Philosophy, young people

The claim that philosophy is a route to well-being is an ancient one, but one which, judging by the curricula of Australian schools, is not widely believed at present. In this article, ***Tim Sprod****, makes a case that philosophising at school would assist in the building of persons who see life as worth living.*

THE unexamined life, according to Socrates, is not worth living. We are all aware that too many young people today come to think that life is not worth living. Could it be that helping young persons to examine their lives may help them to see that life is worth living after all?

Of course, the vast majority of young persons do not commit suicide, and many of them do see their lives as worthwhile. Yet there are too many others who, though they are not about to take their own lives, do find that their lives are lacking in meaning.

What, then, was Socrates' solution to the problem of unexamined lives? It was philosophy. Indeed, Socrates was famously put to death because his provocation of the youth of Athens to examine their lives was taken as a form of blasphemy. Few call philosophy a form of blasphemy these days, but many see it as irrelevant for the young. Rather they see it as merely a pastime for a few unworldly scholars in the universities. So to suggest that one answer to the problem of youth hopelessness may be to help them to philosophise may seem to be a strange claim. It is, however, the claim that I wish to make.

Absolutism and relativism

US Vice-President Al Gore, in response to the recent killings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, urged that society ought to be teaching children "values and meaning". Just exactly what he meant by this is not obvious. Some would hold that we ought to teach children values that are contained in a pre-established religious framework. The meaning of life, then, is the story told within that framework. For others, that approach amounts to indoctrination, and infringes upon the autonomy of the child. Children ought to discover or clarify their own values, and find their own meaning.

We can see in this divide a contrast between an absolutist and a relativist view of the world. The former claims that there are absolute moral truths and an objective meaning of life. The latter claims that values are relative – either to societies, or in the more extreme version, to individuals. There is no "meaning of life" – only the meanings we find for ourselves. In education, each position leads to a quite different approach. An absolutist will claim that values must be passed on, unchanged, from generation to generation, that meanings are known, and must be taught. A relativist will claim that teachers have no right to teach values and meanings, but must rather structure classrooms in such a way that children can work out what their values are, and discover the meanings that things hold for them.

Yet each position has its difficulties, and an educational system based in either of them can lead to children feeling there is a loss of value and meaning. In a multicultural world, it is hard to sustain the claim that there is just one set of values and meanings. For if there is, then why can't everyone agree on it? We live in somewhat sceptical times, and many of the doctrines of the established claimants to the absolute truth can easily be

questioned. It seems that, for many, a loss of faith in a number of the tenets of an absolutist system leads to a rejection of all its claims to truth.

A relativist position fares little better. In looking for meaning and value, children will be quick to conclude that, if one value is no better than another, then it doesn't matter much which you have. If their teachers are being carefully "neutral" in the interests of not imposing their own values and meanings, children can get the message that there are no values to which it is worth committing oneself. Again, they start to believe that we live in a value-free, meaningless world.

Examining meaning and value

The philosophical conflict between absolutism and relativism is very old, going back at least to Plato's record of the clash between Socrates and Protagoras on the issue 2,500 years ago. It is also very complex, and far from being resolved. However, I don't think that we need to solve it before we can see that neither of the positions I sketched out above is capable of providing a basis for an educational program that helps children to avoid lapsing into despair and hopelessness.

If there is an absolute truth of some sort in matters of meaning and value, then we have to admit that it must not be obvious, or it would be universally recognised by now. Yet if values and meanings are relative, we equally have to admit that many cultural and religious traditions have nevertheless found answers which, if by no means the same, seem at least to be often somewhat similar. What is most interesting about this, though, is that, often, the more abstract the value is, the closer the agreement seems to be. Let's look at a specific example.

