

Helping Children To Philosophizing: State of the Art, Live Issues, Outcomes and Proposals

Michel Tozzi

I. Seven key ideas about what exists around the world

1. *The practice of philosophy with children at the preschool and primary level* has been developing significantly around the world since the 1970s and today involves some 50 countries. The oldest network is the one at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC), set up in 1974 in the USA by the American philosopher Matthew Lipman. Its impact is undeniable and is due to the stable method that was gradually developed and improved, the research carried out as to its effectiveness, the training given in some universities with examinations and custom-designed diplomas, etc.

The network of the International Council of Philosophical Inquiry with Children (ICPIC), set up in 1985, which does similar but not entirely the same work, has been incorporating ideas differing from the Lipman orthodoxy as the method has been progressively adapted to diverse cultures that may even have been critical of its material.

The practice may be assisted pedagogically or financially by public or private associations and institutions. It is often *university lecturers and/or teachers of philosophy* who initiate or help with practical work in the context of their research or of training they organize (for example: Michel Sasseville, Pierre Lebuis or Marie-France Daniel in Quebec; Philip Cam in Australia; Walter Kohan in Brazil; Diego Antonio Pineda in Colombia; Ekkehard Martens, Barabara Brüning or Barbara Weber in Germany; Daniel Camhy in Austria; Irene Puig or Félix García Moryon in Spain; François Galichet, Sylvie Queval or Michel Tozzi in France . . .). They may then set up children's philosophy centres with the help of practitioners and trainers. It is also possible to find *associations* started by private individuals who launch this type of activity in their country after training that has inspired them.

The *English language* has been a determining factor in disseminating the method

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in some regions and countries (for instance ex British colonies in Africa, Asia and the South Pacific). The spread to South America, where Spanish is spoken (Portuguese in Brazil), has come about through links formed by university teachers in those countries with the IAPC training centre in the USA. Mexico blazed the trail in 1979. University teachers and Catholic figures had the leading role in those countries probably because philosophy, like religion, is concerned with the *problem of meaning* and because philosophy for children could play a reflexive role as *emancipation* for children of the underprivileged classes. Extension to the French-speaking world occurred from the 1980s in Quebec (Canada), then to several countries in Europe through ethics or morals classes and out of links to Matthew Lipman's team.

2. *The Internet is going to play an important part* in spreading this innovation throughout the world. The formation of a worldwide group is using the web's digital network as its preferred method for giving cohesion to a community of practice and research, despite the handicap of geographical distance, by circulating information on tools, practices, training and research.

As an example, in France, in an environment which was at the outset hostile to these practices in primary schools, the site *pratiquesphilo.free.fr*, with its database and distribution list, has made it possible, from a first national conference in 2001, to link up a number of widely dispersed, isolated colleagues by giving them concrete support and the energy to persevere. The Internet is suited to these network structures which work around hierarchies through a horizontal formation that frees expression and initiatives, makes it possible for class practices to be shared and for members of the network's collective to co-train.

3. In class and training practices the Lipman approach is seen to predominate around the world.

The spread of one particular method can be explained partly by the fact that, unlike Germany or France for example, *the English-speaking countries had no tradition of teaching philosophy prior to university*.¹ When the problem arose of developing children's thinking further, a method in English was available, covering both primary and secondary school, with a coherent curriculum and teaching material for children and teachers.

The spread of Lipman's method worldwide has given rise to adaptations in different cultural contexts: from simply translating his books to modifying them slightly or more significantly and even creating new teaching material inspired by his approach, then developing new approaches inspired by doing philosophy directly with children.

GRUPIREPH (Groupe d'enseignement et de recherche pour l'enseignement de la philosophie – Teaching and research group for the teaching of philosophy), centred on Irene Puig in Catalonia, has produced a whole set of original teaching material in Catalan and Castilian. In Germany Ekkehard Martens has developed a didactic model for doing philosophy (called 'five-finger') which is different from Lipman's. Michel Tozzi in France has used research in teaching philosophy, and also Célestin Freinet's 'cooperative pedagogy' and Jean Oury's 'institutional pedagogy', to redefine the concept and practice of the research community, dubbed 'Discussion à visée

philosophique' (DVP – philosophy-oriented discussion) by Jean-Charles Pettier.

