

Initiating a Project in Philosophy for Children

After attending an intensive summer workshop in Philosophy for Children (P4C) given by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp last summer, I returned to school in September eager to implement the programme in a significant way. How to go about it? When to begin? Whom to involve? What steps to take in order to ensure a favourable reception of the project within the school community? These were some of the questions with which I began a year ago and what follows is an account of the initiation aspects of a project which is still in progress at Edinburgh Elementary School in Montreal, Quebec.

At first it was tempting to consider ways of subtly integrating P4C into the existing programme. Few, if any, other people would need to be involved and we could begin immediately. It was a temptation resisted however. Too often the best intentions and enthusiasms acquired at workshops can 'wear off' in the face of practical daily demands, and I worried that such integration would become only too subtle. More important, however, was the recognition that the P4C programme is too comprehensive to be subtly integrated without significant loss. The practicalities of our particular situation made this a glaring factor.

The biggest inhibiting practicality was a severe time constraint which was related to the fact that the children were in a French Immersion programme. This meant that, as their English teacher, I would have a maximum of 375 minutes a week in which to cover their entire Language Arts curriculum -- the same course as for non-Immersion classes. Under these conditions, to 'subtly

integrate' P4C would be to squeeze it in, and that just wouldn't do. It had to have its own clear identity in order to justify the use of 150 minutes per week.

The apparent advantage of involving few other people can also sometimes be a major mistake where educational change is concerned. Because of the nature of the P4C programme in terms of the degree to which it promotes discussion and thinking for oneself, and in terms of the degree to which it differs from the children's normal school fare, I anticipated that our deliberations would not long remain contained within the classroom. Indeed it is a desired effect of the programme that the children be stimulated to discuss with others. Therefore, in order to ensure that parents, especially, understand and be receptive to whatever the children might bring home from their P4C sessions, it was imperative that close attention be given to their role as well as to that of others not directly involved.

Having decided to formalize the effort, therefore, the first step was to seek administrative support for the project. Our new principal was most encouraging and she was especially helpful in handling administrative details and in providing valuable moral support. She suggested that we apply to the School Board for Pilot Project approval, since it was an unfamiliar programme and new materials were involved. This would mean that some form of evaluation would be required and that the project would be monitored by a consultant from the Board.

Approval was obtained in November, and the next step was to acquaint the children's parents with the programme. This step was taken in recognition of the importance of offering information to parents before making changes since they would be more likely to be supportive if offered the opportunity to become as fully

informed as they would like. In this instance their support was considered to be crucial to the success of the project.

The meeting with parents took place in early December, and sixteen out of twenty-six grade five children were represented by one or more members of the family. We began (as we did at the workshop and as I would with the children) with a reading of Chapter One of Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery. It was a good idea. The participating parents enjoyed doing the reading, and it was clear that the content had an instant appeal. After their encounter with the material in the novel, the procedure to be followed with the children was illustrated by projecting overhead transparencies of representative activities from the manual, Philosophical Inquiry. While discussing specific activities, I was able to weave in more theoretical aspects such as the importance of training in philosophical discussion techniques, the role of the "novel-qua-text" and the development of a spirit of "community of inquiry". After this look at the programme itself, I then addressed some anticipated practical concerns such as the amount of time to be spent on P4C and just how it would fit into the children's programme. Then, finally, I provided some background information on the origins of the programme and the extent to which it was being implemented elsewhere. In general, the response of the parents was one of enthusiasm and keen interest, and they seemed to appreciate the opportunity to be informed in this way.

Meanwhile, the children did not know about the project. Although we had been trying out different seating arrangements and discussion formats within the context of their normal English programme since September, nothing specific was said to them about the pilot project until the first actual session. This was a deliberate attempt to avoid creating misleading expectations on their part and to

maximize their opportunity to learn by doing. The less said to them about the programme beforehand the better.

By early January we were ready to begin. The children learned that they would be the only group in the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal to participate in such a project. They heard a minimal description of what it is to do philosophy with emphasis on the hope that they would come to learn the meaning of the word through experience, and they learned that the Language Arts objectives would now be worked on through the P4C programme, thus enabling us to dispense with their basal readers and traditional language books.

This last point requires further comment. It was important that the children understand that, although we would no longer use materials previously considered important, this did not mean we would let go of that which they were to learn through those materials. Rather the new programme would involved Language Arts objectives with and at the same time as objectives specific to P4C. What this amounted to was an integration not of P4C into Language Arts but the reverse. In practice, some procedures had to be developed to account for this dimension, but the material in the manual was readily adaptable to Language Arts objectives, and the programme as a whole seemed all the richer for it -- if that is possible.

Between January and June we did P4C in forty-five minute sessions, three times a week, for about sixty sessions in all. The children's reactions varied. Initially they seemed intrigued and somewhat bewildered by the nature of the material. ("These questions are weird. Who made them up? Did you?") Then gradually a genuine enthusiasm was evident as well as an apparent pride in the fact that they were engaged in a project that was unique. However, their response fluctuated over the months, and there was a time when

I feared that the honeymoon might be over. That was just the time when I was considering the advisability of increasing parental involvement.

By April, a number of parents were expressing a greater interest in the programme. Some had developed an intrinsic interest in philosophy for children, and they wanted to know more. Also, as expected, they were seeing and hearing evidence of the programme at home. The children by this time seemed to enjoy having visitors, and the presence of others seemed not to have a detrimental effect on the discussions. When consulted about the prospect of parental visits, they consented. That is, they did not say no.

And so we had a month of three or four parents visiting in each of eleven sessions. The first session was not at all representative of what was to come, and caused me to have serious second thoughts, but that was the only such session. All the others were extremely worthwhile. Although the presence of parents accounted for some inevitable constraints, the programme was able to continue to develop. Indeed, there were important and unexpected developments which were directly attributable to the parents' participation. From that experience I have gleaned thoughts about what to do differently another time, but excluding parents has now become unthinkable.

When all the parents had visited, I scheduled one more opportunity for them to come together to share in-progress thoughts, questions and concerns. Unfortunately this meeting was poorly attended indicating, perhaps, a satisfaction with the programme and the degree to which they felt familiar with it. Or perhaps the low attendance was due to competition with a busy season of community activities involving the children. The most important question on the

minds of those who did attend was whether or not the project would continue next year. The feeling was unanimous that it should -- and it will.

So often the success of a project can depend heavily on the way in which it was initiated. It is important, therefore, to examine the initiation stages of successful projects in order to identify the factors which may have contributed to that success. In this particular case, it would seem that time, consultation, and participation were important contributing factors. Time was taken to consider the questions raised at the outset, and the proverbial one step was taken at a time and in good time. Consultation preceded implementation and included not only interested people within the school system but also and especially the children's parents. Participation in the project in the form of visits to actual sessions with the children was open to all -- an opportunity not missed by many.

What should be evident from this account is that educational initiation is a complex process. Rarely can successful initiating be entirely attributable to the efforts of one person. However necessary that person's initiative and energy might seem to be, it is not sufficient to ensure the success of a project. To judge any educational initiative to be a success, therefore, is to acknowledge the important contributions of everyone involved.

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