Philosophy for Children: A New Inservice Option

For the past year we have been introducing teachers in western Massachusetts to Philosophy for Children by means of letters, bulletins, and informational demonstrations. Occasionally we find that a number of teachers in a given school district are interested in the idea, but they may not want to commit themselves to the time and expense of taking a course for college credit. A useful alternative, at least in Massachusetts, has been for the teachers to apply to the state for funding to set up a Commonwealth Inservice program. If their proposal is approved, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts pays for a consultant to conduct the requested program and supplies a fixed amount of money (at present $20.00 per teacher) for materials. Upon successful completion of the program teachers receive inservice credit which count toward salary increments.

We do not know how many states offer comparable programs, but with the reduction in federal funding over the past few years this is certainly a fruitful avenue to investigate. Our purpose in this article is to provide information to educators who may wish to follow through on this idea in their own state or county. We will briefly discuss the inservice application procedure in Massachusetts. We will also describe some of the adaptations that must be made in teaching the Philosophy for Children workshop as an inservice course and evaluate this approach in terms of its advantages and limitations.

Application Procedure

The first step in applying to the Commonwealth Inservice Institute falls to the teachers in a school district who are interested enough in a certain program to initiate an application. The Commonwealth grants provide funding to projects that are requested by teachers rather than by administrators. For each application one teacher must act as the convener. This person is responsible for writing the application, registering interested colleagues in the proposed program, coordinating the purchase of materials, and monitoring the sessions once they have begun.

The following information is based on the two funding proposals with which we have been associated to date, both of which were successful in obtaining funds and resulted in the workshops described in this article. One of these grants was awarded to teachers in Wilbraham, a suburban community; the other, to Pittsfield, a small city.

In addition to budgetary specifications the application form requests justification of the proposed program in four areas:

(1) Need for Program — The convener stated that through interviews with teachers a need was expressed for some training in the teaching of higher level thinking skills to children. It was also suggested that by increasing their analytical skills, children would improve their scores on basic skills tests.

(2) Objectives — The following four were determined:
   (a) learn to draw inferences from a premise;
   (b) discover alternatives to a premise;
   (c) learn to perceive possibilities;
   (d) produce ideas and develop skills in teaching thinking skills in the classroom.

(3) Description of Activities — The course was described as fifteen working sessions after school, of two hours' duration each. The consultant's role was to lead philosophical discussions, exercises, and activities; to encourage the modeling of roles and situations to be applied in the classroom; and to provide audio-visual materials.

(4) Outcomes — Under this heading were repeated all the items earlier listed as objectives, since ultimately children would develop these skills by means of the philosophy program.

Adaptions

We had previously taught the Philosophy for Children materials only through the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, which offers twevle graduate credits from Montclair (New Jersey) State College for a two semester course and is also able to guarantee at least a limited commitment to the program on the part of the local school district. Under the Massachusetts Inservice guidelines we would be teaching a course in which no grades or credits were given, in which attendance would depend on the district requirements regarding inservice programs, and for which we could not presume a districtwide commitment to purchase materials or to designate class time for implementation. Accordingly, we set about making some accommodations.

We established the workshop as fifteen two-hour sessions, to accommodate the Commonwealth Inservice Institute recommendation of a single semester program. Because the teachers who chose to register represented a diversity of grade levels, academic areas, and schools, we chose to present two sets of Philosophy for Children materials, assigning approximately fourteen hours of workshop time to each. Instead of covering a single novel thoroughly we decided to present the first two or three chapters of each novel exhaustively and then to select topics of special difficulty from throughout the books for discussion in the remaining sessions. In this way, teachers were enabled to continue the classroom implematation on their own long after the inservice course was completed. The workshop provided them with improved skills and confidence in the methodology, as well as with the opportunity to discuss the philosophical subject matter which they felt they most needed.

Because the teaching experience forms such an important part of the Philosophy for Children program, we were reluctant to withdraw it altogether as a requirement simply in deference to the brevity of the workshop. The two and one-half hours a week required in the Montclair State College course being too difficult a norm, we therefore chose to adapt the required classroom implementation time, recommending one hour per week. This could be apportioned throughout the week as the teacher desired. A number of teachers have done more than the required hour, while a few may have done less. We observed every teacher once during the fifteen weeks in order to gauge the level of skill and offer suggestions.

Since the Commonwealth grant had not covered any materials other than those for the teachers, districts have had to invest some of their own funds to purchase the children's books. They were usually willing to purchase thirty copies of any novel used. Considerable sharing was therefore necessary. It worked well when a number of teachers were in the same school, but it made implementation difficult for the teacher who was the only one in any given school using the program. The purchase of the books made it possible, on the other hand, for schools to continue the program in future.

A final adaptation involved the Philosophy for Children method itself. We began, as always, by showing the teachers how to lead the entire class in philosophical discussion. This worked well, but some students seemed reluctant to speak before twenty-five or thirty classmates. We then tried, with the cooperaton of the teachers, dividing the class into groups of five to discuss a particular question or exercise and having each group report back to the class as a whole. This proved to be a sucessful device for involving more students and added a needed variety to the format.

Limitations and Advantages

The major limitations to teaching under a state grant such as the one described here are related to time, materials, and administrative support. Fifteen two-hour sessions do not provide enough time to develop a complete familiarity with two sets of materials, although they are probably enough to direct a competent teacher down the right path. In addition, more books for classroom use are necessary in order to establish an orderly implementation program. The final problem involves the issue of district commitment. Unless the administration is supportively behind the program, teachers may cease to use it after the inservice course has ended. However, this problem often exists even when the course is given for graduate credit and is not unique to the inservice format.

The primary advantage of giving this inservice course is the number and variety of teachers — and therefore children — it touches. We have not seen a lower level of either enthusiasm or ability on the part of those taking the course for inservice credit than we have seen in the past in the graduate students. On the contrary, the teachers sometimes demonstrate a more professional attitude than those interested primarily in graduate credits. We also believe that the one hour per week implementation requirement is generally more workable than the two and one-half hours required by the graduate course, and is more likely to be maintained once the program is completed.

In conclusion, we think that the advantages of using the inservice approach during these fiscally difficult times clearly outweigh the limitations. Given the reasonable assumption that only a percentage of teachers will continue to use the materials when no longer enrolled in a course, the need to give competent training to as many as possible must be emphasized.

Glen A. Ebisch
Maureen L. Egan