Chapter 2

A Case for Integrating Philosophy into Early Education

THE CHALLENGE: EDUCATION FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

What should education for the twenty-first century look like? The first couple of decades of this century show a world of complexity and change. Problems, from the economy to the environment, are becoming increasingly global; politics is becoming ever more divisive; and new digital media have left us oversaturated with information, much of it fake. Meanwhile, advances in automation and artificial intelligence threaten to change the nature of work. As more and more routine service jobs pass to machines, human employees will be called on for creative tasks that don't follow scripts and don't fit neatly into a box.

To flourish in such a world, individuals will need to stay ahead of the curve and keep up with the times. This requires critical thinking, the ability to deal with complexity and ambiguity, and a readiness to enter into constructive dialogue with people of differing perspectives.

For the most part, U.S. K–12 schools are not teaching any of these skills. Weighed down by standardized tests and unreasonable funding models, schools are rushing to make it through overfull content curricula. Students are rarely given time to form their own questions or explore their own ideas. As a result, more and more high school graduates are arriving at college ill prepared to think for themselves. There was a step forward in 2015 when Congress repealed No Child Left Behind, but the K–12 system is still a long way from freeing itself of standardized tests and bringing thinking back into the classroom on anything like a national scale.

The United States' top colleges and universities are reforming their curricula to ensure that students learn the transferable skills they need

for twenty-first-century life. The American Association of Colleges and Universities is at the forefront of this movement. In 2005, it launched a campaign called Liberal Education and America's Promise that challenges undergraduate institutions to reimagine their general education curricula around learning outcomes such as critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and information literacy (American Association of Colleges and Universities n.d.).

American pre-K schools are in a unique position to address these challenges. Relatively unburdened by standardized tests, pre-K teachers have access to an otherwise scarce resource: time. Perhaps as a result of this, they have developed their own distinctive culture of experimentation that resonates deeply with progressive, student-centered ideals.

The present curriculum aims to integrate the twenty-first-century skills, which colleges are striving for and K–12 schools are missing, into pre-K instruction. Put differently, it strives to instill a certain kind of intellectual character, to nurture and develop curiosity and questioning, and to help children practice engaging in useful dialogue with others. In short, we aim to help pre-K students learn to think.

Our lessons draw together typical elements of pre-K instruction—games, dialogical reading, and art projects—laying particular stress on developing listening and self-regulation skills. The lessons are arranged around philosophical puzzles and the ethical big ideas of figures from Socrates to modern-day feminists. In this way, the project aims to address twenty-first-century problems through a fusion of the best thinking of historic philosophers (some of them a millennia old) and best practices in current early education.

A PHILOSOPHER'S VIEW OF EARLY EDUCATION

The jump from ancient philosophy to early education is not as dramatic as it might at first appear. Plato argues at length in *Republic* that one cannot have a functioning state without the right system of early education to ensure the character development of future leaders. He spends about one-fifth of *Republic*, which is arguably his most central text, laying out what that would look like.

Plato's student Aristotle was even more systematic. His works on nature (*Physics* and *Metaphysics*) lay the groundwork for his theory of human nature (*On the Soul*), which lays the groundwork for his theory of human happiness or flourishing (*Nicomachean Ethics*). According to this grand theory, happiness is tied up in character formation. The crowning gem of Aristotle's works, *Politics*, sets out how the state should attend to the character formation of its children.

That is to say that two of the most important philosophers from antiquity, in their most important works, argue that a proper system of early education is the key to a happy, functioning state. The systems they spelled out focused on literature, music, and physical education that were meant to instill the right character traits or "virtues" in the young, mostly through habituation. Actual philosophy came later. In this respect, they both depart from Plato's teacher, Socrates.

While Socrates never wrote down his ideas, we can gather from his students, Plato chief among them, that he spent a lot of time at the gyms of Athens, which were the main centers of both physical and literary education for the young. There he would routinely engage youth (perhaps starting with early teens) in discussions of what makes for a good life.

In short, Greece's three most central philosophers agreed on character development as the main goal of early education and stressed its importance for the state. They disagreed, however, about what role, if any, philosophy should play in it. This brings us to an even more basic question: What is philosophy?

Bertrand Russell once said, "Science is what we know, and philosophy is what we don't know." While this may, in part, have been meant as a joke, it gets at a profound point: Until we sufficiently understand the world, we need people who will explore in rigorous and systematic ways what we don't yet know. In what follows, we treat philosophy as (a) a method of rigorous inquiry (b) into questions that matter, (c) whose answers are, at least for the moment, unclear. According to this definition, philosophy is not a body of knowledge so much as a method for articulating and exploring questions.

