people are naturally inclined to engage in it, and this issue illustrates some of the ways that they do.

Jana Mohr Lone, *Editor-in-Chief*

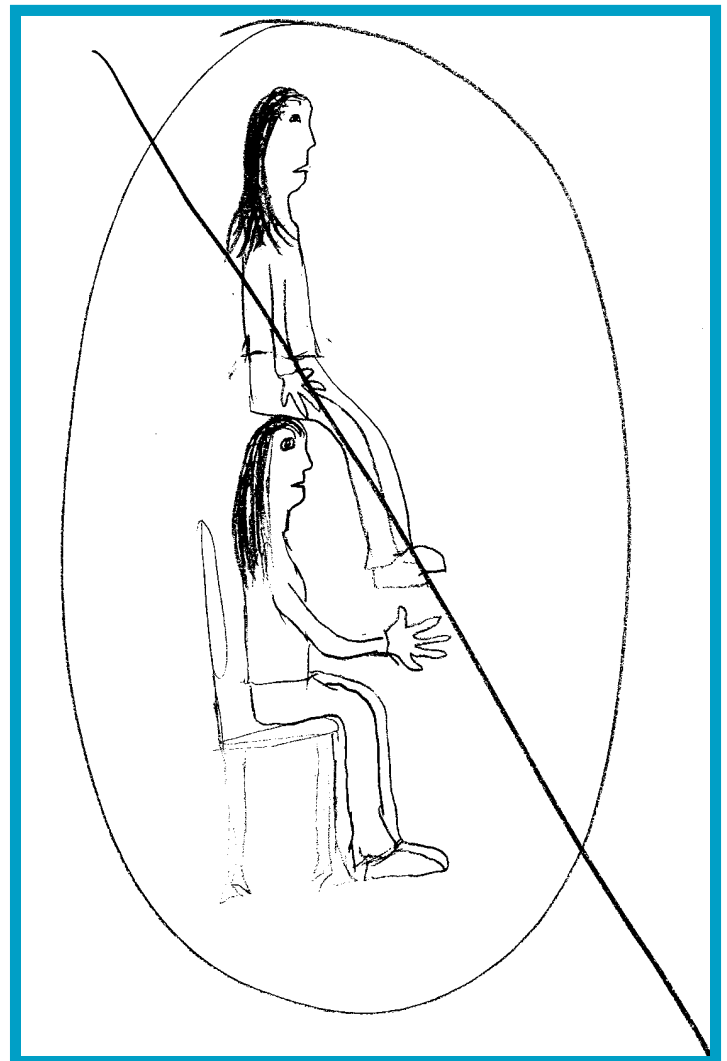
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## Children’s Rights

This pilot issue of *Questions* is devoted to questions about children’s rights. What is a child? How are children different from adults? What rights should parents and other adults have over children? What gives parents the rights to make some decisions for their children? Should young people be entitled to make their own decisions?

Teachers and philosophers from 8 states and 3 countries facilitated discussions with K-12 students about these and other children’s rights issues. This issue includes excerpts from some of those discussions, as well as essays, drawings and poems by the students.



*“The right to not have people sit on my head.”*  
Grade 6 Student, Whitman Middle School, Seattle



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*Questions* is published by the Philosophy Documentation Center with the generous support of the American Philosophical Association and the Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children. If you would like to receive more information on how to obtain copies of *Questions*, please contact Jana Mohr Lone of the Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children, Department of Philosophy, University of Washington, 345 Savery, Box 353350, Seattle, Washington 98195-3350; phone (206) 221-6297; fax: (206) 685-8740; e-mail: [jmohrlone@hotmail.com](mailto:jmohrlone@hotmail.com); [www.philosophyforchildren.org](http://www.philosophyforchildren.org).

If you would like to make a tax-deductible contribution to support the ongoing publication of *Questions*, please see page 16 of this issue.

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## Doing Philosophy with Young Students

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Sara Goering

California State University at Long Beach

Introducing philosophy into the classroom can happen in many ways. What works best for one class or one teacher may not be as effective or as meaningful for another class or teacher. Consequently, a variety of techniques and approaches have been used with success. One point of pedagogical agreement within the community of advocates for doing philosophy with K–12 students is that the aim is to encourage students' own philosophical thinking and reflection, rather than simply to teach them the names, dates, and historical significance of important figures in the history of philosophy. In other words, we want to help children to *do* philosophy, to contribute to its questions and subject matter, rather than to study its history. To do this, they must be actively engaged, not only in the discussion, but also in the choice of the material and ideas for discussion.

Most philosophy sessions begin with an activity designed to spark students' interest and to generate questions for philosophical discussion. This activity might be a shared reading, a thought experiment, a piece of art, or a game. Shared readings (e.g., a story, an excerpt from a novel, history book, or classical philosophy text, or a current newspaper article) foster language and reading comprehension skills as they raise philosophical issues. Although excellent novels and stories written specifically for doing philosophy with young people are available, often the students' regular reading curriculum materials, when looked at critically, may suffice to spark the initial discussion. Thought experiments are a classic technique used to assess intuitions and invite philosophical imagination (e.g., if you had a ring that could make you invisible, how would you use it?). Works of art are well suited to stimulate thinking about our assumptions of meaning and intent, and also serve as a way to elicit participation from students who might have language comprehension problems or who are simply inclined towards the visual rather than the verbal. Finally, games designed to raise philosophical issues (e.g., the rights drawing game described in this issue) can encourage philosophical thinking in a fun, engaging manner that addresses young students' needs for tactile and physical stimulation. Philosophy games that utilize role-playing challenge students to think beyond their own identity and circumstances.

Following the initial activity, students generate their own questions or points for discussion. The teachers involved are encouraged to take on the role of co-inquirer, participating in the discussion with the students rather than directing, leading, or simply facilitating it. Through this process, students learn to ask and construct relevant questions, develop their own views and articulate reasons for them, and listen and learn from their peers. At the end of the session, the students are invited to reflect back on the ground covered in the discussion, either through a collective summarizing of the various lines of argument, or perhaps through individual written reflections or drawings.

