

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - The Improvement Of Teacher Training In Philosophy For Children Through The Pragma Dialectic Approach



In this paper I intend to argue that teacher training in the Philosophy for Children Program can be significantly improved through the Pragma Dialectical Approach. For that purpose, I will first make a brief and necessarily sketchy presentation of the fundamentals of the Philosophy for Children Program. Then I will make a few comments on its potential for an education for democracy, making specific reference to the Chilean experience. Next I intend to discuss the concept of a “Community of Inquiry”, central to the Philosophy for Children Program, in order to show 1) how the building of such a community can contribute to the development of reasoning skills and democratic attitudes in the participants and 2) what is expected from the Philosophy for Children teacher.

Based on this discussion, I intend to reflect on what I see as some shortcomings, as far as helping teachers meet those expectations, in the presentation of the formal and informal logic contents of the novels and teacher manuals, which are the standard materials used for teacher training in the Program. I shall also comment on the bearing that the usual structure and length of the Workshops may have on the results of that training.

Finally, I intend to show how the Pragma Dialectical Approach can help overcome the difficulties and contribute to improve the teachers’ training. For this purpose, I shall discuss some features of the Pragma Dialectical Approach such as the formulation of a code of conduct for rational discussants and the analysis and evaluation of various types of argument attempting to show how these can help the teachers in training become the kind of model of reasonableness that the Philosophy for Children Program expects them to be.

1. The Philosophy for Children Program

The Philosophy for Children Program is deservedly renown and appreciated worldwide for its merits in helping to develop reasoning skills and reasonableness in children through philosophical dialogue. Using philosophical novels for children, the teachers trained in the Program are able to organize lively discussions in the classroom about things that matter to the students, thus breaking the monotony and lack of meaning of which traditional education, through the imposition of an “Adult Agenda”, is usually accused.

As Matthew Lipman, creator of the Philosophy for Children Program explains, the main purpose of the Program is “to help children learn how to think for themselves” (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980: 53). Rather than aiming at teaching philosophical topics to children, the Program aims at helping them “to think philosophically” (Bosch, 1992: 18).

According to Lipman (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980: 22), the most adequate means for stimulating thinking is dialogue. When we are intensely engaged in dialogue about things that matter to us vitally, says Lipman, we perform a number of mental activities such as listening attentively, considering carefully, rehearsing what we might say next, establishing connections with what others have said or written on the topic earlier or somewhere else, trying to figure out what the speaker is aiming at and what the assumptions are from which he or she is starting, etc. In other words, although we may not be aware of that, we are exercising our reasoning skills and thus stimulating their development. The same applies to children. Therefore, if we manage to engage them in dialogues that are meaningful for them, Lipman argues, we will contribute to develop their reasoning skills. If we help them, in this process, to become more sensitive to the variety of perspectives and the complexity of the problems involved, we will contribute to develop their reasonableness.

The role of Philosophy in this endeavour is twofold:

1. to maintain or repair the connection with the children’s curiosity making it possible “to elicit from them the wondering and questioning characteristic of philosophical behavior at any age” (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980: 103), and
2. to give dialogue the necessary structure and rigour that makes of it an effective tool for the development of reasoning skills.

The first is taken care of by the novels and by the methodology. The novels cover a great variety of topics from the philosophical tradition. The methodology stimulates children to ask and wonder about anything that the readings may

prompt them to ask and guides them in following the inquiry where it leads.

The second is covered by Logic, both formal and informal. Lipman says that there are three meanings of Logic in Philosophy for Children: Formal Logic, Giving Reasons and Acting Rationally.

Formal Logic's main purpose in the Program is "to help children discover that they can think about their thinking in an organized way" (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:131). Giving Reasons or "The Good Reasons Approach" emphasizes seeking reasons and assessing reasons given by others. Its main purpose in the Program is to help children "discover the broad range of applications of structured, deliberate thinking" (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:139).

Acting Rationally designates the kind of Logic whose purpose it is "to encourage children to use reflective thinking actively in their lives" (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:146). Neither the philosophical questions and ideas nor the logical notions are contents or subject matter that the students are expected to learn as that. The teacher's role is to promote among the children a philosophical discussion of the highest level, using the novels' contents to stimulate them to discuss those issues that really interest them, and to become him or herself an arbiter that guarantees the discussion's impartiality. Therefore, Philosophy and Logic are blended, so to speak, in the activities the students and the teacher perform and it is rather artificially that one separates them for the purpose of analysis.