There have been other influences too: Leonard Nelson's 'Socratic philosophical dialogue' inspired by *Socrates' maieutics* in Plato's work, which developed in the Germanic countries of Europe. And some new approaches are being developed such as AGSAS's (Association des groupes de soutien au soutien – Association of support groups for support) *philosophy workshop* in France, formalized by the developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Jacques Levine.

4. These practices are often backed up by *training courses for teachers* leading to university qualifications in some countries and by a considerable quantity of national and international *university research*, with regular conferences and a large body of publications and theses. In terms of a significant innovation in educational systems, some researchers do indeed see these practices as a promising field for research in an as yet poorly investigated area, which raises live and hotly debated issues.

5. Though such philosophical practices are developing on a global scale a *great disparity* can be seen around the world. They are very much alive in North America, Europe, Australia, they exist in some South American or Asian countries, but are insignificant in primary schools in Africa and almost absent from the Arab world.

How can this disparity be explained? By the presence or absence of philosophical traditions and/or philosophy teaching in certain countries? By the influence of philosophy teaching from a democratic perspective or as official ideology? By a relationship of conflict or not between belief and knowledge, faith and reason? By obstacles or not to the English language, which has been the worldwide carrier of these practices? More generally, by cultural traditions that are philosophically strong or historically distant from a western type of rational philosophical approach (in black Africa for instance)? By France's influence in ex-colonial African countries, where there is a tradition of philosophy teaching that is nevertheless restricted to the end of the secondary curriculum, which is an obstacle to introducing it earlier in the school course?

6. These practices are not generally embodied in state *institutions*, at least not under this name, because it is difficult to discover what degree of 'philosophicity' might be contained in an ethics or morals or citizenship or even religious studies course, which may be very moralizing in tone, injunctive and prescriptive of values to be imposed or fostered, for example the Belgian non-confessional morals course or free examination, and may run alongside a process of developing 'thinking for yourself'.

Why this official absence? In the English-speaking tradition philosophy is not seen as the primary route for educating people for democracy but takes other routes: in Canada, while there is philosophy in Quebecois colleges (the French tradition), *humanities* are taught in English-speaking Canada. On the other hand because there is a strong tradition in France of teaching philosophy in secondary schools, there is a great reluctance to introduce it at the primary level.

7. However we should note some interesting *developments*:

- in certain cases such practices are not institutional but are officially encouraged as an innovation: France or the UK;
- sometimes, if they are deemed interesting by politicians, they are officially introduced on an experimental basis with a view to a possible roll-out after they have been evaluated (Norway);
- elsewhere they are officially institutionalized within the educational system (Australia, Mexico).

II. On a few live issues around philosophy with children and theories relating to them

After this overview of the state of the art I shall address a number of *live issues* debated on different levels.

1. How does philosophy relate to childhood and childhood to philosophy?

Philosophers are divided on this issue, between those who think children are ‘spontaneous philosophers’ in their radical questioning (Karl Jaspers, Michel Onfray) and for whom to do philosophy is to address a question as if for the first time; and those for whom there is a *childhood of philosophy* (the pre-Socratics) but no child philosopher, since doing philosophy means emerging from childhood. This takes us back to the issue of the *age for philosophizing*. Some interpret Plato as an opponent of doing philosophy with children, quoting a passage from the *Republic*;² on the contrary others note that he enters into dialogue with adolescents, for instance in *Lysis* (Sylvie Queval, Université Lille-3, France).

What is a child? A not yet adolescent, a not yet adult? Is it a question of age, and up to when? Is it a question of world view, or cognitive capacity (Piaget), or physical maturity, or historical and social construction, or specific rights?

How does *childhood relate to philosophy*, its questions about death at three or four, its questions as to why about origins, the world, God, friendship and love, the sense of growing up? For Epicurus it is never too early to do philosophy; you have to start in the nursery says Montaigne, unlike Descartes.

The study of childhood that is involved in doing philosophy with children has some important implications: *ethically* it means assuming the child who formulates an existential question to be the adult’s ‘valid interlocutor’ (Jacques Lévine), a little *Human*, and helping to construct the human being in the child as a reflective subject starting ‘to think for himself’.