Philosophy can enter the classroom in a wide variety of ways. In some areas, teacher trainers are available to offer intensive training and follow-up guidance to teachers who are interested in doing philosophy in their classrooms. In other places, graduate students and senior-level undergraduates in philosophy work with selected classes on their own or in partnership with practicing teachers. Some teachers have previous college experience with philosophy and raise the issues in an integrated fashion throughout their curriculum. We invite you join the movement to bring philosophy, with its sense of wonder and curiosity about the world, into schools in your area.



## A Conversation with Children: Children's Rights in School and at Home

Teacher: Talya Birkhahn  
Keshet School, Jerusalem, Israel

The children were pre-school and grade 1 students (5–6 years old) at the Keshet school. Keshet is a unique pluralist school in Jerusalem that attracts children from both religious and secular Jewish backgrounds. Translated from the Hebrew by Talya Birkhahn.

*Talya [teacher]:* Are there things in school that are not fair—that go against your rights?

*Tal & Hillel:* That everyone is angry with us all the time because we make a mess.

*Tzipi:* The teacher has to do it nicely.

*Talya:* Let's think about our own home—are there things at home that you deserve but that you do not receive?

*Hillel:* We deserve to be able to make a mess

*Tzipi:* It is not good, a mess, because then you don't find things. It depends what kind of mess - in the living room it's OK, but not in your own room.

*Talya:* Is there a 'good mess' and a 'bad mess'?

*Adin:* A mess with drawing is good.

*Anat:* On Saturday I take blankets and put them on the floor and take pillows and toys and then there is a mess.

*Tzipi:* When adults are angry with me I intentionally make a mess.

*Hillel:* When you make a mess you can lose some things.

*Talya:* So you deserve as children to make a mess, but you said that a mess is not always good. Maybe in the beginning . . .

*Hillel:* Sometimes the mess is a mistake and the adults don't have to be angry. You can arrange things without being angry.

*Tzipi:* My brother makes a mess and I don't find my things.

*Matan:* At home you are not allowed and in the class it has to be organised.

*Talya:* So, do you feel that you deserve more things as children—in school or at home?

*Hillel:* At home . . .

*Yoav:* Sweets. Most of the things that we want to do we do at home and not at school. It's easier to be kids at home.

*Tzipi:* The grownups have to do more for us, both in school and at home, because we are smaller than them.

*Talya:* What is more fun and valuable to be—a child or a grownup?

*Matan:* A child, because in such—you do not die and you have more time to live.

*Anat:* A child because it's more fun.

*Adin:* A child does not have to go to work.

*Hillel:* A child because you cannot die and have more time.

*Yoav:* A child because you can run and play.

*Tzipi:* A grown-up because a grown-up learns more than in school.

*Adin:* Adults tell children what to do.

*Hillel:* A child because more friends come to visit me.

*Talya:* Most of you said that you prefer to be children because you don't have to go to work and you can play and be more with friends.

**ACTIVITY:** The children drew pictures of "Why is it worthwhile to be a child? What do I deserve as a child?" Some children explain their pictures: (*pictures described in italics*).

*Matan:* A child standing in front of a shelf with books: "His duty as a child is to keep the order."

*Tal:* A kindergarten with his father there: "I have a right to play to in the kindergarten without my father being there." [His father is very strict.]

*Adin:* Drew a child throwing things: "I have a right to play and have fun, but it is my duty to arrange everything."

*Yoav:* A child playing: "Children have the right to play."

*Hillel:* A child in a math class: "Children have the right to learn math."

*Anat and Tzipi:* Drew themselves playing with each other: "We have the right to play with each other."

*Talya:* Are you glad to be children?

*Everyone:* "Yes!!"

## Kids' Quotes: Children's Rights

Interspersed throughout this issue are a selection of quotes from discussions about children's rights by the Summer 2000 Apogee Class at Northwestern University's Center for Talent Development (CTD). The students, ages 10–12, who participated in these discussions were: **Carrie Abbott, Cecella Chen, Elina Chertok, Alexander Copulsky, Nacirema Frisch, Angela Hiss, Charles Isaacs, Morgan King, Michael Lennon, Rucho Mehta, Shira Mendelsohn, Gaby Ruiz-Funes, and Alexander Soble**

“Most of the time the parents always want the best for their children. And since they have more experience over the years than their children, I think that's what gives parents rights over children.”

“Parents should have the right to make some decisions. But it all depends on a number of things: the children's ages, how mature they are, and what decisions are being made.”

“Parents should have the right to make decisions for their children depending on the circumstances and this is because the parents do have more experience and they might have been through many of these things. So depending on the circumstances the parents should have rights over their children.”



## Grownups and Children: Zalman Haran Primary School, Talpiot Jerusalem, Israel

Dubi Bergstein, 5th Grade Teacher

### A Story about the Relationship between Grownups and Children

Marina Hefets, 5th grade

Any person can be little or Big, even grownups. But the same person can behave differently at different ages. Grownups can make fun of children, but they don't understand that it makes the children feel bad. They forget that they were once children.

A person can like something and when he grows up he doesn't like it anymore. It is weird that the same person behaves differently at different ages. Let's say a little person likes to play with his dolls and he doesn't have to worry about money. But when he grows up he starts worrying about it, and that is how people change all the time.

### The Loving Song

Idan Yassy, 5th grade

I am tall, I am short, I don't want to go and learn.

I love freedom, I don't want to be alone.

I am a grownup, want a job and I want—

To raise a family, live in a palace,

Be the ruler. And most of all I want to decide.

### From Small to Big

Guy-Oz Golan, 5th grade

From small to big, from short to giant, from kindergarten to high school.

From weak to strong, from school to work, from underage to "responsible."

Are grownups necessarily better than children? Is being "responsible" better than being young?

Who said that grownup people are more responsible than young people?

And why are young people being denied their rights?

That is the way the world is and there is nothing we can do to change it—the "responsible" know better than the young.

But why is the world like that? Maybe it can be changed.

Maybe not in the whole world, but

Maybe at least in school or in our neighborhood.

