

Special Issue: Literature and Philosophy in Schools

Editorial

Why study literature in schools? What special benefits come with an education in literature? What might students be missing if they bypass literature? These, surely, are hard questions. Will students who lack experience of literature lack imagination? Or human sympathies? Or moral development? Or cultural and historical awareness? Scratch the surface, and the questions about the value of literature as a school subject unfold rather rapidly, and dauntingly.

The impulse for this Special Issue arose from discussions of these questions between the two editors, mostly at breakfast at a café on the Canning River in Perth, Western Australia. We were conscious of two general problems. One is the trend against the study of literature in schools in our corner of the world. When they can, students are choosing disciplines other than English literature. The other general problem is so-called 'literary theory'. We are not hostile to theorising about literature; indeed, as philosophers, we are committed to theorising about literature as much as about science or ethics or reasoning. But we doubt that literary theory, as commonly practiced in academia, is beneficial to those teaching and studying literature in schools. We wanted to find a form of literary study that would benefit both teachers and students.

Both of us have been involved in the Philosophy in Schools movement for 25 years. So part of the solution to our problems was staring us in the face: apply the hard-earned wisdom of the Philosophy in Schools movement to the study of literature in schools—especially the pedagogical wisdom. We started writing a paper of our own, stating our own thoughts on the issues, for submission to this journal. The thought then came to us that there might be a Special Issue of the *Journal of Philosophy in Schools* dedicated to the subject. We proposed this to the editors, Laura D'Olimpio, Andrew Peterson and Michael Hand. They were keen. The following Call for Papers was sent out:

Many would agree that the study of literature is valuable to secondary students. But there is much disagreement about the nature of this value. Clearly, literature is not like the empirical disciplines, including history and social studies. It does not depend upon fact and evidence. Perhaps literature is in some ways like philosophy, in that it provokes classroom

thought and discussion. But it does not present or examine arguments in the way that philosophy does. Is there a case for an approach to literature through the philosophical community of inquiry? If so, what might such an approach look like in schools and what would it achieve?

The response to this call was a strong one. We received enough good quality submissions for two Special Issues. Here we are publishing eight papers; a further eight are on track to appear in the May 2025 Special Issue.

In the first paper, 'Using explainer videos to do philosophy with children and young people', Lisa Bortolotti from the United Kingdom discusses Aesop's fables. The fables are, as she says, 'exactly the type of story that can promote personal reflection and can be used to introduce a philosophical concept or kickstart a philosophical discussion in a classroom with children and young people'. They are brief, structurally simple, based on animal characters, involve no plot or character development, and present an explicit moral message. Given this, the fables may seem simple, but they contain arguments from analogy, and discussing these arguments in class introduces a level of reflective thought that expands the students' mental capacities. She shows how 'explainer videos' can be used to enhance the classroom experience, especially for children with limited reading ability.

In the second paper, 'The Enlightenment of fiction: Literature to learn to philosophise', Edwige Chirouter from France offers a perspective based on her experience of teaching 'youth literature' in France, Belgium and Africa. The literature she uses includes 'picturebook classics', such as those by Maurice Sendak, Tomi Ungerer, Claude Ponti, and Kitty Crowther, or traditional oral tales. Literature presents 'thought experiments we conduct in the great laboratory of the imagination', in Paul Ricœur's words. Children need this imaginative experience; 'childhood is the golden age of belief in the imaginary', she says. The experience of literature has three great benefits: 'it facilitates the exploration of possibilities, opens readers to otherness, and thus brings complexity to philosophical reflection'; 'literary references help to uphold the rigorous standards of philosophical thinking'; and 'literature establishes a healthy emotional distance' between personal experience and general concepts.

The third paper, 'Attending to adolescent experience: The tragedy as a stimulus and a model', comes from Lucy Elvis and Michela Dianetti in Ireland. Their focus is on tragedy and its relevance to adolescents. Following Ann Margaret Sharp, they are inspired by Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, who 'provide accounts of the moral value of attention that are both timely and enriching for the practice of philosophy for and

with young people'. In tragedies such as Sophocles' *Antigone* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* 'we feel compassion for the characters because what is transmitted is not a judgement on the wrongdoing of the character, of an evil choice for which they are punished, but their suffering follows the entirety of what they are'. 'As not-yet-adult, [adolescents] find themselves caught between forces beyond their control placing them in a position akin to the tragic hero, moved as they are by the forces of fate (Oedipus), loyalty (Antigone) and love (Lear)'. P4C teachers can learn to go beyond conceptual analysis and to think more deeply about the adolescent experience of life.

