

I like Chocolate Ice Cream: A Lesson in Thinking Civics

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“How does one *become* a philosopher?” asked a student out-of-the-blue, when I was a 22-year-old first-year teacher.

To this day, I vividly remember that student’s name. I also remember the sinking realization that I was completely unprepared for the question. I had no answer. I finally mumbled something like, “People who write a lot ... and having ideas, and ... well you get the idea.” The student, Jeff, was kind enough to let me off the hook, no doubt assuming I had no more of an answer to this question than he or anyone else in the room. Even though this experience occurred in a secondary social studies class, the lessons learned can apply to all grade levels and most especially the elementary.

Through such experiences in my first year of teaching, I discovered the importance of answering questions in the form of a question. Reflecting on this experience, I remember that Jeff demonstrated a confidence that evidently came from prior experience. I suspect that early in his life, Jeff was encouraged to think out loud and to articulate his thoughts and questions. Parents and, in school communities, elementary teachers hold great authority over promoting or diminishing opportunities that enhance students’ thinking and inquiry.

In retrospect, I realize that Jeff confronted me with one of the greatest questions I have heard in an educational setting, and it stunned me. Worse, I

didn’t realize that I should have used his question to begin to create a community of inquiry in my classroom. Gaining the most from the opportunity of a child’s question(s), demands that teachers believe in a positive community of inquiry, and engage in its practice in daily life, most certainly in the school and classroom. I had heard this in my schooling, but I had no personal experiences or ideas on how to do this in a classroom. Like most beginning teachers, I was thinking of surviving and that included orderly and quiet classes.

When I heard Jeff’s question, I immediately thought to myself, my goodness, what else does this student want to know? Doesn’t he know that, as his teacher, I will tell him all he needs to know about politics and government? And why is he thinking in a method of inquiry rather than absorbing necessary knowledge? But after a period of reflection, more profound questions entered my mind, such as what does *he* know?

Simply stated, children can and do have amazing thinking powers. Adults often say that children do not think normally, but what is true is that children think *differently* from adults. Listening to young children, one often hears them asking a question aloud and proceeding to answer the question as they try to

solve the puzzle themselves. Pritchard suggests that through the process of “thinking about thinking” (philosophy) children can make sense of their educational experiences as a whole, and make important contributions to another area of concern that cuts across the curriculum, critical thinking.¹

Teachers should realize that if a child is silent, it might be that he or she is thinking. As a student, parent, educator, or citizen, it is critical to recognize that children not only think abstractly and philosophically, but that they do it long before Piaget’s so-called “formal stage.”² According to Piaget and his theory of cognitive development, it is suggested that prior to age 11 or so children are not capable of philosophical thinking.³ However, teachers and parents who actively listen to youth experience different results.

Many scholars in this field of education now believe children initially think philosophically when they begin to ask “why?”⁴ Drawing from personal experience with my own three children, that moment seemed to be when they came out of the womb! Of course, as Piaget suggests, mental development occurs at different stages and in different sequences depending on experiences and opportunities. But, one’s development as a vocal and independent thinker is influenced in a unique way when exposed to supportive nurturing, and to oppor-

tunities to express thoughts freely. It is through your own eyes, that you come to view interrelated systems and make connections to the values that you perceive important.

West Virginia has recently implemented an initiative called Global 21. The goal of this initiative includes defining and distributing comprehensive knowledge of twenty-first-century content and pedagogy to create classrooms that will prepare students to be successful citizens. Additionally, this initiative has a learning model to assure that students learn the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the challenging global market. The 21st Century model codifies knowledge into three areas: Information and Communication Skills; Thinking and Problem-solving Skills; and Personal and Workplace Productivity Skills. Therefore, “21st century learning challenges students to excel in core classes as well as learn real-world skills such as working in teams, problem solving and critical thinking.”⁵

In order to address these policy challenges, elementary teachers need to make a concentrated effort to support our young philosophers: we need to listen carefully to our youth and ask them to tell us what they are thinking (a technique used by Piaget). A major challenge in teaching young children is that young learners lack the experiences and knowledge necessary to understand and interpret new information.⁶ Adults are often surprised by what they hear from youth, and either ignore or cut off the dialogue before it begins because the incidents seem to happen at unexpected or inconvenient times.

A personal example from my own experience contributes to the title of this essay. My oldest daughter Jennifer (then 4 years old) was listening to a conversation I was having with my seven-year-old son Robert on the principles of democracy. After a few minutes of discussion with Robert, comparing and contrasting different types of governments and their theories, Jennifer suddenly announced that she

liked *democrattchi*, mispronouncing the word because her front teeth were missing. Sensing Robert was losing interest, I engaged Jennifer: “What do you know about democracy?” I asked. “*I don know, I don know*” she replied.