*I think we should have the right to decide in some circumstances what is right and wrong because many, many ideas that parents have are completely wrong, and they are influencing their children to do some things.*

*I think the parents should very gradually change the rules to give their child a little more responsibility each year. And then see how they do with it. And if they abuse it then take it away again. But if they don't abuse it then keep on gradually changing the rules.*

## Topics of Philosophy of Education: Philosophy, Childhood and Subjectivity<sup>1</sup>

Rosana Aparecida, Fernandes de Oliveira, and Walter Omar Kohan  
University of Brasilia, Dept. of Educational Foundations



With philosophical practice as a starting point, we proposed to help children question their ideas about what it is to be a child and the relationship between adulthood and childhood. We also asked ourselves to what extent philosophy contributes to a more reflective attitude toward who we believe we are and the possibility of thinking of ourselves in different ways.

We held ten philosophy meetings in two classes at public schools in Brazil. Students were in third grade (approximately 9 years old, although in these groups, as in most Brazilian Public Schools, children of different ages are in the same class). Different texts, such as videos, films, children's literature, photographs, slides and others, were used to elicit reflection about childhood.

Following is a discussion of a session held November 12, 1999. There were 35 students in the class which lasted an hour and a half.

The objective of this class was to explore the act of playing. Playing is commonly seen as something obvious and natural. But what do children think about the act of playing? How do their impressions of it compare to those of adults? How do we—and how ought we—to value it?

In the class, students played freely with playdough, in pairs or groups, as they chose. After playing for 30/40 minutes, the teacher asked the students to comment on their playing. The discussion started from their comments.

Jose: "If you didn't want us to discuss you wouldn't have given us time to play, we would've been wasting our time."

Jose's speech suggests that playing is only allowed in the classroom if it has a pedagogical objective. We see the act of playing according to its functionality; if there is a function or objective, then it is acceptable. Jose's comment makes us rethink our role as educators and as developers of philosophical discussions among children. Other children came into the scene:

Ana: "Everything has to be done at its own time. You can't do everything at the same time. The mother determines when it is time to play, and so does the law."

Clara: "I can choose some things, but not everything. You have to be older to choose things, to tell yourself what to do."

Ana and Clara introduce the discussion about the right time to do things, the time being determined by parents, the law, and older people. We can notice that a given assumption about children and adult rights is affirmed in both comments: adults have power, which includes making their own decisions about what to do, whereas children can do only what the adults decide they should do. These ideas were apparent among all of these groups of children. We developed some strategies in several meetings to enable the children to question these ideas.

Leo: "I prefer that there is a time for each thing. I think this is good. There must be a time for brushing your teeth. I feel lazy when I have to brush my teeth. If there isn't a time for brushing my teeth, I won't feel like brushing them."

Joao: "If it is time to go to school and I don't go, my mother tells me off."





Leo's statement indicates his belief that if there were not determined times for doing things, he would not do many things that he dislikes or that make him feel lazy; he seems to understand though, that many of these things are necessary, such as brushing teeth. Therefore, Leo does a lot of things he does not like and, in Leo's opinion, having a time for each activity (even though the ones you do not like to do) is good. It seems that Leo is not given the opportunity to question or participate in the elaboration of the social rules that govern his life. They are transmitted as obligations, duties. Joao confirms that children have no role in making the important decisions concerning their lives. He cannot choose to go to school or not.

Sara: "The child is not independent, free like the adult. This is why the adult has to say when it is time to do this or that."

Sara makes a strong distinction between children and adults; the former is dependent, not free; the latter is free. She seems to understand independence as freedom.

Sara: "Playing is doing nothing."

Joao: "I disagree. Of course it is doing something. If I am playing, I am doing something; I am playing."

In the social scale of values, playing appears as doing nothing, it has no productivity, no concrete benefit. Playing is not recognised as something important in itself by adults (even those of us who say we do so and bring philosophy to schools to help children develop a more thoughtful relationship with their own reality!). Joao disagrees with this state of affairs; according to him, if the child is playing s/he is involved in an activity, s/he is not just doing nothing.

Sergio: "Children have little time to play, they have to go to school, etc."

Celio: "Doing other things doesn't mean that you're spending play time because there is a right time for playing. There's no point in wishing to play in the classroom, you can't."

Joao: "I disagree. Doing other things is spending time that you could be playing. I'd rather be playing at home than studying at school."

If adults determine what children should do and at what time, playing can be postponed: it will happen after studying, after doing what adults consider the more important activities. Sergio says that a child has little time to play because there are other activities that must be done first, such as going to school. Is there a right time for playing? For Celio there is. And it seems to be of secondary importance. Joao again disagrees. He considers playing an extremely important activity and believes that using time that could be used for playing to do other things is the opposite of what children should do.

Clara: "Toys motivate children to play."

Angelica: "Why do toys motivate children but they do not motivate adults?"

Clara: "Willingness motivates us to play."

Ana: "There are child things and adult things."

Clara introduces toys to the discussion. According to her, toys motivate children to play. Asked to give reasons for her statement, she introduces the notion of will. It is as if we had a "natural" will to play. Ana seems to mean that when our natural will is influenced by adult culture, it gradually abandons play.



"The right to have as many kids as I want."  
Grade 6 Student, Whitman Middle School, Seattle



Alex: "There are people who discriminate against boys who play with girls' things."

Angelica: "Why?"

Clara: "I don't know. When I was born this was already determined: boys' toys and girls' toys."

Angelica: "And how do you know which toy is for boys and which is for girls?"

Clara: "We see the toys and know who they are for."

Bia: "My father doesn't let my brother play with me, with my girls' things."

Alex: "My uncle doesn't let my cousin play with a doll."

Sara: "If you get a doll, will you become a girl?"

The gender issue appears in the discussion. The students did not know how to explain from where this distinction came; when they were born, it was already there. We play with gendered culturalized toys. For Clara, this is natural, obvious, it is just a matter of "noticing": knowing what toy is appropriate for a girl or a boy is a matter of observing. Sara questions this reality in a very deep way. What is the influence of toys on the player? How do toys interfere with the subjectivity of those who play with them? Jose answers:

Jose: "No, but the adults determine what we can play with."

Angelica: "Is it true that the adults determine what you should play with?"

Joao: "The child can play with whatever s/he likes, s/he knows what s/he likes."

Pedro: "All I know is that we can't tell ourselves what to do, we can't do what we want."

According to Jose, even though toys do not influence significantly children's subjectivity, adults determine what children should play with. Again, Joao expresses his disagreement: it is the child who knows with what s/he wants to play. Therefore, he/she should decide with what toys to play. Pedro expresses the voice of the oppressed child: even if a boy wanted to play with a doll, that desire would be repressed and he would be prevented from doing so.

