

# **PEDAGOGY OUT OF FEAR OF PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF PATHOLOGIZING CHILDREN**

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## **Abstract**

The article conceptualizes the term *Pedagogy of Fear* as the master narrative of educational systems around the world. Pedagogy of Fear stunts the active and vital educational growth of the young person, making him/her passive and dependent upon external disciplinary sources. It is motivated by fear that prevents young students—as well as teachers—from dealing with the great existential questions that relate to the essence of human beings. One of the techniques of the Pedagogy of Fear is the internalization of the view that without evaluation and assessment we cannot know a child's level or "worth"—and therefore are unable to help him/her if he is "slow in learning."

In contrast, Philosophy for/with Children offers a space for addressing existential questions, some of which deal with urgent social issues. The willingness to make philosophy inquiry an alternative already from an early age seeks to allow the child to challenge him/herself with new and fresh questions. Philosophy for/with Children does not regard children as a "space of lack" (experience, knowledge, values, etc.) The new and fresh philosophical perspective of children demands the presence of a willingness to engage in dialogue and rejection of the fear of the innocent and deep questions of philosophy. Shaking free of the Pedagogy of Fear and restoring honor to children's questions demands a fundamental conceptual change within education. The replacement of existential certainty as it is depicted by adults in the existing education system with an existential question is a heavy intellectual task that in most cases is viewed as subversive—primarily on the part of the adult. It demands a return to starting points and a willingness to allow children a free and safe educational space in which to ground preliminary and fertile questions about themselves, their lives, their environment, and, most of all, the changing world they discover with the form of originality that is right for them.

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**Keywords:** Concepts of Childhood, Pedagogy of Fear, Philosophy for/with Children, Dialogue with Children

In recent decades, educational systems over the world have been motivated by what I shall call herein call a *Pedagogy of Fear*. This pedagogy touches on the concept of childhood, the child, and the rationale for his/her education and on practices relating to the pedagogy of his/her upbringing. It fuels the view that the child constitutes a potential educational—generally psychological problem—that must be diagnosed, defended, assisted, and, of course, “promoted” and aided and abetted.

The pedagogic view that has come to dominate the educational discourse relates to two points of departure—two vertices—that influence and bolster one another:

- The child as “not-knower”: This philosophy contends that children are essentially “not-knowing” young people whom the education system can better by raising their level of knowledge and learning of values so that they become “knowing” - i.e., possess intellectual knowledge and know how to behave. It views the child during his/her childhood as a “candidate for”—as someone “not yet fit,” denying that s/he is autonomous and able to guide and direct his/her life in a relatively independent fashion (Lipman, 1991). Some educational systems thus contain a double discourse—an external one that discusses the belief in the child’s capabilities (some of which fit the educational structuralism) and an internal one within the school based on the belief that the child is “still not ready” and that the school is the place in which s/he undergoes the process of maturation.
- The model of demand as the pedagogic basis for the operation of the educational system. Here, the school is perceived as the ideal place for learning—a “beit midrash (study hall) for learning,” if you like. According to this logic, this sacred hall of learning that benefit from objective prestige affords optimal teaching-learning processes that are conducted in a professional educational language that accords them profound social legitimacy. On the

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basis of this view, the school possesses the right to demand at any and all times that the young student meet the standards set by adults and gain measurable achievements as a way of preparing to enter adult life as a fit and mature person. His/her life is thus in many respects a matter of swimming in a sea of demands and commands.

In line with these two departure points, teachers view themselves as lifeguards who must save the children from the world outside the classroom walls and thus in effect engaged in a sacred task. This terminology is also used in such programs as “No child left behind” and “War on poverty,” programs such as “Teach for America” and “Knowledge is Power Program” (KIPP) also drawing some of their educational ideology from the same pedagogical source.

This article seeks to critically analyze the way in which this pedagogy in fact serves the opposite purpose, setting the students with scientific clarity between yardsticks that champion ostensibly professional statements about “potential,” “abilities,” and “accomplishments.” These indices perpetuate the students’ consciousness of themselves and their parents’ view of them. The “accomplishments” being incorporated via slogans into official documents, it is only a short step to the creation of a complete terminology within which children become “people with special needs” or “emotional problems that demand psychological intervention.” This stage leads in turn to the fixing of a glass ceiling rather than the construction of broad and rich expanses of educational development. The psychological domination of the educational system that has occurred in recent decades has served the over-heavy policy of assessment and evaluation as part of the production of the “desired educational graduate.” In this process, philosophy has gradually been squeezed out of the educational space.