No tradition seems to lack a prohibition on murder. Yet an injunction such as "Thou shalt not kill" is far too general to be of any great use in guiding our actions. What counts as the sort of killing the commandment covers? Clearly not all killing, for killing plants does not fall under it. Nor, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, does killing animals for food. Nor does killing other humans in warfare, or in self defence, or … the exceptions can be multiplied. But these exceptions themselves are not clear-cut. I have ignored in the above the arguments of vegetarians and pacifists, who claim the commandment does cover some of these cases.

Many of the contentious issues in our society turn on the difficulty of deciding just how a value, to which all sides to the debate would adhere in its highly general form, is to apply in a particular context. The abortion debate turns on the question of whether a foetus counts as one of those living entities that one ought not to kill, as the euthanasia debate turns on whether the injunction covers cases where one has been asked by "the victim" to kill them.

All this suggests that, whether it is some sophisticated version of absolutism or of relativism that might one day carry the day philosophically, we will still need to deal with "essentially contestable" values and meanings in trying to figure out what sort of person we want to be, and how we ought to act in any particular situation. An essentially contestable concept or value is one that does not admit to a clear, precise definition which will hold in all contexts. We might be tempted to say that there is no "right answer". Yet this does not imply that any old answer will do. We can, if we think carefully about it, see that there are some interpretations which are clearly better than some others. Just where the balance lies between several such competing "better answers", however, may tend to shift as we consider different situations.

This is precisely why, in order to lead a life that makes sense and to be able to make decisions that enhance our quality of life, we need to "examine our life". Young persons will

& well-being

be more likely to fail to deal with a complex situation if they are unable to make nuanced judgements that take account of the intricacies of the context, and the impact that these have on the ways in which certain "moral rules of thumb" can be applied.

In this discussion, I have concentrated more on moral values, but these are, of course, not the only values in life. In order to esteem our actions and achievements, we need to be able to search for, and find, the meaning in them. But this begs the question: how is it that we become able to examine our lives, and find these values and meanings? Is it a capability we might be lucky enough to be born with, or is it something into which we are capable of being educated? And if the latter, then what are the best methods of educating children to be able to examine their lives?

I contend that we become able to examine our lives through engaging in examinations of the sorts of concepts and values that are central and common to our lives (Splitter & Sharp 1995). They are central because they matter to us now, and they are common because they arise again and again in different contexts. We can become adept at this sort of examination, and this happens if, when we call these concepts and values into question, we then have the assistance of others in subjecting them to careful and rigorous scrutiny. Vital to this scrutiny is the presence of more experienced others, who help us to structure our investigations in increasingly sophisticated ways. The Philosophy for Children program is an educational approach that meets these conditions.

Philosophy for Children

Philosophy for Children involves school children in whole-class philosophical discussions. It aims to equip children with better thinking capacities through introducing them to, and enabling them to investigate, many of the "big questions" – the questions that involve the sorts of common, central and contestable notions I have referred to above. Using the program, teachers encourage children to think more deeply about these ideas in a classroom community of inquiry. Children will then focus reflectively on their own thinking and the skills they use, thus improving them, in the meantime exploring and enhancing their own ideas and those of others in response to philosophical and other puzzles. The joint exploration of ideas leads to more cohesive shared knowledge within the group.

Philosophy for Children is based on the idea that children can explore values and make meaning (and, in the process, improve their reasoning capabilities) in a community. The teacher's role is not that of supplying knowledge, meaning or values for children to swallow, but of providing the model of an experienced thinker to the apprentice thinkers of the class, and of ensuring the level of thinking is kept high. Children set the agenda for the discussions by asking questions that appeal to them, ensuring that what is discussed is appropriate to their needs and abilities and that student questions are valued. The thinking is done within a rich context, with repeated applications of thinking techniques to diverse contexts as is judged appropriate by the participants. This improves the chances that children will be able to transfer these skills to other situations. The model of discussion allows students to drive the conversation, creating the time for proper exploration of ideas.

