

Maria daVenza Tillmanns, PhD
Email: davenza@sbcglobal.net

daVenza Academy of Philosophy

5530 Renaissance Avenue # 1
San Diego, CA 92122 – USA

Philosophy for Children and their Intuitive Knowledge

Parallel Session

“The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything except our thinking. Thus, we are drifting toward catastrophe beyond conception. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive.” Albert Einstein

I could present this paper in power point in which case I would need audio-visual equipment.

Philosophy for Children and their Intuitive Knowledge

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“Philosophy makes progress not by becoming more rigorous but by becoming more imaginative.” - Richard Rorty

*“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.”
- Pablo Picasso*

“I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination encircles the world.” – Albert Einstein

It is my contention that children, as immersed in the world as adults are, that they too have a knowledge of that world, an intuitive knowledge.

Jean Piaget describes how we go through stages of cognitive development as we grow up and in so doing develop our cognitive knowledge of the world we are immersed in.

But there seems to be another form of knowledge besides the cognitive and that is the intuitive.

During a Moral Education conference at Harvard University (which I attended), L. Kohlberg, who developed his theory of moral education based on Piaget’s stage theory, and Matthew Lipman, the Founder and Director of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, entered into a discussion about whether children had the ability to enter into philosophical dialogue. The general assumption was that children cannot do so, because their cognitive development has not progressed to that stage of abstract reasoning.

Lipman, however, argued that children are more than ‘ready’ to enter into philosophical dialogue. His work clearly demonstrated that they enjoy sharing their thoughts and ideas,

listening to others, changing their minds and pondering the questions discussed in school at home.

Towards the end of my paper, I give an example of my own experience “doing” philosophy with children which also attests to the fact that children are in fact natural philosophers.

The Kohlberg/Lipman disparity, so to speak, led me to consider that there may be two different kinds of thinking, the intuitive and the cognitive.

In doing philosophy with children, we appeal to their intuitive knowledge and help to develop that intuitive knowledge into well-articulated cognitive knowledge.

But it also does much more.

Philosophy for children, finally, acknowledges children’s ability to dialogue about issues of fairness and justice, beauty and morality.

This is where we have failed children for decades, because while we may find their thoughts and ideas *amusing*, we never truly appreciated the fact that children may have a knowledge that we somehow cannot grasp or understand (anymore) ourselves and so cannot give them the acknowledgment they deserve. They are “just” children, after all.

In *I and Thou*, Buber states that: “ In the beginning is relation – as category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul; it is the *a priori* of relation, *the inborn Thou*.” (Buber, *I and Thou*, 1958, p. 27)

I believe this *a priori* relation is the basis for the intuitive knowledge of the world we live in and are immersed in.

For Buber, this *a priori* relation later develops into the *essential* relation, one based on self-being, which is based on the consciousness of individual separateness (Brice, 1984 in Praglin, 2006).

Relation, then, is the basis for intuitive understanding, which later develops into a cognitive understanding of the world developed out of a sense of individual separateness.

We will always retain some form of this intuitive understanding of the world, yet too often it is *replaced* by the cognitive skills we develop in school, and as a result our cognitive skills are developed in a vacuum, disassociated from our being.

This vacuum or void creates a *dependency* on others, be they people with authority, the need for status, “lots of money,” following trends and fads. We have robbed people of their ability to enter into inter-dependent relationships, with their relationship to themselves in tact.

This may also explain in part what motivated the students in the famous Milgram study to be “willing” (when instructed by the experimenter) to intensify the shocks administered to “the learner” (actually an actor) when he made a mistake to the point that could have killed him.

Philosophy for Children, on the other hand, honors the relationship children have with the world around them. It helps them to cultivate their inner authority and to be self-critical, meaning to be able to self-regulate and truly be in charge of their own thinking and decisions – not letting someone in a white coat, as in the Milgram study, make the students do what they later deeply regret, and which for many was also traumatizing.

Because the intuitive knowledge has not yet developed the cognitive skills to express itself, it uses the imagination. Imagination, however, is not devoid of any kind of reason.

Imagination is the language of intuitive knowledge borne out of our *a priori* relation with the world.

If we rob children of their intuitive knowledge, we essentially rob them of their relationship with the world they are immersed in.

When we try to *re-establish* this relationship through building their cognitive skills, we have replaced their intuitive knowledge with cognitive knowledge *at the expense* of their relationship with the world and their relationship with themselves.

As a result we can train people to be very smart and knowledgeable, but at the expense of their inborn intelligence, rooted in their relationship with the world.

We can do the most horrible things to the environment, other life forms and other people, because we have replaced the “inborn Thou” with the “It,” as Buber would say.

For the I-It relationship is instrumental in nature and strictly serves the individual’s needs at the expense of the relationship one has with the world.

Essentially, we have replaced a life rich in meaning for a life of riches.

We need to foster and nourish the *inborn Thou* and strengthen children’s relations to the world around them and other people.

