

Developing philosophical discussions with children and young people in residential care homes

Terje Jostein Halvorsen

Abstract

Philosophical discussion in small groups is a method already known in the field of residential child care, through Kohlberg's theory on how to promote young people's ability for moral reasoning. This paper offers a presentation of two philosophers, Matthew Lipman and Gareth Matthews, who advise approaches similar to the Kohlbergian approach but where the aim is to promote cognitive development in multiple domains. Their approaches may prove useful in the endeavours to improve the educational achievements of children and young people in residential care homes. Moreover, these approaches may also promote social competence and social functioning. According to the author, the philosophical knowledge needed to initiate and lead discussions, can yield an additional benefit in the form of a more stringent and in-depth professional reasoning.

Keywords

Philosophical discussion, Socratic Method, cognitive development, educational achievement, social competence, professional reasoning

Corresponding author:

Terje Jostein Halvorsen, Professor, Faculty of Social Science, Nord University, terje.j.halvorsen@nord.no

Introduction

Since the 1980s, an increasing number of researchers have focused on the educational attainment of looked-after children (cf. Aldgate, Heath, Colton & Simm, 1993; Berridge & Brodie, 1998; Berridge, Dance, Beecham & Field, 2008; Cameron, Connelly & Jackson, 2015; Jackson, 2001). Children in residential homes are in high risk of educational failure, and such failure may cause social problems later in life. Several scholars have called for efforts to promote looked-after children's ability to cope with academic challenges. According to Francis, residential care professionals should 'Develop a learning culture', 'identify and support the child's interests and talents', and 'look beyond the school for learning opportunities' (2008, p. 30). Philosophical inquiry as proposed by Lipman and Matthews meets these claims and may be part of the effort Francis calls for.

Another issue that has attracted increased attention in the field of residential care and adjacent fields is how poor reasoning skills might get children and young people into problems in social interaction. This new focus can be traced to changes in professional theories. Both psychoanalysis and behaviourism have undergone a 'cognitive turn'. In the former, Fonagy and colleagues (2004) have described the importance of mentalisation, that is the capacity to interpret human reactions as manifestations of mental entities. This meta-cognitive capacity is a prerequisite for affect regulation and for the ability to adapt to the needs of others. In the behaviourist tradition, several scholars have described how clients can learn to identify self-instructions and self-evaluations that promote and maintain problem behaviour and replace these with thoughts that bring alternative behaviours (compare Bandura, 1986; Meichenbaum, 2017). Also Kohlberg (1984), who has logical constructivism (compare Piaget, 1953) as his starting point, has put reasoning skills on the agenda in social pedagogy. His approach where young people are invited to discuss dilemma situations is included in ART, Aggression Replacement Training (Goldstein, Glick & Gibbs, 1998). Since the late 1990s, residential care professionals in many countries have attended training programmes to qualify as ART-educators. Also philosophical inquiry as proposed by Lipman and Matthews may have a positive

impact on social function. Their approaches can promote social competence in form of an ability to articulate problems and give reasons and a habit of actively listening to others and exploring disagreements reasonably.

Two unusual philosophers

Matthew Lipman and Gareth Matthews worked as philosophers at American universities in the last part of the previous century and the beginning of this century.

They both by coincidence entered the field of pedagogy. Even though they did not work together their efforts were partly parallel. Unfortunately, neither Lipman nor Matthews have yet received much attention in the field of residential child care.

Lipman was born in 1923, grew up in New Jersey and studied at universities in America, England and France (Lipman, 2008). Philosophy of art was his major area of specialty (Lipman, 1967, 1973). After completing his PhD Lipman became a lecturer at Columbia University in New York City. In his work with students, Lipman made an observation that aroused an interest in pedagogy. As an elite university, Columbia had talented students who worked hard. The students read a lot and had extensive knowledge in their special fields. They did not, however, reason as strictly and profoundly as Lipman had expected. They lacked what he describes as sufficient thinking skills. He concluded that there was something fundamentally wrong in the school system: that teachers imparted knowledge but that students got no guidance or training in how to reason in a stringent way. Therefore, a far-reaching educational reform was needed. Lipman was aware that Dewey had come to the same conclusion:

John Dewey was convinced that education had failed because it was guilty of a stupendous category mistake: It confused the refined, finished end products of inquiry with the raw, crude subject matter of inquiry and tried to get students to learn the solutions rather than investigate the problems and engage in inquiry for themselves. Just as scientists apply scientific method to the exploration of problematic situations so students should do

the same if they are ever to learn to think for themselves. Instead, we ask them to study the end results of what scientists have discovered; we neglect the process and fixate upon the product (1991, p. 15).

Lipman (1988) came to the original idea that the best way to promote cognitive skills is to bring children in contact with philosophy. In this field, scholars for centuries have described how to avoid shallowness and ambiguous or erroneous ways of reasoning. Gradually Lipman moved from philosophy of art to pedagogy and started formulating what became known as Philosophy for children or Philosophy for children and young people.