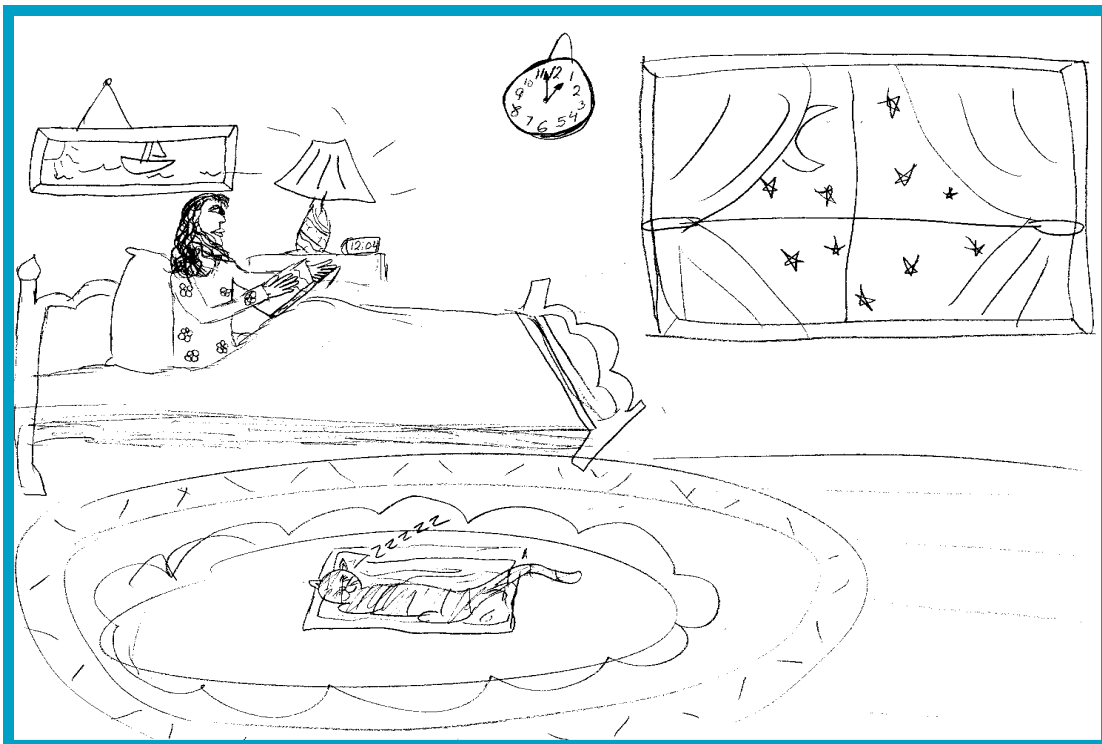
Throughout these meetings, children had the opportunity to make their voices heard and to listen to one another. Some of them changed their views during the discussions. They analysed and reflected about their own conceptions about childhood and adulthood. Some children gradually became more conscious of their ability to make decisions concerning their own lives. Some students saw the conception of childhood as problematic, and questioned whether adults really know everything.

It was hard for us. Sometimes we were disappointed not to hear what we expected to hear from children about childhood. We felt the tension between respecting the children's voices and hearing ideas expressed by what seemed to us to be alienated children. If we interfered, weren't we too much directive? If we did not, wouldn't we be collaborators in an oppressive reality?

These questions are still alive; as are many of questions these children had the opportunity to ask—in some cases for the first time—as part of the gift of philosophy. Might this be a sufficient goal for the practise of philosophy, at this time when so many answers are imposed on children? A place where questions can be constructed and expressed by children themselves.

#### NOTE

1. We thank Julian Merçon for assistance in translating this text and Jana Mohr Lone for revising it.



*"The right to stay up as late as you want."  
Grade 6 Student, Whitman Middle School, Seattle*



# Great Book Discussion Group

Facilitator: Wendy C. Turgeon  
Smithtown Middle School, Smithtown, New York


## Introduction

During the fall of 2000, a small dedicated group of eighth graders got together each week to participate in a Great Book Discussion Group. Along with reading short stories and discussing their themes, they addressed some philosophical issues.

Often the discussion turned to their own experiences and they explored the fuzzy area between childhood and adulthood that they inhabit as thirteen year olds. They were acutely aware of their own limitations but they also recognized the injustices often visited upon them. They are held to be responsible in so many areas of their lives, but then denied a voice in major decisions. They knew that a good teacher was not always the most personable nor the easiest; they acknowledged fairness and accountability as equally important in the making of a good teacher.

In general the students agreed that children certainly had rights, but they were cautious about treating children in the same manner as one would adults. They supported a graduated concept of responsibility with respect as the lynchpin, running throughout the adult-child relationship. Here are some of the essays they contributed.

### Shelbi Thurau, Grade 8


 I think that young people should be allowed more rights and responsibilities than they have at the present time. I do think that there are also some things that parents should still have control over.

One thing I think should be changed is that the voting age should be lowered to fourteen years old. My reasons for this are, we are the next generation and should have a say in how our government is run. The president and other government officials are now controlling the fate of our future. They are deciding who we are at peace with and how our country will be run. If younger people don't have a say in the government it is almost like we can't control our future lives. Commercialism is always saying how we are the next generation, and we can make the world a better place, but how can we make a difference if we don't have a say in what is happening now. If the voting age is lowered, it will cause younger people to believe I really can make a difference and I have a say in how our country and my future is to be run. Kids should also have the opportunity to ask questions to presidential candidates at debates and interviews. We have to be sure that our issues as young people are addressed so that we can be guaranteed a better tomorrow. If a president or other government official does not care about what the next generation has to say, why should our generation care about politics at all. Besides government, I think that there should be some changes in education. The changes I have to say younger people may find offensive and may not like me for saying. I think that if a student cannot maintain grades of A's, B's, or C's, they should be required to go to classes to help them catch up to what they are capable of. I feel that all young people have the potential to be something great, they just have to be willing enough to want to try. I think it is also important for parents to be involved with what their child's strengths and weaknesses are in school. If parents don't show concern, students probably couldn't care less about their educational performances.

