

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Engaging Philosophy in the Quest for K-12 Deeper Learning

By Gary Colletti

Students gravitate toward philosophy. As a 10th grade philosophy teacher, I once had a student ask for detention so we could continue a discussion about Plato and Aristotle without tarnishing his reputation as a respected gang member. That request revealed the paradox of teaching philosophy in K-12 classrooms: Many find it an unsuitably difficult subject to teach to children, and yet children are drawn to its ability to help them make sense of a complex world.

Education experts have urged schools nationwide to engage students in deep, personalized, collaborative learning—to get students thinking creatively and to get them questioning and reasoning. In 2013, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation published its first set of student skills and demeanor, dubbed deeper learning competencies, to help educators develop students' higher order thinking and engage them in learning.¹

What teachers sometimes lack is the how. Most educators have difficulty describing critical thinking and engaging students in doing it. Yet the teaching of philosophy provides an elegant framework for building deeper learning competencies in K-12 settings: to discern the real from the fake, regulate their own behavior, express ideas, interpret others' messages and respond appropriately, and attain subject matter mastery, metacognition, and social learning, for starters. In addition, "philosophy breaks down the sometimes artificial divisions among subjects by showing that the 'big questions' are present in all courses."²

STARTING YOUNG

Teaching K-12 philosophy faces two obstacles. The first is a perception problem.

Although parents and educators alike view self-analysis, evaluating choices, questioning, and expressing original thought as desirable K-12 endeavors, placing them under the heading "philosophy" makes them sound impossibly difficult for young children, only appropriate for some gifted older students, or unlikely to build measurable skills. None of these statements is true.

I have seen students across many grades and socioeconomic backgrounds, in Advanced Placement and special education classes, engaged in philosophical thought and supporting positions with logic and theory. Studies bear out my experience. For example, one UK study of 3,000 students in 48 schools found that students who had participated in K-12 philosophy discussions outperformed the control group long after the classes had finished. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds saw an even bigger leap in reading, math, writing, as well as increased confidence, comfort with asking questions, and ability to listen. Teachers reported that engaging in philosophy with children improved their teaching style.³

Philosophy instruction does occur in schools nationwide and takes many forms. In 29 states, students engage in programs supported by centers for philosophy for children, university outreach programs, or ethics bowls supported by colleges and foundations. A number of high schools offer philosophy classes, clubs, or integrate logic, ethics, or metaphysical skills into other classes. Whether these opportunities are distributed equitably remains a question.

Philosophy instruction is not reserved for high school. Children as young as five or six explore deep concepts through discussion-based activities, usually inspired by literature they are already reading. Elementary and middle school

students typically engage in a dialogue-based model called philosophy for children (P4C). Middle and high school students learn logic and substantive argumentation, citing ancient and modern thinkers as they examine big questions such as the nature of reality, evaluate media messages, and wrestle with situational ethics—all the province of philosophy.

High school students participate in ethics bowls in 26 states and the District of Columbia. Observing the rounds at these bowls, one can see students exploring complex topics, collaborating, and expressing thoughts with well-composed, philosophically based critical and creative thinking. Presumably, these fortunate students had teachers capable of guiding them.

PREPARING TEACHERS TO DEVELOP PHILOSOPHERS

The second obstacle to teaching philosophy is teachers' lack of comfort with the subject.⁴ This is an opportunity. Currently, teacher preparation programs generally touch only on the philosophical sliver that focuses on pedagogy and enables teachers to name their "philosophy of teaching."⁵ Thus teachers typically miss the chance to gain the skills they need to develop critical thinkers in the classroom.

Regardless of whether they are certified in math, all teachers have had sufficient exposure to enable them to teach math to young children. As one researcher put it, "However, the best English teacher in the world would not be expected to teach teenagers calculus."⁶ Similarly, teachers must be prepared to teach critical thinking rather than winging it.

Strengthening teachers' ability to foster philosophical thought requires grounding in a framework whose foundations have been laid over thousands of years. The skills needed to help children formulate metaphysical questions, form logical arguments, and weigh ethical choices requires training. As Makaiau and Miller note:

It is common for the teacher to ask the class to “discuss” a reading without any guidance, structured activity, and assessment. In order to bring philosophical activity into the context of the classroom, teachers must thoughtfully design and implement organized, philosophically rich classroom activities and assessments. These do not emerge organically by simply arranging students in a circle or around a table.⁷

Although no state has adopted standards of learning or course requirements for teachers in the United States, Ontario has. After collaboratively developing courses and standards for teaching philosophy to 6- to 18-year-olds, classroom teachers and university academics successfully petitioned the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2000 to designate philosophy as a “teachable subject,” meaning that schools of education could then offer teacher preparation courses for philosophy, much as they do for literacy and numeracy pedagogy.⁸ One such course at the University of Ontario, Philosophic Inquiry across the Curriculum, spanned primary to secondary education and prepares teachers to incorporate philosophy into every teachable subject.⁹