For my present purposes in this paper, it is important to note that the teacher not only is expected to know and to be sensitive to an enormous amount of philosophical material, but also is supposed to be aware of the rules of good reasoning and to be able to point them out to students as needed during the discussion and to help them apply those rules to their reflection and everyday experience.

2. Education for Democracy

Beside its remarkable results in improving children's reasoning and reading comprehension, the Philosophy for Children Program is also known for its impact on the development of other areas of the child's personality, such as creativity, dedication to work and what in the Program is referred to as "personal and interpersonal growth" (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:65). This expression refers to an increased awareness of the own personal value and the value of others and an increased sensitivity to one another's personalities that emerges as

a result of being engaged in the common venture of philosophical inquiry. Learning to think together respecting rules of thinking and discovering different and unthought of ways of thinking and looking at things helps develop a special sensitivity for what it means to belong to a community. This will become more clear later when we discuss the concept of a “Community of Inquiry”. For the moment, it is enough to say that in the very conception of Philosophy for Children is the seed of an education that is both democratic and for democracy.

In a research project (Fondecyt[i] Project O7O3-91), conducted for four years in a suburban area of Santiago, Chile, in a school that serves a population of extremely socially deprived children, my husband, Celso López, and I were able to show that the Program can be an effective tool for educating for democracy in Chile.(Cf. Vicuña,1991).

What we did was to work with the children from 4th to 7th grade using the philosophy for Children materials, train the teachers so that they could do the same, and observe and register in every session the “democratic behaviours” that were being developed. For this we used an observation chart in which we included fourteen democratic behaviours. The research assistants, all university students majoring in philosophy, were in charge of this task. We also measured the development of reasoning skills in the children and contrasted it with a control group. The results showed significant improvement in the experimental group.(Cf. Vicuña & López, 1994).

I think that the Program’s enormous potential for an education for democracy is obvious to those who know and reflect on its foundations and methodology. The only merit of what we did resides in showing that these ideas really could work in Chile, and in the most difficult setting. Now that we have shown it, we must be able to prepare teachers that can replicate the experience. Hence the importance of improving the quality of teacher training, especially in places like Chile where democracy is still quite far from being completely realized.

3. The Concept of a Community of Inquiry

According to Lipman, the expression “Community of Inquiry” was presumably coined by Charles Sanders Peirce and was originally “restricted to the practitioners of scientific inquiry, all of whom could be considered to form a community in that they were similarly dedicated to the use of like procedures in the pursuit of identical goals”(Lipman, 1991:15).

Applied to the field of Philosophy for Children, the expression designates a group

of persons (the children and the teacher) who are engaged in a common search that is both cooperative and mutually challenging. In Lipman's conception, whenever children are stimulated to think philosophically following the inquiry where it leads and submitting themselves to the procedures that are proper to that inquiry, the classroom is converted into a community of inquiry. This means that "students listen to one another with respect, build on one another's ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another's assumptions" (Lipman, 1991:15).

The repetition of the reciprocal expression "one another" in the above characterization is indicative of the communitary and cooperative aspect of this endeavor, also present in the words "build" and "assist". But there is also reciprocity in the mutual challenge to be critical, to supply reasons, to draw inferences, to identify assumptions. What becomes manifest, then, in this characterization are the two aspects that ought to be part of the community of inquiry: the communitary and the logical.

Some images that Lipman uses may serve to explain what the community of inquiry is all about. I consider the following four images to be the most suggestive and therefore I propose to elaborate on them in order to get a better grasp of the concept and especially of the teacher's role.

1. *The kittens and the ball of yarn.*

"Under suitable circumstances, says Lipman, a room full of children will pounce on an idea in the way a litter of kittens will pounce on a ball of yarn thrown in their direction. The children will kick the idea around until it has been developed, elaborated upon, and even in some instances applied to life situations, although the latter is seldom achieved without the teacher's artful guidance." (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:104).

Doing philosophy with children is inviting them to play with ideas, to make them roll around, to take them apart, and to take out the different threads until they apparently make a big entanglement. They may think that they are just playing and that what they are doing does not have much sense, but a skilled teacher will be able to help them find sense in that apparent entanglement, what the lines of convergence and divergence are, and how to go about to clarify the issue.

2. *The human pyramid* (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:105).