I suggest that pedagogy motivated by fear prevents young students—as well as teachers—from dealing with the great existential questions that relate to the essence of human

beings. I claim that pedagogy based on a fear of philosophy in fact pathologizes children and childhood.

*Pedagogy of Fear* stunts the active and vital educational growth of the young person, making him/her passive and dependent upon external disciplinary sources. Under the guise of a living, breathing educational system that seeks progress, fear and apprehension of a conscious and alert life guided by an educational space that enables the philosophical life so necessary for the young person is inculcated. It is thus no wonder that Martin Seligman (1995), the founder of the positive psychology school, argues that modern psychology has been co-opted by the disease model. According to his view, we've become too preoccupied with repairing damage when our focus should be on building strength and resilience, especially in children. In its over-enthusiastic adoption of the model of "repairing damage," the *Pedagogy of Fear* views students as in constant need of "repair."

In contrast, Philosophy for/with Children offers a space for addressing existential questions, some of which deal with urgent social issues. As Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyon (1980) observe, "Philosophy is ... of enormous benefit to persons seeking to form concepts that can effectively represent aspects of their life experience" (p. 90). These philosophical questions threatening some social and educational structures, those interested in maintaining them claim that philosophy is irrelevant, ineffective, "pompous," and "badgering" and has nothing to do with success—certainly not financial or real-life success. This definition of philosophy stands in stark contrast to that propounded by Gareth Matthews, one of the proponents of Philosophy for Children. Wondering whether children as young as three are capable of undertaking such tasks as reasoning, Matthews (1984) notes that "Piaget has taught us to suppose that children of that age and even those who are much older are highly egocentric" (p. 114). In his view, the cases he

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examined indicate that children, even from the age of three, can pose “interesting puzzle[s] in the logic of counterfactual conditionals” (ibid). Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyon (1980) similarly argue that Philosophy with Children is based on the view that children’s questions are frequently grand and sweeping, raising issues of great metaphysical importance:

“The fact children can raise such questions indicates that they begin with a thirst for holistic explanations, and it is patronizing to say the least not to try to help them develop concepts equal in generality to the questions they ask” (p. 29).

### **The Dominant Hegemonic Discourse as a Tool to Exclusion**

The pedagogical approach that excludes philosophy from schools and educational communities has a long and complex history, having shaped the hegemonic discourse and thus influenced people’s views of society, war, and patriotism and determined the standards by which these concepts are judged (Gramsci, 1971). In line with this critique, McLaren (1989) objects to an educational system that, seeking the interest(s) of the dominant class, promotes a consciousness of agreement.

This hegemonic discourse—which Freire (1970) calls the “pedagogy of the oppressed”—represents itself to teachers and students as the authentic representative of “reality,” “the economy,” and “society.” It thus portrays itself as the ultimate representative of “existential certainty”—the latter also being exemplified in the policy of over-evaluating and assessing of young people, who are meant to meet ostensibly objective standards based on essentially quantitative measures relating to themselves, their success, and their future.

On this view, schools are the ultimate representative of “knowledge”—and of course its status—and, at the end of the educational path, of a singular, unique “truth” (Apple, 1982). To

this end, the educational system enlists the help of scientific tools that bestow validity on all the assessment processes of young students. These tools also form the basis of the regular curricula across all the grades while classifying according to disciplines and hierarchic levels of thought (Apple, 1986) through to graduation. This juncture is the final goal—the telos—of the educational process. Only once the student has passed this point, via the summarizing evaluative process of final exams, is s/he recognized as a fit and proper graduate—as a person who has completed his “preparation” and joined the “world of those who are fit.” The constant assessment—which resembles the process of annual re-licensing—that accompanies the progress of children and young people is part of the domination of the adult world over that of their children, bestowing scientific legitimization on it (Apple, 1989).