Philosophy often proceeds by reading texts from the past; however, philosophers are not always concerned with *what* people thought but *how* they thought: how they framed questions and the different methods they used to think through theories.

The earliest philosophers explored issues that we would now think of as belonging to physics, biology, psychology, political theory, literature, and religious studies. Over time, some discussions reached sufficiently clear consensus that they *stopped* being philosophical and became new disciplines, for example, today's "hard sciences," which even into the nineteenth century were referred to as "natural philosophy."

At the start of the twenty-first century, such fields as quantum physics and cognitive science are proving more complicated than we had thought. As a result, they are, at least in part, coming *back* to philosophy to provide models for making sense of a world that is stranger than our nineteenth-century predecessors ever imagined.

There is one very special set of questions that has remained a part of philosophy from the beginning: ethics. Questions of how we should live

have taken different forms over the centuries. In general terms, the ancients focused on what makes a good life, which they saw as caught up in issues of character. Modern philosophers, by contrast, were more concerned with what makes actions right or wrong.

Despite over two millennia of philosophical discussion, neither set of questions has been definitively answered. Along the way, though, we have narrowed down the most plausible options. Whatever you want to say about what makes an action right or wrong will likely boil down to talking about its consequences (J. S. Mill), the intent behind it (Immanuel Kant), or some combination of the two. Whatever you want to say about what makes someone a good person, it will likely boil down to issues of character or such virtues as justice, moderation, courage, and friendship as explored by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Each of these ideas has been explored, refined, and defended by various theorists over the centuries. Such theories provide useful frameworks, a set of possible "moves" that we might make today in thinking about issues of right and wrong. That's not to say we are bound to only their ideas, but why start from scratch if we don't have to?

While philosophy explores a broad range of questions, we decided to focus here on ethics for three reasons. First, four-year-olds can relate to these questions. They are constantly confronted with choices to make in situations that are still new. They have to interact with others while still working out many of the required social skills. What is fair? What does it mean to be a good friend? When should you be brave? What even is bravery? In one sense, life for a four-year-old is one big, confusing, scary, and challenging mess. This is the bread and butter of philosophy.

Exposure to ethics is also really useful. That is not to say that we are "teaching children morals." Rather, we are helping them think through questions about the best way to live. Put another way, we are concerned with the *process*, what we might call "ethical reasoning," not the *content* of any particular moral system, whether it be religious, political, or cultural. Our school systems have tended to confuse these two, and in an attempt to remove religious or political content, at least from the public system, we have by and large eliminated the process as well.

The final reason for teaching ethics in pre-K is one that the authors of this book did not see coming at the start: Confronting ethical questions has a way of putting teachers and students on the same level. While teachers might apply a so-called Socratic method to questions such as, Why do some rocks float but not others?, the teacher already knows the answer and is not simply saying it for pedagogical reasons. When it comes to questions such as, What is a good life?, teachers who realize the question's difficulty will be more

willing to treat students, even as young as four years old, as peers of a sort. The result for classroom culture can be transformative.

A DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGIST'S VIEW OF PRE-K PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy has long had a place in the competitive debates of high school "ethics bowls" and in recent decades has made significant inroads into middle and even elementary school curricula through the use of storybooks. Yet, even those sympathetic to precollege philosophy have largely passed by pre-K on the grounds that philosophy's topics are too abstract for the four-year-olds' concrete modes of thought and its extended discussions too demanding for young attention spans. To overcome these challenges, the present project reimagines what a philosophical discussion can look like.

Drawing creatively on different modes of scaffolding (games, storybooks, art), this curriculum provides an approach to discussing abstract concepts in developmentally appropriate ways. The end result draws together many best practices within early education that are normally seen as separate. Philosophy, however, unites them into a systemic, organic whole that embraces these seemingly scattered elements and elevates them to a new level.

This approach to nurturing philosophical dialogue among young children echoes the theory of psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934; *Cognition and Language*, 1999), whose work was rediscovered and popularized by Barbara Rogoff (2003) and others. Vygotsky's premise is that children's thinking develops in a social context, which he calls "socially shared cognition."

Imagine a young child playing with a ball. The child interacts with the ball by throwing and dropping it, learning its weight and other properties. As the child moves to throw the ball to another person, the possibilities for learning grow exponentially. Most learning takes place in a social context. Vygotsky asks: Who buys the ball, names it, teaches the throw and catch game, and imbues it with meaning?

Imagine now the task of baking a cake, building a wall, or hammering a nail. Each task is learned in a sort of apprenticeship, as the child observes the adult or older peer, gets feedback, corrects behavior, and tries again. Vygotsky writes that children are in a decade-long *apprenticeship in thinking*, as they listen to and imitate adults who think out loud. This process happens through guided participation, explicit instruction, and informal observational learning.

