

# Does “Philosophy for Children” Equal “Philosophy in the Classroom”?

1.

I would like to start with a clarification of the title. The phrase “Philosophy for Children” is used here in the same meaning it has within the I.A.P.C. terminology; i.e. the name of the program prepared by the I.A.P.C. . The phrase “Philosophy in the Classroom” is used here in the same meaning it has in the title of the book by this name written by Prof. Lipman and Dr. Sharp, i.e. as indicating the I.A.P.C. program as taught in the existing system of compulsory education (c.e.). There is no real difference in the meaning of these two phrases as used now by the I.A.P.C. people. By asking the question about their relationship I want to raise the possibility that the identification of these two phrases is not a necessary one; furthermore, that it is a mistaken identification.

In other words, I will give two answers to the question expressed by the title. The first, quite weak and almost trivial: “No!, it shouldn’t necessarily be the case”. The second, strong and unfortunately not trivial: “No! it necessarily shouldn’t be the case.”

Both answers fall outside the paradigm which guides the activities of all those who follow the I.A.P.C. program. The second sharply contradicts it. The people who have succeeded to obtain the huge achievement of developing and implementing the program, have done it only in the framework of the existing c.e. . It seems that they have never seriously considered the implementation of the program outside this framework.

This attitude is easy to understand in a reality in which “learning” and “being educated” are automatically understood as “going to school”. But understanding the motive does not mean justifying its results. I will argue that accepting unquestionably the dominant paradigm, causes the I.A.P.C. people to ignore the huge potential of their program.

Although my argument falls outside the domain of the so natural and dominant paradigm, I hope that the people who implement a program appealing to critical attitude and intellectual openness will apply the same attitude in examining one of the basic presuppositions of their program. I hope that they will (at least) seriously consider my argument, and maybe even start a process of reevaluation of the relationship between the program and c.e. . Such a process, whatever its specific results may be, will benefit education in general and the program in particular.

2.

The first answer I want to defend is that the I.A.P.C. program shouldn’t be implemented only within c.e.. This is almost a trivial, technical point which amounts to asking: why not try other patterns of implementation? For example, an adaptation of the material into a television series, video tapes, records, children books or games (in this last case I have in mind mainly some of the exercises) or a combination of several of these media — all of which would be sold in the free market without any connection to

c.e..

The argument in favor of this suggestion is very simple and can be summerized in two words: “Why not?” That is to say why not try additional ways of propagating the program and its message? This question becomes even more meaningful when one realizes that the number of children that can be reached by some of these ways, if successful, is much larger than the number reached now in the slow way of convincing one principal after another.

One could raise here the counterargument that Philosophy (or rational discussion) is a serious business that cannot be done with the help of games or t.v. series. My reaction: to a certain extent this is a valid claim. The only possible way to do philosophy is by dialogue. All the other ways can serve only as “provocations” or auxiliaries. But from this point of view, the written stories, developed now by the I.A.P.C., do not differ from a t.v. movie. Reading them is not doing philosophy, but one hopes that the reading will provoke philosophical dialogue.

3.

My second claim is much stronger: The I.A.P.C. program will never be successfully implemented within c.e., and therefore should be tried mostly outside it.

The reason is quite simple. The existing school system is based on compulsory curriculum which the students are compelled to study and the teachers are compelled to teach. Another compulsion which is inherent to the system is, of course, compulsory attendance. No efficient learning can take place under compulsion since in such cases one “learns” mainly because of fear and the desire to please the teachers (such claims have been clarified and defended by people like Holt and Illich; I will not elaborate on them here).

Nevertheless there is a sense in which one can compel a teacher to compel a pupil to successfully learn a mathematical equation or a historical fact. The teacher will be quite quickly “burned out”, the pupil will probably hate mathematics or history (or just relate to them as “a bore”) the rest of his life, but learning (although not “efficient learning”) can be said to have taken place. The pupil will remember the equation, or the historical fact, for a (probably short) while.

But philosophy (as distinguished from the history of philosophy) is unique from the point of view that while “teaching” it no facts or equations should be made the object of memorizing. Here (to paraphrase McLuhan) the method is the message.

When compelled to study mathematics or history the student can be said to have learned them although he did not get the spirit of these disciplines. He learned the facts. It is a case of learning, although not of efficient learning. But in philosophy there are no facts; there is only a method. The philosophical method is the method of independent inquiry, based on curiosity and the will to follow it, on the basis of independent, critical, rational thought. Nobody can compel any student to be curious about a certain subject, nor to have the will to examine it critically, twice (or once) a week at a set hour.

In a system which is wholly based on discrediting the child’s own curiosity and independent thought, and therefore on compulsion and manipulatory methods (tests, contests, grades etc ...) there is very little chance that real philosophy, which stems from curiosity

and independent thought could be done.

Exceptions are of course possible. There will always be glimpses of short term successes; human curiosity is too strong to be totally abolished even by c.e.. But very few long term victories of the "Philosophical Eros" can be expected.

The developers of the I.A.P.C. program have been probably aware of the above contradiction between the spirit of c.e. and the spirit of the program, hence their objection to grades in philosophy classes. But although this objection is a step in the right direction it is very far from being sufficient. Philosophy is being taught now as a part of the compulsory curriculum by teachers who grade the students in other subjects. It is very naive to suppose that it can be discussed in an atmosphere free from the alien-to-learning pressures of c.e.. Unfortunately it seems that the I.A.P.C. people consider giving up even this positive step for the sake of gaining higher status within c.e.

Besides being an effort to achieve the impossible, the exclusive implementation of the I.A.P.C. program within c.e. causes its developers to ignore the huge potential of the program as a possible cornerstone of a true learning process that can take place in a future free and open educational system (to a certain extent it already takes place in some of the free schools that exist today).

It is not an accident that Philosophy has been, almost totally, neglected within c.e.. The philosophical spirit contradicts the "raison d'être" of c.e.. In a reality in which learning will be free there is every reason to believe that Philosophy will regain its major role. Although talking about such a reality may seem to some unrealistic, I am convinced that it will have to be established soon. It is simply the only way to handle the need to adapt to a quickly and constantly changing society. The I.A.P.C. program is a wonderful pilot example of a stimulating and relevant philosophy course which could be followed in such a reality. When it is being pushed solely in the direction of becoming a part of the existing, fossilized, c.e. it loses all this huge potential importance.

5.

To conclude, let me emphasize the main message of this paper. As a believer in the I.A.P.C. program's merit and potential, I have attempted to suggest that by focusing exclusively on the implementation of the program within the c.e., its developers follow a path which can lead to very limited results, rather than follow a path that can lead to a new, far better educational reality.

I did not try to systematically defend my claims, nor to answer many important questions that they evoke. This has still to be done. I just tried to point to the possibility of seeing the I.A.P.C. program from the perspective of another and (I believe) more fruitful educational paradigm.

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