The children's questions, and the subsequent discussion, typically arise from a story. Often, the story is a purpose-written novel or short story presenting a group of children engaged in creating their own Community of Inquiry in and out of school. Alternatively, an existing story, picture book or novel, a movie, a newspaper article or other trigger material can be used. What is important is that the texts have philosophical hooks embedded within them. To support teachers, a manual is often produced, which highlights the philosophical issues and offers discussion plans, exercises and background notes for the teacher to use as appropriate.

In the classroom, the teacher sets up a community of inquiry. The children sit in a circle so that they can see each other. A section of the text is read around the group. Then children's questions about the passage are gathered and written up publicly and the discussion begins. The teacher's role in building the discussion is crucial.

As discussion leader, the teacher must have previously considered the possible lines of development of the discussion arising from the various hooks in the trigger experience, even though they cannot be sure that any particular line will be picked up by the children. This assists them in identifying the potential of remarks that students make, and can suggest the right intercessions to make to help develop them. Of course, as the agenda is set by the students and the actual direction of the discussion arises from its own dynamic, there is still considerable need for teachers to think on their feet.

Life, stories and ideas

So far, the description I have offered of Philosophy for Children shows how the youngsters engaged in a philosophical community of inquiry can draw from fictional stories a number of philosophical ideas to be explored. The connection to their own lives still needs to be drawn. This connection, I wish to claim, is made through the power of story as part of the structure of not only our lives, but also our selves.

Our sense of self is a sense of a character in a narrative. We define our selves in terms of our story – where we came from, who we are related to, the path of our lives. In particular, we see

In the community of inquiry, the youngsters read a story of other children, and the ways they not only act, but also attempt to make sense of their actions.

Northside Photographics

our values in terms of the ways we typically act in certain situations. Thus, we do not claim to be honest because we have an abstract understanding of the concept of honesty, but because we know that in situations where we have been tempted to act dishonestly, we have not succumbed. Indeed, our sense of ourselves as honest draws on specific stories from our past involving temptation and honest reactions, and also other situations of temptation, dishonest action and feelings of guilt and remorse – possibly even discovery and shame – followed by vows not to act in such a way again.

In the community of inquiry, the youngsters read a story of other children, and the ways they not only act, but also attempt to make sense of their actions. In the discussion, this can lead to a consideration of the ideas – values and meanings – that lie behind the actions. But the youngsters in the inquiry do not stop there. They also illustrate their discussions with anecdotes.

Anecdotes are episodes from the lived narratives of the students. They are thus rich in contextual detail. This benefits those who retell them, who through the telling connect the substance of the inquiry – both the story it has arisen from, and the concepts that are being discussed – to their own experience and place in the world. Anecdotes are also rich in emotional attachments. They are rarely mere recitations of the facts, usually providing a way for those telling them to work through and even, often enough, discover their emotional reactions to the events in their lives. They are motivational for the tellers, who discover in the telling of the anecdote that they are now personally connected to the discussion. In anecdotes, students bring *themselves*, as whole, embodied persons, to the inquiry, which becomes woven into their life's narrative.

To concentrate on the tellers of the anecdotes is to miss the greater part of their benefit. The telling of anecdotes also benefits the listeners, for they gain an insight into the world inhabited by others, which has the effect of changing their own worlds. The sharing of anecdotes is a part of the process of creating an intersubjective world, in which it is possible to understand, and feel connected to, others. In hearing of the way you see your surroundings, feel about the events in your life and react to them, I am not merely learning about and connecting to you, but also envisaging for myself alternative possibilities for my own living in the world.

Anecdotes, even a series of somewhat loosely connected ones, can serve all these purposes, though it must be emphasised that the teacher needs to exercise pedagogical judgement as to whether these gains outweigh the possibility that the inquiry will turn into a loose free association of stories. Clearly, an anecdote performs these services best when it meshes well into the inquiry and contributes to its further advance-

ment, for these are the conditions under which the whole community is most likely to remain engaged and to explore the implications of the anecdotal narratives.