The *a priori* relation signifies our immediate and direct relationship with the world, relatively unmediated through societal and logical structures of thought, and finds its expression in a form of *parrhesia*, if you will, a form of speaking freely or frankly.

It is to speak from the logic of experience, as opposed to the logic of truth (Foucault, 1994 in Kohan, 2013, p. 176-177).

Through the process of “questioning their relationship to what they already know,” and “putting [thinking] itself into question” ((Kohan, p. 176), children become aware of themselves *as thinking beings*.

I believe it is also in this way that children develop what David Bohm calls the “proprioception of thought,” the ability to “observe thought,” or the ability for the” self-perception of thought” (Bohm, 1998, p. 73-83).

It is the ability to become self-critical in the sense of self-aware through questioning what we already know through experience,

“[Rather], *we are primarily interested in students and teachers entering a zone of interrogation – in putting themselves, their lives, their passions and beliefs into question through the experience of thinking together.*” (my emphasis), (Kohan, p. 178-179)

In some of my talks, I mention that since all disciplines have their expertise, what expertise do philosophers have? My answer: philosophers are experts in not knowing.

In “doing” philosophy with children, in practicing the art of philosophy, the art of not knowing, we need each other to *think together* to explore deeper concepts we only vaguely understand, let alone know.

Thinking together not only binds us, but allows us to explore unknown and unknowable territory with joy, curiosity and confidence. We have each other after all.

Weber also points to the importance of play:

“The notion of play becomes so central because when we play we become creative – we acquire reality... Through this process, *reality becomes ‘our’ reality.*” (emphasis mine) (p. 77)

In the example I give of my own experience “doing” philosophy with children, I want to show that it is not so much that the children intuitively touch on complex philosophical ideas. The students are wrestling with ideas about how to understand the world, which is where philosophy began as well.

Miller addresses this point as well, saying:

“... to allow the students to think for themselves resulted in the students *doing* philosophy. The students’ thoughts and questions often pushed the community’s inquiries and discussions to that of the “philosophical.” The students examined issues and paralleled arguments professional philosophers have been writing about for over 2,000 years.” (p.7)

“ [The students] interpretations were grounded *in personal connections* (my emphasis) supported by reasons indicating they were no longer passively subservient to

authority, but willing to challenge from their own personal point of view.” (p. 7)

Discovery leads to learning, not just having answers. We do not want to provide children with what I call “processed knowledge,” which hurtles down the conveyor belt of knowledge in the form of teacher-proof lesson plans, text books, teaching to the test exercises, etc.

How can we be surprised when children decide computer games are more interesting than life itself?

We have essentially robbed them of the desire to “get dirty,” while playing outside and discovering what this place is about, engaging this world and all its complexity, filled with wonder.

We have created a world too boring for children and act surprised when they are bored.

The world isn't boring and in “doing” philosophy with children we keep the fascination with this place we call earth alive.

Bio - Maria daVenza Tillmanns, Ph.D.

I received my doctorate from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 1998. I title of my Dissertation is: Philosophical Counseling and Teaching: “Holding the Tension” in a Dualistic World. It was published by UMI Dissertation Services (now ProQuest). I had my own Philosophical Counseling Practice in the Netherlands from 1989 – 1993. During that time, I was Board member of the Dutch Association for Philosophical Practice in Amsterdam. In Holland, I also ran a Philosophy for Children Program at two International Schools. Together with Ran Lahav, I co-edited “Essays on Philosophical Counseling,” published in 1995. Articles of mine have been published in various Dutch, British, and American Journals. From 1996-97, I was President of the American Society for Philosophy, Counseling and Psychotherapy (ASPCP, now NPCA, National Philosophical Counseling Association). From 1998 – 2002 Dr. Maurice Friedman and I had a joint practice in Philosophical Counseling: Philosophical Counseling through Dialogue. My husband the Rev. Dr. Wilfredo (Willy) Crespo and I conducted a bi-weekly Socratic Dialogue group for five years for inmates at the Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) downtown San Diego while he was employed as their Prison Chaplain. He and I conduct a Socratic Café once a month that we started in 2002. I taught at University of California, San Diego for nearly ten years in their Teacher Education Program, Human Development Program and Department of Communication. I also taught for UCSD-Extension. I worked as a Field Representative for the Professional Union at UCSD representing approximately two hundred Non-Senate faculty and forty Librarians for eight years. In 2005, I was invited by Princess Irene of the Netherlands to discuss my work on Dialogue (based on Martin Buber and Maurice S. Friedman’s work). I conducted an intergenerational philosophy program for kids, parents and grandparents once a month at St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church, where my husband is now Rector. Two years ago, I was the Philosopher-in-Residence at La Jolla Country Day School in La Jolla, California. Presently, I teach philosophy at California College in San Diego. Currently, I am seeking funding for a project in partnership with UCSD “doing” philosophy with children in underserved schools in San Diego. Jessica Davis, a doctoral student at Columbia Teachers College has joined me in seeking funding for this project. We are also collaborating on bringing philosophical dialogue into SoCal Schools.