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Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

## The Child Philosopher?

*"A child is not a vase to be filled,  
but a fire to be lit"*  
**Montaigne**

**A child questions incessantly: "Where was I before I was born?", "What is being a grown up?", "Why is it wrong to lie?", "What is dying?". Although we must not answer these questions for them, we must accompany children in their endeavours, lest they find themselves out of resources. This is what learning to philosophize is all about: to stimulate situations where children can develop their thinking skills, allowing them to have a better understanding of their relationship with the world, with others, and with themselves.**

**A**mong the most broadly-spread practices is the philosophically directed discussion (DVP, *Discussion à Visée Philosophique* in French) with children. What are the developments that this exercise triggers in children?

youngsters, tales, myths, brief extracts from philosophers...). The specific goal of this reading process is not to study the text in itself, but to extract questions with an anthropological interest in order to discuss them in class. Hence, these practices are mainly based on *speech*, and in particular, on *debate*.

### Awakening Reflective Thinking

In order to allow children to position themselves better in their relationship with the world, with others and with themselves, the DVP aims at teaching them how to begin to "think by themselves" from the age of five, and at developing reflective skills, starting from their fundamental questioning on the human condition. This exercise presupposes children's "philosophical educability". To philosophize is an attempt to coordinate the questioning, the conceptualization and the rational argumentation processes about notions and questions that are problematic to the human condition. This exercise is focused on the quest of meaning and on developing a relationship with truth.



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### Building the Identity of a Thinking Being

By means of the DVP, the child becomes conscious of his/her capacity for reflection and discovers that he/she carries a fundamental dimension of being: the thought that he/she is the source of. By developing a thought and through the verbal exchange with peers, the child becomes conscious of his/her cognitive activity in a social context.

### Contributing to the Making of a

#### "Reflective Citizen"

The DVP installs a space for discussion in the classroom, in the same manner as democracy in its political sense implies a public space for debate and expression of the plurality of the citizens' opinions. One of the means of educating in civic values, apart from mere teaching, is to set up live situations that lead pupils to build their debating skills in a "public space at school".

### Appropriating language

Through language-related activities as a means to foster a reflective relationship with language, with knowledge, with others, and with oneself, the DVP often relies on reading as a starting point (literature for

**The Child Philosopher?**

## Learning to Philosophize with Children around the World

Learning to philosophize at school is a subject of interest in several countries around the world, and different initiatives have been undertaken in the last few years, ranging from official encouragement for innovation, to the introduction of philosophy in primary school, as well as the development of pilot programmes.

According to the UNESCO Study published in 2007 *Philosophy: A School of Freedom*, initiatives of different sorts are underway in the following countries: **Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chili, Colombia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Spain, United Kingdom, United States of America Uruguay, and Venezuela.**

### Instilling an Ethic of Respect for Others

DVP develops in the classroom the educational practice of an ethic of group *discussion* and *dialogue*. In DVP, the enquiry process is shared, removing the sense of confrontation. "The other" is not a rival, but rather a partner, or even a co-operator. DVP is thus an acquired habit of "disagreeing within civic peace". It *prevents violence* and *enhances tolerance*, for instance, between ethnic groups. It is a factor for peace and dialogue. The *discussion-founded* ethics that are implemented go beyond a purely democratic goal, for they respect the person regardless of the ideas he/she carries. To respect a citizen is to respect an individual who has rights; to respect a person is to acknowledge his/her dignity as a human being.

### Clarifying the very meaning of philosophizing and the method of teaching it at an early age

Analysis of the process of learning to philosophize throws light on the relationship between philosophy and childhood and adolescence. From a philosophical perspective, how can we define this relationship? Do children have the right to philosophize? And even beyond that, do they have the duty of building their own humanity? If indeed they do have this right, what are the ethical and political principles that it ought to be founded on? Is it a human right, a citizen's right, or a child's right (cf. Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)? Can learning to philosophize guarantee, from an intellectual stand-point, the demand for democratic debate in the public space? From a didactic perspective, under which conditions a discussion can be or become philosophical? And if one starts "philosophizing" at an early age, the

following questions need to be answered: What philosophical programme should be designed? With which objectives and in which manner? In order to develop which skills? With what sort of evaluation system?

### Next Steps

After the publishing of the Study *Philosophy: A School of Freedom*, UNESCO will organize sessions focused on the topic of learning to philosophize on the occasion of regional meetings on philosophy teaching in 2009. If the impact of philosophy on children may not be apparent immediately, its impact on tomorrow's adults could be so remarkable that it would make us wonder why philosophy has to this day been marginalized or refused to children.

### For more information

[www.unesco.org/shs/philosophy](http://www.unesco.org/shs/philosophy)

*Philosophy, A School of Freedom*,  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org>

*Philosophy for Children*, Report of a Meeting of Experts at UNESCO, 26-27 March 1998  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001161/116115mo.pdf>

*Intersectoral Strategy on Philosophy*  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/>

*La philosophie saisie par l'UNESCO* (French only)  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org>

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