2. Is the philosophical educability of childhood desirable?

Encouraging children to reflect could be psychologically dangerous: why talk about tragic things, pull their imagination back down to cold reason, demystify their dreams? But many children experience hard social or psychical situations. Around

three to five they all wonder about death. Psychologists can travel with them by putting suffering into words. But there is another way – philosophy's – of grasping an existential experience, which allows you to *distance yourself* from the emotion you feel by making it an *object of thought*, referring to a shared human condition, helping you to grow in humanity. There is a *therapeutic* virtue in philosophy because it 'takes care of the soul' and has a calming effect. It is not possible finally to put to rest a child's existential question because it is a human question: but answering for her stops her thinking for herself. So we need to go with them as they wander on, developing tools for thinking that will allow them to understand the world and find their way in it.

3. *Is the philosophical educability of childhood a right in legal and political terms?*

There are implicit assumptions from political philosophy in philosophy for children: Lipman, for example, tries to make a close link between learning philosophy and democracy. Awakening reflective thinking in children in the form of the research community would be a way to educate them for reflective citizenship. Some people see this as an instrumentalization of philosophy. But not the democratic philosopher who relies on human rights and children's rights as a 'regulating idea' (Kant) which may appeal to a right to philosophy (Derrida) or a right to philosophize.

4. *Is the philosophical educability of childhood a cognitive potential?*

Again it must be psychologically possible, which is contested by those who point to children's poor cognitive development, their lack of psychic maturity, their meagre experience of life and their low level of knowledge prior to reflection. But Lipman used Piaget's developmental stages when he wrote his 'philosophical novels' adapted to each age. Researchers in developmental psychology such as Albert Bandura maintain that the child's cognitive possibilities are present earlier than was thought, developing discursive skills from a very young age because of the 'argumentative orientation' of language (Frédéric François), on the basis of experiences which they already have and which they can formalize in words if appropriate machinery is provided.

5. *Is the philosophical educability of childhood a postulate for practice?*

We know about the 'Pygmalion effect'. It is all the more likely that children will fail if their teachers think they are incapable and the reverse if teachers do everything possible pedagogically towards success. Children who are believed in grow in self-esteem and are motivated. As long as discussions are not arranged, students will not know how to discuss. It can be learnt. When a 'research community' is suggested they learn to ask themselves questions, define, argue. In the past children's potential for reflection was underestimated simply because their *philosophical educability* was not *postulated*.

6. The challenge of struggling or failing children

Reservations have been expressed about children who are struggling at school: how can children think seriously if they have a problem with *using language*? But language is not chronologically prior to thought, they develop in tandem. Their thinking can be developed by working on language, but their language is also refined by working on their thought. This is so especially when work is done orally, making it possible to start to think before learning to write, or with children who have difficulty writing.

If these practices are extensively developed with failing children they set in motion a dynamic of exchange around issues that life throws up. With this reflective activity children can recover self-esteem by experiencing the dignity of thinking beings, a process of narcissistic repair where thinking salves the wound of seeing themselves as stupid. So they will develop an internal language between the emotion felt and the action, and make their relationships with others and themselves more peaceful

7. The issue of pedagogy and didactics

So how should we *didacticize* this activity, make it possible for teachers to teach it and pupils to absorb it, looking at it from the perspective of a *didactics of learning how to do philosophy*?

i. The issue of discussion

Discussion is the most widespread form in primary schools around the world. Is it *contingent*, historical or psychological in nature (we are dealing with children), or *necessary*, connected with the discipline itself? Is the 'research community', or 'philosophy-oriented discussion', just one method among others of learning how to do philosophy, or does it manifest 'genetic' development of reflective thinking, in the sense that confronting embodied alterity is the condition (Vigotskij) for confronting 'oneself as another' (Ricoeur), 'the soul's dialogue with itself' (Plato)?

