

The Age of Philosophy



A district VP in
Greater Victoria,
and her students,
tackle the
big questions

by Leslie Dyson

Philosophy asks the big questions. Young children show a knack for philosophy with their seemingly hundreds of questions. “Deep inquiry is not just for the academic elite,” said Tiffany Poirier, an award-winning educator, a leader in the Philosophy for Children movement, District Vice-Principal in the Greater Victoria School District, and mother of two boys. “Kids can do rigorous philosophical inquiry,” she said. She recalls starting to ask the big questions when she was five years old if not earlier.

As a philosopher and mother, she ponders questions such as: What is a good role model? What do I want to give to my kids?

“But there are so many surprises because every child is different. There seem to be 300,000 questions a day so they can still take you aback.” Her seven-year-old son recently asked, “Why do people die?”

However, one of the most challenging questions for her was “Is Santa real? It’s a dilemma for a parent. What does it mean for something to be real? I take comfort that that these are questions children can explore for themselves.”

While on maternity leave, the questions and ideas continue to flow so she has moved into the digital realm by offering online courses in inquiry, and she makes it work by typing amid her 10-month-old son’s flying fingers and

The interconnection of ideas



conversing with colleagues during nap times.

Poirier draws inspiration from *First Peoples Principles of Learning* and western and eastern philosophy. “Philosophy wasn’t invented by old dead white guys – it’s of universal human interest,” she said. “But I was inspired by Socrates – portrayed through Plato’s writing – such as challenging authority and the status quo and asking questions like what constitutes a good moral life? And to stand up for what you believe, even when you may die for your beliefs.”

She also draws on the work of Matthew Lipman, the founder of the Philosophy for Children movement, Benjamin Bloom who is best known for *Bloom’s Taxonomy*, and Ken Robinson who writes about creativity and challenges our notions of school systems.

Poirier started exploring philosophical inquiry with Kindergarten to Grade 7 students in Vancouver classrooms in 2006, then worked in Surrey, and later took a vice-principal position in Victoria. She has written a children’s book, *Q is for Question: The ABCs of Philosophy*; was a presenter at a TEDx event in Victoria in 2013; and received the

Prime Minister’s Award for Teaching Excellence in 2014. She has created learning resources and strategies <https://inquiry ninja.com/> and frequently presents them in workshops to educators.

“Every teacher has a unique approach,” she said. “I use a lot of physical manipulatives and metaphors to invite students to learn through play.”

Her Question Toolbox is a shiny red metal box filled with an assortment of tools representing 50 types of questions, such as: **a mousetrap** to represent questions that entrap; **a protractor** for questions of degree; **a can opener** for those that are open-ended; **a compass** for those that question where we are now and where we want to go; **a chess piece** to represent strategic ones; and **a hole punch** for those that poke holes in arguments. There’s also **a zipper** that serves as a reminder about the importance of silence and a misting atomizer representing micro messages we may be unaware of.

She has demonstrated to thousands of teachers how a Big Question Roadmap can help children (and inquisitive people of all ages) how to move through the question-

ing stages of:

- 1) feelings (discomfort that can prompt the desire to change)
- 2) problematizing (seeing the broader implications)
- 3) dreaming (imagining the possibilities)
- 4) developing (various approaches that could be put into practice)
- 5) actualizing (posing the question How can I do x so that y results to achieve z?)

Poirier offers a range of ideas that have worked to deepen philosophical inquiry in her classrooms: storytelling, role-playing, setting up dialogue circles outdoors, and fish bowl and speed-dating style conversations.

Providing space and time to think are essential. “Classrooms are 30 people in a tiny box with many voices and crashing and banging. I’m not talking about using an oppressive ‘sh, sh, sh!’” Rather it’s about finding balance and new ways to accommodate all learning styles, she said. For example, those who are reticent to speak out are invited to use technological tools to write their comments in dialogue boxes. And she’s facilitated wordless dialogues, including a conversation conducted with Lego.

There are ways to demonstrate the interconnection of ideas. In one exercise, she uses long pieces of yarn. As each idea is presented, a piece of yarn is added to the network until a spider web of ideas is spun. “It helps students pay attention to what their neighbour is saying and how it contributes to the whole.”

She also uses time and space to allow for the processing of ideas. It’s

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startling to learn that teachers’ typical wait time for answers after posing a question is one second. “Three seconds feels like an eternity,” she said. “I challenge myself to wait five seconds.” Sometimes no answers are forthcoming. “Sometimes we don’t need an answer,” she said.

Poirier is also careful, during these dialogues, not to express her own beliefs. “I never say ‘This is my philosophy’ or give the idea that ‘This is what you should think.’”

While creating a safe space for children to ask whatever is on their minds, she said, “We maintain rules around hate speech and racist, homophobic, sexist, and non-inclusive statements. But sometimes teachers shut things down too quickly” without meaningful examination. Prior to setting rules, there is a class conversation about where fallacious beliefs come from and why they are problematic.

Several years ago, Poirier took a course in philosophical inquiry at Montclair State University in New Jersey. She learned about the work of Lipman and the impact of psycho-social postures such as slouching and fidgeting and to recognize these behaviours and their effects. “We videotaped our dialogues. I noticed I was slouching. My body didn’t say I was listening. I had to ask myself, am I modeling good listening and good inquiry?”

“Students can feel when their

teacher doesn’t have a safe hold on the classroom. The kids pick up on psycho-social dynamics. I may be a 5’4” female but I need to lower my chair so my head is at their level... Teachers can forget the effect of their privilege and that they can be perceived as intimidating.”

Questions at the end of her professional development workshops have included, “But there’s not enough time in the day for inquiry and dialogue” and “We have so many other things to cover!” Poirier replies that there are ways to integrate dialogue in as short as three minutes at the close of the school day. For example, she has everyone sit in a circle, she sets a timer, and says, “OK Johnnie, a question of your choice – Go!” It might be “Why is there greed?” Each child speaks for a few seconds and that evening she transcribes the remarks. “We listen the next day. They hear the dialogue and we analyze the transcript together.

“Careful re-listening has helped me learn more about my students and check my assumptions. One child’s remark might seem out of context, but when I listen again, I might see that they are logically further along, they just missed plugging in one connecting premise. But I might have missed that without the transcript review.


“When we start to do inquiry based learning and open class dialogue, we don’t get to control the

day as we used to. We’re listening for thoughts, ideas, and curiosities on the fly.

“Still, I want to create cohesion in the day. I bring an open-ended teaching approach supported by tools, strategies, and clear examples and I come, every day, with a plan. But if a child brings in a pinecone and math inquiry like ‘Why are there swirls in nature?’ it triggers discussion and makes learning more organic. Lots of educators are doing this.

“Ken Robinson’s philosophy about what creative and personalized education can look like for children sits very well with people,” she said. “And teaching everyone tools for deeper inquiry is especially important this year because we’re looking at what’s happening in the media and how journalists are being challenged for posing big questions and trying to keep society accountable. When you see another freethinking person being challenged, it makes you ask how important is your voice and what is needed to form cogent opinions? It’s important for us all to keep asking questions.

“Kids have to believe we respect them. Maybe you don’t facilitate one dialogue so well, but if your heart is in the right place, the students will feel it. Tone is everything. Keep asking and inviting those questions. And keep the pressure on, otherwise children will miss something vital that they need to know.

“I love this work and no matter what happens, I always want to be on the ground, learning and questioning alongside my students and colleagues because that is where the joy and excitement is! 

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