Doing philosophy with children is also similar to the building of a human pyramid

by the children in the school yard. They are all necessary in order for the construction not to fall and each one contributes in a different way to the balance of the whole. It belongs to the teacher's role to show where there is need of support and where of counterbalance.

3. *The construction of bricks* (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980).

The way in which all children participate in the discussion and contribute to bring about clarity and to make sense of the problems at issue is similar to a construction made of bricks in which everyone is placing his or her own brick making it fit in harmoniously in the whole. The teacher should be able to point out where there is a brick lacking and how to make the building become more stable and more harmonious.

4. *The boat tacking into the wind* (Lipman, 1991:16).

When the children and the teacher are committed to this kind of inquiry, the whole group advances like a boat that goes into the sea following the wind's impulse that sometimes pushes in one direction and sometimes in another. The wisdom of the teacher, as that of an expert sailor, lies in knowing how to benefit from the favorable wind and how to resist the adverse one, when to unfurl the sails and when to pick them up.

Through this last image Lipman intends to show the most significant feature of the community of inquiry: that the progress of the group resembles the process of thinking itself. "Consequently, when this process is internalized or introjected by the participants, they come to think in "moves" that resemble its procedures. They come to think as the process thinks" (Lipman, 1991:16). By means of these four images I have attempted to make understandable in a few words a concept that is rather difficult to explain to someone who hasn't lived through the experience. What is important to note for my present purpose is that the communitary aspect and the aspect concerned with the development of reasoning skills are intertwined. Therefore, in the process of building such a community the teacher has to attend to both.

Through participating in such a community, students become aware of the diversity of perspectives and the diversity of thinking styles from which an issue can be looked at and are willing to examine rigorously all possible alternatives. In the process, they learn how to think better because they are enriched by the different perspectives and learn to correct their thinking in the light of the other

participants' objections or suggestions. In order for them to be able to come to this ideal situation, they need to be guided by a teacher that helps them learn to respect each other, to become aware of one another's thinking processes and to develop a sense of what thinking rigorously entails.

According to Lipman, the conditions required to build a Community of Inquiry are intrinsic to philosophy itself (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:45), therefore doing philosophy with the children is the best way of fostering its development.

What is needed, says Lipman, is "a teacher who is provocative, inquisitive, impatient of mental slovenliness and a classroom of students eager to engage in dialogue that challenges them to think and to produce ideas" (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:102). The model for this ideal teacher is Socrates. In Lipman's view, Socrates' most remarkable features, as he is portrayed in Plato's dialogues, are his ability to question, his rigurocity and his belief that knowledge is not something that one transmits to other, but something that one helps the other to elicit from himself.

The Philosophy for Children teacher is expected to emulate Socrates, becoming for his/her students a model of inquisitiveness, rigurocity, openness, intelectual honesty and humility. He or she must be someone who challenges the students to think and who is able to show them how to think well and how to improve the quality of their thinking. The most important of the teacher's abilities should be the ability to foster and to guide a philosophical discussion, representing for their students an impartial arbiter and a challenging, inquisitive, open minded facilitator of it. There are a number of skills that the teacher should master for this purpose.

Among the ones mentioned and analyzed by Lipman are the following (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:102-128): the teacher must be able to elicit from the students their views or opinions, to help them express themselves more clearly, restating, explicating or interpreting what the children say when necessary, to request definitions, to point out to fallacies, to indicate underlying assumptions, to maintain the relevance, to center the discussion, to examine alternatives, to request reasons, to request evidence and to orchestrate the discussion conducting it to a higher level of generality.

It becomes clear from this that the teacher is expected not only to think philosophically but also to be able to analyze and appraise all the children's contributions, to show how they relate to one another and to help the discussion grow and become a meaningful experience to all participants.

The question, of course, is how to train a teacher in order that he or she develops

these features.

4. Some shortcomings in teacher training

To train a teacher in Philosophy for Children is no easy task. It is necessary to help them develop a genuine curiosity, a commitment to philosophical inquiry, an ability to question, a sensitivity both to rules of rigorous thinking and to different thinking styles, and the skills required for conducting a philosophical discussion mentioned above. In relation to this, Lipman says:

“No explanation of the art of teaching philosophy can be adequate for the teacher-in-training. First, it must be admitted that philosophers themselves have never been very clear about what they do when they teach philosophy. We therefore lack a complete understanding on which an adequate explanation could be based. Second, even if we had such an explanation, it would be insufficient without a competent modelling by the philosopher coupled with the teacher’s experiencing what it is to engage in philosophical dialogue. These three components- - explanation, modelling, and experiencing- are indispensable in preparing teachers to teach philosophy on the elementary grade level.”(Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:125).