I was looking for an angle to explain a couple of simple political concepts so I asked: “How do you know you like democracy, Jennifer?” She startled both Robert and me when she blurted out passionately, “I like *democrattchi*, ‘cause I like ice cream, and ‘cause of *democrattchi*, I can choose chocolate!” Ah, civics 101! The meaning of her announcement about democracy resonates with me to this day. Jennifer viewed personal choice making as the definition of democracy. Obviously, she later learned that democracy is quite a bit more complex, but the freedom of making personal choices remains a foundational principle for American democracy.

The connections Jennifer had made inspired me to think more deeply about how children develop their amazing abilities to think reasonably, even at such a young age. Jennifer had connected the *word and the world* (her world). Burstein and Hutton point out that when young people are presented with multiple perspectives and viewpoints, they are taught to question, analyze, and problem solve, ultimately developing critical-thinking skills.⁷

Jennifer’s conclusion preceded her formal schooling. This supports the belief of some scholars that philosophy of thought should begin in earnest upon receiving those first few questions or inquiries. Dewey frequently discussed his belief that the classroom should bring the “real” world into the school and provide opportunities for engagement in thinking and problem solving.⁸ Such an idea is supported by the model of twenty-first-century education with its focus on critical thinking and problem solving now being advocated for the curriculum in many states.

Many adults do not take children seriously and push their simple inqui-

ries aside for another day. Even so, why should we be so anxious to begin encouraging this ‘thinking’ so early in life? Critics would say children are sometimes not ready to think deeply or have sobering and penetrating thoughts. The real answer to this question lies in the reality that life’s burdens do not wait for the mature learner to “arrive.” Deaths of loved ones can strike at any time: so it may be natural for a child to ask, “What is death?” For the teacher, and especially beginning teachers, it is imperative to be prepared to reply to serious questions from students, viewing such opportunities to “care” and “support” as a great privilege. Philosophy encourages the intellectual resourcefulness and flexibility that can enable children and teachers alike to cope with the disconnectedness of a society that seems to have gone deaf to the needs of its own people.

Nell Noddings points out that “while we (educators) are primarily in the role of a care-giver, it is also vital to *model* caring.”⁹ As was the case with my former student Jeff, most youth look to adults for guidance. Linking the classroom to the real world, as Dewey advocated, requires educators to establish an environment that provides an opportunity for true dialogue between teacher and student.¹⁰

The potential for the development of children’s philosophy depends on the wisdom of their *elders*, who have the power to make educational policy. In the beginning it is the parent(s) or guardian who guide and direct this process, but when formal schooling begins, various educational forces determine what is taught, when it is taught, to whom it is taught, as well as who it is that will teach.¹¹ Those who make decisions will want to know *why* we should engage young children in “*doing philosophy*.” Teachers who adopt a philosophy of listening to youth and providing them with the classroom climate that enables inquiry have the children’s welfare as their immediate concern. This may at times be in conflict with school or state administrative policies. Teachers need

to find ways to practice their philosophy in congruence with school policies to make significant differences in the lives of their students.

The real civics lesson received from Jennifer's reasoning connected to chocolate ice cream was that she valued the *freedom of choice*, one of the very basic tenets of our democracy. The very existence of our country is due to similar ideals that Thomas Jefferson penned over 200 years ago about rights, liberties, freedoms, individuality, and hope for posterity. The issue of protecting such civic values and ideals is a central motivation for taking the time to create a process for children to do civics by doing philosophy (thinking about thinking and reasoning).

Much of our nation's concern about our well being is focused on external threats, specifically terrorism and extremism. Some people reason that the greater threat may lie from within our own country. Sharp and Reed believe that getting a new generation to think for themselves vouchsafes democratic ideals and "thinking for oneself counters autocratic and totalitarian tendencies."¹²

To facilitate philosophy as an educational pedagogy, we as educators must become model "Teachers and Scholars" and allocate the necessary time to artfully and truthfully respond to our students, including their questions and thinking. Perkins attests that thinking must be visible. Teachers and educators who do not demand instant answers and visibly display their own uncertainties to questions by pondering, taking the time for the "what ifs?", convey respect for the processes of thought and encourage students to identify, ponder, and analyze different issues and perspectives.¹³

Freire takes teachers' responsibilities one-step deeper when he speaks of teachers as "cultural workers."¹⁴ Richhart and Perkins also support this perspective, saying teachers and schools should strive to create a "culture of thinking," because the culture of the classroom sets the tone for thinking and learning, ultimately shaping what

is actually learned.¹⁵ In every way that teachers engage or neglect to engage students, educators are teaching values about what it means to live in this world and what it means to relate to other human beings. Freire goes on to say that teachers must consistently reflect on their practices, to become more socially conscious about what they believe.¹⁶ Educators need to continue to re-think and re-evaluate long-standing beliefs and practices, not only for their students, but also themselves. It is one thing to speak and write about democratic relations between teachers and students, it is another to deny or rebuff students because they ask difficult and demanding questions.