In 1972, Lipman was offered a position as professor at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Here it was arranged so that he could pursue his new interest and he established The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. Lipman was active as a researcher until shortly before his death in 2010.

Gareth Matthews was born in 1929. As a young man he studied philosophy at universities in America and West Germany. For most of his academic career Matthews worked as a professor in philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, in the city of Amherst. This position he held until he died in spring 2011. As a professional philosopher Matthews was engaged in the study of the antique period and the medieval period (Matthews 1990, 1999). He also worked with issues related to philosophy of mind (Matthews, 1992). Through his research Matthews became a recognised professor in philosophy. Matthews' private life was one of a quiet family life with wife and three children. It turned out that one of these would make a decisive impact on Matthews' career.

In 1963, a special incident took place. The family's cat, Fluffy, had contracted fleas and Matthews realised that he had to fumigate the cat. Matthews' four-year-old daughter Sarah watched the process. She wondered how the fleas had come into Fluffy's fur. Matthews answered that they probably had come from another cat Fluffy had played with. He presumed that this was a sufficient answer. However, he was wrong. Sarah wanted to know where the other cat had got the fleas. Nor was she satisfied with the answer that also the other cat had got fleas from a cat, a third cat.

It can't go on like that forever, Sarah objected. One of the topics Matthews often taught to students was the cosmological argument for a first cause. This argument implies to rule out a line of causes, and thereby prove the existence of a first cause. Matthews recalled reflecting: 'Here I am teaching university students the argument for a First Cause, and my four-year-old daughter comes up, on her own, with an argument for the First-Flea' (1994, pp. 1-2).

Sarah's ponderings brought her father on a new track. Through further discussions with his own children and with children in schools and institutions, he came to realise that children are able to enjoy, and to benefit from, philosophical discussions:

I don't want to come right out and say that children are philosophers, or that philosophers are children — though there would be some point in saying each of those things. Instead, I want to say this: what philosophers do (in rather disciplined and sustained ways) is much closer than usually appreciated to what at least some children rather naturally do (albeit fitfully, and without the benefit of sophisticated techniques) (Matthews, 1976, pp. 14-15).

While many professionals, often with reference to the theory by Piaget (1953), oppose the idea that children can do complex, abstract reasoning, both Lipman (1991) and Matthews (2009) argue that children's cognitive potential is underestimated by Piaget and his followers.

Prepared or spontaneous discussions

When it comes to educational methodology the two pioneers to some extent split up. While Lipman advises prepared and manual-based discussions, Matthews proposes spontaneous discussions.

Lipman has developed an educational program package in form of manuals for the pedagogue (for example Lipman, 1996; Lipman & Sharp, 1984) and textbooks for children about children who come in contact with philosophical issues. In the books about Pixie (Lipman, 1981) a young girl is protagonist and narrator. According to Lipman, each session should start with a reading of an

excerpt from one of the books. Then the children should be invited to respond to the text by suggesting questions the text raises. The manual contains several instructions about how the pedagogue can facilitate the discussion. Before starting, the children are encouraged to underpin their conclusions with arguments. They are also asked to listen carefully to the arguments of others. The group is embarking on a joint venture, a teamwork project, not a competition. According to the manual, the pedagogue must not show off with his/her wisdom and philosophical insight. Instead, the Socratic Method (see Brichouse & Smith, 2009) is advocated. The pedagogue should give careful hints for further exploring by asking thought-provoking questions. Lipman (1988) uses the term community of inquiry to name the advantageous educational context where the educator and the children work together to clarify a philosophical issue.

Lipman's books for children deal with different branches of philosophy, especially ontology, epistemology and ethics. The excerpt below touches on the ontological schisms materialism versus idealism and monism versus dualism:

Pixie: When something happened to a thing, did anything happen to the idea of that thing? I mean, if a chair got burned up, did the idea of the chair get burned up too?

Brian: No, nothing can destroy ideas. The things that share in those ideas can get destroyed, but not the ideas.

Pixie: And is that the same with people?

Brian: It could be. Abraham Lincoln was killed, but was the idea of Abraham Lincoln killed? (Lipman, 1981, p. 94).

Teachers in many countries have attended training programmes where they have learned to apply Lipman's programme, and several schools have included philosophy in the curriculum. At these schools, philosophy is listed in the timetables. Applied in a residential care setting prepared discussions as proposed by Lipman could be organised in the form like a 'philosophy club' or weekly discussion meeting. Such meetings should be arranged so that the

children or young people would like to attend. Those who participate must find that they learn something they benefit from. In addition, something to eat and drink and time for nice informal chat may motivate.