In consequence, in the Philosophy for Children practice everywhere the teachers are trained in workshops where they are expected to experience in themselves what it is like to be a participant in the building of a community of inquiry. Using the same materials that they will later use with the students, i.e. the novels and teacher’s manuals, they are guided by an Instructor or teacher trainer in building a community of inquiry with their colleagues in training.

True to its Deweyan origins, the Program provides each of the teachers in training the opportunity of “learning by doing” through the experience of guiding at least one of the sessions. This and being a participant in the building of a community of inquiry constitute the “experiencing component”. The “modelling component” is provided by the Instructor, a philosopher trained by Lipman himself. The “explanation component”, however, is less visible in the workshops. What is usually done is giving the teachers to read “Guiding a Philosophical Discussion” (Chapter 7 of Lipman’s *Philosophy in the Classroom*: Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980:102-128). In this text they will find very clear and practical explanations on how to do their work. But, even in this text, there are things that a teacher with no background in logic will find hard to understand or to apply in practice, for instance, inferring logical implications, seeking consistency,

indicating fallacies, etc.

As I see it, the explanation component doesn't seem to be sufficiently accounted for in the workshops, especially in what regards to the logic contents of the Program. This also hinders the exercise by the teachers of the experiencing component in this matter. There are several reasons for this:

1. The logic contents included are not the same in all the novels. Therefore, the teachers trained in "Pixie", for instance, will not have the same opportunity of being exposed to some logical contents as the ones trained in "Harry".
2. The logic contents of the Program do not include a thorough treatment of the fallacies. Although many excellent exercises on faulty reasoning are provided in the teacher's manuals, there is no systematic treatment that may ensure that the teachers will be able to use them profitably.
3. The logic contents of the Program do not include as a topic the procedural aspects that the teachers are expected to be able to point out to the students when guiding the philosophical discussion, like going to the point, avoiding personal attacks, providing reasons, avoiding contradiction, maintaining relevance, etc.
4. Due to the methodology of the Program, one only gets to discuss what the group chooses to discuss in every session. Therefore, it is quite possible that the logical aspects are not discussed, just because they are never chosen to be discussed. Of course, the teacher, being a member of the community of inquiry, can always propose to discuss logical topics, but he or she cannot impose them. This should never be a problem with the children, because the teacher has countless opportunities and ways during the school year to introduce the issues that have been left aside. However, given the length (usually 60 hours distributed in an intensive week) and the somewhat artificial nature of the workshops, the teacher trainer does not have this luxury, but has to move on in order to cover all the ground assigned to that workshop.

As stated before, there are many excellent exercises in the teacher's manuals, e.g. on analogical reasoning, part-whole relationships, syllogistic reasoning, inductive reasoning, and so on. But, if they do not come up during the training period, it is very unlikely that the teachers will attempt to use them later on with their students.

In our experience in teacher training in Chile, we have seen that teachers do, in fact, avoid discussing logical subjects. In so doing, they fail to get the necessary

experience to work these subjects later on with their students and they are deprived of discussing the theoretical explanations that may help them understand how these logical aspects can be introduced in the practice of successfully guiding a philosophical discussion.

The explanation and the experiencing components being absent, the only way that is left for the teachers to learn is by imitating the Instructor's modelling. This is hardly sufficient, for excellent that the Instructor may be.

What we often see is that the teachers "learn the music but don't learn the words", as we say in Chile. That is, they go through the stages of reading, inviting the students to formulate questions, helping them find relationships between the different contributions and grouping them. They are also able to create an open, inviting atmosphere, promoting questioning and discussion. But, when it comes to providing the necessary help to center the discussion, or to pointing out to some fallacy that has been committed, or to showing that some contribution is not relevant to the issue at hand, they simply fail to do it.

In order to counter this deficiency in the explanation component, we have introduced in the structure of our workshops in Chile some short lectures followed by discussion. One of the subjects of these lectures is the role of logic in Philosophy for Children. Although this helps, it is by no means enough. What is needed is a basic and systematic treatment of the logic involved in the Program.

