Working for the IAPC

I

During the school year of 1980 — 1981, I worked as an IAPC teacher trainer in the state of New Jersey.[1] Within the workshops, the standard IAPC curriculum materials and method[2] were used to train approximately 40 teachers, including a number of administrators as well as a district superintendent. I also worked directly with children in classes ranging from the fourth to the eighth grade. Lipman's novels[3] were the basis for classroom discussion. After reading the novels aloud, students (whether workshop teachers or children in classrooms) were encouraged to generate topics for further analysis and elaboration. Next, exercises were selected from the teacher's manuals, guiding the examination of problems at greater depth. The goal of the workshops was, primarily, to develop a sense of the value of reflective discussion and to generate a community of inquiry. More specifically, I worked toward the improvement of discussion skills, sensitivity to philosophical issues as they arose in dialogue, and the identification of thinking skills.

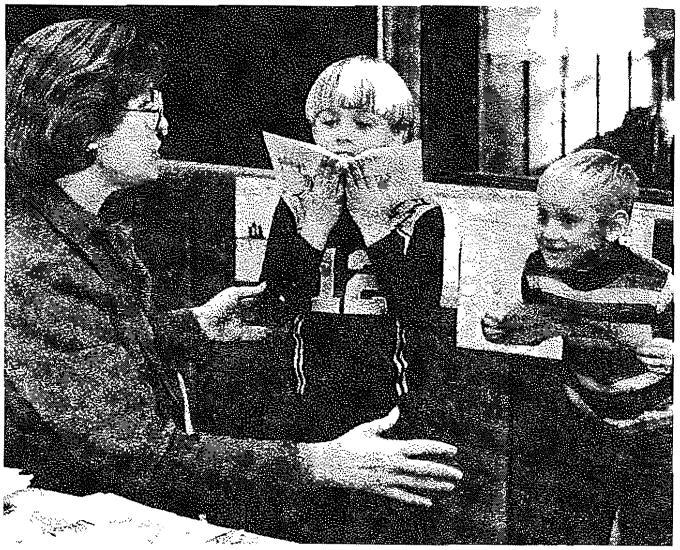
The standard IAPC curriculum was, however, presented within workshop formats that differed from one district to another. One format used employed a philospher in residence. As a resident philospher, I worked directly with children in a number of specially selected classes and met informally with the few teachers involved. In another format my primary interaction was with the teachers, all of whom taught in the same school. In the third format I worked with large numbers of teachers from a wide range of schools. In the latter formats the focus was on formal teacher training workshops.

These experiences, based on a broad array of modes of interaction with a wide variety of districts, teachers, and students, have prompted this attempt at descriptive analysis of what is involved in initiating children into the activity of philosophical inquiry. In this paper I will begin with a few tentative generalizations about factors which influence the success of workshops. Next I will present three brief case studies. Finally, I will draw a few summary conclusions.

II

Despite my own clarity as to the goals and procedures of the workshops, it became all too obvious to me that my ends were qualified by factors arising within the context of implementation. The effectiveness of the program was conditioned by elements as diverse as the social and economic style of the community, the presence of union disputes, the prior exposure of workshop members to philosophy, and the willingness of students to be open to outsiders or unfamiliar modes of classroom interaction. Within the workshop, factors determining success included the kind of format chosen, district goals, the presence of administrators, the personality of the individual teachers, and the size of the groups worked with.

Of primary importance to program effectiveness are the styles of individual teachers. Workshop members are, more frequently than not, experienced teachers.



The variety in experiential backgrounds results in differences of attitude, point of view, and approach that affect the way IAPC training is manifested in workshop and classroom. Although teaching styles were quite diverse, they could be, roughly, ordered along a continuum ranging from "soft" to "hard." The soft end of the continuum was characterized by a tendency to choose introspectionist exercises from the manual, a preoccupation with the interpersonal aspects of the program, the use of student anecdotes as the basis for classroom discussion, and the affirming of value standards. The hard-end teachers tended to look for "right" answers, frequently had discussions within a limiting framework of questions and responses, used exercises in the manual as the basis for written assignments, and, in the more extreme cases, graded students for their work in philosophy.