Some things that should not be changed that deal with younger people is the requirement to go to school. All children should have the opportunity to have an education even if they don't want to. A young person may not have any idea of what they are capable of until they are subjected to an educational environment. If a child does not have an education, they would never be able to do anything that they wanted to do in life.

I think that this newsletter is a great way to show adults and other important people what kids think. After all, we are the future.

### Mike DiFrancisco, Grade 8


 What is a child? A child is an adult with less experience. In some cases, children know more than adults, and might even be better at running the world. When you are a child, everything is new and you are open to new opinions and you are open-minded about everything. When you become an adult, you lose that. That is why children and adults are so different. A child will always ask, "Why?", and an adult thinks that he or she knows everything and just accepts all strange customs and things without truly understanding them.

It is the parents' responsibilities to teach their children everything they know about life, and guide them. But sometimes, parents take this responsibility and turn it into a right that they use against you. They will think they are helping you by not letting you make any mistakes, but really, by preventing you from making your own mistakes, you really never learned anything, except, "Mom says its a bad idea to . . . ." Of course sometimes a parent should stop their child from making a major mistake in their life, but they shouldn't stop children from making little mistakes that aren't harmful and that they can learn from.

Back to what I was saying before, about how children are adults with less experience. Children are smarter than you take them for. And when I say they know more than adults, I also mean they are more fair than adults as well. It is very unusual to find a toddler who is a racist. Even someone in elementary school. But as we grow up, we learn more from our parents, by hearing little conversations they are having with others, especially at holiday parties, that talk negatively about a group of people. Then, the child, wanting to be like the adults, will become prejudiced. He will then take that with him to school, and his friends will also become prejudiced. That is how racism and all that gets into middle schools; and high schools. If only the parents hadn't been talking negatively about that group of people, maybe, just maybe, that one child wouldn't be a racist. So parents have the responsibility to watch what they say, 24/7, even when they think their children aren't listening, because half the time parents think they are alone, without little ears listening, they really aren't.

Children, before becoming like their parents, when they are fair and kind, would probably be better at ruling the world, or country, than an adult, because of their characteristics. Anybody who is in charge of a country, state, town or anything should above all be fair. And in many cases, children are more fair than adults. So, what is a child, you ask? I'm sticking to my story: An adult, with less experience.

### Diane Galler, Grade 8


 I don't think parents have the right to tell their kids to work. There is enough to do in one day—school, homework, sports—without adding the extra stress of work. Also, the child may not physically be ready to work. If any sort of lifting, etc., is involved there could be a serious injury. However, if young people decide that they want to work, parents don't have the right to keep the money that their children make. That money is well earned, therefore making it the child's decision of what to do with it.



## On Children's Rights and Patience

Teachers: David A. White and Jennifer Thompson  
Center for Talent Development  
Northwestern University

### Introduction

 "On Children's Rights and Patience" was produced by the summer 1999 Apogee class—Philosophy: Ways of Wisdom—at Northwestern University's Center for Talent Development (CTD). The class had ten students from four states; three entering 5th grade, one entering 6th grade, six entering 7th grade.

The Apogee course focused on brief primary-source readings from various philosophers. During discussion of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, a dispute arose concerning whether patience was always a virtue. David White commented that Aristotle analyzed such virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (the class had read excerpts from Book VIII on friendship). A sixth-grader exclaimed, "We should do our own theory of patience!" Thus was born the "patience project."

Jana Mohr Lone suggested via correspondence that this interest in patience might intersect with the topic of children's rights and she offered useful suggestions in this regard. White then arranged a series of ideas on patience—all produced by the Apogee students—in rudimentary prose. The resulting account went through three drafts, each criticized by the students. At this point, a student suggested that their work be critically appraised by the older students in CTD's Spectrum Introduction to Philosophy class (grades 7–9). The Spectrum instructor, Jennifer Thompson, had her students read the relevant section from Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as theoretical background.

After discussing their account of patience and children's rights with their Spectrum counterparts, the Apogee students integrated the Spectrum contributions (White advising when necessary), resulting in the account that follows.

### On Children's Rights and Patience

Written by: *Ifunanya Aniemeka, Angela Czahor, Michael Everett, Ashraya Gupta, Richard Lee, Marysa Leya, Andrew Remissong, Karen Shen, Samantha W. Tsang, and Kevin Yaroch*

Are parents patient with children? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. A more interesting question is—do parents sometimes *use* patience as a way of controlling children, perhaps even controlling them excessively and to the point of oppressing them? For example, should a child be told "Be patient!" whenever a parent does not want to do what the child wants to do? This tactic does not seem fair. Even if patience is a virtue, it does not seem right for a parent to wield patience as a weapon to force a child to act in a certain way.

But just what *is* patience? The dictionary defines patience as "enduring pain or discomfort without complaining." A second meaning is "calmly tolerating delay, confusion, etc." How helpful are these dictionary descriptions for understanding patience in general?

*"The more mature children are the less decisions their parents should make. The older they are the less decisions their parents should make for them. And the more responsibility and trust that they've shown, the less their parents have to interfere with their lives. Because once they are old enough to handle things physically and strong enough to handle mentally, they can do it."*

*"I think that no matter how mature you are when you're young, you shouldn't have all your rights when you're like 6 or 7 or 8. I mean the smartest kid in the world might be 8 years old, but it's not safe for a mature 8 year old to go out and do whatever he or she wants. So it does depend on age, when you are mature."*

*"Obedience doesn't always mean maturity. Because if your parents tell you to go rob a bank and then jump off a bridge and you do that. You probably wouldn't be very mature because you couldn't make your own decisions and it wouldn't be very good for yourself."*

Let us examine a teacher exercising patience with her students in the classroom. Two conditions, making an active decision and reasonableness, appear to be necessary for thinking of patience as a *virtue* rather than as merely some sort of personal characteristic. Thus the teacher must *decide* to be patient; if the teacher is patient just by nature, then it would not appear that patience should be called a virtue. After deciding to be patient, the teacher must be *reasonable*; if in order to learn the lesson the students need more time than the teacher had planned, then the teacher should be flexible and use the extra time for this purpose. Her reason would quietly tell her, "They are close to learning the lesson; let's spend just a bit more time on it and they will have it."

