

Philosophy for Children and the 'whole child'

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Abstract

The notion of educating the 'whole child' invites suspicion because of the value-laden assumptions carried by such a goal. I argue that the intuitive appeal of the notion reflects the meaning of education but that the goal is also implicit in P4C in its respect for wholeness in content, rationale and practices whereby the learner is honoured and engaged. In this paper, I focus on the senior high school curriculum in which the rich resources of philosophy can speak to the broad range of students' questions and concerns: intellectual, existential and social, addressing (and challenging) their 'whole' persons with its legacy of wisdom.

Key words

community of enquiry, Philosophy for Children, whole child

Introduction

When I wrote the original version of this paper published in 2000, I was challenged by a sceptical response in philosophy of education writings about the notion of the 'whole child'. While acknowledging the intuitive appeal of the notion, the liberal position cautions us against the importation through this notion, of 'thick' values into the theory and practice of education.

Whether or not liberal disquiet about importing 'thick' conceptions of the good into education is as compelling today, we are nevertheless faced by the challenge of an increasingly pluralistic world with competing notions of the good. On the other hand, there is no escaping the fact that education is, of necessity, a normative notion concerned with transformation of the individual along evaluative lines, a transformation that I believe must be conceived as a form of 'wholeness'. Indeed, my own experience as a teacher of senior high school Philosophy and English confirms not only the intuitive appeal of the notion but also its meaningfulness and necessity.

A version of the original paper was delivered at the 1999 Hobart FAPCA (Federation

of Australasian Philosophy for Children Associations, now FAPSA) National Conference in which the keynote speaker was Professor Gareth Matthews from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and author of, among other books, *The philosophy of childhood* (1996). It was a great pleasure to hear him in the flesh, especially as I had very much enjoyed his book.

A few years after that conference, I left university teaching and research to return to high school teaching to find a number of identifiable changes in the school culture. Two deserve particular mention in this context. Firstly, as senior high school teachers today, we are encouraged more so than ever to be alert to students who struggle with personal difficulties and or mental health issues. Secondly, a new challenge has also arisen for classroom management: the ubiquity of mobile phones and screens!

In the early paper I tried to articulate meaningful notions of 'wholeness' which are a necessary part of education. In this version, I have re-worked some ideas in the light of my subsequent experience of classroom teaching and course writing for senior secondary philosophy in the ACT. I continue to learn a great deal as a teacher in this sector. My students, their questions and their lived experience have challenged my understanding of philosophy and its pertinence to their questions and their lives in ways that are not only academic but also pastoral, as well as counter-cultural.

In the paper that follows, I have incorporated some of these new concerns and challenges to conclude that the notion of the 'whole child' has received new meanings and an ever increasing pertinence.

Among the annoying questions that children ask are some that are genuinely baffling ... philosophy is an adult attempt to deal with the genuinely baffling questions of childhood. (Matthews 1996, p. 13)

When now ... I teach Aristotle or Aquinas to university students, I try to locate the questioning child in me and my students. Unless I do so, the philosophy we do together will lose much of its urgency and much of its point. (Matthews 1996, p. 14)

A terminally injured or ill child is the ultimate threat to our parental pretensions. If we can learn to deal honestly with that threat and to deal respectfully as well as lovingly with such a child, we will have taken a major step in the development of our own maturity. (Matthews 1996, p. 101)

In his *Philosophy of childhood*, Gareth Matthews gives us a picture of children and their capacity for philosophy that both affirms and endorses the importance of doing philosophy with them. The book also challenges some deeply held assumptions about children that lie behind much of educational theory and practice which fail to recognise their ability to make a positive contribution to philosophical concerns. In particular, it makes the point that one of the exciting things that children have to offer us is a new philosophical perspective.

