

Why Philosophy Should Be Part of the K-12 Curriculum

Last fall, Intellectual Takeout's Daniel Lattier asked [“Should We Be Teaching Philosophy in High School?”](#) and argued persuasively that we should.

I needed no persuading, but I did need to be convinced of the wisdom of starting to teach philosophy to children *even before* high school, which I knew a few had proposed. But after reading Steve Neumann's recent piece for the *Washington Post* ([“Why kids—now more than ever—need to learn philosophy. Yes, philosophy”](#)), I'm now convinced it's a good idea.

In the piece, Neumann argues that philosophy should permeate the K-12 curriculum in America. Crazy, right? But he quickly qualifies:

“I don't mean that we should teach kids philosophy the way they would encounter it in college. Adolescents don't need to dive into dissertations on Plato's theory of forms or Kant's categorical imperative. (That kind of study is valuable, too, and should be included in secondary education somewhere, but that's an [argument](#) for another day.) The kind of philosophy I have in mind helps kids become better citizens by turning the classroom into what the philosopher John Dewey [called](#) ‘embryonic society.’”

Basically, Neumann is advocating for a K-12 curriculum that focuses on “asking questions” and “rigorous dialogue.” (As Socrates famously said, “Philosophy begins in wonder.”) In so doing, he is taking his cue from Matthew Lipman, former professor of philosophy at Columbia University:

“While teaching philosophy to undergraduates at Columbia University in the 1960s, Lipman saw that his students were

passionate to change the world but deficient in their ability to reason soundly and exercise good judgment. He also realized that college was a little late in life to learn to think properly, so he created the [Philosophy for Children movement, known as P4C.](#)"

And what does a P4C curriculum look like in schools? *Sapere*, an organization that promotes the curriculum in England, [explains](#):

"Children are taught how to create their own philosophical questions. They then choose one question that is the focus of a philosophical enquiry, or dialogue. For example the question might be 'is it ever ok to steal?"

The teacher, as facilitator, supports the children in their thinking, reasoning and questioning, as well as the way the children speak and listen to each other in the dialogue.

After the enquiry the children and facilitator reflect on the quality of the thinking, reasoning and participation, and suggest how they could improve; either as individuals or as a group (community).

P4C is intended to be a regular activity so that the children develop their skills and understanding over time. The role of the facilitator is crucial to ensuring quality dialogue and progress, as well as integration with the curriculum.

*It is well documented that P4C has an impact on children's cognitive, social and emotional development. **P4C is about getting children to think and communicate well; to think better for themselves.**"*

Given the angry, polarized state of political discourse in America, we need to restore civility and mutual understanding. Should part of that restoration effort involve teaching children the art of critical thinking and rational dialogue?

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