More fundamentally, is this oral practice *legitimate* compared with the written one of texts or essays? It is not enough for a discussion to be democratic for it to teach how to do philosophy. It is necessary for there to be a discussion ethics within a 'communicative action' (Habermas), an aim of meaning and truth, the setting in motion of rational thought processes which the teacher ensures by leading. This is the 'regulating idea' (Kant): an 'ideal situation for speech' (Habermas), which can serve as a landmark for teachers.

ii. The issue of the teacher's role

The question that arises first is the *degree to which the teacher guides*, which in France ranges from the hyper-directiveness of the maieutician (Brénifier) to non-directiveness, through focusing on thought processes (Tozzi).

Then it must be decided whether teachers should express their opinion on the topic. The most common position is to hold back so that the students should not be

expecting the teacher to give the right answer, and should feel free to think in their own name. Teachers develop a culture of questioning and question themselves. And if they outline a personal viewpoint they make it very vague so as never to impose it.

However I think that by their questions they should intervene when intellectual demands arise in the discussion: a 'why' leads on to presenting an argument, a 'how would you define that word?' to conceptualizing.

iii. The issue of teacher training

The paradox of this innovation is the lack of philosophical training for primary teachers. Everyone agrees it is necessary, but the question is: what form should it take? Do we need an *academic* training in philosophy as content (doctrines and history of philosophy) or in doing philosophy, in a philosophical practice as an *activity*?

Between those who say you cannot learn to do philosophy without the philosophers (and therefore push back the age for doing it) and those who think that learning to philosophize means first of all letting questioning emerge and express itself, then encouraging it so that it goes on working in a 'thinking group', postponing study of the philosophers till later, the debate is ongoing and sometimes heated.

A philosophical baggage is always desirable, but what counts, according to Lipman, is the ability to lead a research community and therefore a training that is both pedagogical for getting a debate going and didactic in how to do philosophy.

III. A few proposals for the future

1. *What outcomes for what values? The challenges*

Six of them can be identified:

i. Learning to think for yourself

Developing the practice of philosophy in the child and adolescent as early as possible ensures that reflective thinking about the human condition is stimulated and strengthened.

ii. Education for 'reflective citizenship'

The 'research community' (Lipman), or 'philosophy-oriented discussion' (Pettier) are forms of debate. And as there is no democracy without debate, learning to debate at school provides an education for democratic citizenship. Learning to debate and learning to do philosophy through intellectual debate are two conditions for an education in 'reflective citizenship', that is to say, a mind that meets other minds illuminated by reason and aiming for truth, with requirements that are both ethical (Habermas's 'discussion ethics' of 'communicative action') and intellectual in a democratic debate. It is an attempt to link the democratic ideal, rooted in human

rights, citizens' and children's rights, with emancipating reason and its universalizing purpose. The challenge is the encounter between childhood, philosophy and democracy.

iii. Assisting children's development

Learning reflectiveness is important for building personality. In that situation children have the experience of acting as thinking beings (the experience of the *cogito*, according to Jacques Lévine), which helps them to grow in humanity. They also have the experience of daring to speak without getting into 'the struggle for recognition' (Honneth), which reinforces self-esteem. In discussions with their peers they can have the rare experience of cognitive disagreement in peaceful coexistence, which raises their tolerance threshold and prevents violence.

iv. Facilitating mastery of language, oral practice and 'debate'

In addition, speaking up in order to think develops language skills. Developing in tandem with thinking, language appears as a tool for thought in a philosophy-oriented discussion. By working on developing your thinking you are working on the need for precision in language.

v. Conceptualizing doing philosophy

From the philosophical viewpoint the practice of reflectiveness with children requires a redefinition of doing philosophy, a conceptualization of its beginnings, its nature and its conditions.

vi. Constructing a didactics of philosophy adapted for children

Teaching philosophy and teaching learning to do philosophy is also brought into question because you cannot teach philosophy to children as you would to adults with lectures, great books or essays.

2. What form of institutionalization?

i. Cultural and intercultural problems

What principles are needed? Philosophy practice with children emerged around 1970 in the USA. For this reason it has particular characteristics. So the question arises of dissemination around the world of a historically and geographically situated method with its own assumptions, not only scientific and psychological, but also pedagogic, didactic, philosophical and political.