An objection that might be raised against Lipman's approach is that philosophy is a subject that not easily fits into educational programmes. Even though the inquiry most often follows the predicted trajectory, unexpected turns may occur. The children might have unforeseen associations and might come up with thoughts that are not described in the manual.

While Lipman offers detailed manuals to follow, Matthews presents anecdotal examples from which to be inspired. According to Matthews, children often realise by themselves how philosophical ideas are embedded in, and underpin, everyday reasoning. Children may also question some of the presuppositions our reasoning is based on. Matthews (1984, 1998) describes how children's philosophical awareness expressed through statements or questions may be starting points for philosophical discussions. Some recognisable examples can substantiate Matthews claim:

'Giraffes are similar but also different', says seven-year-old Jenny. She scrutinises the picture on her lunch box and has noticed that the spot near the corner of the mouth on the giraffe to the left is slightly smaller compared to the other giraffe. Jenny's statement deals with concept theory, defining characteristics, additional characteristics, similarity and uniqueness.

'Why do we call penguins birds even though they cannot fly?', asks Tom. He is ten years old and is about to colour a drawing with different birds. His questioning is about conceptual vagueness and the distinction between categorical and dimensional classification.

'Pluto has been a planet and it may become a planet again', says Frank with an important look. He is twelve and has a special interest in astronomy. He reads books and magazine about celestial bodies and hope that one day he can afford an astronomical telescope. In one of the magazines, he has read that the International Association of Astronomy changed the definition of planets in 2006.

This entailed that Pluto was excluded from the actual category. Frank's statement is about the problem of universals. This is a schism in ontology and epistemology, where realists oppose conceptualists. The former claim there is a natural system of categories whilst the latter disagree and argue that all categories and classification systems are social constructions.

'Is Hero responsible for its mischief?', asks Jim. He has discovered the three-month-old puppy on the beach while it was chewing a pencil box. The question Jim raises in a humorous tone is about the schism between determinism and indeterminism, and about the difference between causal explanations and motive explanations.

'Why do giraffes have long necks?', asks Jean. She is fourteen and is attending an excursion to the zoo. The answer to this questing is in the history of evolution and in functional explanations, a kind of explanation describing how a phenomenon is sustained by its effects.

'Is there something like false knowledge?', asks Tom. He is sixteen. At school he has noticed that the teacher uses the expression true knowledge. Tom wonders if such usage implies that there is something like false knowledge. His pondering is about the definition of knowledge. A widely held view is that genuine knowledge is infallible, and that true knowledge consequently is a tautology, similar to unmarried bachelor.

'Can it be morally right to tell a white lie?', asks Jenny. She is sixteen and explains that there is a girl in her class who walks alone most of the time and often looks sad. Her name is Sheila. Usually, Sheila wears outdated and worn clothes. Her parents are poor. Jenny says that she feels sorry for Sheila and has tried to be kind to her. Today Sheila attended school wearing a new but weird looking jacket. She had asked Jenny if she fancied the new jacket. Jenny answered that the jacket was nice because she didn't want to hurt Sheila. The question Jenny raises is about the difference between duty ethics that tells us to follow rules, and utilitarianism that tells us to consider consequences, but also about act utilitarianism versus rule utilitarianism. The former tells us to consider the consequences of the single act, while the latter tells us to follow the rule that

brings the best consequences in the long term. Jenny has acted in accordance with act utilitarianism but fears that Sheila may see through her and become even more hurt and upset.

'Can teachers decide the meaning of words?', asks seventeen-year-old Frida. She is a bit agitated because of an argument with the English teacher. According to the teacher Frida and several other students use the word unique incorrectly. The correct meaning of the word is one of a kind and not unusual or great as Frida and her classmates seem to believe. Frida's question is about etymology and the tending of a language but also about the distinction between words and concepts and the fact that some words change meaning, the subject of pragmatics.

Attentive child and youth care workers will experience countless such incidents. These are golden opportunities that should be utilised. If the professional responds in an adequate way the child's wonder may transform into philosophical reflection and discussion, a joint inquiry that promotes cognitive development. The discussion may involve one child or several. It may be short or long and take place in a wide range of situations, for instance during meals, homework sessions or outdoor activities, or after watching a film or a television programme.

As described in the introduction, vulnerable children and young people may need to improve their ability to think about problems and issues of different kinds. While some of the examples above are particularly relevant for the ability to cope with academic challenges, others are about social interaction.

Although there are methodological problems associated with evaluating the impact of philosophical discussions, there is a substantial body of empirical research which suggests positive outcomes (Fair, Haas, Gardosik, Johnson, Prince & Leipnik, 2015a, 2015b; Gorard, Siddiqui & See, 2017; Millett & Tapper, 2012; Topping & Trickey, 2007a, 2007b).

