

Having taught for many years, I had for a long time been aware that something was missing from the content of the education the children were receiving. However, it was difficult to perceive the exact nature of that elusive missing element. Slowly I came to realise that in the English school system it was taken for granted that children would learn to think and reason effectively, and that this improvement in thinking skill would occur naturally as a result of the childrens' exposure to the curriculum content they were being served. This false assumption was at the centre of my concern, for the development of childrens' thinking and reasoning was not the focus of any subject the children were being asked to study.

Here then was my missing element, for there was much evidence in the behaviour of young people to indicate that they were either incapable of reasoning effectively, or, if they could reason well, that they were unable to use this skill as an active guide to reasonable behaviour. Many examples abound to illustrate this fact, but one will suffice in this instance. It is a well documented fact that pregnant women who smoke seriously put at risk the health of their unborn child. Doctors, surgeries and maternity clinics unambiguously advertise this fact, and yet some women continue to smoke during pregnancy. Here is *prima facie* evidence of the implementation of behaviour based on deficient reasoning, or upon the rejection of the results of efficient reasoning. Either way, the problem with children is that they are still capable of wondering about the world they live in, and if presented with such models of unreasonable behaviour are likely to arrive at some sort of conclusion that will eventually have a part to play in the future behaviour of the children themselves. The danger is, of course, that they will arrive at the wrong conclusions, and continue to perpetrate, from one generation to the next, the unfortunate consequences of poor thinking. It is important that the mould is broken, but this cannot be effectively achieved by complacently assuming that children today are automatically learning to become better thinkers. Some carefully structured programme of intervention is required to enable teachers to guide their pupils to behave rationally and reasonably, and the best way of achieving such a goal would be to encourage the children to learn to think for themselves. Implicit in such an achievement would be an ability to reason well, and the final step to secure independence would be the ability of the pupils to govern their behaviour on the results of their thinking.

It is difficult to imagine pupils brought up to espouse these ideals manifesting some of the self-destructive and antisocial behaviour that is exhibited by too many of today's young people, and after all, the criminals, drug addicts, alcoholics, etc. have all passed through our education system, apparently unable to accept the basic modicums of conformity and restraint that are necessary to ensure that the society in which we all live is fit for all to live in.

How, then, if my hypothesis for change is acceptable, can children be taught to think? This problem has been addressed by an eminent American philosopher, Professor Matthew Lipman, who has for the past twenty years been devising a programme designed to do exactly that, i.e. to teach children to think more effectively. He has written a most comprehensive and original curriculum package entitled, 'Philosophy for Children,' and this came to my attention in the early 1980's. It is designed to be the subject of three lessons each week for children from the age of eight onwards, and it is not only the content that encapsulates the necessary principles for children to acquire the ability to think and reason well, but its very implementation serves as the necessary model for the mental behaviour that is to be encouraged. What Matthew Lipman wrote was a series of novellas, adventures of a group of children who are themselves embarked upon a journey of discovery. The content of the novellas themselves serves as the paradigm for the intellectual adventure that pupils exposed to the programme will themselves undertake.

I have been working with a group of young children for two years now, and three times each week they meet together to consider some of the fundamental issues that Matthew Lipman's programme addresses. But before I relate some of the effects that the programme seems to be having upon the abilities of these children to think more effectively, I must first put the content of this programme into some kind of perspective. The introduction of any new subject to children, or adults for that matter, is necessarily structured to take into consideration the current knowledge and intellectual maturity of the students. Thus no-one would seriously advocate the introduction of A-level mathematics to pupils who had not yet mastered the basics of O-level mathematics. Lipman has structured his course to take into consideration the basic requirements necessary for good thinking to take place, and thus his first two modules are concerned with the acquisition of formal and informal logic, and it is only after these three components have been subsumed, that pupils are deemed to have their basic thinking skills refined to a point from which consideration of more complex issues can be reasonably considered.

As each of the first three modules requires about eighteen months' study, it can be seen that the programme is quite comprehensive in its scope, but the fundamental elements of good thinking are not themselves trivial. Among the many concepts that the children are invited to consider in the first two modules are those of ambiguity, relationships, similes, metaphors, analogies, rules and reasons, mystery and myth. If this seems like a prosaic academic diet, then the following conversation will perhaps put the children's response to the course into some sort of perspective.