Therefore it cannot be a matter of imposing a cultural model (for instance a western and American one) on other states and in other contexts. But it may be possible to start from orientations signed up to by states in international conventions (human rights, children's rights) in order to promote educational practices that, as UNESCO wishes,

move in the direction of a culture of intellectual critique, dialogue and peace among individuals, peoples and states. I assume a universality of rights that can nevertheless adapt to the plurality of cultures. For this reason, given the unequal presence in the world of philosophical practice in primary school, I propose a very diversified strategy.

ii. Promoting innovation within and outside the institution

Philosophy-oriented practices are often innovative and not institutionalized, in contrast to a country's traditions. Innovation can be a catalyst for renewing the educational system because, even if it is not generalized throughout a country, it introduces a fresh practice to solve some issues. Thus it allows breath into a system that may have dysfunctional aspects.

And so I recommend that these practices should be promoted where they do not exist, encouraged, for instance with grants, where they do (as in France), publicized and disseminated widely.

Where there is at present no practice of this kind, it is possible to start, for example, with the country's stories or legends to make children reflect on what they tell us about the human condition, allowing them to talk about their interpretations and discuss the different readings without closing down the exchange of views with the 'right' interpretation.

iii. Organizing official trials

Unlike innovation, a trial is a political decision to attempt to introduce a new practice into the educational system. It benefits from special pedagogic and financial help, is carried out according to a precise protocol with the help of practitioners, for example with training and often with research as well. It very often includes an evaluation so as to draw conclusions for a possible roll-out.

I recommend that trials of these practices should be set up (as in Norway) in tune with the objectives of educational policies.

iv. Institutionalizing certain practices

Institutionalizing some practices of doing philosophy with children (as in Mexico or Australia) goes even further. It is possible:

- to introduce learning to think philosophically into some primary schools or some courses, and to do this as an option;
- to have people trained in philosophy come into the classroom to work with the children in the context of projects looking at philosophy as a 'cultural practice';
- to roll out learning to do philosophy among all the pupils in one region or on a countrywide scale.

This can be done within subjects in an interdisciplinary way: thinking about aesthetics in the arts; about ethics in morals or even religious studies classes; about epistemology in the sciences; about political philosophy in civics and history, and so on.

This generalization may also be achieved in the form of a specific time in the week, of variable length depending on the children's age (philosophy workshop or club).

v. Organizing a curriculum for the whole school career

With a view to institutionalization we need to think about the prospect of a full school curriculum

I think (as Montaigne did) that we need to start early, at the preschool and primary level: putting in place requirements for rigour, reasoning skills through regular exercise. Strong themes (death or love) emerge from very early childhood. We should not subordinate awakening reflective thinking to the presumed requirements of an age, language level or degree of maturity. People start to develop their view of the world as soon as they have the language to put their experience into words, an experience that will be reviewed in order to 'extend their thinking' (Kant) as they grow up.

This learning should be progressive and coherent. And that progression assumes teaching strategies that identify the objectives to be pursued and the methods, materials, tools and media to be used.

3. What practices should be promoted in class?

Any practice that develops autonomy of judgement and free examination of ideas is seeking meaning and truth illuminated by reason, cultivates questioning and the sense of the problem and fosters the constructive, rigorous encounter between ideas.

Any strict normalization would be likely to lead to sterilization because it is a question of training for the intellectual liberty of minds. So teachers need intellectual and pedagogic freedom and pupils need free minds, since no one can think for them. It is therefore not a matter of indoctrinating them but of assisting them gradually to find for themselves answers to the questions they are asking.

A few pointers:

Begin from the children's questions because it is their questions that make sense to them and put them in a position to search, motivated by the 'wish to know'.

Such questions may also be brought out by a strong text, custom-made for a reflective activity (for instance Lipman's novels), tales or myths incorporating 'world wisdom' or important works of literature.

Organize *exchanges of ideas* on these issues led by a teacher's firm or light guidance so that the children compare their opinions among themselves and experience socio-cognitive conflicts that help them develop.

There is also the opportunity to use *moral dilemmas* (Lawrence Kohlberg): a case is suggested which raises an ethical problem and a solution has to be found clarifying and ordering the relevant values.

To develop learning to do philosophy it is also possible to suggest *specific exercises* in problematization, conceptualization and argumentation.