Adults do not behave this way out of malice or arbitrariness but are themselves victims of the same *Pedagogy of Fear*. In other words, the fear is passed down from generation to generation as part of a basic human-survival need—not only via supervised means but also by our very addiction to it (without being conscious of this fact or acknowledging it). It thus becomes our unconscious collective—a hidden, unspoken, self-evident space—from which we suckle and in which we function. Being the pathological disease of the West, it is no wonder that we have become so focused on needs and deficiencies that we have forgotten that children also have strengths and capacities.

### **The Language of Clinical Medicine in Education and the Child Narrative**

As noted above, one of the techniques of the *Pedagogy of Fear* is the internalization of the view that without evaluation and assessment we cannot know a child’s level or “worth”—and therefore are unable to help him/her if he is “slow in learning.” In recent years, assessment

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bodies have thus begun testing children from younger and younger ages in order to ascertain how badly “retarded” they are in understanding and absorbing the learning material. The language of clinical medicine having infiltrated education, we have begun speaking of “early diagnosis” in order to help the potential “patient” before s/he becomes terminally “ill” and can no longer be “cured.” In a gradual process, medical terminology has permeated educational language, becoming clinical, diagnostic, ostensibly objective-scientific, numerical, and, of course, “true.”

This process had led to the fact that, even at a young age, existential questions relating to human beings, the human essence, and humanity’s place in the world have been classified as superfluous, troublesome, and confusing, distracting the child from dealing with what should be his/her primary concerns—success in studies and life. Philosophic inquiry has thus gradually been driven outside the young person’s learning world—despite the fact that more than forty years ago Matthew Lipman, the founder of Philosophy for Children, proposed a vast alternative space that paid respect to attentiveness to the authentic and original philosophical questions children (even very young ones) ask—even when they are not completely sure of the right way to ask them. This view represents a willingness on the part of adults to let go their determined and determinative erudition and higher authority, as well as their daily desire to raise (in both sense of the word) their subordinates (i.e., children). This disposition places at its center a pedagogy of humility towards the child that contains not only an element of caring but also an understanding of the child as the one writing the story of his/her life and thus needing to ask essential questions about it.

The structuring of the narrative—which often contains a causal explanation that reflects a human need that permits the strengthening of identity and identification—allows young people to identify themselves within the whole and develop empathy and feel emotions such as longing,

love, anger, disbelief, or suspicion. As part of a community of philosophical inquiry, young people can organize their human knowledge around the axiom that personal experience is generally recounted in a narrative fashion that helps structure identity (Heikkinen, 2002). Possessing multiple perspectives and attitudes towards life, they frame their understanding of themselves and their world, other agents of socialization also operating. Their community of inquiry may thus be said to add a dimension to Bruner's definition (1987) of constructivism as a type of "worldmaking" and narratives as "lifemaking." Developing this argument, I would like to suggest that the philosophical community of inquiry's discussion of mourning and memorial sites constitutes a type of "meaning-making." This process is connected to the cultural shift from modernism to postmodernism that has blurred existing distinctions—including that between scientific reporting and artistic expression. Individual autobiographies and narratives having become much closer to the social sciences, some writers have even begun to ask themselves where the boundary for researchers lies—where they may adopt the style of a novel, short story, or similar genre. Underlying this view is the belief that knowledge is a composition of narratives ceaselessly created via social interaction in correspondence with the emphasis postmodernism lays on multiplicity and diversity as constitutive elements of human existence. As Lyotard (1984) argues, human knowledge is no longer subservient to a meta-narrative that seeks to outline a coherent universal viewpoint based on correspondence between sentences and concrete items in the world.



**Philosophy for/with Children as a Space of Freshness and Inventiveness**

This willingness to make philosophy inquiry an alternative already from an early age seeks to allow the child to challenge him/herself with new and fresh questions. As Jana Mohr Lone (2012b) notes:

Historically there has been almost no examination by philosophers or others of the emergence of philosophical thinking in childhood. Philosophy, unlike mathematics or literature or science, commonly has been considered a discipline only for adults, at least in the United States (p. 3).