The children had been introduced to the nature of ambiguity and had revelled in the pleasure of being able to play around with words and sentences, including correcting me when I was careless in my own use of language. A few weeks later, one of the pupils shared with the rest of the group an article he had read in a newspaper, which stated that King George the Fourth had died from injuries sustained when he fell off the lavatory. Of course the rest of the children immediately burst into laughter when they heard this, but when they had regained their composure I asked them who King George the Fourth was. One child immediately informed everybody that he was the fourth king of England called George, and straight away a girl said that that statement was ambiguous. Several pupils agreed with her and very quickly every child had perceived the nature of the ambiguity. They then enjoyed themselves for a few minutes determining unambiguous ways of stating a correct answer to my question.

This is not an isolated example of the pupils' response to the content of this programme, for it illustrates well not only the children's ability to understand and retain the ideas they are introduced to, but also shows the facility they have to utilize those ideas to enhance their own understanding of new and different situations. The children were nine years old at the time this interchange occurred, and had been engaged with the course for about six months.

As the programme progressed, the children had to try to come to terms with many ideas that many people perhaps think about only occasionally. Thus they discussed the nature of prejudice, justice, freedom, truth, friendship, rules, trust, respect ... the list is comprehensively long. In the process, the children formed their own community of enquiry, learning to respect each other's point of view, gaining from the insights offered by other pupils in the group, for of course each of the children is able to contribute their own experiences to the discussions, thus enriching every conversation with a wealth of thoughts and opinions. The children learned to be comfortable with criticism, and readily seek to challenge unsubstantiated statements or incautiously uttered remarks. Even I am not immune from their willingness to seek clarity and meaning, and more than once have been upbraided for making comments such as, "Are you all ready to continue?". Statements of this kind are now met with gently disapproving corrections of the kind, "Excuse me, Sir, but how can any one of us possibly know if everybody is ready to continue, for no-one can know the state of another person's mind?".

And so the course progresses and the children are becoming more and more capable in their ability to think. They rarely offer comments without giving reasons for the opinions they are stating, and they are becoming more and more adept at seeking meaning and understanding. A recent one-hour lesson was spent discussing the statement, "All squares are rectangles", and during the course of their examination of the truth of the statement, they spent twenty minutes arguing over the meaning of the word, "same", before concluding that any decision had to be dependent upon the definition of the word, "rectangle". And then the final comment of one pupil was, "Can we carry on with this tomorrow, Sir?".

The pupils are now ten, and have finished two years of the course. I am excited by their progress and by the fact that they have only just begun to learn the rudiments of good thinking practice. The room in which we meet is across the playground from the main school building, and I am constantly amazed to see them, two years on, running to get to the lessons. As their thinking skills develop, their challenge to currently held thoughts and opinions becomes more and more sophisticated. They are not going to be easy children to teach in future, for an active and curious mind will seek to understand more completely the nature of the society in which that person lives. They will reject cant and hypocrisy, for they are beginning to develop a passion for reason and truth, for meaning and understanding, for thinking and reflecting upon the experiences that affect them during the course of their lives. Their humour and creativity seems enhanced by their exposure to this course, and as they mature they become more and more enjoyable to work with (even if they do continue to respond to my imprecision of expression with devastating ease!).

The future for these children should be bright, for they are beginning to enjoy the benefits of an educated mind - educated not with facts alone, but with an ability to utilize the considerable powers of thought that they have at their disposal.

At the end of one week a little while ago, the group had been discussing the concept of freedom. It was nearly the end of the lesson, and we only had time for ten minutes' discussion on this theme, so were unable to explore the idea very much. At the beginning of our next lesson four days later, Simon came rushing in and couldn't wait for the lesson to begin. "Sir, Sir," he panted, "just because we live in a free society, it doesn't mean that we are free!" (not a question, this, but a statement carrying much conviction - and this from a ten year old). I was somewhat unprepared for such a powerful opening comment, and rather inanely responded with, "Where did you think of that?" "In the bath," he replied. Now what does that remind me of, I wonder?