

Book Reviews

Review of ‘Children as Philosophers: Learning Through Enquiry and Dialogue in the Primary Classroom’

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Haynes, J. (2002). *Children as Philosophers: Learning Through Enquiry and Dialogue in the Primary Classroom*. London: RoutledgeFalmer. ISBN 0- 750-70946-4. pp. 155

The book addresses teachers and their pedagogical practices in schools that can effectively help young children to think freely, critically, and grow into reasonable adults. It suggests teaching to build upon children’s natural ability to think, question, enquire, share, and to make sense of the world and their learning. In this book, teaching is considered as the process of enhancing their active intelligence, encouraging engagement, authenticity, and drive in knowing; widening the spectrum of knowing and its ways, which leads to wisdom and development of a sense of responsibility.

This approach to teaching is significant and special because we find out how authority plays a role in both traditional education systems (overtly) and in progressive education (covertly), and fails to empower students. The need for this transformative pedagogy, in a sense, calls for openly deconstructing the educational process. Even if the book is authored by an American, with instances, examples and settings from the USA; the concern is universal, not solely contextual.

For such transformation to occur various questions need to be dealt with; such as, what can be done in classrooms, how to enable teachers, what characterizes such processes, what teachers are supposed to focus on, the challenges and problems with such teaching, can these be a regular part of all curricula, can every teacher take this up, how these can lead to making students reasonable

and responsible, and so on. All these issues are discussed quite realistically in this book to give teachers a better understanding.

The first part of the book opens up with a flavour of philosophical enquiry. Its meaning and significance gets expositied through the citing of children’s thinking and discussions, occurring within the classroom. We find that teaching anything provides scope for lot of significant learning and in this part, the ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of such enquiry begins to make sense to a new reader. There is a definite emphasis on children’s participation in everything related to them, including their learning. This is understood in the context of child rights, the conception of childhood, and the issues related to the realities of children the world over. Therefore, the freedom to participate can come to children depending upon the nature of the adult-child relationship and this calls for certain qualities in a teacher.

The second part of the book is to help a teacher think about thinking (metacognize) more clearly. There is good level of discussion, with examples, that characterize philosophical enquiry, critical thinking and how the teaching of virtues/values is based on teaching thinking. A few different approaches to teaching thinking, to create a community of enquiry, are also discussed; along with how it makes society more democratic. It is apparent that philosophizing is considered to be more transformative than merely acquiring knowledge of any discipline. There are sufficient examples on the kinds of things that can be picked up to initiate such discussions; the possible paths that cognitive activity can take, and the kinds of



changes that are observed in students. Yet the reality of teachers' mind-sets, given the diverse demands made upon their role, the politicization of education, the regulatory controls over a teacher's activities, the teachers' own views and positions; all make it quite complex for a teacher to carry out such a venture.

One observation that can be highlighted is that teaching thinking or philosophical enquiry requires an oral culture, a communal dialogue where actively-thinking people openly participate. The role of teacher is thus central and critical to this kind of educational process and not replaceable by a technological access to knowledge. Perhaps we can assert that philosophizing requires the real presence of participants and dialogue. When we don't exert power as adults, with the accumulated knowledge of history and the system of education, can we succeed in empowering children?

A variety of approaches and aspects of teaching, through enquiry and dialogue, are discussed in part three. Whether if, how far, and what can promote philosophizing, and even how we can monitor progress in such abilities, is illustrated in chapters 6 and 12. The processes are not surface-level, nor is the development and progress easily assessable. Nevertheless, children's skills, metacognition, ability to deal with complexities, courage in the face of confusions and ambiguities, willingness to explore and relate to one's own experiences, keen listening to opposite views and ability to observe their own patterns and preferences; all improve.

The last part of the book further examines the situation and role of teachers in such philosophical enquiries, the ways in which such enquiry can be integrated, and whether there should be scheduled slots for these enquiries. The last chapter stands to justify and support the need to engage in such practical activity, by highlighting its benefits to all children, teachers, and society at large. Students' clarity, confidence, communication ability, active listening, accommodation of differences, courage

to engage with complexities, open-minded participation, and meta-cognition all improve. Through free, open and shared enquiries, they learn to trust and respect each other; they become more reasonable and self-regulated. These changes in students can make people, and societies, more democratic and harmonious. These are lofty and often hard to achieve aims of education, which get lost in the countless performance ratings of students, teachers and schools.

There is, however, no empirical study to support these claims. The examples and classrooms scenarios may sufficiently convince those already inclined towards such non-linear, anti-delivery mode of teaching, and looking for freedom from within the syllabus. This may not be sufficient or efficient in persuading stereotypical and successful teachers. Teachers being controlled, supervised, prescribed and evaluated on a set of criteria are unlikely to venture into such expansive and unknown domains and ways. Although the transformative effects may be valuable, the demands are also very high. One wonders whether teachers, schools, and education platforms are prepared for this. The venture is suggested for primary classrooms and two things go in its support; that as fresh entrants into schools, children are likely to take to it well, and that primary classroom processes may be comparatively less structured than higher ones and therefore more amenable to this approach.

The author has tried to plead the case for such a pedagogy on grounds of children's rights, democratic citizenship, and curricular modules like 'life skills and/or thinking skills', with fair cautions. Philosophical enquiry in all subject areas has implications for the way we run schools, the curricula within classrooms and outside and the way in which we educate our teachers, in service and before service. It also affects the way we assess students' development. The school systems are so structured and closely monitored, that only rarely can teachers dare venture into such transformative pedagogy. Therefore, the transformative pedagogy,

even if initiated individually by teachers, may not be sustainable without other transformations. Can we look forward to these other changes in view of the political and neo-liberal forces/pressures on all educational fronts?