

Simple gifts

Julie Winyard visits **Professor Matthew Lipman**, founder of the Philosophy for Children movement. The interview is introduced and concluded by **Robert Fisher**



I first came across the work of Mat Lipman more than twenty years ago and, like many teachers, was inspired by his vision of Philosophy for Children (P4C). What, I wondered, would be the impact of this radical idea on the learning and achievement of children in the UK? I started by trying to use Lipman's methods and materials with my own primary class. What surprised me was the quality of the questioning and dialogue prompted by Mat's simple but philosophically-charged stories. It transformed my ideas about what children could do, think and become through the practice of philosophical discussion.

Later, I took part in one of the annual training programmes at Mendham, run by Mat Lipman and Ann Sharp – not far from their Institute for Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) in Montclair State University, New Jersey. While working with educators from more than a dozen countries, I realized that Mat had inspired a global movement. When I returned to the UK, I continued researching P4C with children of all ages and abilities. I found Lipman's 'Community of Enquiry' (a rigorous classroom dialogue based around questions raised and chosen by pupils) to be a powerful strategy for developing children's thinking across the curriculum.

I helped to found – with Roger Sutcliffe, Karin Murriss and others – SAPERE, the UK organization for P4C (www.sapere.net). We adapted Lipman's approach to make it more accessible for UK teachers. Thus followed my *Stories for Thinking* series and other resources including Karin Murriss's use of picture books, Roger Sutcliffe's and Steve

Williams's use of news stories and Sara Liptai's use of music, art and photographs. These new developments increased the range of materials and methods for creating communities of philosophical enquiry with children.

Mat Lipman remained the inspiration for all this work. So when Julie Winyard, the Headteacher of Benhall St Mary's CofE VCP Suffolk, told me she was going to see Mat as part of her recent visit to the USA, I suggested she interview him and chronicle the event. I hope you enjoy her 'Close Encounter of the Philosophical Kind'.

Robert Fisher

Julie Winyard interviews Matthew Lipman

Julie: So how did a Philosophy professor get hooked on education from Kindergarten through the grades?

Mat: It was after the riots in Colombia. I reckoned that if students began philosophical thinking at eleven or twelve, they would become much more reasonable as students and as adults. Also, I used to teach Sunday School at the Unitarian Universalist Church my first wife and I went to. She thought I ought to do something so I started to teach the Grade 3 children. We played games, made constructions and I told stories.

Julie: Could this have sown the seeds of the philosophy for children novels?

Mat: Well I guess so but I hadn't thought of it in that way before!

Matthew Lipman is eighty, soon to be eighty one, and looks remarkably fit for a man of his years. He greeted me on a cold morning with: 'Can I make you a tea or coffee? Boy your hands are cold!' After we shook hands, he rubbed my right hand between his hands in a most concerned manner – not quite the image I had of such a revered academic. While he boiled the water, I took the opportunity to look round his office.

The IAPC (Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children) is housed in a wooden building painted olive green. The interior reflects the rather quaint exterior view. Mat's office is lined with bookshelves filled with his own books and novels and those of philosophers through the ages! He made hot water for me (I supplied the fruit tea bag!) and coffee for him and then we sat and shared thoughts and ideas about P4C for a good three and a half hours.

He started by telling me about his last trip to the UK. Sadly he is no longer able to travel far. He told me how Robert Fisher had taken him to a conference for teachers and that they had not liked what he had to say. I suggested this could be because he was using a different frame of reference and that the UK teachers had thought he was criticising their

A P4C class in New Jersey, USA



practice rather than challenging them to think in different ways about developing a more focused approach to teaching thinking skills.

The Philosophy for Children programme started thirty years ago and is continuing to grow in terms of the number of countries taking it on board in their schools and the level of commitment from teachers. The irony of this is that in the USA the programme has had little national impact. Having been here for a week's study visit and meeting with principals and teachers, I can understand why. Teachers in the USA still have a great deal of autonomy and it is rare to find a whole-school approach to any initiative. What happens in one fourth-grade class may not happen in any other, let alone through a whole school – a point made very strongly to us by the District Superintendent of the county we visited in Connecticut. Thanks to IAPC and Montclair University, local schools in New Jersey are working on the programme – but even this involvement is not consistent.