These considerations speak against the allowing of free associating from one anecdote to another, for an open slather attitude to anecdotes has dangers of disconnection from the dynamics of the inquiry. Nevertheless, the elimination of all anecdotal reports has its own dangers, leading to the over-formalisation of the inquiry into dry, academic discourse, cutting it free from the lives and concerns of the participants. One of the capacities that students have to learn is that of using anecdotes in a way that does not just connect their experience to the conversation, but also helps to advance the inquiry itself. In pursuit of this cause, teachers can ask students who are offering anecdotes to make clear the ways in which their anecdote sheds light on the topic in hand, or request that other students look for the connection.

In this way, we gain a three-way symbiosis between the trigger story, the meanings of the concepts that it raises (such as honesty, justice, fairness, love and so on), and the lives of the youngsters themselves. They are learning to live an examined life – a life, according to Socrates, worth living.

Practical impacts

Jim Burdett (1999), in an article assessing the potential of Philosophy for Children for reducing the rate of youth suicide, makes two claims. First, he analyses the factors leading to depression, and in some cases suicide, in terms of Vulnerable Personal Factors and Malignant Environmental Factors. The former are those factors specific to the individual, while the latter are those of the general social situation in which the individual is placed. Burdett claims that Philosophy for Children can have an impact on both. His account of its impact on personal factors is largely through the remediation of faulty cognitive processes: he instances all-or-nothing thinking, mental filters, disqualifying the positive and jumping to conclusions. He also mentions the content of the inquiries: issues such as friendship, relationships, authority, death, personal identity. I have suggested that these claims can be extended beyond good thinking and sound concepts, to a connection of values and meaning to the examined lives of individuals. His second claim that social factors can be alleviated by the community of inquiry is much more long term, as it turns on the building of a clearer thinking body politic.

For practical verification that the community of inquiry can have the sorts of effects I have been claiming, I will turn to an article by Peter Raabe (1997). First I will note that Raabe's article does not describe a community of inquiry among school children. Rather, it takes involves adults in a live-in addiction recovery centre in Vancouver, Canada. Clearly, these are people who are not merely at-risk, but already live blighted lives.

Raabe recounts the development of a community of inquiry at the centre in some detail. It was, as can be imagined, not an easy process, but he recounts the way the participants came to see its impact on their own lives once the community has become well established. A newcomer to the centre complains that the discussion is simply a "senseless conversation" like he has often had in bars. Raabe (1997, 90) says:

> Before I could respond to him several of the men spoke up. One of them explained, very patiently, that this was not simply opinionated bar talk, but that they were learning to think for themselves. Another one pointed out that they were learning to think clearly about themselves and their lives, something, he felt, many of them had never done before. A third said that they were giving their brains a workout in order not only to become better thinkers but, more importantly, to become better people … Our community of inquiry was effecting a change in its members so that they were stirred from living lives of subjectivism, intellectual and social isolation, and finding the world an alien and confusing place, to discovering what it is to be fully active, and intentionally participating, members of the greater community.

In other words, the members of Raabe's community are seeing what it can be to live examined lives.

References

Burdett, J. 1999, 'The community of inquiry as a means of reducing youth suicide', *Critical & Creative Thinking*, v.7, n.1 pp.1–9.

Raabe, P. 1997, 'From Addiction to Community', *Inquiry: Critical thinking across the disciplines*, v.17, n.1, pp.81–93.

Splitter, L. & Sharp, A. 1995, *Teaching for Better Thinking*, ACER, Melbourne.

Tim Sprod is the convenor of the Australasian Philosophy for Children conference, Growing into Philosophy: children, young persons and philosophy, to be held at the University of Tasmania, 3–6 July this year, and he would welcome inquiries from readers interested in attending. He has just completed a PhD which considered the philosophical basis of the development of moral persons and the connections with the community of inquiry, and has now taken up the post of International Baccalaureate Coordinator at The Friends' School, Hobart.