Furthermore, the teacher would think this even if she also felt that the lesson was becoming dull for her—in short, she would calmly tolerate delay, as the dictionary suggests. In fact, the teacher might even slow down to an uncomfortable pace in teaching the material, but she would do so because she recognized that the interests of her students are better served by her enduring this discomfort than if she said, "Well, that's it for today," and then moved on to something which, for her, is more interesting. The teacher would take the time to get things right in making as certain as possible that her students learned what should be learned. She would wait, as courteously as she could, for this result to be achieved. A teacher acting in this way would be an example of someone practicing the virtue of patience.

But patience has limits. For a teacher exceeding these limits, patience would cease being patience and become foolishness. If the teacher spent several hours more than she had planned on the lesson, then her attempts





at getting the students to learn would be unwise. She would be foolish to go beyond a certain point just in the hope of trying to “be patient.” At the other extreme, a teacher who thinks that no extra time whatsoever is necessary in order to teach her class a lesson would be shortsighted. In general then, patience lies between foolishness and shortsightedness.

But it is always possible that the teacher is patient, waits calmly and courteously for the desired result, endures personal discomfort—and the students never do learn the lesson! It seems that the intention to be patient could lead to wasted time depending on whether or not the hoped-for result had been achieved. Would the teacher have decided to be patient if she knew in advance that the students would never learn? This decision is surely foolish.

It seems then that *knowing something about the result* is necessary in order to justify rationally the decision to be patient. If you knew that the train you are waiting for would never come, would you wait patiently for the train? If you knew that the cash register would break down, would you wait patiently in line at the check-out counter of the supermarket? Surely not, in both cases. Should the teacher then be patient with her students if she knew that they would not learn the lesson?

One way to determine when to be patient is to reflect on the *importance* of the hoped-for result and the *probability* of its being attained. If it is true 99% of the time that the train has arrived and the cash register has functioned, then it is probable that they will do so now, while you are

patiently waiting. And you would also ask yourself: How important is it that you catch *this* train? Or, in the other case, can you wait and make your purchases at the store at some other time? These questions appear to be relevant for determining whether or not you should be patient.

It seems, however, that importance and probability in these senses would be difficult for the teacher to determine when she was in the process of deciding whether to be patient with her students. Her decision seems to require a fair amount of experience with students as well as with the subject matter she was trying to teach. This point also makes us wonder whether patience is *acquired* by some sort of training or whether it is *innate*, merely an inborn ability. If we are born with patience, then it does not seem completely correct to call patience a virtue. But if we must learn to be patient, at what age should we begin to attempt to acquire this characteristic and through what kind of circumstances?

These are difficult questions and they must be addressed if patience is to be properly understood. But assuming that one is patient, then it appears that patience can combine with other similar characteristics. Thus if the teacher were patient and if it is true that patience has limits, then she would also know when to *stop* being patient in order to attend to other matters. Her reasoning would tell her that in some cases, patience must be combined with, e.g., justice or doing her duty; for if the teacher carried patience to extremes, then she might be unable to do her duty to other students or to other subjects. So patience must be capable of being combined with other virtues, otherwise patience itself ceases to be a virtue.

“I think it really depends on whether the child is usually obedient or not, that’s how many rights they should have.”  
“I disagree because I mean you can’t expect kids to be perfect. They’re not going to obey their parents every single minute of every single day.”

“You also need to show some responsibility, that you are mature enough to do things that are right. To make choices for yourself and that is also important.”

“... How do parents feel their children are mature? As soon as you can speak you can just say I’m an adolescent. It doesn’t mean it would be true. How do you make the distinction between mature and not? Do you have to take a bi-monthly test?”

“Well many parents are overprotective and they’re always watching their children at all times. And too, many children need some freedom from their parents.”

“I think you can’t really determine how mature children are just by how old they are. And also I don’t think you can judge by their obedience because if you’re mature then you can make decisions on your own. Not by simply doing what someone tells you.”



Although this discussion of patience is incomplete, it has been sufficiently developed to answer the question posed at the beginning. Was the parent correct to say "Be patient" to the child just because the parent did not want to do what the child wanted to do? Has the parent respected children's rights in saying this to the child?

It is true that a parent saying "Be patient" to a child generally has the best interests of the child in mind. However, a parent using "Be patient" to control a child's activity merely because the parent does not want to participate in or

supervise that activity would be abusing patience by requiring the child to act in a virtuous way when, in fact, no good reason exists for the child to practice such a virtue. The child's right to seek his or her interests is being impeded by the parent's unjustified appeal to patience. In these cases, it seems that parents should say "Be patient" to themselves rather than to the child!

It is obvious but worth saying: in matters involving patience (and everything else!), children *and* parents should try to think about and evaluate the reasons for their actions before they act.



*"The right to pursue your own happiness."  
Grade 6 Student, Whitman Middle School, Seattle*



# What Do Rights Look Like?

## An Exercise to Explore What Rights Kids Have and How They Matter

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In the following, I describe an exercise I've used with young people to explore the nature of rights in general, with an emphasis on inquiry into the rights of children. As an experience that combines individual and group work, it lends itself well to larger classes; in most of the classes that I've done the exercise there were about 30 students.

I begin the exercise by passing out to each student in class a different right that he or she presumably possesses. Students are allowed to look at the right they have been handed out, but they are not to show their rights to any of their classmates.

Some of the rights are quite basic: for instance, the right to worship as you choose, the right to vote, and the right to pursue your own happiness. Others are less fundamental: for instance, the right to disagree with your teacher, and the right to listen to your own music. Others are contentious or even somewhat silly: for instance, the right to drive, the right to sing, and the right to not have someone sit on your head.

Once each student is given a right, I ask them to take about 10 to 15 minutes to illustrate it. Some students draw extremely expressive pictures in full color; others sketch with stick figures in pencil. I don't put any constraints or conditions on their creativity here. I only ask that, when they finish, they don't show their drawings to their fellow students or tell their classmates what right it is they have illustrated.

When everyone is done drawing, I have each student write in very small letters on the back of their drawing what right they have illustrated.

Working in groups of five, students then show their drawings to their groupmates and try to have them guess what right they have illustrated.

After groups have identified the rights they've drawn, I give students who so choose the opportunity to show their drawings to entire class to see if the whole group can identify the right they have drawn.