I could see from Matt's face and body language that he found this difficult and frustrating. He was so pleased to see the work that my pupils had done and I began the sharing part of our chat by reading him some extracts from our communities of enquiry notably the following extract from a question posed by Robert Fisher based upon an idea in a poem about a magic box by Lauren, age 8:

*Go and open the door,
Maybe outside there's
An island,
The world
Full of History*

*I shall keep my box,
In its own square shape,
I will keep it forever,
And ever.*

Question: Outside you say there's a world full of history and you'll keep your magic box forever. *Is history the same as forever?*

Enquiry into the question

In this enquiry, the format was: think first, share with the person next to you, then raise your hand to add a new idea or challenge/ agree/ add to an idea already given.

Lauren: I don't think it's the same because forever is all your life and history.

Laura: Forever is like your lifetime and history is what you've already done and what other people have done as well.

Sarah: If they were the same it would be weird because it hasn't been forever yet because you haven't grown into an adult yet.

Philip: No they are not because tomorrow is in the forever because you don't know what you are going to do – history and the forever are really different from each other.

Craig: Well it is a bit, because history is in the past and in the past you're alive but you're not meant to stay alive forever.

Chelsea: It isn't because history is in the past and forever is in the future.

Charlotte: Imagine on a timeline ... history is behind you and forever is in front of you. Forever is what's going to happen and history is what has happened.

Sarah: Like we've just said, history is the past and you can't turn back time because that's history.

Craig: You can repeat time because you can use videotape and keep playing it over and over.

Philip: Cameras are the same. You can look at the photo and remember what it was like in the past and you can draw a picture to remind you of where you have been.

JW: Can you get forever onto videotape?

Charlotte: I don't think you can capture forever because there weren't any camcorders when the world started and to get forever you would have to start at the beginning of the world and video till the end of the world!

Tara: Everyone is in the past. When you're a baby you're in the past.

Laura: If you could go back in time ...

Lauren: How could you do that?

Laura: You'd have to use magic or get an inventor.

Sarah: I could go back in time and stop my nan from dying.

Tara: We've just been in the past in Mr McKeon's class and now we are in Mrs Winyard's class. (She was referring to having registration with Tim and then coming to work with me for Literacy).

Charlotte: We've been in the past but we haven't exactly been in the future – we have sort of because when you're in the past you never quite get to the future!

JW: What does everyone else think about this?

Laura: Quite interesting really because you jump ... when you get to the future it is jumping away back into the past.

Philip: But I think you can be in the future. If you put your hand up and you know what you're going to say, that's the future.

Mat found this a fascinating discussion and we talked about Philip's insight regarding being able to be 'in the future!'

Mat: They are really thinking! Children can be original! In the community of enquiry children can be creative and sociable with ideas. It is an environment where they don't just converse like volleying before a tennis game! They start to develop roles within the community of enquiry. Some children will raise questions, others will look for connections – relationships between ideas. They will start to depend more on one another. You will see an interdependence developing.

Julie: I haven't seen this as yet amongst the whole group but there are pairs who are beginning to challenge each other. Even more exciting, they continue the community of enquiry in the back of one of their parents cars. One parent told me it was like listening to much older people debating and 'setting the world to rights!'

Mat: There are set stages in the development of the community of enquiry in the classroom. First you read the story or poem round the group and then you call for questions. These are based on something puzzling or problematic, something mysterious that the child wants to explore. If, of course, they don't see anything problematic you're probably on to a 'dead duck'! However when you get the questions, write them on the board with the child's name beside them. The next step is to ask the child to clarify, explain exactly what their question means so everyone in the group can understand. Philosophy is about meaning. Science is about truth. As they explain their question the teacher can ask, 'Does this question move the enquiry along? How could it be re-phrased?' Then the children can vote for the question they like best or the child who has not offered a question could be asked to choose a question to start the discussion.

