

Matthew Lipman (1923–2010)

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On 26 December the American philosopher and educationalist Matthew Lipman passed away in West Orange, New Jersey, aged 87. Lipman was the creator of Philosophy for Children and became the founding father of a worldwide educational movement that has brought philosophy to school children all over the world.

Lipman was born in Vineland, New Jersey, on 24 August 1923, into a Russian Jewish émigré community. Although his father owned a machine shop, and was something of an inventor, the family fell on hard times during the depression, and this made college entry all but impossible for him.

Lipman first came to philosophy during the Second World War when he happened to be given a couple of books centred on the philosophy of John Dewey by an academic at Stanford University, where he studied for two terms as part of his induction into the army. These and an anthology of Dewey's writings were among a small collection of books that Lipman carried with him through the battlefields of Europe in the closing stages of the war.

On returning to the United States, Lipman pursued his philosophical studies at Columbia University, and eventually struck up an acquaintance with Dewey, who had long retired from Columbia, but was still living in New York. Lipman's postgraduate years were partly spent in Europe as a Fulbright scholar, and though Dewey had died before Lipman returned to Columbia as a young academic, the eminent philosopher of education had left his mark. Lipman specialised in aesthetics in his early career, but it is hardly surprising that someone so heavily influenced by Dewey should eventually turn his attention to education.

The shift from a conventional academic career to his work for children began in the social and political ferment of the late 1960s. The reasons for this change are not altogether clear – even, I suspect, to Lipman. In his autobiography, *A Life Teaching Thinking*, published in 2006, Lipman mentions many influences, including beginning to think about the need for educational change in teaching the Vietnam War generation of undergraduates, a growing dissatisfaction with a rather makeshift academic career, concern for the education of his own children, and what seems to have been a growing sense of the need for sweeping social change as his African-American first wife began a political career.

No doubt the university riots of 1968 and the teach-ins that Lipman himself engaged in, provided a social and educational atmosphere in which a man who was a meliorist by temperament

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should have concocted a plan for radical educational change. How was educational change to contribute to a better society? In essence, for Lipman as for Dewey, a better society meant two things. First, it meant a society that stresses the kind of cooperation and free interplay between people that gives expression to a wide range of interests and maximizes the satisfaction of those interests rather than catering to a narrow range of interests or to the interests of the few. Second, it meant one in which there is a reasonable, open-minded and inquiring outlook, rather than a tendency to be dogmatic or doctrinaire. The first is what Dewey understood by a democratic community, and the second points to his account of reflective thinking that would underpin an inquiring society. Recasting Dewey's conception of the Great Community in miniature, Lipman wanted the classroom to be a Community of Inquiry. Only, unlike Dewey, who thought science education provided the leading edge of an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning, Lipman turned to philosophy itself.

For philosophers influenced by Dewey and pragmatism, theoretical conceptions are nothing if not grounded in practice. And the practical starting-point for Lipman was the school textbook. Textbooks that so often present the desiccated residue of the inquiries of scientists, mathematicians, historians and others, provide the student with a great deal to be learnt but not much to think about. Lipman's initial idea was for a short text that would provide a 12-year-old with an experience of open inquiry, in which reason and reflection would underpin the exercise of judgment. For this, he would need a reasoning base, and his choice was Aristotelian logic. Though Lipman says that he got the title for his first philosophical novel from the name of a New York Yankee pitcher, Mel Stottlemyre, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* is obviously a play on 'Aristotle' with a Jewish twist.

In 1969, an early version of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* was produced with the aid of a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities, and this was followed by a trial with fifth-graders in a school in Montclair, a New Jersey dormitory town across the Hudson River from New York, where Lipman was now living. The trial showed dramatic improvements in logical reasoning, and the differences between those who had been given Lipman's intervention and the control group still showed up six months after the experiment had concluded.

By 1972 Lipman had created a position for himself at what was then Montclair State College (later to become Montclair State University), giving up his career as an Ivy League professor for what must have looked like the chancy pursuit of teaching children to think. At Montclair State College, Lipman was soon joined by a young professor of Education, Ann Margaret Sharp, who together with Lipman founded the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) in 1974. Their separate strengths in Philosophy and Education were exactly what was necessary to bring the venture to fruition, and Lipman's mixture of social reserve and intellectual audacity alongside of Sharp's gregariousness and infectious enthusiasm were a winning combination.

For the next thirty years Lipman and Sharp collaborated: Lipman writing the series of novels that became the core of the IAPC curriculum, and Lipman working with Sharp and others developing the extensive teacher's manuals that accompany them; Lipman focused on directing the IAPC and Sharp taking Philosophy for Children to all parts of the globe. After such a long and fruitful collaboration, I cannot help but note here the deep sense of loss now that they have both died within the space of a year.

How should we judge Lipman's legacy? While Lipman wrote for teachers as well as for children, he continued to produce more conventional academic work, such as the two editions of his Cambridge University Press book *Thinking in Education*. The title is one that those familiar with the educational writings of John Dewey will instantly recognise as paying homage to him. And it

is partly for having helped to resurrect Dewey's educational thought, and showing that it has lost little of its leading educational edge when put into practice in novel ways, that Lipman should be remembered.

Yet Dewey never thought of Philosophy as the torch-bearer for inquiry-based teaching and learning – as the school discipline par excellence for learning to think – and nor had others. This is not to forget that many countries offer philosophy as a subject in the senior years of school. From Lipman's point of view, however, that is rather like putting icing on top of an already baked cake. He aims to have a more formative influence on children's thinking, by starting when they enter school and providing philosophy all the way through. In engaging young children in philosophical inquiry, Lipman is echoing the view of the educationalist Jerome Bruner when half a century ago he famously said that you can teach the rudiments of any subject at any age provided that you teach it right.

Lipman's philosophical novels for children, such as *Elfie, Pixie, Kio and Gus* and *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* have been seminal works, which have been translated into many languages and used in schools in many parts of the world. At the same time, they have inspired philosophers and educators in other parts of the world to write other materials. That the work he commenced is being continued by other hands, who continue to experiment within the paradigm that he created, shows that he has left us a living legacy.

In his autobiography, Lipman says that he has never doubted that the power of teaching thinking could transform education. Whether the Philosophy for Children project has achieved its aim of doing just that, he says he is wont to leave for other people to judge – but he can't resist saying that, at least by some standards, he and his followers have 'pulled off their great experiment'. By some standards, that's certainly so. There are schools that have been transformed by Lipman's ideas, and vast numbers of children have had their lives enriched in ways that would never have happened without him. But harnessing the power of Philosophy to teach children to think is still an idea in its infancy.

Lipman may well have been right that Philosophy is the discipline most needed if we are to centre education on the teaching of thinking. Yet it is a discipline in short supply when it comes to the school curriculum. It is extremely rare to find philosophy taught as a subject area in the elementary school, or in the junior secondary school. And the philosophical dimension of the standard school subjects is mainly noticeable by its absence. Turning this around is a herculean labour. Still, these days there are many philosophers and educators around the world who are willing to undertake the task. And it is to Matthew Lipman more than to anyone else that we owe the determination to try.