Philosophy for/with Children does not regard children as a “space of lack” (experience, knowledge, values, etc.) According to Gareth Matthews (1984), the psychological model of children’s “stagal maturation” that has been accepted without question or reservation by scholars of childhood is biased and erroneous from its very foundation upwards. Although it is compatible with biological or psychological development, it is not compatible with philosophy. As he asserts, there is no reason at all to assume that children are incapable of discussing and debating. Any person, whatever their age, who listens to the philosophical responses and questions that children ask understands that they possess a freshness and inventiveness that adults sometimes find difficult to grasp. Maturation and maturity frequently bring with them staleness and a loss of inventiveness that coalesce into conformist or normative education—or at least a commitment to obedience and mediocrity. The new and fresh philosophical perspective of children demands the presence of a willingness to engage in dialogue and rejection of the fear of the innocent and deep questions of philosophy.

In this context, Mohr Lone (2012b) observes that:

Although we acknowledge the significance of childhood and adolescence in our lives this does not seem to lead adults to take young people's experience very seriously. Childhood sorrow, teenage relationships, young people's perspectives about the world around them—rarely are any of these viewed by adults as lasting or meaningful in the way adult experience is considered to be (p. 3).

### **Parents Over-Protective Actions during Children Wondering**

Another principal reason for ignoring children's capacity to live a philosophical life lies in the existential need imprinted within adults to protect their offspring from a world perceived as cruel and threatening. Adults perform their protective parental role in such an overenthusiastic fashion as to cast a heavy shadow over the light necessary to nourish the freshness of their children's world. Parents—and teachers—unnecessarily expand their parental role, bringing into the freshness of young people's learning their own knowledge of the world, the answers they have already found (or not found) to questions, and an experience that is irrelevant for children undertaking the first steps of philosophical inquiry. In doing so, they “quench”—sometimes with a very heavy hand—the lamp of wonder that, according to Aristotle, is one of the most important elements of learning.

Society has also created a dichotomous division between “protective” and “neglectful” parents. The former has given birth to the need—which parents consider to be urgent and immediate—to respond to the child's every question rather than allowing him/her to develop the ability to ask questions and develop curiosity and imagination. This prevents children from remaining within the space of unanswered questions (by the adults)—a space that is vital from a philosophical perspective (and frequently also from a learning one) because it stimulates

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imagination, creativity, and wonder. Adults regard the provision of answers by parents—and teachers—as part of their duty, some parents claiming that questions confuse the child, create distress, and tend to lead to prohibited territory wherein the child can err. Adult fear being prominent here, too, they fill the fresh space of the “fluid” question with the “cast concrete” of answers that put an end to self searching and the love of searching—the very foundation of philosophy. The child who embarks on a philosophical quest in uncharted waters is thus immediately met by an adult who accompanies him/her—sometimes rather brutally—whenever he strays into paved paths that already possess “closed truths.” While parents/teachers are motivated by the desire to provide a safe place that protects from the “street”—and now from the internet and its dangers—it is not at all certain that this is a space that permits, opens up, or, most essentially, teaches.

In such a structured world in which the architecture of learning has already been implemented and leaves no room for discovery, the adult’s accumulated experience is regarded as preferable to the childish questions of the young person. I would like to argue that legitimizing philosophical inquiry for the very young in fact gives children strength. Rather than empowering, however, this force intimidates the adult, who fears that questions—even the most basic—may undermine the child’s world, confuse him/her, offer him/her untraditional answers, or (God forbid) lead him/her to a world where s/he has no financial success or social integration. As Mohr Lone (2012b) observes, “The most common response to young children’s deeper questions is to treat them dismissively or condescendingly” (p. 3).

This *Pedagogy of Fear* is fed by the education system’s virtually blind devotion to Piaget’s psychological-development theories, receiving daily legitimization from the patronage of educational psychologists. According to Matthews (1994), this commitment establishes a

complete doctrine that prevents the possibility and primarily the basis of legitimacy of the philosophical question as a source of learning for the very young. Some psychologists, he argues, believe that “If philosophy is a cognitively mature activity, to encourage children to do philosophy would be as pointless, perhaps even damaging to the child as trying to get newborn infants to walk” (p. 33).