Julie: And should I, as the teacher, group the questions in some way for the children?

Mat: No, because then you are intervening in a controlling role and in the community of enquiry. The teacher should be a partner in the discussion."

Julie: What about clarifying what the children have said?

Mat: You need to be very careful here not to put words into the children's mouths.

(Having read through the transcripts of enquiries my class have had I had already spotted how easy it is to do this with an adult's more experienced vocabulary for unpicking meaning. I shared this with Mat and asked him how I could help the children to develop the range of vocabulary they are beginning to need to be successful at communicating meaning in a discussion.)

Mat: It is very interesting that you should ask this because it is an area we are currently researching here. I remember teaching a group where we were discussing war within the community of enquiry and one girl (the children were between nine and ten years old) was looking for a word, in fact agonizing for a word, then she suddenly came out with 'unthinkable' and the relief on her face was amazing! I can imagine her going home and telling her parents this word and the context in which she thought of it. Parents need context to understand important moments in their child's learning and, when the context is such a powerful one, that child will remember that moment for a long time!

Julie: Are there ways to develop the 'thinking vocabulary' of pupils?

Mat: I think ideas banks are good for developing vocabulary. The teacher can keep a glossary and/or make lists of the words that come up within the community of enquiry and these can be added to. Also the teacher can introduce new words to help the children. You could have imaginative or inventive words or emotional words.

(See Lipman 2003 p.137 for clusters of value terms around critical, creative and caring thinking and Fisher 2003 p. 259 for a useful list of words to help children explain meaning.)

Julie: Children seem to pick up the terms 'agree' and 'disagree' within our community of enquiry.

Mat: This is universal! It is a feature of philosophy for children that they learn the vocabulary of discourse and it happens in every country where the programme is introduced.

Julie: Children in my teaching group have also got better at remembering what each other has said.

Mat: This is also a feature of how children develop within the community of enquiry. It amazes me how they are able to keep track of several different ideas at the same time and suddenly come up with a response to an idea that was given much earlier in the discussion. The teacher certainly can't often keep track like this!

Julie: What age children begin to take part in philosophy.

Mat: We have recently been working with kindergarten children from three to five years old. I would never have thought this was possible! They need a different approach because you can't expect very young children to sit down in one place for a long time! In fact they get up walk around the room a few times and then come back to the group with another point they want to make!

Julie: What topics can be introduced with this age group?

Mat: Children are fascinated by names. Names are wonders for them. They have an emotional response to names; they are a type of symbol – a sort of iconography. Finding out who they are and how their name relates to them as a person needs exploration.

New materials

Mat shared with me the new materials, yet to be published, edited by him and Scottish teacher, Chloe Ogden, and developed by teachers from Taiwan, Korea, Ukraine and Iceland. The title of the book is *Thinking Trees and Laughing Cats*. We shared one of the stories he has contributed: *How Jim Got His Name*. I read the story aloud

Has Jim got his name

'There was once a boy named Jim who told everyone that his name was Alexander.

His family called him Jim, his teacher called him Jim and his friends called him Jim, but he insisted that his name was Alexander.

One day the teacher announced a contest. Whoever wrote the best story would win a prize. And what was the prize? It was the name Alexander.

Naturally everyone hurried to tell Jim the wonderful news. But Jim refused to get excited. "I already have the name Alexander," he said, "Why would I want two of them?"

Just the same he entered the contest and he won. So now he calls himself Alexander Alexander, and everyone else calls him Jim Alexander.

Except his parents. They call him Jim Jim.'

(This extract is used with the permission of the author: Copyright 2003)

We both laughed about this story and Mat shared some of the ideas for questions and games to play using this story. For example:

- *Questions we can ask.* We ask questions about the story. We answer each other's questions.