Next, I have each group decide which of the rights in their group is the most important. Groups have to try to come to a consensus among themselves about this; if they really come to loggerheads over more than one, though, they can identify two that are equally important. I give them about 10 minutes for this part of the exercise. During their discussions, I go around the room and join in, asking questions, and encouraging students to give the best reasons they can think of to support their positions.

The rights that have typically emerged as important from this part of the exercise are:

The right to be friends with whoever you want; the right to disagree with your teacher; the right to receive medical care if you get sick; the right to listen to the music of your choice; the right to have as many children as you want; the right to NOT be friends with somebody, and the right to pursue your own happiness.

On the blackboard, I list the right that each group has identified as most important. I then ask students to write down which of the listed right is most important, and why. I give them about 5 minutes to do this.

Some sample answers (from a couple of 6th grade classes) include:

"The right to medical attention is the most important because if you don't have that right, people would get really sick and die and then nobody would be around to have any rights at all."

"The right to pursue your own happiness is most important because if you have that right, then you can do all the others, like vote, or listen to music, or have all the children you want."

"The right to vote is the best one because without voting, there wouldn't be any rights at all."

"The right to have kids is the most important because if people didn't have kids, there would be no people and with no people there would be no rights."

"The right to choose your own friends is the most important because who your friends are is one of the most important things in your life."

"I think that the right of medical attention is most important because if you didn't have medical attention you could get hurt, or worse, die. Plus, the other ones are stupid."

We then have a discussion among the entire class to try to come a consensus about which of the listed rights is the most important. Usually a couple of rights emerge as especially important: students then engage in a fairly spirited discussion about which of these two is most crucial.

For instance, in one of the sixth grade classes, students were pretty evenly split over the right to vote and the right to pursue one's own happiness. Those who supported voting as most important argued that society could put the right to pursue happiness to a vote; consequently, voting rights would have to take precedence over happiness rights. Those who supported the right to pursue happiness argued that people wouldn't vote if it didn't make them happy, so obviously happiness took precedence.

In another sixth grade class, students were split over the right to medical attention and the right to have as many children as you want. Basically, those who argued for the former emphasized that without the right to medical attention, people might be too ill or injured to exercise their rights. Those who argued for the latter pointed out that without children, there wouldn't be anyone around to have rights anyway.

Finally, after our discussion, we take a vote to decide which of the rights the class as a whole takes to be most important. (Typically, if the class has identified the right to vote as one of the important ones, someone points out the irony of voting on this decision.)

In different classes in which I've done this exercise, the winners have been the right to pursue one's own happiness and the right to medical attention; the right to vote has won once. Clearly, these represent extremely fundamental rights. What's been exciting for me in doing this exercise is to see how students in a community of inquiry reason together to work towards a reasonable consensus about what rights are and which of them matter more than others. And I think this exercise does a pretty good job of making that possible.



# High School Essays on Families

Teacher: Suzanne Strauss

*Northampton High School, Northampton, Massachusetts*

After reading *Hamlet*, our class discussed such issues as gender roles in families and what is and should be acceptable behavior for family members. Some of the students' essays, written as a result of those discussions, follow.

## My So-Called Life

Anonymous

Grade 12



Being an adopted child is very difficult, because I have to do everything I am told or get considered a bad kid. I was 12 years old when my aunt (my mom's sister) adopted me. It was hard for me at first, because I was going to a different country, which I knew little of. My uncle is in the Navy and was stationed in Japan at the time. A few months passed by and I was getting into trouble because I wasn't responsible enough. So at age 13 I was expected to do chores like washing dishes, laundry, vacuuming, dusting, etc.

My aunt and uncle have a child who is three years younger than me, who's a spoiled brat. She doesn't do anything in the house but tattle on me, get me in trouble, read my journal, take my belongings, snoop in my room, and sneak my clothes. I can't say anything to my aunt because she won't believe me anyway. My aunt and I didn't get along at all; in fact, we always had an argument. Everytime I make a small mistake, my aunt will make a big deal out of it, but whenever her "little angel" does something wrong it's forgiven and forgotten. I didn't care because she's the real daughter and I'm just adopted.

At first I didn't call them mom and dad; I felt awkward because I didn't feel loved. I was closer to my uncle, so when I got in trouble he backed me up. I didn't like my aunt because she was too strict and gets aggravated easily towards me. I told her I didn't trust her because she didn't trust me, and she's always up on my business. She would look through my room as soon as I left for school, thinking she would find some crack. I never talked to them about any problems or what's happening in my life.

As I was getting older, my relationship with them was getting slimmer; I isolated myself from them. I was the outcast of the family; sometimes they would leave me by myself in the house while they were out shopping. I felt so alone and became rebellious. I still did my chores and stayed in my room all night. I learned to talk back and became a smartass. I'm in trouble every week; all my friends felt sorry for me because I got in trouble for small things. But I told my friends not to worry about it because I owe them a debt of gratitude of which I am and become. Also, I'd tell them it won't be long till I leave; as soon as I graduate, I'm out!

I was responsible for my cousin; when something goes wrong I get blamed. I hated being the oldest, because I get blamed for everything! Even though we all fight a lot, there have been good times. My aunt and uncle spoiled my sister and I; we would go shopping every week. My sister and I always have new thing and I had a car. Our rooms are decorated with our favorite Disney character, and complete with appliances.

I think that trust is very important to have between parents and children. Children become rebellious because of lack of attention, too strict, assuming things, and having no trust. Children's responsibilities are going to school, having good grades, respecting their parents. Parents' duties are to make sure their children have a comfortable home, they're in school, learning their manners and getting respect from them. Parents should get involved with their children, academically and physically, so there would be a good relationship. My relationship with my parents is much better than before. I learned from my mistakes that taught me how to be independent and do my best, also with the help of my parents.

## The Roles and Responsibilities of Parents, Kids, and Step-Parents

Kevin Rogers

Grade 12



In a perfect world there would only be two components that make up a family, parents and kids, but this is not a perfect world and parents do break up for various reasons and parents do remarry; when they remarry it puts another little "cog" into the machine we call a family. All the pieces of a family have their own little jobs and responsibilities in order to make the family work like a fine-tuned machine whether you have two pieces, parents and kids, or three pieces, parents step-parents, and kids; either way everyone has to work together and know their jobs or the family will break down . . .

