

The Apprenticeship Model: What We Can Learn from Gareth Matthews

originally published in *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1989)

Gareth Matthews has already been widely praised for his ability to recognize the philosophical worth of children's comments and speculations. In his books *Philosophy and the Young Child* (1980) and *Dialogues With Children* (1984), he invites us to join him in this recognition and to consider how we might respond to children's philosophical remarks as seriously and respectfully as he himself has been able to.

But Matthews' work does something else as well. It offers us a model of teaching philosophy – indeed, teaching anything – by apprenticeship, by letting children see us at work and then inviting them to take part. In this case, the work is philosophy, and the invitation – particularly the spirit in which it is extended – is at the heart of anything we might call Matthews' method or technique. He does not say to children, "This is what philosophy *is*," but rather, "This is what philosophers *do*." He is not designing a curriculum as much as he is inviting children to join him in an activity that (and this is critical) he has already chosen for himself.

Matthews calls children natural philosophers. If they are, it's because philosophy is something people do, have found reason to do throughout the ages. We can also say that children are natural musicians or scientists, since these too are human activities. Perhaps the deeper truth is that children naturally want to belong to their culture, to join its older members in whatever pursuits they deem important. In reminding us that children are natural philosophers, then, Matthews is actually reminding us of philosophy's importance in human life.

If philosophy is something people do, then it's natural to assume that children will want to do it; hence Matthews' decision to enlist children's help in writing philosophical stories. It is in an important sense as if Matthews were building a house and asking children to help him saw the wood. In the process he will learn about children, about wood, and about houses, but his chief business is doing something that he thinks is important, and he involves children in it because he suspects that they will enjoy it and that he will value their help.

It's this authenticity and lack of contrivance that characterizes the apprenticeship model. The theoretical physicist David Deutsch wrote about that model, "The guiding principle is that the child should be truly productive from the beginning."¹ The work we offer children must not be invented solely for their education, but must be a genuine part

¹ David Deutsch, "Becoming Experts," *Growing Without Schooling* 29.

of the real work at hand. For Deutsch the physicist, this means finding “tasks integral to [his] overall problem” in physics with which to seek the apprentice’s help. For Matthews the philosopher, the job is much the same. In his dialogues with the children at St. Mary’s Music School in Scotland, he is in fact seeking the children’s help with tasks integral to an overall philosophical problem that has intrigued him and, often, other philosophers.

For example, after reading the transcript of a discussion in which children in an American classroom tried to determine how they could be certain that a package that said “lettuce seeds” did in fact contain lettuce seeds, Matthews wrote, “I would like to puzzle out with those kids whether we know and if so how we know that certain little seeds are lettuce seeds.”² In this spirit, the spirit of wanting to puzzle out a problem that interested him, he offered the lettuce question to his children at St. Mary’s. They, too, were interested.

Martin repeated the idea that one could plant all the seeds and then wait until the spring to see which ones came up lettuce. I suggested that Martin’s procedure might give us sufficient condition for “I know that those *were* lettuce seeds” but not “I know that these *are* lettuce seeds.”

Suddenly David-Paul became animated. “You could sample some out,” he said, “You could take two [seeds] of each [kind] and plant them and mark where you put them, and then put them in a greenhouse so they’ll grow quicker and watch which came out lettuce and then you’d know and you could plant the right ones.

The idea was ingenious. Knowing which seeds are lettuce seeds is, in a way, knowing which seeds have a certain potentiality. We might determine that by forcing a sample of the lot to realize their potentiality on a speeded-up schedule. After learning in this way which seeds *were* lettuce seeds, we would have a splendid basis for inferring which of the remaining seeds are lettuce seeds.³

In the lettuce seed discussion, David-Paul became a real help to Matthews, a real colleague. But Matthews was not the only one who benefited. That children are natural philosophers does not mean that adults have nothing to offer them. We don’t merely apprentice ourselves to activities, after all, but to people who engage in activities. In apprenticing themselves to Matthews the more experienced philosopher, the children at St. Mary’s were able to focus and refine their natural philosophical wonder, and learn to use it as experienced philosophers do.

In seeing which possible solutions Matthews found most plausible and thus most helpful, for example, the children gained a sense of what makes one proposal philosophically tighter, or neater, than another. Matthews’ saying, “That doesn’t seem to

² Gareth B. Matthews, *Dialogues With Children* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 52.

³ Matthews, 1984, p. 55.

be a sufficient condition” or “That doesn’t convince me” gave the children important information about what a philosophical argument requires.

Over and over again, in his descriptions of the philosophical issues that he brought before the St. Mary’s class, Matthews makes it clear that these are questions he would have been thinking about even if he did not have the St. Mary’s class to teach. About mental representation, for example, to which the class devoted some time, Matthews says, “Questions about whether one can think in pictures and, if so, what limitations a picture ‘vocabulary’ imposes, are debated heatedly these days among philosophers, psychologists, and computer scientists. I find that debate fascinating and important.”⁴ We can be sure that the children at St. Mary’s sensed during their discussion that Matthews found the issue fascinating and important, and perhaps they even had the feeling that they were participants in that broader debate.

It is important to recognize that Matthews’ approach is not, though it may seem to be, a way to find out how children’s minds work. It may, indeed often does, have this result, but it does not begin with this intention. The children with whom Matthews works are not laboratory rats but less-experienced colleagues, a difference that makes all the difference in the world.

It’s a difference that can be difficult to discern, however. The spirit in which Matthews brings the lettuce seed problem to his classroom is not, “Let’s see how these children learn about epistemology,” as much as it is “Let’s see if we can puzzle out this problem together.” Of course – and this is why it becomes tricky – Matthews does indeed wind up learning a great deal about how children think about epistemology. But I maintain that learning this as a consequence of shared work is critically different from setting out to learn it with the expectation that this is one’s sole task and will be one’s sole result. Matthews operates as though there is every reason to expect that the children will be helpful, interesting, valuable partners, or at least just as likely to be those things as anybody. His interest in the workings of their minds resembles, I imagine, the interest he would take in any philosophical partner, anyone with whom the conversation was stimulating.

Why, one might then ask, does Matthews focus his two books on children? Why make the age distinction at all? I cannot speak for Matthews, but it seems to me that the answer lies in the prologue to *Dialogues With Children*, where he writes:

What has not been taken seriously, or even widely conceived, is the possibility of tackling with children, in a relationship of mutual respect, the naively profound questions of philosophy. I hope that what follows will convince my readers that children can help us adults investigate and reflect on interesting and important questions and that the children’s contributions may be quite as valuable as any we adults have to offer.⁵

⁴ Matthews, 1984, p. 104.

⁵ Matthews, 1984, p. 3.

Because the relationship between children and adults that Matthews proposes has not been widely conceived, it is necessary for him to work to convince his readers of something that many may not have previously been inclined to believe. Matthews writes about children; he also writes on behalf of children, on behalf of their ability to be a genuine help to us in philosophy or any other activity. Let us do all we can to move in the direction Matthews so eloquently urges us.

Susannah Sheffer