Whether in order to conceptualize or to argue children always start with examples or talking about their day-to-day life. This is their way of establishing a link between

an idea or abstract question and their own experience. It is a necessary anchor point to begin reflecting, but we need to help them to go beyond this in order to increase in abstraction and generality with universalization as our aim ('Speaking like everyone else' Kant says). The counter-example is interesting because it is still concrete but already has the epistemological status of proof. And we need to go as far as more general, decontextualized arguments.

It is possible to start from language insofar as the notions to be conceptualized are words in a language and we think only with and in a language: *use language material to conceptualize*, explore the thought paths suggested by words (synonyms/antonyms vs. conceptual distinctions; lexical and semantic field vs. conceptual field).

We can also *bring forth primary representations* in order to work on them subsequently at the conceptual level. Associative thought, writing fictional texts, thinking experiments may lead to a return to concepts: 'describe a world where everyone lies or where you could do what you want: what conclusion do you come to?'

In addition we can leave language aside initially and work with the *registers of the body or the imagination*, then come back to more abstract thought via verbalization, the springboard to conceptualization. This can be done for example through:

- (a) *poses of the body and artworks*: use clay to form your *idea* of freedom (comment on what you make); pose your classmates in space, using their positions to simulate an unjust situation (cf. Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed): so what is injustice?; draw truth: say how the completed drawing represents that idea . . .
- (b) referring to emotions followed by their *verbalization* (how can you tell that what you felt was joy? What is joy then?);
- (c) *connotation of pictures* (why do you think that advert evokes anger? How can you define it then? What image most represents the idea of happiness for you? Why?); verbal *metaphors* (if justice was an animal, which one would it be? Why?); *analogies* or symbols (why do scales represent justice?); *allegories* (Plato's cave, death as the skeleton with the scythe), etc.

If we want to link the philosophical orientation with a democratic one and an education for citizenship, discussion will gain from being organized in a *democratic pedagogic setting* with *democratic rules for turn-taking* (order of enrolment, priority for the student who has not yet spoken or not spoken much, or for the youngest in mixed-age classes), and sharing out of positions of responsibility among the students (the chair decides who speaks, the secretary keeps a record of the work done together, the timekeeper, the person keeping order, the one who sets out the room, who looks after the microphone, etc.).

If in addition we want to make a link between the philosophical attitude to an issue and construction of children's personalities, how they speak in public, the fact that they dare to express publicly a thought about the human condition or that they experience the *cogito* (Lévine), we will proceed instead by going round the table, where each child can be allowed to develop and express his vision of the world by reacting personally to a fundamental question and developing a real 'internal language'.

We can also work on *reflectiveness* in tandem with other school subjects, either in an interdisciplinary fashion or by working on a reflective aspect in each subject (an

example from Quebec: 'Philosophizing about maths' or 'The world of the sciences'). For instance *argumentation* can be worked on while learning languages as well, in both oral and written modes. In the same way there are areas of intersection between the didactics of philosophy and learning your native language in school.

We can end with the basic condition for introducing these practices, *assisting* philosophy-oriented work:

- i. By providing *teachers with initial and further training* in these practices and setting out in detail:
 - (a) the skills expected of pupils and to be developed in teachers;
 - (b) the appropriate training mechanisms: objectives, content, methods;
 - (c) a suitable policy for training trainers that should place at the heart of the training, apart from some philosophy landmarks, the analysis of philosophy-oriented situations and practices, focusing on the philosophical aim of the suggested activity;
 - (d) production of customized teaching material.
- ii. By researching into these practices through theses and studies.³

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Notes

1. In his overview of *Philosophie et démocratie dans le monde* (Paris: Livre de poche/Editions UNESCO, 1995, pp. 102–6) Roger-Pol Droit made the distinction between the 'English-speaking model', where philosophy is 'restricted to certain university departments' and 'political education is carried out elsewhere', and the 'French-speaking or Latin culture model', where philosophy is taught in secondary school and 'should help develop citizens' thinking capacity'.
2. Cf. the warning in the *Republic* (VII, 539b–539c) advising against developing the eristic spirit in children and young people.
3. On these two points see my proposals for UNESCO in the first part of the report *La Philosophie, une école de la liberté* (2008), <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001536/153601F.pdf>.