. . . The children have two main jobs: to learn from the parents and be a pain in the parents' butts. The second part isn't really a job it just works out that kids are pains at times. At the start of the child's life the child's only job is to be dependent because they can't do anything else. As time goes on the child gets household responsibilities to make the parents' lives easier. The chores go from cleaning his or her room to cooking dinner. In some cases, the child has to take the roles of the provider at a very early age like high school years but it should not come to that.

A child's most important role should be to make mistakes and grow up because that is how people learn and become good people. As long as the child's teachers are good—by teachers I mean parents—their mistakes will be minor in the long run. The other big job a child has is to be a good person and make their parents proud to be parents.






## The Changing Face of Marriage

Dan LaFlamme

Grade 12

 Growing up in the perfect house in the perfect neighborhood my life was great, but times do change, things do separate. Marriage has become less a ritual of love and more of a testing situation. people rush into marriage and find during its course that they are totally not compatible. The American family has become sort of a mockery in the sense of no longer in its former glory, where couples would meet, fall in love, and after a long time marry. I remember watching, as a child, shows on "Nick at Nite" and seeing how perfect the families seemed. The father would work while the wife stayed at home and cooked and cared for her children; that is how my life was until one word destroyed it forever – that word being DIVORCE.

Divorce is an awful thing to go through for parents and children if there are children involved. According to the National Center of Health Statistics in America, the divorce rate is 41%, and 10% of all adult Americans have been or are currently divorced.

In the classic family the parental units are the authority figures. They keep everything in line. The father is supposed to be the breadwinner but as

time progresses mothers are becoming breadwinners also. In the past, many women stayed home and cared for children and the home, but starting in the 1960s more and more women began working outside the home and this has become more prevalent today. I know few people whose mothers stay home. Parents are the glue that keep the family together. Even if there is only one parent the parent has to set rules and guide the child to be a good person.

Step-parents are usually awkward people, not in the sense of how they look but their presence is awkward. By observing some of my friends who live with step-parents, I see that the relationship is strained a little. The child knows not to get too close to this person because the child is cautious about the possibility of divorce in this marriage also, and the fact that this person is not the child's "biological parent" means that they feel like a visitor in the family setting.

Children are the reason families exist; without children it is not a family just a union between two loving people. A child solidifies the relationship and is a product of the love the couple shares. Children do not really have much responsibility – just to be loved and to love their parents. They should follow the ground rules that their parents set down for them and try to lead a healthy productive life.

In the end the American family unit has been tarnished. Marriages will still happen and hopefully succeed, but many are destined to end unhappily.



*"The right to disagree with the principal."  
Grade 6 Student, Whitman Middle School, Seattle*



## Resources and Ideas for Discussions about Children's Rights

### Some Discussion Questions/Topics for Essays, Stories, Poems or Drawings

- What is a child? How are children different from adults?
- What rights should parents and other adults have over children?
- What gives parents the rights to make some decisions for their children?
- What responsibilities do parents and other adults have to children?
- To what opportunities are young people entitled?
- Do parents have the right to tell young people to work? Do parents have the right to keep the money their children earn at work?
- Should young people be entitled to make their own decisions? About everything? About some things? What things? At what ages? How should we decide?
- Should young people have the right to control and direct their own learning?
- Should young people have the right to vote? At what age?
- Do young people have a right to privacy?
- If you were to create a Bill of Rights for children, what rights would you include?

### Suggestions for Reading Materials

Some of the following will be more appropriate for older students and some for younger students, depending on their levels of sophistication and reading abilities.

#### Preschool and Elementary School:

- Albert's Toothache* by Barbara Williams
- My Friend the Monster* by Clyde Robert Bulla
- Brave Irene* by William Steig
- Lily's Purple Plastic Purse* by Kevin Henkes
- Verdi* by Janell Cannon
- Yertl the Turtle* by Dr. Seuss
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: An Adaptation for Children* by Ruth Rocha and Otavio Roth (United Nations Publications)
- Videotape: Amnesty International Animated Version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

#### Middle School and High School:

- Summary of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Chapter 5 from *Savage Inequalities*, by Jonathan Kozol
- "Afternoon in Linen," in *The Lottery*, by Shirley Jackson
- "The Use of Force," in *The Farmer's Daughter*, by William Carlos Williams
- Chapter 5 from *My First Love and other Disasters*, by Francine Pascal
- Parts of *Escape from Childhood* by John Holt, especially chapters 16-24
- Stolen Dreams: Portraits of Working Children* by David L. Parker
- Chapter 1 from *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*, by Grace Llewellyn
- In Their Best Interest? The Case Against Equal Rights for Children*, by Laura Purdy
- [www.unicef.org/crc](http://www.unicef.org/crc)



"The right to be friends with whoever you want."  
Grade 6 Student, Whitman Middle School, Seattle

## Thanks

A project like this requires the commitment of many people. We thank the American Philosophical Association for being willing to take a chance on this journal and for providing the funding for this pilot issue, and Richard Bett for making everything easy. Betsy Newell Decyk, the former chair of the Committee on Pre-College Instruction in Philosophy, has been an anchor of support for the project from the beginning. The members of *Questions'* editorial board (Chris Bellon, Betsy Newell Decyk, Lori Fells, Sara Goering, Ashraya Gupta, Roz Ladd, Michael Pritchard, David Shapiro, Hugh Taft-Morales, and Wendy Turgeon) volunteered hours of their time to create this issue. We are grateful for the involvement of all of the teachers, philosophers, and K-12 students who participated with their classes, from 8 states and 3 countries. We also acknowledge Berrie Heesen of the University of Amsterdam, who founded the European journal *100*, part of the inspiration for *Questions*. Finally, we thank both Matthew Lipman and Gareth Matthews for their support of this project and for their visions for the importance of philosophy to young people.

— Jana Mohr Lone



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## Continue to Receive *Questions*

Funding for the pilot issue of *Questions* was generously provided by the American Philosophical Association. We hope to adopt a subscription format within the next several issues.

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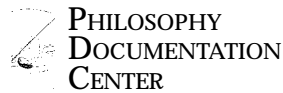
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