America's elementary teachers have a responsibility to give our children a legacy that will enrich their lives, including the ability to *think about thinking*. According to Matthew Lipman:

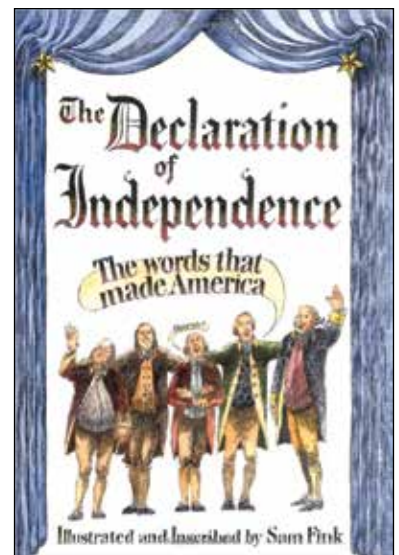
The doing of philosophy is something children might find quite agreeable, if it meant conversing about philosophical topics in ordinary language disciplined by logical constraints. And if children could not readily be introduced to an already existing community of inquirers, what would be wrong with converting the existing classroom into an ongoing community of inquiry? This is applied philosophy in the double sense that it is applied recursively to the discipline to be taught as much as to problems in the world at large.⁷

In curricula that encourages philosophy as having an integral role in educational programs, students get the opportunity to wonder and speculate, in a natural state surrounded by questions. Salmon notes that when thinking becomes a part of a young child's routine, the child becomes more open and responsive to situations that require thinking critically, ultimately developing a more positive attitude towards

thinking and learning.¹⁸ Teachers and educators should foster such thinking by creating learning environments that stimulate children's curiosity. How much more exciting and meaningful are such efforts for both teachers and students than continually drilling and practicing rote memorization of material.

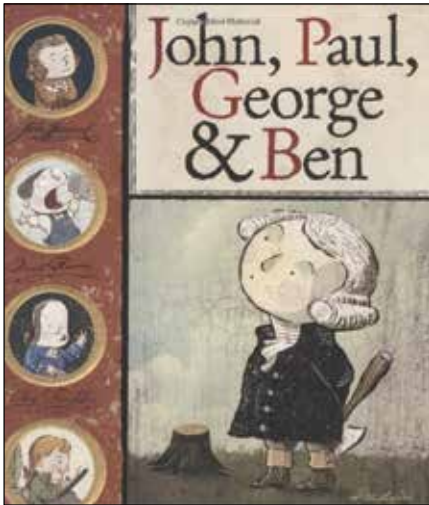
Guiding Young Thinkers to Explore Democratic Ideals as Citizens

Students at the earliest ages need to be provided with the opportunity to think, question, and reflect. There are many useful resources for early elementary teachers to help students think democratically and develop a philosophic method of thinking.



The Declaration of Independence, illustrated and inscribed by Sam Fink, is a large illustrated production of the text of the "Declaration of Independence." The text and illustrations help students develop an understanding of the language that shaped American democracy and give students mental images of events. These images include small men yelling, "This is becoming unbearable..." while a large figure of a king holds a book titled "New Laws." The text opposite this image is from the Declaration of Independence: "And accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable."¹⁹ While the

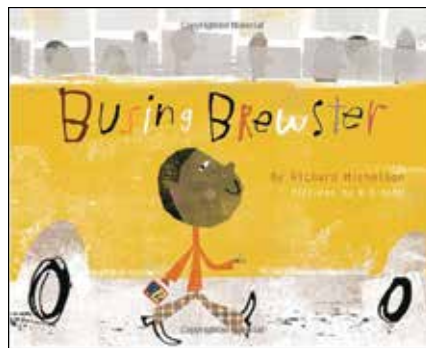
text might appear to be linguistically difficult for young children, the book can be easily read to students and the vocabulary explained. The images throughout the book along with the text provide teachers with a concrete history lesson that allows them to discuss both the development of America as an idea (philosophy) and reality (history).



On a lighter note *John, Paul, George, and Ben* by Lane Smith provides brief biographical sketches of some of the major figures of the construction of American democracy. Each of the men in consideration is pictured as a child, developing the traits, ideas, and philosophy that would help him when he became an adult. Not all adults in these vignettes valued the traits in all the children. This book could be used to ask teachers and students to consider character development and recognize that students who have distinctive traits have value and important roles to fill. This book, though a bit juvenile in parts, provides a humorous and enjoyable

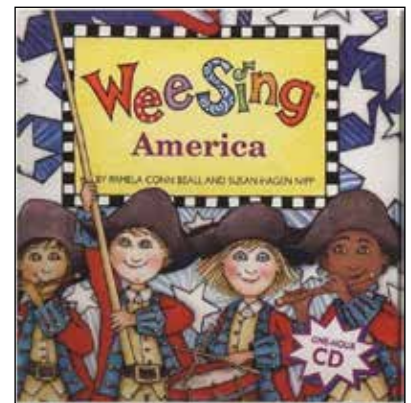
way to develop historical thinking in very young students. In addition, it brings to life some of the underlying philosophical issues that arose during the Revolutionary War.