Rather than the philosophic option, the education system prefers many methods for asking inquiry questions—some of which are dependent upon fields of knowledge and disciplines. While these questions are positive, they are themselves directed towards a certain type of knowledge that is linked to the curriculum rather than taking the form of questions relating to the student’s life and his/her search for their meaning. Moreover, in the present era of technological advancement and achievement, the education system limits human contact and its philosophical possibilities of innovative philosophical ventures. In a world of currencies and commodities, the ability to think a pure thought that is irrelevant to “reality” becomes a luxury or is excluded for reasons of lack of practicality - primarily economic.

### **Return to Philosophy for/with Children as a Rich Space of Inquiry**

Shaking free of the *Pedagogy of Fear* and restoring honor to children’s questions demands a fundamental conceptual change within education. The replacement of existential certainty as it is depicted by adults in the existing education system with an existential question is a heavy intellectual task that in most cases is viewed as subversive—primarily on the part of the adult. It demands a return to starting points and a willingness to allow children a free and safe educational space in which to ground preliminary and fertile questions about themselves, their lives, their

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environment, and, most of all, the changing world they discover with the form of originality that is right for them. It calls for an abandonment of adult colonization in favor of young immaturity and an acknowledgment of a fountain in which innocence is the proper basis for a philosophic sensitivity (Mohr Lone, 2012a) that is not necessarily naïve—sensitivity imbued with the hope that the question is that which will nourish the discovery and, most of all, sanctify human affluence.

A protracted living, breathing philosophical space validates philosophical inquiry that does not focus specifically on content but rather on asking—in particular, philosophical questions relating to all fields of life (Sharp, 1988). In many senses, such legitimization is of a space that contains continuous uncertainty that enables the child to live his/her life as a changing space rather than as an imaginary certainty. Childhood thus demands that the adult withdraw to some extent in order to let the child deal with questions in the purest way possible, without any “adult contamination” that may pollute or mold them, thereby making them banal. It demands that the adult let the child find his/her own way through the jungle of questions, giving him/her space, trust, and support. Here, the model of educational demand becomes a model of support.

Adults dealing with education—in particular teachers—are to a great extent imprisoned in Plato’s cave, no longer believing in Gareth Matthews’ (1994) assertion that children have the freshness to ask questions such as “Does the world have a beginning, and if so, when did it begin?,” “How do I know that everything isn’t a dream?,” or “Am I alive when I’m on YouTube?” Adults prevent the development of the child’s philosophical self, created by the human ability to contemplate experiences and think about them. The philosophical self is made curious by the complexity of everyday life and the profound meaning of our ordinary views, manifesting itself in our tendency to ask questions about them. The traditional conception

attaches importance to the intellectual, social, ethical, and emotional development of identity, paying little if any attention to philosophical identity—the philosophical self. In most children, the latter thus remains undeveloped, children receiving the message that the concrete details of life are more important than intellectual abstractions and that philosophical questions are trivial or too complex for them to try and solve, not leading them anywhere—or, alternatively, being told that religion can answer them. The ascription of the phrase “waste of time” to engaging in philosophical reflection at a young age seriously impinges upon the ability to philosophize or develop philosophic skills.

Philosophy for/with Children is designed to implement three central tasks: a) to provide the tools for philosophical, critical, constructive thinking and investigation of the phenomena of life; b) to provide the tools for creative thought that will inspire ideas and deepen creative life; and c) to develop skills for caring behavior based on community involvement (Chesters, 2102). The three Cs—critical, caring, and creative—are the three elements that are lacking today in educational curricula across the globe which overemphasize learning achievements, assessment, and evaluation and a discourse centered around student “advancement.”

These philosophic tools are designed to be used in/by a classroom community of inquiry that necessarily brings about essential change in the classroom discussion by raising interesting questions, enabling each student to participate in the process of asking questions as members of the community, focusing on a particular subject, stressing listening and relating and informed and educated acceptance or rejection. According to Lipman (1988), the goal of Philosophy for Children is to develop excellent philosophical, logical, inventive, and analytic thinking. In order to gain this, we must prompt our children to think, encourage their intellectual abilities, and strengthen their ability to discern the relationship between things, make proper distinctions, and

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create links. Sharp (1988), who worked with Lipman for many years developing curricula for Philosophy for Children across the world, adds further aspects, arguing that Philosophy for/with Children develops cognitive qualities and intellectual attributes.