- *Questions our teacher can ask.* Do all children around the world like their names? Do all children have nicknames?
- *Games we can play.* We go around the group and say: 'If I had two first names I would be called ... because ...'
- *We make up a story to show what we mean.* We make a list of reasons for why Jim prefers the name Alexander. We make up and tell a story about how Jim came to prefer the name Alexander.

These are just a few of the ideas included and they illustrate how easily the youngest children could be engaged by this story and how readily they would be inspired to talk about their thinking.

Another very exciting development related to these stories is that, for the first time, they include a progression in philosophical skills: *We Think About Our Own Thinking And Imagination*. The stories are also cross referenced to the State of New Jersey Standards. I found this very interesting and could see that both could readily relate to our Early Learning Goals and beyond into National Curriculum Statements of Attainment. Mat added:

'We must not take anything about young children for granted. They really enjoy a challenge to their thinking! Another idea I have used is to ask: "How many corners does a circle have?" Children are not tied down by conventional ideas. They are free spirits! Jostein Gaarder says much the same in his account of philosophical thinking in Sophie's World: "To children the world and everything in it is new, something that gives rise to astonishment:" (Gaarder 1995, p.16)

'Philosophy for children has to appeal to the adult and child's level at the same time. It has to be legitimately interesting to both so that both are engaged within the community of enquiry'

Mat's most recent research within philosophical thinking is related to 'Caring Thinking' (Lipman 2003, pp. 261-269). He says: 'People say this is not so easy to explain. How can you show caring is related to thinking? You just have to think about what thinking goes into writing a birthday card; how it is composed, what emotions go on inside you and how you think about expressing these in words to communicate the meaning you want to communicate to the other person. This also involves recognition of another person's feelings.'

Mat is also keen to say that P4C is a bridge between adults and children: 'philosophy for children has to appeal to the adult and child's level at the same time. It has to be legitimately interesting to both so that both are engaged within the community of enquiry.' With this in mind he gave me something to try out with my teaching group when I returned to school: 'There is an amazing Shaker poem called *Simple Gifts* which has been set to music by Aaron Copeland. Read the poem with the children and get them to think about what questions, puzzles, mysteries and problems it raises for them.' I accepted Mat's challenge and report on the outcomes at the end of this article.

Simple Gifts

T'is the gift to be simple
 T'is the gift to be free
 T'is the gift to come down where we ought to be
 And when we are in the place just right
 We'll be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained
 To bow and to bend we will not be ashamed
 To turn, turn, t'will be our delight
 Till by turning, turning, we come 'round right.

Robert Fisher's concluding thoughts

Research both in this country and the USA indicates that the impact of P4C on children's thinking and achievement is significant. At Benhall School Julie has been using my *Stories for Thinking* and *Poems for Thinking* as the basis of her work on P4C for the last 18 months with a group of Year 3 and 4 pupils. In this year's non-statutory SAT results the majority of the group achieved well above national expectations and, significantly, 80% of the group were previously under-achieving boys.

The children themselves recognise that P4C has had a powerful effect on their approach to answering comprehension questions – especially as they had done very little guided reading during the term. Julie is planning to introduce P4C across her school and trial Mat Lipman's new book for pre-school with the playgroup as well. It will be fascinating to see how this affects the minds of children in this area where there is considerable rural deprivation and low aspirations.

I am working with the Leiston Pyramid, of which Julie's school is one of ten primary schools, two middle schools and a high school. The latter has recently been awarded 'Leading Edge' status. Their mission is as follows: 'In the Leiston Pyramid of Schools we believe that: "a child who

has gained proficiency in thinking skills is not merely a child who has grown but a child whose very capacity for growth has increased" (*Teaching Children to Think*). We are committed to building our pyramid into the most effective 'thinking pyramid' in Suffolk and to gain national recognition for our work."

I am sure that without such aspirations the Great Pyramid of Giza would still be a heap of stones. Teachers and pupils in this part of Suffolk seek to build something equally memorable based on Mat Lipman's enduring vision of a thinking community through which the learning potential of all can be realised.