Matthews' work in philosophy for children (and indeed the work of many others so involved) gives insight into the familiar advocacy that we should educate the 'whole child'. In the philosophical debate on this kind of advocacy and on what it might mean, we are left with a certain cautionary wisdom about it. On the one hand, we are reminded of its 'intuitive appeal' and the 'significant truths (McLaughlin 1996, p. 12; see also Standish 1995) that it carries, but we are also rightly cautioned about its problematic nature. The argument is that when 'wholeness' is understood as 'integration' and 'comprehensiveness', it postpones the question of what highly particular and value-laden views are being assumed by which a person's overall view of life are shaped. In other words, when pushed further, wholeness—understood in these senses—hides what could amount to quite controversial and 'thick' conceptions of the good.

As noted in my introduction, I believe that as educators we should not be warned off the notion of educating the 'whole child'. Indeed, I wish to argue that Philosophy for Children has a positive contribution to make in this debate by demonstrating abundantly that the practice, as well as the theory spawned of such practice, is of necessity 'holistic' in certain additional senses of the word (note that in this paper Philosophy for Children refers to both theory and practice and is referred to here as P4C). Besides 'integration' and 'comprehensiveness', wholeness could also be understood as 'continuity' and 'adequacy'. How these additional senses emerge in P4C will be discussed in relation to the work of Matthews and other philosophers and practitioners. In the process, I hope to show firstly, that some apparently innocuous claims that are made in practices within P4C present in fact quite a significant philosophical challenge both with regard to children and with regard to the nature of philosophy itself. Secondly, by giving insight into the relationship between the 'natural' and the 'conventional' in intellectual and academic developments, P4C also throws light on the value-laden nature of the educational enterprise, especially as it occurs within a community of enquiry (COE).

My argument will proceed in three parts. In Part 1, I consider the notions of wholeness as 'integration' and 'comprehensiveness' and introduce the liberal challenge to clarify the values that underpin the idea of educating the 'whole child.' In Part 2, I explore the additional senses of wholeness as 'continuity' and 'adequacy' as they emerge in P4C and consider how these various senses may be related in its theory and practice. In the final part, I return to the liberal contention that educating the 'whole child' is too value-laden and controversial to be a coherent goal to show that, on the contrary, P4C addresses this directly in the ethos of a COE in which wisdom is the goal and the 'whole child' is central.

Part 1: 'Wholeness' as 'integration' and 'comprehensiveness'

In his examination of the slogan that we should educate the 'whole child', T.H. McLaughlin (1996) offers valuable clarification of the possible meanings of 'wholeness' as 'comprehensiveness' and 'integration'. The former could refer to the need for education to be 'broad', 'rounded' or 'balanced' in its approach and influence. 'Integration' on the other hand refers to 'coherence' and internal harmony within persons and he opposes it to 'fragmentation'.

McLaughlin warns that while these senses of wholeness carry significant truths they are problematic to implement since notions like internal harmony or coherence presuppose 'the notion of elements fitting together according to some principle' (1996, p. 12), which begs the question of the kinds of values for personal development that are presupposed. He rightly warns against this hidden way of advancing slogans, especially in public education which must respect the plurality of values when there is a lack of consensus with respect to thick conceptions of the good by which a person's overall view of life are shaped. McLaughlin throws the challenge: 'What value basis can education therefore appeal to in relation to these matters and to education of the whole child generally?' (1996, p. 12; for an extended discussion of McLaughlin's position see Lamb 2001).

Wisely, McLaughlin does not end there but adds that while the slogan that we should educate the whole child is not unproblematic, at another level it also expresses 'a number of significant truths' (Matthews 1996, p. 9) and could be used as a way of opening up educational discussion. If the notion of 'wholeness' is implicit in the theory and practice of P4C, what significant truths can it yield through its processes and goals?

Part 2: 'Wholeness' as 'continuity' and 'adequacy'

In advocating for the philosophical potential of children, Matthews also contends that philosophy itself should be more in touch with childhood in two different ways. Firstly, that good philosophy is 'an adult attempt to deal with the genuinely baffling questions of childhood' (1996, p. 13) and accordingly, teaching philosophy well requires teachers to locate 'the questioning child' within themselves. Philosophical activity is, in a sense, child-like because it involves the willingness to be baffled and to give up adult pretensions to knowledge. Secondly, Matthews says that given the capability and experience of children, there are contexts in which they should be considered our partners 'in a joint effort to understand it all' (1996, p. 14) because they can teach us by their imaginative perspectives on questions for which we do not have answers.