In leading a philosophical discussion, teachers support and stretch the child's thinking, instructing children on how to respond to each other in useful ways and modeling a form of asking questions for them to imitate. This

expansion of thinking skills, in addition to expanding children's vocabularies of ethical concepts, is the main goal of the present curriculum.

Millet and Tapper (2012), in a review of the benefits of philosophical inquiry in schools, place this movement solidly into a social or collaborative framework. Children are learning about not just philosophers but also how to do philosophical thinking in a social context, both following their teachers and with each other. They are also learning to think in an ethical framework as they consider questions of value that arise from daily life. Philosophy is dialogue.

Topping and Trickey (2014), in their study of the role of dialogue in philosophical education for ten-year-olds, note that, as teachers increase their use of open-ended questions and children practice responding to complex ideas through collaborative inquiry with each other, the children improve in their overall participation and in their ability to support an expressed view with reasoning.

Given how little work has been done with philosophy at the pre-K level, there is little quantitative data to look to for evidence of effectiveness. The methods presented here, however, bear a strong resemblance to interventions that address critical thinking skills through the use of teacher–child and child–child dialogue.

The Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies program, an intervention in twenty classrooms, engaged small groups of children in dialogue about books to improve their vocabularies of emotional expression and interpersonal problem solving. The effort was effective in all areas (Domitrovitch, Cortes, and Greenberg 2007).

Dialogic reading is a popular and well-known interactive technique based on the extensive research of Grover J. Whitehurst, who encourages adults to prompt children with questions and engage them in discussions while reading to them (Whitehurst et al. 1988).

The I Can Problem Solve curriculum starts at age four and can be used in families, as well as in school. It uses a series of stories and discussions to promote problem solving. At the youngest ages, this consists of teaching the definitions of terms like "is," "is not," "I can," "I can't," "truth," "lie," and so on, gradually introducing more complex words (Shure 2001). Studies show that its greatest benefit comes from teaching children the vocabulary of self-control and dialogue (Shure 2001). This is accomplished by teachers modeling the use of these concepts.

Jerome Bruner, a researcher of children's thinking, coined the term "scaffolding" to describe the sensitive structure we provide to children when we introduce ideas that require effort but are not *too* hard for the child to understand with help. This hypothetical area, from what the child can understand all alone to what the child can understand with maximum help, is called

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the zone of proximal development. Bruner writes, "It is an elastic space that stretches and moves up as the child learns. The essence of great teaching is to know the child's zone and consistently push for slightly higher performance" (Kozulin et al. 2003, 15).

Vygotsky describes the job of the parent, teacher, or older peer who comes between the object or lesson and the child as mediation. His theory is thus known as mediated learning. He describes a taxonomy of mediation that is illustrated in communal aspects of the P4C process. A mediated learning experience happens when the child is guided in thinking by someone more competent. Several curricula exist for developing mediation skills in parents and teachers, and a wealth of research indicates the benefits of a mediated learning approach (see Kozulin et al. 2003 for a review).

Vygotsky believes that it is learning that drives development, not the other way around. Those who teach with the scaffolding method find children learning far more than one would predict based on their ages. Types of mediation include the following:

- *Mediation of reciprocity* includes establishing a respectful, serve-and-return relationship between learning partners who share cultural beliefs and values. It is similar to responsive caregiving and means that the adult has to listen carefully to what the child has to say.
- *Mediation of meaning* includes sharing the meaning of the material but also the joy and excitement of learning itself. It shows the child why the event has meaning for each person. This connects the material to the child's own worldview or experience.
- *Mediation of transcendence* takes the learning beyond the present into other places and into the past and future. The adult asks questions about what happened yesterday or what could happen tomorrow, explaining reasons for choices and plans and imagining "what if" scenarios. Don't tell them the answers! As we bridge time and space and help children identify commonalities, we are helping them discover rules, guidelines, and truths for themselves.

As the adult stands in the gap between the experience and the child, this space becomes the sacred space of learning (Kozulin et al. 2003).

In sum, the marriage of philosophy, much of it ancient, with contemporary approaches to early education may seem implausible at first. If approached a certain way, however, the two complement each other in attractive ways. This is backed by developmental theory and research in educational best practices. Just as importantly, integrating philosophy into pre-K addresses a social need that is only becoming more pressing as time goes on: As the world becomes increasingly complex and fast-changing, our educational system must keep

up, producing individuals who can think for themselves and engage others in useful dialogue.

As the early generations of Western philosophers saw and current research reaffirms, the health of our state and the happiness of its citizens turns on the intellectual character instilled by our system of early education.