Ontario now boasts a large contingent of philosophy students, according to a teachers’ association. Based on its study of pre-university philosophy instruction in Canada and 10 other countries, UNESCO recommends introducing philosophy courses and pedagogy in teacher training, with the aim of embedding philosophical enquiry in primary and secondary education and of developing future teachers’ critical thinking.¹⁰

Incorporating philosophical training into teacher preparation programs can more viably scale deeper learning than having philosophers teach K-12 classes. State boards of education can promote the introduction to K-12 philosophy skills in teacher preparation programs and can consider precollege philosophy in these programs as evidence that deeper learning standards of pedagogy are being met.

Like literacy and numeracy, philosophical thinking and questioning are superdisciplin-

ary and strengthen one’s ability to succeed in any subject. Teacher preparation programs thus should be developing teachers’ facility in metacognition, practical ethics, and logic—the “hinges or links of reasoning processes” that help students think and learn.¹¹ Such programs should provide educators with a toolbox of thinking exercises and activities to advance student inquiry.

Access to teachers who have been exposed to philosophical thinking is an equity issue. It presents an opportunity to promote educational quality for all regardless of socioeconomic background, school resources, age, or even cognitive ability. Philosophy is incorrectly considered to be an elite topic and irrelevant for most students’ assumed futures. As a result, programs that engage students in explicit philosophy instruction have been skewed to a few schools.

The clearest statement for promoting equity for all students through philosophical thinking might be the following:

... distinguishing truth from error, which is properly what is called good sense or reason, is by nature equal in [everyone]; and that the diversity of our opinions, consequently, does not arise from some being endowed with a larger share of reason than others, but solely from this—that we conduct our thoughts along different ways, and do not fix our attention on the same objects. For to be possessed of a vigorous mind is not enough; the prime requisite is rightly to apply it. The greatest minds, as they are capable of the highest excellences, are open likewise to the greatest irregularities; and those who travel very slowly may yet make far greater progress, provided they keep always to the straight road, than those who ... while they run ... forsake it.

René Descartes’s commentary on the power of reasoning skills is as apropos now as when he wrote it in 1637. Students in schools that do not offer philosophy are at a disadvantage. The ability to reason and engage in higher order thinking is meant to be in the domain of each child, regardless of socioeconomic background, neighborhood, or tracked level in a school. Current

learning standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do but not how teachers can help students “rightly apply” what they learn.

By encouraging universities to infuse philosophy instruction into teacher preparation programs, state boards can increase the capacity for teachers to engage K-12 students in all schools. Such instruction will lessen teachers’ apprehension toward adding philosophical practice to K-12 classrooms, help students master all academic content, and develop the social and emotional learning benefits associated with improved skills at communication and self-analysis.

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1 William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, “Deeper Learning Competencies,” strategy paper (April 2013), https://www.hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Deeper_Learning_Defined_April_2013.pdf.

2 James Davis, “Socrates in Homeroom: A Case Study for Integrating Philosophy across a High School Curriculum,” *Teaching Philosophy* 36, no. 3 (2013): 217–38.

3 Education Endowment Foundation, “Philosophy for Children: Evaluation Report and Executive Summary,” report (Durham University, 2015).

4 Laura Elizabeth Pinto et al., “High School Philosophy Teachers’ Use of Textbooks: Critical Thinking or Teaching to the Text?” *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction* 5, no. 2 (2011): doi:10.3776/joci.2011.v5n2p45-78.

5 Lauren Bialystok, “Philosophy across the Curriculum and the Question of Teacher Capacity; Or, What Is Philosophy and Who Can Teach It?” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 51, no. 4 (2017): 817–36. doi:10.1111/1467-9752.

6 Ibid.

7 Amber Strong Makaiau and Chad Miller, “The Philosopher’s Pedagogy,” *Educational Perspectives* 44, nos. 1 and 2 (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i at Manoa, 2012): 8–19.

8 Ontario Philosophy Teachers’ Association, “About OPTA” (January 2018), <http://ontariophilosophy.ca/about.htm>; Ontario Ministry of Education, “The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9-12: Social Sciences and Humanities” (2013), <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/ssciences9to122013.pdf>.

9 Bialystok, “Philosophy across the Curriculum.”

10 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, “Teaching Philosophy in Europe and North America” (Paris: UNESCO, 2011).

11 Emma Worley, “The First R: Why We Need to Teach Philosophy in the Classroom,” *The Guardian* (September 23, 2013).