District goals form another crucial variable. Districts ranged from those for whom the philosopher was a free agent adding another dimension to an already rich curriculum to others for whom philosophy was to attempt to fulfill a specific function satisfying a clearly defined need. Such needs arose in the pursuit of goals ranging from programs for gifted students to attempts to raise student performance in standardized tests through a "thinking-skills" approach. Other districts voted for extended teacher-training programs based on their perception of the past effectiveness of the IAPC's approach.

District goals influence the success of the IAPC workshops by determining the mode of interaction between the trainer and his district. One such mode is provided by the format of having a philosopher in residence who might come into the district for a number of days per week and meet informally with teachers. The most common mode of interaction is a trainer hired on a district-wide basis, who, furnishing graduate credits for workshop participants, trains groups of teachers in the use of IAPC materials and monitors the effectiveness of the training by observation and, sometimes, testing. Training of this sort includes a formal workshop and modeling in the classes of participating teachers.

A host of other variables affects outcome. The size and diversity of the group are frequently crucial factors.

Group dynamics can serve as a corrective for individual styles and show the participants the value of a community of inquiry through the group clarification of philosophic issues. Another issue is previous exposure to similar programs. Prior philosophy courses are important in determining expectations, as are experiences with other approaches to teaching thinking skills. Teachers with a specialization in remediation or reading skills frequently bring strong theoretic presuppositions to the workshop. Concern with community or parent response is a constant factor in the willingness with which workshop participants accept new appraoches toward content or pedagogic styles. The age of students, the willingness of different groups or communities to enter into potentially provocative dialogue, intellectual levels, and attitudes towards discussion are among many factors that affect workshop success.

III

Given this brief general framework, I would next like to present a descriptive account of the three districts I worked with last year. Each of these exhibited a particular combination of the factors identified in the last section, and each may be seen as more or less successful as a function of these factors. But one *caveat*. The analysis being offered here should be treated for what it presents: a mere fragment of the potential experience and understanding of Philosophy for Children.

Leonia, across the George Washington bridge from New York City, is a suburban refuge for New Yorkers. A small, affluent, white district, Leonia has a large number of successful professionals in the community. It tends toward innovative programs. As a philosopher in residence at Leonia, I taught two classes of fifth graders as well as two classes of sixth graders once a week. In addition to classroom teaching, I held informal conferences with the classroom teachers, who were considered to be among the best in the school. Two of them were experienced teachers nearing retirement. The other two were young teachers who generally worked together. The teachers also did one or two additional periods of philosophy with the children during the week. These teachers were not enrolled for graduate credits. The reading assigned for the year was *Harry*. The goal of the program was to give the teachers enough experience so that they, in turn, could train teachers for succeeding years.

The classes in Leonia were extraordinary. The students were, for the most part, articulate children who were used to having their ideas taken seriously. The classes exemplified an admirable degree of mutual respect and tolerance, and philosophy became a vehicle through which the more reticent or reserved students were encouraged to play an active part in the classroom through venturing opinions, presenting personal anecdotes, or representing unique points of view. It became clear that the philosophy program had a positive effect in integrating the students into a community. This was especially true of the sixth grade classes, where the styles of the teachers and the needs of the age turned the philosophy class into a forum on the problems of early adolescence, peer pressure, dating, drugs, and the like. In general, the teachers viewed the program in a positive way, seeing an increase in the students' verbal abilities, strengthened disposition towards seeing alternatives, giving reasons, and developing and supporting coherent positions.