Besides making claims about the nature of philosophy and the extent to which it is 'natural' (a claim that I will not discuss here), more controversially Matthews also maintains that children are more our equals than we think in how they approach philosophical questions and sometimes this capacity could derive from their own deep experiences of life. Such a claim brings Matthews into direct collision with the view of stage and maturational development which has been central to the study of childhood in the twentieth century. The view is associated with the well-known theories of Piaget and Kohlberg, theories which according to Matthews show an 'evaluational bias' (1996, p. 16) because the later stages are treated as more satisfactory than earlier ones. Matthews says that such theories reflect a biological conception of life in which adults in their prime are regarded as normative and children, accordingly are treated as 'proto-type adults to be nurtured principally for their potential' (1996, p. 12). These models stress discontinuity and disjunctiveness in personal development because they represent childhood as a stage and a state to be overridden and superseded and, as a consequence, they caricature our children and limit the possibilities of our relationship with them.

However we regard Matthews' reading of Piaget¹, the crucial contention is that children have a natural inclination for philosophy and that far from being essentially impeded by naiveté and immaturity, children are by virtue of their youth, able to bring an imaginativeness and inventiveness to philosophy that are part of its spirit. Matthews therefore recommends that we should view children as partners in

¹ I am grateful to an original referee who queried Matthews' reading of Piaget. However, that does not have to affect the force of his recommendation for how we should view children in their engagement in philosophy.

learning and their 'adequacy' rests on what the philosophy teacher recognises as the gift of 'freshness' that they bring to enquiry. Accordingly, teachers will not be dismissive of the child-like in favour of the sophisticated, the mature and the academic.²

In his claim for the philosophical adequacy of childhood questions in enquiry, Matthews presents a challenge not only to psychological positions on child development and pedagogy but also to views on the content of philosophy itself. Taught and presented today as an academic discipline, philosophy can often lose touch with what the philosopher of education, RK Elliott (1975), calls 'common understanding'. He contrasts this with academic understanding which is more specialist and technical as it has been shaped by narrow horizons of interests in its own disciplinary development. 'Common understanding' on the other hand is more vitally connected with lived experience and the concerns which arise from it. As such it is more 'natural' and tends towards a more synoptic view of things, a quality that, according to Elliott, is sacrificed and taken over in academic understanding. In this takeover, understanding begins to serve other interests and concerns and philosophical questions lose their freshness and urgency.

In a similar vein, and advancing a similar advocacy, Mary Midgley (1989) says that the kind of understanding that we should seek to promote in our teaching is one that forms the 'background map' of the whole range of our knowledge. Specialist knowledge should therefore be related to everyday thinking and feeling and made answerable to it. Education of the whole child according to these kinds of recommendations will mean the promotion of a sense of context which relates specialist knowledge to questions that students ask spontaneously out of their life experiences and their learning.

Elliott's advocacy for the richness and breadth of common understanding as a form of philosophical enquiry supports Matthews' pedagogical recommendations: in particular, that teachers should recognise the child as adequate for the task while finding that questioning child within themselves. However, if this is to encourage the vital enquiry that it intends, another connected kind of 'continuity' is called forth that relates to selfhood and learning. In other words, beyond the two senses of continuity with respect to pedagogy and content is a sense of continuity *within* the person (whether teacher or child) that is recognised and honoured in P4C.

² Honouring the adequacy of children does not translate into unprincipled affirmation of children's contribution at the expense of extending them in directions of appropriate philosophical rigour. See Phillips (1996).