Busing Brewster, written by Richard Michelson, is the narrative of a first grade student preparing to attend Central School during the 1970s. While the start of a new school year should be an exciting moment for Brewster, it becomes very stressful, as he experiences the process of desegregation. Brewster's education is shaped by desegregation and a sympathetic librarian who becomes his friend. This story addresses racism, desegregation, and the power of an engaged and caring teacher. Reading this book allows teachers to reflect on the importance of noticing and caring for classmates who are new or different. Teachers and students can take this thoughtful book and apply the lessons of desegregation in American history to current social problems such as bullying and isolation.



To continue to teach young children how to think and discuss democratic ideals, *Wee Sing America*, by Pamela Conn Beall and Susan Hagen Nipp, in-

tersperses music of traditional American themes and famous speeches, in the form of quotes from John F. Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, and the Preamble to the Constitution. The CD provided has many patriotic songs, but the benefits of using a CD in a classroom with young children is that it can be played over and over, allowing students to commit to memory the words and the songs. Children love music and the singing is a powerful tool to help them convert ideals to memory. It is important that teachers use the quotes as a way to discuss important themes of democracy with students.



Beyond books and music, play may be the most important method by which students can learn about democracy. Play must be overseen by the teacher and teaching moments must be carefully observed. The freedom of students should be actively protected except where it infringes on the rights of another child. As in most early childhood education, the engagement of the teacher with the students is critical to the development of philosophical and democratically minded play.

Resources for Stimulating Democratic Thought

- S. Fink, *The Declaration of Independence: The Words That Made America*. New York: Scholastic, 2002.
- R. Michelson, *Busing Brewster*. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010.
- L. Smith, *John, Paul, George, and Ben*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2006.
- P.C. Beall and S.H. Nipp, *Wee Sing America*. Audio CD. New York: Price Stern Sloan (Penguin), 2005.

Teachers could construct a scenario of decision-making about the schedule for the day and allow the students to decide the order in which they engage in their activities. Students could vote on books for reading aloud time, and follow the wishes of the majority. Teachers could allow students the opportunity to explain their choices and desires and discuss the consequences of each decision. All of these activities have democratic meaning but these ideals will have to be reinforced by the teacher through continuing discussion and modeling. The students should be told that they are engaging in democratic thinking and practice. As with Jennifer, her observation about chocolate ice cream came when she heard a discussion about democracy. It wasn't constructed from nothing. She was listening to her father and brother, gave thought to what she heard regarding democratic ideals, and joined in the discussion. Most importantly she wanted her thoughts (voice) to be heard. 🗣️

Notes

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2. S. Wilks, *Critical and Creative Thinking: Strategies for Classroom Inquiry* (Armadale, Australia: Eleanor Curtain Publishing, 1995); G. Matthews, *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).
3. J. Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World* (New York: Routledge and Kegan, 1964).
4. Wilks, *Critical and Creative Thinking*, 2.
5. West Virginia Department of Education, Monthly Communication Update: March, 2009. Retrieved on, January 2, 2010, from <http://wvde.state.wv.us/teach21/mpir.html>.
6. M.K. Barnes, E.C. Johnson, and L. Neff, "Learning Through Process Drama in the First Grade." *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 22, no. 4 (March-April 2010), 19-24.
7. J.H. Burstein and L. Hutton, "Planning and Teaching with Multiple Perspectives," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 18, no. 1 (September-October 2005), 15-17.
8. J. Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1938).
9. N. Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 249.
10. R. Reed and T. Johnson, *Philosophical Documents in Education* (New York: Longman, 2000), 22.
11. J. Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004).
12. A. Sharp and R. Reed, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*:

Studies in Philosophy for Children (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

13. D.M. Perkins, *Making Thinking Visible*. Unpublished Manuscript, 2003. Retrieved from www.pz.harvard.edu/vt/VisibleThinking_html_files/06_AdditionalResources/06a_AdditionalResources.html.
14. P. Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998).
15. R. Richhart and D. Perkins, "Making Thinking Visible," *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 5 (2008), 58.
16. A. Darder, *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2002).
17. M. Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 143.

18. A.K. Salmon, "Tools to Enhance Young Children's Thinking," *Young Children* 65, no. 5 (2010), 26-31.
19. S. Fink, *The Declaration of Independence: The Words That Made America* (New York: Scholastic, 2002), 35.

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