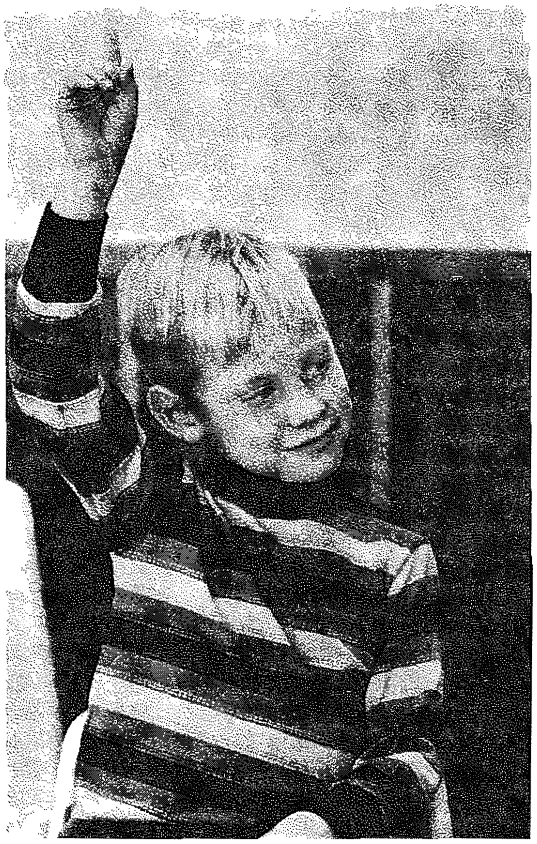
Unfortunately, the impact of the program was limited, having, for the most part, influenced the pedagogical abilities of only the few teachers directly involved in teaching philosophy. Problems of impact were exacerbated by the fact that the fifth grade classes, which in general tended to focus on more deeply philosophical problems, were both taught by the older teachers whose ability to influence their peers was limited because of their imminent retirement. Also, the program became tainted with the image of the "rap-session" approach favored by the younger teachers. These teachers had already opted for a number of "soft" programs in literature, for instance, and the rest of the faculty viewed Philosophy for Children as just another one of the softer pedagogical curricula. Thus, philosophy became another bone of contention in a community where the faculty was already polarized between those favoring the traditional pedagogical approaches and others defending the more recent innovative alternatives.

To add to these problems, today Leonia is faced with a serious administrative change in the academic year of 1981-1982. Leonia Middle School is being combined with a less affluent middle school in an adjoining district. This has put philosophy on the "back burner." Consequently, the cost of a philosopher in residence, roughly equal to the cost of a teacher trainer, has paid for a one-year program which, for the most part, affected only four teachers, two of whom will soon be retired. The program, although successful in certain respects, is viewed as being of only secondary academic importance. And the teachers who will, if ever, teach others the skills required to implement *Harry* are quite iconoclastic in their approaches and consequently could, at least to some degree, misrepresent the goals and methods of the IAPC approach.

IV

Roselle Park is a predominantly white, blue-collar community in south-central New Jersey. The school community is small enough to be housed within the same building complex. The workshop included seven middle school teachers, the district superintendent, and two assistant principals. The most experienced teachers were selected. The group included two reading specialists. All workshop members were enrolled for college credit at Montclair State College. The Philosophy for Children program was integrated as part of reading, language arts, and social studies. The district monitored the program using the California Achievement Test for reading skills. The test was used as a norm-referenced instrument. That is, growth over the year was to be compared with the expected annual average growth.

A number of factors curtailed the success of the workshop. The presence of administrators reinforced standard district practice even when this was inconsistent with IAPC practice. The most telling indicator of the conflict between IAPC and district goals arose from the demand that teachers grade students



for their work in philosophy. This demand was made on the grounds that the work in philosophy was integrated into the other parts of the curriculum for which students had to be graded in a justifiable fashion. As a result of this focus, exercises from the teacher's manuals were regularly assigned as written homework. Students began to look toward the teachers for "right" answers to the various exercises. This further exacerbated problems stemming from the fact that children in this district were highly competitive. Grades in all areas of work were publicly posted. Students had a "work-reward" economy. Work was something you got a grade for. Consequently, philosophical investigation and inquiry — not generative of a clear token of achievement — were not deemed work and were consequently suspect. To make matters worse, anti-intellectualism was reinforced through strong peer pressure. In the eighth grade, where the problems were most severe, students who tried to develop discussion skills were teased for "sounding like teachers." If a student spoke carefully, the response was on the order of "What did he say?" Students would present opinions that they felt would be supported by the largest or loudest group of students in the class. Attempts by adults to reinforce individual thoughtfulness or sophistication in expression were met either by rudeness or withdrawal. The better students rapidly became silent, and classes in philosophy quickly turned into a battleground for what were seen to be fundamental differences in basic life styles.