Lisa Rygaard Frost Kristensen of Denmark has a similar theme in her wide-ranging and theoretical paper 'Developing ethical formation through literature and philosophy in school'. She takes her inspiration most of all from philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Matthew Lipman, but draws together a wide array of thinkers. 'The value of literature in the philosophical classroom is that allows students to try on another person's thoughts, emotions, life experiences, perspectives, attitudes and worldviews'. 'Ethical formation should be regarded as two-sided, meaning that it is not only essential to find our own place—in terms of values and how we view the good life—but it is equally important that we can transcend our individuality and decentre in the name of sociality.' She ends by offering examples of 'how school practitioners may use literary texts to prompt ethical reflections through philosophical questions and enquiry'.

Another wide-ranging discussion, 'Using literature to improve the moral imagination' by Stephen Keko Miller from the United States, continues this theme. Miller takes his inspiration from Walt Whitman, John Dewey, Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, Toni Morrison and others. His main issue is 'how to improve Moral Imagination'. He quotes Booth on 'the unique value of fiction: its relatively cost-free offer of trial runs'. Booth's idea of 'co-duction'—talking together about the content and meaning of a literary work—is drawn upon and connected to the 'community of inquiry' familiar to the Philosophy in Schools tradition. Miller contends that, 'despite the very private nature of reading fiction, when it comes to making sense of it, it is a social process'.

In the sixth paper, Sofia Nikolidaki of Greece offers an empirical study on 'Prospective preschool teachers learning to use picturebooks for philosophical inquiries'. Her paper 'outlines a methodology for pairing literature (specifically picturebooks) with philosophy with children and integrating them into the practice of prospective preschool teachers at kindergartens'. She investigates two topics: One, 'how do preservice preschool teachers extract philosophical concepts and generate questions

from picturebooks when they participate in a philosophical community of inquiry during their university laboratory sessions? And two, 'how do preservice preschool teachers effectively facilitate philosophical discussions with pupils based on picturebooks when they are teaching in kindergartens?' She reports on the experience of her student-teachers in their efforts to introduce philosophical inquiry to young children. Her discussion is richly descriptive of this difficult task for new teachers.

In 'The quest for self in Italian secondary schools: Bridging literature and philosophy, Giacomo Romano of Italy discusses the state of philosophical teaching in Italian upper secondary schools. One part of the curriculum is focused on the idea of the self, which is often approached through literary texts, notably those of Luigi Pirandello, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, JD Salinger, Samuel Beckett and Italo Calvino. However, Romano argues that the curriculum needs to engage with contemporary philosophical debate about the self. He places emphasis on the 'narratological' idea of the self, which he sees as especially valuable for teenage students. For teenagers 'the development of the self can be facilitated through literary and philosophical exploration, which students can effectively utilise for personal growth. This process can help individuals identify their strengths and weaknesses, boost self-confidence and self-esteem, and improve interpersonal relationships with peers and others'. Thus, he contends, 'the highly ambitious targets of ministerial philosophy programs can be transformed from merely educational and disciplinary aspirations into practices that shape and train personalities'.

The eighth paper, 'Fostering toleration in secondary school students through Enlightenment philosophical tales', is by Matthew Sharpe of Australia. He argues that 'teachers of philosophy in school, interested in the use of literature in their classrooms, can benefit from teaching the wonderful, today widely-neglected literary works of the Enlightenment philosophes'. He has in mind the 'fables of reason' of such authors as Montesquieu, Voltaire and Denis Diderot. 'None of these texts require technical training to understand or to enjoy. None of them engage in demanding forms of academic argumentation of such a kind as to go over students' heads or to bore so many of them as to render a class ineffective. They each involve characters with which readers are asked to identify for long enough to undertake the lived experiment of looking at things through their eyes, and taking an interest in the consequences of their philosophical positions.' Their special value is that they teach toleration and intellectual humility.

As mentioned above, a second Special Issue on Literature and Philosophy in Schools will appear in May 2025. We are confident that it will add another valuable set of discussions to the present Special Issue.

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Guest Editors