Julie Winyard is Headteacher of Benhall St Mary's CofE VCP, Suffolk

Robert Fisher is an educational consultant

References

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Simple gifts

We read the poem Mat Lipman gave us together and then the children read it quietly again to themselves. I then asked the children to think about any questions, problems, mysteries or puzzles the poem posed for them. Two questions they eventually chose to discuss were: *Is this about Heaven and God?* (Craig) and *What does it mean about 'the gift to be free'? What is the 'gift'? Is there any point to this poem?* (Philip). Here are some short extracts from the transcript of discussions over 3 sessions. Mat Lipman read the transcripts and wrote a letter to me about it. (See opposite page).

JW: So we will start with Craig's question: Is this poem about Heaven and God? Does anyone need Craig to explain a bit more what he means. (*Several voices said, 'Yes!'*)

Craig: Where it says, 'We'll be in the valley of love and delight,' I thought that was God because he mostly loves everybody and then when it says; 'To be simple and free' I think these are things that God likes.

Sarah: Well I don't know really if it's delightful in heaven although I hope it is! God is loving so it could be about God and that.

Chelsea: I think I agree with Sarah because if He hadn't of loved us he wouldn't have made us.

JW: How does the poem relate to what you are saying about God?

Chelsea: Because He is loving?

Tara: I disagree with Craig because the valley of love and delight is about a valley where there is love.

Craig: I'd just like to tell everyone that the simple and the freedom and the love are like in God's gifts so that when you open them up they go into you. Because that's how God shows that He loves everybody because He makes everybody free.

In the second session, I read the poem again to the children to remind them about it.

JW: Let's start with some thinking time on what 'the gift' might mean. We'll do a circle round.

Chelsea: It could be all sorts like a dog or something; a present. When it says it's to free well all sorts of things can be free ...

Freddie: It's sometimes a toy.

Timothy: It's just a different word for a present.

Philip: I think that a gift isn't something that will cost a lot of money, it's really something quite small and a present is really something quite big like a big box.

Jasmine: A gift is like a present say if you give a gift to your Mum because it's her birthday or something then you're giving a gift to her and it's a present as well.

Sarah: I think a gift is a puppy.

JW: Do you think a gift is always a puppy?

Sarah: Well I thin it means you love someone if you give him or her a gift.

Charlotte: Philip said a gift is smaller and a present is larger, well I think a present is like if it was your birthday or something and a gift is a bit like a present but it's different somehow and I don't know why and I've got proof that a present isn't always big because Lauren for my birthday gave me this little necklace thing and that wasn't big.

Tara: Free is like being a puppy in a cage wants to go out and be free into a bog space; like we are free because we are out of home.

JW: So why are you free when you are not at home?

Tara: Because you can do more stuff when you're not at home and I'm usually bored at home because everything's the same and there's nothing to do there. I can be free when I'm not in home like when I go up my road and I can do what I like.

Timothy: I disagree with Tara because you're not free all the time because you have to go to school and do what the teacher says or you get a warning.

JW: That's an interesting idea, so how does that stop you being free Timothy?

Timothy: At break you are free but inside you are not allowed to run around like in the classroom.

JW: If you were free what would you do?

Craig: I disagree with Tara because you're not always free, you go to school and then like Timmy says, you're not always free because when you're at school you have to do what the teachers tell you. And then your Mum and Dad say you have to go to school because you want to do what you want to do but your Mum and Dad tell you what to do so you're not free.

In the third session the discussion turns to the concepts of 'love and delight'.

Charlotte: I have got something to add to mine well when I said the valley of love and delight might just be describing your feelings because if you're just feeling happy then you could be stuck in a traffic jam but you might feel happy and it might just be like the valley of love and delight and then you don't mind being stuck in the traffic jam but I can't really find all the words I need to say what I mean!