Professional reasoning

To be able to practice philosophical discussions with children or young people, the professional must be familiar with actual topics. The professional must foresee what directions the discussion might take and what conclusions might be reached (Chesters & Hinton, 2017). Such capacity is particularly urgent when practising the approach proposed by Matthews, where there is no manual to lean on and the professional himself/herself must come up with the questions that motivate for further exploring.

Repeating and expanding one's philosophical knowledge can be laborious. This effort may, however, yield a double pay-out. In addition to a better understanding of the child or young person and an ability to promote development, philosophical insights enable the professional to understand fundamental aspects in theories and research, and thereby avoid shallowness and vagueness in his/her professional reasoning.

This latter claim can be substantiated by returning to some examples above and connecting them to professional reasoning. The example of the penguins dealt with categorical versus dimensional classification. Insight in these two approaches of classification is of utmost importance for those who work with vulnerable children and their families. Earlier researchers in most fields solely applied the categorical approach to classifying. This is based on the Aristotelian theory of meaning where a concept definition is a list of necessary and sufficient characteristics (Aristotle, 1963). To be assigned to a category, a unit needs to have all the characteristics listed in the definition. To lack one implies exclusion. A unit is either included or excluded from a category. To belong to a category to some extent is not possible. In recent years, dimensional classification is used as an alternative, or complementary, approach. This approach is based on Wittgenstein's (1953) theory of meaning. According to Wittgenstein, the tool for categorising is not a list of necessary and sufficient characteristics, but the conception of a prototypical category member. In assessing units for classification these are compared to the prototype. When this approach is applied in a professional field, lists holding a large number of traits are worked out. To be assigned to a category, a unit only needs to have some of the

characteristics listed. Knowing this is a prerequisite for a realistic understanding of psychiatric diagnoses, and thereby the dimensionality of mental disorders. Several mental problems are not all-or-none phenomena, but something most people to some extent suffer from (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The example with Pluto was about the problem of universals. Insight into this is necessary to fully understand professional debates about classifications. There are several such debates ongoing. One is on psychiatric diagnoses. Mental disorders are classified in two different catalogues, International Classification of Diseases (ICD) (World Health Organization, 2018) and Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), both designed with the ambition to provide a complete overview of the disorders that exist. The categories described in the two catalogues, however, are not identical. Consequently, both catalogues cannot be a correct account of a natural order. The foregoing is an understatement. The professional should be aware how his/her reasoning might be biased by professional classifications (Bertolino, 2015).

Insight into the problem of universals also helps the professional to realise how children's and parent's perception and reasoning may be influenced in some special way by the concept structure in a language variant. There is an analogy between the problem of universals and the phenomenological approach in social pedagogy.

The example with the puppy Hero was about motive explanations. This kind of explanation is rooted in the ideas of Kierkegaard (2015) and Sartre (2007) and is a building block in both humanistic psychology (Glasser, 1999; Maslow, 1968) and in empowerment theory (Freire, 2003; Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011). Professionals who apply these theories believe that the client's self-perception very often is self-fulfilling. Therefore, an important professional task is to present motive explanations and an existentialist view on human life in a stringent manner.

The example relating to giraffes' long necks was about functional explanations. This kind of explanation is a central element in attachment theory, which is a

theory of relevance to residential care (Graham, 2006). To fully understand attachment theory, one must know that the theory is a synthesis of object relations theory and ethology, the branch of biology concerned with the adaptive, or survival, value of behaviour.

Moreover, one must know that ethology provides attachment theory with a special kind of explanation. According to Bowlby (1989), the child's inclination to seek towards caregivers is a result of the genetic selection that has taken place during the history of evolution. Imprinting and critical period are some of the ethological concepts in attachment theory.

Conclusion

As we have seen, philosophy is not just a weird interest for some scholars in an ivory tower, not a third party one can choose to invite in. Philosophy is present in professional reasoning and in the everyday lives of ordinary people, also the lives of children. By acquiring philosophical knowledge, the child and youth care worker is able to practise an exciting approach that may support children and young people in a decisive way. Moreover, philosophical insights enable the professional to trace, clarify and evaluate presupposition underlying professional reasoning, and thereby contribute to a greater degree of intellectual cohesion in the field.

Several scholars have continued the work of Lipman and Matthews. In addition to the books of the two pioneers, there is an extensive body of professional literature discussing methodological issues and offering useful advice and examples (such as Cam, 2006; Gregory, Haynes & Murriss, 2017; Kaye & Thomson, 2007; Lone, 2012; Wartenberg, 2009; White, 2001, 2005; Worley, 2015). Hopefully, some of these texts will inspire professionals within the field of residential child care in years to come.

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About the author

Terje Halvorsen PhD is a professor at Nord University in Norway. Here he teaches students who qualify for child welfare work. His research interests are child welfare, residential care, foster care, social pedagogy and developmental psychology. Before he became an academic scholar, Halvorsen worked for 12 years at a residential care home.