5. The Pragma Dialectical Approach

I think that the Pragma Dialectical Approach could help to overcome some of the difficulties just mentioned and contribute to the improvement of teacher training in Philosophy for Children. I shall limit myself to pointing out to four features of the Pragma Dialectic Approach that make of it a useful tool for helping teachers meet the challenges outlined above.

1. The Pragma Dialectic Approach formulates a code of conduct for rational discussants and gives ten rules to be observed in a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992: 208-209). These rules are to some extent equivalent, yet much more precisely expressed than the Philosophy for Children requirements for the building of a community of inquiry. For example, the building of a community of inquiry requires from the participants:

a. mutual respect and mutual challenging.

This could be expressed by

rule 1: "Parties should not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or

casting doubt on standpoints”, and

rule 2: “A party that advances a standpoint is obliged to defend it if the other party asks him to do so”.

b. openness.

This, again, could be expressed by rule 1.

c. intellectual honesty.

This is expressed by rule 5: “A party may not falsely present something as a premise that has been left unexpressed by the other party or deny a premise that he himself has left implicit”, rule 6: “A party may not falsely present a premise as an accepted starting point nor deny a premise representing an accepted starting point” and rule 9: “A failed defense of a standpoint must result in the party that put forward the standpoint retracting it and a conclusive defense in the other party retracting his doubt about the standpoint”.

d. rigurocity.

This is expressed by rule 3: “A party’s attack on a standpoint must relate to the standpoint that has indeed been advanced by the other party”, rule 4: “A party may defend his standpoint only by advancing argumentation related to that standpoint”, rule 7: “A party may not regard a standpoint as conclusively defended if the defense does not take place by means of an appropriate argumentation scheme that is correctly applied”, rule 8: “In his argumentation a party may only use arguments that are logically valid or capable of being validated by making explicit one or more unexpressed premises”, and rule 10: “A party must not use formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous and he must interpret the other party’s formulations as carefully and accurately as possible”. Although these rules are formulated for discussions between two parties and not for group discussions such as the ones that take place in the community of inquiry, being aware of these rules may be of great help for the teachers in their role of arbiters of the discussions. For this purpose, of course, they must understand what lies behind each rule and have had the opportunity of discussing them. From a pedagogical point of view, being able to summarize this information in these Pragma Dialectical ten rules is most advantageous.

2. The Pragma Dialectic Approach explains the fallacies as violations of the rules for a critical discussion. Therefore, knowing the rules may help the teachers get a better understanding of the fallacies. Since, as stated before, the training workshops’ structure makes it difficult to take up the logical issues in a thorough

and organized way, the summarizing and comprehensive vision that the Pragma Dialectic treatment of the fallacies offer, represent a significant improvement for the teachers.

This is not to say that this will replace the necessary experience that ought to be acquired through time and practice, but I think that it will help the teachers in gaining confidence in their handling of the logical aspects.

3. Through the analysis of various types of argument the Pragma Dialectic Approach provides the teachers in training with different models to evaluate different situations. Particularly helpful in this context are the “argumentation schemes” that the Pragma Dialectical Approach distinguishes. According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst, arguers usually rely on ready made argumentation schemes : “a more or less conventionalized way of representing the relation between what is stated in the argument and what is stated in the standpoint” (Eemeren van, & Grootendorst 1992:96). Therefore, arguments can be analyzed as belonging to one of the three following categories of types. The arguer may try to convince his interlocutor by pointing out that something is “symptomatic” of something else, or something is “similar” to something else, or that something is “instrumental” to something else. Of course, there are many subcategories of argumentation schemes that the teachers should be made aware of, but there is a great advantage for them in knowing and learning to identify these main types, because this will help them to better understand and evaluate the children’s contributions.

4. Through the acquisition of the skills for dialectical analysis and normative reconstruction the teacher can be helped in developing an ability for better guiding the children during the different stages of the building of their discussion.

The brief mention of these Pragma Dialectical features may serve to indicate how this approach can help improve the quality of teacher training in the Philosophy for Children Program.

During the last three months a special course on the logical aspects of the Program has been offered to public school teachers already trained in one of the novels. For this purpose the Pragma Dialectical Approach is being used. We do not have results yet, but the teachers report that they are extremely pleased with the course and that it has helped them greatly in their work with the children.

NOTES

i. Fondecyt is the Chilean National Fund for the development of Science and Technology.

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