Timothy: I think this poem is about a dream and I disagree with Charlotte because you wouldn't be happy if you were in a traffic jam because you would want to be in the place where you want to be.

Charlotte: Yes but something might have happened to you and might just be so happy that you might not really care that you are stuck in a traffic jam.

Timothy: Yes but you would care because you would like to be home.



Matthew Lipman responds

Dear Julie

Many, many thanks for sending me the transcripts of your students discussing the Shaker gifts song, 'Simple Gifts.' It's a very good discussion, as well as a learning experience for me, because it reminds me of how, on one level at any rate, Philosophy for Children is supposed to work. We expect, in philosophy, to recognize what is problematic or puzzling and then be able to reconcile or unite the differences of interpretation. The song does this by the way it presents an exciting bouquet of ethical terms that on first reading conjures up moral inquiry in the sense of going beyond the conventional meanings assigned to such terms as *gifts* and *free*. New interpretations are needed in order that an organized understanding of the poem flow from a perception of how the terms can be defined so they are compatible with one another. This is the work of the classroom community of philosophical (or literary or poetical or whatever) inquiry. I use the term 'bouquet' advisedly because it's similar to the work one does in selecting a bunch of flowers and arranging them together to form a bouquet.

I've now re-read the transcripts of the discussions your class has had with regard to 'Simple Gifts.' They're a lively bunch of kids, and nevertheless have a good deal of persistence in trying out their interpretations. They need no encouragement to point out, when they propose an idea, just whom they agree with or disagree with. But they're doubtless puzzled by the evident strangeness of the poem, and they keep exploring the words that seem to be used as ethical concepts one moment and then as descriptive terms the next.

The poem thus works to enhance their ethical consciousness by providing principles by means of which they can guide their thinking. Terms like *simple*, *free*, *love*, *delight* and *right*, thereby get them to see how these terms enable them to engage in principled rather than unprincipled or non-principled thinking. These terms can operate as reasons or as values. The poem thus gives them an ethical vocabulary using abstract but familiar terms, but whose relationships to one another are puzzling and problematical. (I find it -interesting that they persist in interpreting 'gifts' as a social term rather than a naturalistic term such as in 'giftedness', as when we say that a singer or a dancer has a 'natural gift'.) The fact is that the kids are challenged by the poem as a good many adults are. Terms like *right* and *free* are traditional moral terms but *delight* and *simplicity* are more unusual, and the kids struggle to interpret and understand the terms so that the poem will yield a *coherent* meaning to them. This, then, is what the poem does for them philosophically: it makes them aware of a number of ethical terms that are obscurely related to one another, and their job is then to *organize* these meanings so that the poem makes sense as a whole. The liveliness of the discussion seems to me proof that they recognize that they are being challenged to expand their horizons: that it isn't enough to invoke traditional moral terms like *good* and *right*. One may be morally good by being *simple*. One can behave morally by being *supple* rather than *rigid*. One can be in the *right* place when one is *flexible* and *bowed* rather than *upright*. The benefits of so acting can be *love* and *joy*, rather than feelings of *shame*.

Your students seem to me to sense the difficulties that the word *free* poses in this normative context. A number of them suggest that *free* is the key word in the poem, and proceed to interpret *free* as *unrestrained*, but then they are puzzled as to its compatibility with the inner discipline alluded to in *bowing*, *bending* and *turning*. I should add that I was pleased to note that some children who were silent in the earlier part of the discussion began to gain confidence and propose ideas in the later part, while some of those who dominated the discussion in the earlier part were heard from less often as time went on. Incidentally, the song 'Simple Gifts' is emblematic, in a way, for Philosophy for Children. At the end of the Lisa program (Ethics for 9th graders), we all usually sing it together. At any rate, we've always done so at Mendham.

I think you can see, just from this particular exercise, how a series of such discussions might have a cumulative cognitive impact on the confidence, articulateness, and moral insight of virtually any group of children.

Matthew Lipman
Prof. of Philosophy
Montclair State University