Problems were not quite as severe in the lower grades. However, the tendency to look to the teacher for conclusive judgments on issues, as well as the ever-present emphasis on grades, inhibited an already minimal willingness on the part of the students to participate freely in the enterprise of philosophical clarification and analysis. In the special reading classes, problems were intensified by the students who, fearful of their peculiar status stemming from a lack of achievement, felt that philosophy was cheating them of time that could better be spent at phonetic drill and the like. This attitude was shared, to some extent, by the reading teachers, who were looking to philosophy as a panacea that would serve their special needs.

The problem with implementation was especially poignant in that the workshop was, in many ways, an excellent one. The teachers were very interested in philosophy and hoped that the program would give their students an experience analogous to the one that many of them had had studying traditional philosophy courses dealing with problems of religion and religious morality. Subjectively, the teachers felt that the workshop had been a success. Many claimed that the experience had opened up students in ways which enabled them to see beyond the narrow confines of a fairly uniform, small town community. Teachers found that despite the problems exhibited in the classes, their students were generally more thoughtful and more probing in their questioning. Even the eighth grade classes had, teachers believed, confronted and understood some of the most powerful controls implicit in their experiences at home and school.

The district, however, defined the success of the program in terms of the scores on the test. And, the test scores, although showing an average increase in reading skills over the year, were not particularly dramatic.[4] Given their priorities, these results were disappointing to all parties concerned and it was felt that Philosophy for Children had not lived up to the expectations of the administrators.

V

The Newark-East Orange workshop was composed of 18 teachers from East Orange and an additional seven teachers who were an overflow from the workshop in the adjoining community of Newark. Both cities represent black, working-class communities in which severe social and economic problems have resulted in serious educational deficiencies. The reading levels in both districts are far below national norms, and both districts have a continuous and long standing problem with delinquency, truancy, and lack of parental support. Both districts, however, are aggressively involved in trying to improve the general ability of their schools to turn out students well educated enough to compete in the state's extensive system of junior and senior colleges. Newark has had Philosophy for Children for four successive years. East Orange began the program in 1980 and is continuing it this year with another large teacher-training workshop. The classes in the program ranged from the fourth to the eighth grade and included two classes of students with learning disabilities.

The Newark-East Orange workshop was marvelously representative of the situation that the teachers would face when bringing Philosophy for Children into their own classrooms, for the workshop had its full complement of extroverts and introverts, people with strong (usually religious) convictions, people who

based their judgments on concrete personal experience, feminists, leftists, conservatives, to mention only some of the differences reflected in pluralist settings. The members of the workshop learned and appreciated how a community of inquiry operates even in the face of dramatic differences in individual outlook. They began to understand the role of supportive criticism in enabling a group to clarify ideas through the process of reflective group thought. In a class of 17- and 18-year-old ex-dropouts, the problems of *Harry* and *Mark* generated a forum in which problems could be dealt with without personal affront and without the need to stake out turf where personal behavior and values had to be defended at all costs. In a class of severely emotionally disturbed 13 and 14 year olds, the *Harry* program became the locus for tentative excursions into freer expressions of intellectual competence.