The sense of wholeness as psychological continuity is found in the notion of 'play' and the psychologist JM Heaton's (1978) idea that the self needs to be 'whole' in a temporal sense, that is, it needs the sense of its own 'ontology' and 'tradition'. His ontological nature of play is understood in several senses: epistemological, psychological and pedagogical. Firstly, play is seen as being prior to any other appropriation of reality—that is, prior to any kind of propositional knowledge that the human child acquires is the 'sense of the world that is known through play'. (Heaton 1978, p. 122). Accordingly, understanding this synoptic view or 'sense of the whole' has prior status to the parts. Further, such understanding reveals a 'porousness' between the person's sense of the world and her own sense of continuity, with respect to her personal history, or, as Heaton (1978, p. 123) puts it, the 'self's tradition'. The continuity that is spoken about here is not the epistemological sense that we found in Midgley and Elliott, for Heaton's account connects the sense of meaning acquired through cultural experience with personal history and memory, described as 'the thread which joins us to our infancy' (Heaton 1978, p. 124). For Heaton, continuity in this respect is a feature of mental health and is for this reason, ontologically significant.

Heaton explains with reference to the 'transitional object' in infancy in which enjoyment and play in its aliveness is an expression of a secure state of the infant's well-being and of the unity of mother and infant. In contrast, when there is anxiety arising from separation, the infant loses 'the sense of the world' and the liveliness of play is also lost. This kind of phenomenon is familiar to teachers who are enjoined to recognise states of disjunctiveness and distress in children that make it difficult for them to learn. It is also recognised accordingly by the public at large that our schools must be safe places for work and play. Pedagogically, Heaton's account affirms what all teachers already respect: that children's personal histories could have a bearing on how they learn and further, that educating the 'whole child' obliges teachers to recognise and to an extent address cases of discontinuity and disintegration in children.

What role can P4C play and how are such issues addressed in its theory and practice? While we honour the principle of 'continuity' between childhood and philosophical wonder and the affirmation of children's adequacy to philosophical enquiry can it also serve a broader pastoral role? I will address this question in the final part of the discussion by showing how in the philosophy classroom, and in a well-run COE, the various senses of wholeness explored above are reflected and exemplified.

Part 3: The 'whole child', philosophical wisdom and the community of enquiry

The notion of a COE which is central to P4C empowers the individual learner by centring them in conversation in order to arrive at understanding. It is now a truism that P4C is embedded in what is shared and begins with a communal valuing of children as persons. The values presupposed in such dialogical learning situations reflect substantial views of persons and of the conditions of their flourishing.

Such values are promoted in forms of regard that are integral to a COE, including the importance of listening and engaging with others in a spirit of openness and respect. As noted earlier, just as children are encouraged to practice attention to others, the teacher should set the example, exemplifying respect for persons and for the enquiry which is underpinned by a seriousness about truth itself. The valuing of truth presupposes openness, imagination and courage. The more different and new the views one encounters, the more they call upon these qualities of the self to listen to another. As we have seen, Heaton's notion of 'play' reminds us that vital understanding involves an active process that draws on the depths of the self and brings the risk of transformation.

This recognition is vital in education in general and philosophical teaching in particular. As the hermeneutical philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer notes, any genuine 'conversation' takes one 'beyond oneself, to think with the other and to come back to oneself as if to another' (1989, p. 110). It is therefore not surprising that Heaton grounds understanding in personal stability, for a sense of personal security is surely required to step out in understanding, in readiness for the experience of contradiction and surprise. Genuine enquiry is self-involving and, as we saw, it calls upon the 'whole person' in a way that is demanding and that draws upon their personal history (see the discussion on play and learning in Gallagher 1992, pp. 45-54).

It has been said that philosophy begins with wonder and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to show this in the questions that children ask and in the way in which they enquire. Wonder and puzzle are indeed addressed and to an extent satisfied by the rich traditions of philosophy, but at times the questions are more deeply self-involving. In Kierkegaardian terminology, 'inwardness' and 'despair'³ attend the serious human questions of existential meaning. How these should be raised and addressed in the classroom requires careful pedagogical and pastoral consideration.

³ See, for example, Kierkegaard (1971, pp. 214 & 240). In Kierkegaard, the feeling of despair is not a state of desperate gloom so much as the recognition that a higher form of existence is necessary, that one has not in fact chosen to be free and to be a self.

