

YES, THEY CAN

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A recent BBC News report presented the following interchange from a classroom in which students who had never studied philosophy before were introduced to the philosophy of Herakleitos by being asked the question of whether it is possible to step twice into the same river:

"Well—I think you can step in twice because if you step in once with one leg, you can step in a second time with the other leg," [a female student] says.

Another counters that this would not qualify as stepping in twice because although two legs have been used—only one body has gone into the river . . .

"You could step in the river one day and then go home. Then the next day, you could come back to the same river—as long as you know the way—and do it again."

Then, in a flash of inspiration, one of the boys . . . now ventures hesitantly: "If you stepped in the river on Saturday, and then you went to step in the river on the next day—where you stepped on Saturday would be gone because the river keeps on moving."

"Aha," [the instructor] says.

To most Americans, such a discussion might seem typical of an "Introduction to Philosophy" course in one of our colleges. To a more elite-minded American, it might seem to be taken from one of our high school honors or AP courses.

In actuality, this discussion took place in Eliot Bank Primary School in the Forest Hill section of London, and the discussants were all seven-year-olds. In other words, this class would correspond to our second grade.

This is a striking example of what education can be—and once was—in this country.

As BBC reporter Hannah Goff observed, "There is a maturity and a diplomacy in the way that these seven-year-olds tackle the puzzle, digging out the words to help them . . . understand . . . They do not always succeed—sometimes they lose their train of thought on the way and collapse in giggles—but they are enjoying trying."

My own teaching experience squares with this. When I was assigned in 1990 to teach an eighth-grade American Experience course, a double class combining literature and history, I was told that one of the readings had to be a novel of my own choosing. I was given a list of non-binding suggestions that predictably consisted of so-called age-appropriate "young adult" novels. To me, this was not the kind of challenging literature that I wanted to use.

Instead—contrary to the skeptical nay-saying of my colleagues—I chose Herman Melville's little-read *Israel Potter*, a philosophically astute fictionalized account of the experiences of a Yankee schlemiel during the Revolutionary War, in which major historical figures—such as Ben Franklin and John Paul Jones—appear in all their unflattering complexity. I assigned each student one chapter to teach to the class. I taught the first six chapters myself as a model. Most of the students rose to the challenge and performed impressively.

I took this risk because I recalled that in my eighth-grade English class, we were assigned—in a regular public school—the *Odyssey*. In retrospect, I realized that this class was one of the most important formative experiences in my intellectual growth.

When we concluded, I asked the students—with my department head as unexpected class guest—to evaluate their experience. Remarkably, even those students who did not like the novel, all said that nonetheless they enjoyed studying what they called "a real book."

The lesson here is that learning engenders appropriate behavior, not—as typically is assumed nowadays—the reverse. As I have said before, the word "discipline" is the Latin word "disciplina," which literally means "learning," and is related to the word "disciple," which literally means "learner."

The evaluative judgment of Ms. Goff is apt: "Behaviour . . . tends to improve when children have a chance to gain some emotional intelligence through philosophy."

In American educational circles, the phrase "emotional intelligence" would be regarded as an oxymoron. We continue to pander to the assumed emotional impulses of our students at the cost of their intellects.

We infantilize our students to their detriment. Indeed, when you infantilize someone, you should not be surprised when he or she acts like a baby.

We know that students who skip a grade when they are young quickly catch up socially and emotionally with their new peers. What is true of these students is true of most students. If we expect them to rise, they will rise.

Instead, we expect them to fall, and that is only one letter away from "fail."

Bob Zaslavsky is a retired teacher of our much-neglected humanities.