There were, undoubtedly, some failures in program implementation in this district, too. A teacher, new to one of the schools, was given a sixth grade class of students who were frustrated because they did not have their own classroom. They met in a hallway, partitioned off from the regular school traffic. This class used philosophy as a weapon in their battle with the teacher. *Harry* was just another device to generate confusion, to "sound on" each other, to wear down the teacher by the brute force of their unconcern. Another teacher, seemingly at a loss when required to get students to speculate and think, ended up by making them write endless lists in response to workbook exercises. These few failures were, however, generously counterbalanced with many successes of the sort frequently described in the literature on Philosophy for Children.

VI

Looking back at my experience with the IAPC, I am filled with appreciation for the riches, both personal and intellectual, that the year provided. Each district responded to the presence of a trained philosopher in terms of its unique character and needs. In Newark-East Orange the workshop served as a forum for discussing critical problems growing out of the academic strains in the district: how could, for example, teachers, all too aware of the struggles of individual students, fail to promote students based on scores in standardized tests, independently of individual effort and progress made in the classroom. In Roselle Park, philosophy offered the workshop teachers glimpses of the pleasures of looking deeply at issues. Problems in *Harry* became the locus for discussions of free will, the objectivity of values, and the cause and purpose of the universe. In Leonia, a fifth grade class persisted in discussing the philosophy of mathematics for three consecutive sessions, unwilling to go on until the notions of "always," "necessity," and "rule" were analyzed with care, reminiscent of the best of analytic philosophy. Nevertheless, in terms of my professional responsibility to the area of Philosophy for Children, I feel some judgment is required regarding the differences in the effectiveness of the program in the three districts.

Newark-East Orange is paradigmatic of the most cost-effective use of the IAPC program. Large numbers of teachers are trained overtime and in a fashion that tends to guarantee the utilization of the program as an integral part of the school curriculum. The administration, although committed, is not intrusive. Most important, the workshop is large enough so that the teachers can experience the formation of a community of inquiry and see the operation of Philosophy for Children from the "student side." The problem with this approach is that it is hard to insure the quality of the implementation, and the involvement of the workshop director with individual classes is, of necessity, less than in a more intimate setting.

In evaluating the success of the Leonia program, we must, on the one hand, note that higher standards in philosophical activities were achieved here than in any of the other districts. Leonia's classes are the sorts from which extraordinary transcripts can be drawn. On the other hand, the low cost effectiveness of the project has to be acknowledged, given that it will have little or no impact on the educational system in Leonia as a whole.

The central problem inherent in the situation at Roselle Park was the existence of a number of hidden agendas, which included expectations of the role of philosophy that could not square with practice. Philosophy for Children is not a cure-all, nor is it a substitute for remediation. It cannot counteract a social and educational milieu oriented to group conformity and competitiveness. Although many of the teachers are continuing to employ the pedagogical strategies that were developed by the program, it remains to be seen what effects — perhaps more intangible than a standard reading score — the Philosophy for Children program will have in Roselle Park.

For the past several years it has become clear, both as a function of test results and reports from involved professionals, that Philosophy for Children is both a worthwhile and successful addition to the standard pre-college curriculum. Further, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the curriculum and methodology that have come out of the IAPC are without serious competitor as a unified and practical curriculum for the teaching of thinking skills, discussion skills, and a reasoned approach to the clarification of normative issues. However, at this juncture we need to make a closer appraisal of the success, or lack of it, of various approaches to the implementation of the IAPC program as a function of variations in the educational context within which it must, of necessity, function. It is in this spirit that this paper is offered.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children based at Montclair State College, New Jersey, hires trainers to run workshops for middle school teachers in a number of states. Their most intensive efforts to date have been in New Jersey.

2. The most complete statement of IAPC theory and practice is available in Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980, 2nd ed. The teacher's manuals to the texts mentioned in the following footnote also include valuable information on IAPC method.

3. Lipman, Matthew, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, Upper Montclair, N.J.: IAPC, 1974.
_____, *Lisa*, Upper Montclair, N.J.: IAPC, 1976.
_____, *Mark*, Upper Montclair, N.J.: IAPC, 1980.

4. Test results showed that students made approximately 18 months' progress on the average in a period of 12 months.

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