But the philosophical curriculum should be broad enough to do justice to such questions. As RK Elliott reminds us, the variety of traditions in philosophy offer 'an enduring intellectual homeland' that address the range of human questions by philosophical ancestors 'able to play the role of liberators' (Elliott 1974, p. 140). While 'liberation' may not come in the form of solutions and answers, the broad tradition could challenge the presentism of our questions and shift our perspectives on them in productive ways.

Besides the importance of 'wholeness' as breadth of content, is the importance of recognising that we indeed fall short of wholeness in our persons. According to David Cooper, good philosophers are those who have 'at least one eye out for the human condition' reflecting a sense of alienation and tension between 'that intuition of ourselves as one with the whole ... and that [of ourselves] as separate beings' (1996, p. 61). For Cooper, it is out of this latent tension that good philosophy arises and the failure to resolve it is not only an intellectual debacle, it is also a human tragedy.

Does educating the 'whole child' then require the recognition of wholeness as absent in our lives? If philosophy is to serve its counter-cultural educational function, I believe it does. Indeed, understanding how this is so in our time provides important directions for pastoral dimensions of education today. In my introduction, I note how mental health concerns are reflected as never before in the teacher's role, agenda and professional development.

What assails students today is a major topic deserving of more expert attention than I can offer. However, it is not controversial to observe that amongst the many values that add to the stress of their self concept and status anxiety are unrealistic conceptions of life promoted for advertising and marketing purposes today. Whether it is in reality TV shows on celebrity singers, chefs, or fashion models, or demands of an academic kind, young people are encouraged to aspire to heights of excellence and of happiness that are narrow, self-centred and unrealistic. If narcissism is an epidemic (Twenge & Campbell 2009; see also Manne 2014), perfectionism is an accompanying virus which feeds the desperate search for unattainable goals.

The role that P4C can play can only be briefly outlined here. With young children, questions of an existential and pastoral nature are already addressed through philosophical narratives and 'thinking stories' (see, for example, Cam 1997) which enable them to understand, empathise and reflect upon a range of human issues. With older children and senior high school students in particular, philosophy's value is also both conceptual and pastoral. Through philosophy (and indeed in partnership

with literary texts) students develop understanding of their humanity and of the ambivalences in the human condition—‘that intuition of ourselves as one with the whole ... and that [of ourselves] as separate beings’. Discussion of philosophical ideas are given relevance as they spill over into examples from literature and life to personal questions and concerns. While the classroom in such situations—the COE in particular—addresses concerns primarily of an academic nature, the range of philosophical questions engages the whole person and nurtures her whole involvement through forms of regard, especially of attentive listening. In this age of distraction and the ubiquitous screen, this too is counter-cultural. In that classroom space and in those moments of engagement, philosophy offers what Mark Kingwell calls the ‘sabbatical of the mind’⁴ in which students can forget themselves and their digital devices.

Echoing perhaps the lack of realism that we try to address as educators, both pastorally and academically, the World Health Organization defines health in idealistic terms as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’.⁵ However, as we all know, this suggestion of the possibility of complete mental, physical and social well-being does not bear much relationship to our own experience of life or health, nor is it a state we can enjoy without fear of loss. In reflecting our common humanity, the rich tradition of philosophy offers a shared human experience of loss and anxiety in this regard. Indeed, the recognition and acceptance of the incomplete and the random in our lives and the integration of its many facets develops a wholeness that is wisdom itself.

While the advocacy that we should educate the ‘whole child’ can be advanced as rhetorical slogan in such a way as to side-step proper educational discussion, the intuitive appeal of the notion is vindicated in the values implicit in P4C. These values that draw upon substantive views of the person and of philosophy itself, are reflected in the respect for wholeness in content, rationale and practice and fundamentally reflected in the ways in which we honour the young in the ‘joint effort to understand it all.’

⁴ Quoted in ABC Radio National, ‘The hipster philosopher’, *The Philosopher’s Zone*, presented by Joe Gelonesi, Sunday 20 October 2013.

⁵ Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948. The definition has not been amended since 1948.

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