### **The Benefits of Philosophy for/with Children**

Philosophy for/with Children can thus not only contribute to children's growth and creativity (as studies of communities of philosophic inquiry with children are increasingly demonstrating) but also to diminishing tension between people—especially the young—and meeting the need for dialogue regarding meaningful content. For some education systems, Philosophy for/with Children can also free teachers from the prison into which they have been placed by the education system—a jail in which they are instructors who declaim fixed texts working with curricula that frequently confine them to uncreative furrows rather than allowing them to perceive the dialogic encounter with the student as a goal.

Over and above all these things, we must understand that we have to shake ourselves free. From our perspective, for those who believe in the asking of questions, raising of doubts, and fighting fear and anxiety—even from the earliest years of elementary school—as a bubbling fountain of freshness rather than a conceptual, spiritual dryness under the guise of a false realistic worthwhileness, Philosophy for/with Children forms a legitimate and beneficial alternative. It grants place and space to the existence of an education that enables the development of communities of young people that engage in the process of seeking answers. As an educational alternative, Philosophy for/with Children can avoid being turned into another “missionary” method or system of learning and enable the important elements of critical thinking, creative thinking, and thinking that includes caring and concern.

A community of philosophical inquiry provides a framework in which children can think and talk about problematic issues with vital support from adults and peers. As Haynes and Murrells (2012) maintain, “The community of enquiry pedagogy is not about a return to child-centredness: neither teacher nor pupil is at the centre. The search for better understanding and justified beliefs through collaborative reasoning and dialogue are at the centre” (p. 4). Splitter and Sharp (1995) suggest a different concept: “A community of enquiry is at once immanent and transcendent: it provides a framework which pervades the everyday life of its participants and it serves as an ideal to strive for” (pp. 17-18).

Philosophy for/with Children breaks down the educational hierarchy to which we are used - or at least allows questions to be asked about it. In such a philosophic space, the student is recognized as a complete person with questions and doubts rather than punished for exhibiting such qualities or forced to change (Kizel, 2014). Hesitation and deliberation are integral characteristics of the young philosopher as s/he seeks concepts and the spaces between them while being supported by philosophic figures, even if imaginary ones. These spaces can frequently stand in opposition to the familiar tradition, which circumscribes self-identity—an identity that is often dictated to young people. Being hierarchic, it contains those who are better and those who are less good and therefore more or less excluded or privileged.

These communities of inquiry confirm Lipman’s (1988) argument, proving the falsity of the adage “adults know and children don’t know” (p.194). Even philosophical inquiry into sensitive issues such as death and attitudes towards it has evinced that children and adolescents can carry out a process that Gareth Matthews (1994) defines as one of “philosophical freshness and inventiveness that is hard for even the most imaginative adults to match” (p. 17). As Lipman



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(1988) notes in this regard, there is nothing positive about seeking to “acquire the knowledge [with] which grown-ups are so richly endowed” (p. 194).

The development of a philosophical educational community also makes room for a hybrid space that contains multiple identities and questions, as well as a plethora of answers (Kizel, 2013). If it is permitted, it can thus afford a place of tolerance, democracy, and a less cynical and more optimistic authenticity. It may also, however, allow for pessimism and dead ends. In this sense, through a discussion of what Lipman (1988) calls an ethical inquiry, the essence of which is the worthy life, the participants in a community of inquiry can engage in a deep and comprehensive philosophical discourse.

As Lipman (1998) notes, developmental theories of childhood frequently tend to assume that childhood is a preparation for adulthood and thus constitutes an “incomplete condition moving toward completeness” (p. 194). He thus contends that they are restricted because they are limited by carefully-selected criteria:

The philosophy of childhood would be much enhanced by fresh work in ethical theory. Such work would take into account the capacity of children to engage in rational dialogue, to offer reasons for their conduct and would not treat children patronizingly or condescendingly by assuming that their behavior is necessarily more selfish and less idealistic than the behavior of adults (p. 195).

Here, the adult is not preferred in any sense—certainly not any philosophical one. Addressing the deepest meanings of life in the context of the commemoration of the dead reveals itself to be intensive and valuable, branching out to relevant issues. In this context Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan (1980) contend that “Adults too often assume that children are curious

merely in order to acquire specific information rather than to understand the reasons that things are the way they are” (p. 25).

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