

Motivational Aspects of Philosophy for Children

The teaching of reasoning skills to elementary school children was conceived until recently as an impossible undertaking.

Reasoning has been generally understood as a higher level accomplishment, and therefore, the idea of teaching reasoning to elementary school children was not taken seriously. But reasoning does not consist only of higher level skills. There are logical skills, elementary primary skills that “for the most part are the basic logical apparatus of human beings of all ages and of virtually all cultures” (Lipman, 1984).

The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children has developed a program for the teaching of thinking skills to children. My involvement with philosophy for children dates back to 1979. Philosophy for children endorses the importance of sharpening children’s reasoning skills, and is concerned with keeping alive the capacity that children have for wondering at the world. Philosophical discussion is the main vehicle to achieve these goals.

Until now, the potential impact that research on motivation can have on issues concerning the structure and management of a philosophical discussion has not been addressed by philosophy for children. Whatever suggestions have been put forward for the conduction of a philosophical discussion with children stem mainly from personal experiences of the “this worked for me, why don’t you try it” kind of teachers and teacher trainers, and not from a more solid body of theory. One exception to this trend are the major pedagogical features that Lipman outlines in one of his writings, and that I will refer to later.

Children are natural philosophers; they do philosophy because they are interested in talking about matters that are puzzling and important for them, they wonder at the world around them, and they are constantly asking questions. During their daily experiences they encounter ethical, esthetical, and metaphysical issues, and they devise their own strategies — good or bad for dealing with them.

Philosophy for children is a program that promotes their awareness of issues like friendship, sharing, stealing, or teasing somebody. In the program, children’s questions are accepted and encouraged, especially the kind of questions that many adults would consider foolish, or are simply not prepared to deal with; questions like Where did the world come from? Where does the light go when we turn it off? What is a number? etc. are questions that children consider perfectly normal to ask. It is after they are turned off by adults that don’t want to examine these questions with them that they stop asking.

The issues are brought up by the children in a spontaneous, natural way, and of course, in their own words. Philosophy for children deals with these kinds of questions, and the way it does it is through dialogue between the

children and a teacher that has been trained in the program by the I.A.P.C. (Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children) in Montclair, New Jersey. During this training, however, there is little or no talk specifically directed to what keeps the children motivated, or to how to induce motivation to learn in the children that are doing philosophy.

In this paper, I will explore some of the motivational principles that play an important role in the conduction of a philosophical discussion with children. Many of these principles are implicit in the program itself, its major pedagogical features, and in general, perspective and the understanding of children that the creators of the philosophy for children program have.

I will try to incorporate research findings on motivation that could add some suggestions to the process of leading a philosophical discussion successfully. These suggestions will be based on motivational theory, and more specifically, on what has been called motivation to learn and internal or intrinsic motivation.

The main thrust of intrinsic motivation is to help the student to understand concepts that will help him/her to satisfy his needs, attain his goals, and become the kind of person that he really wants to become.

Motivation to learn, as understood by Brophy, is the desire of a child to learn for its own sake, to learn because learning represents doing something worthwhile, something that enhances personal growth and enrichment, because every subject is potentially useful as a means to help a person lead a richer, fuller, happier, more satisfying kind of life, regardless of occupation or profession. This conception of learning and of motivation to learn stresses the importance of the process of learning, and not of the outcome, and it minimizes the importance of grades and extrinsic rewards, competition and normative evaluation.

In philosophy for children, dialogue is the process through which children learn and sharpen their inquiry and reasoning skills. As in motivation to learn, this dialogue — the process — is considered more important than the final outcome of any discussion. It is during the process of dialogue that children learn to establish the criteria for a good or bad argument, and to differentiate a good from a bad reason, to recognize when somebody is jumping to conclusions or making sweeping generalizations, to find counter-examples for a given assertion, to deal with analogical reasoning and with relationships, etc.

The outcome of the discussion is not as important as the process of dialogue on which the children engage themselves. A discussion might provide an answer to a specific question that a child has been concerned with for a long time, or an insight that will change the way a child will look at things in the future, but most of the time this is not the case. Many discussions end up with the children having more questions than they had before, and hopefully with a desire to keep searching, seeking, and asking.

A philosophical discussion is not a problem solving strategy either, although sometimes it can serve this purpose. Its main value lies on the participation of the children in a community of inquiry, on the give and take of ideas, on

the sharing of different points of view that are challenged or accepted in the light of logically structured arguments. Children involved in these discussions present their own ideas to the group. An idea can be challenged, contradicted, turned around, or changed during a philosophical discussion. The things that the children talk about come from a series of children's novels that are packed with philosophical issues.

A regular class starts with the seating arrangements. Ideally children sit in a circle so they can all look at each other. Then they read part of the philosophical novel; after they finish reading, the teacher asks for ideas that have interested them from the novel, s/he writes them on the blackboard and puts the name of the child after the corresponding idea. Finally, they choose an idea that they think would be worthwhile to explore. The teacher has a manual with hundreds of exercises to stimulate discussion through questions asked to the children. There is no right and wrong answer, and all ideas are taken seriously. However, reasons count, not any old reason, but good reasons. These reasons and explanations can be further expanded or challenged by other children. The method of inquiry used in philosophy for children is a self-corrective method. Children assess the validity of their arguments, the consistency of their ideas and the clarity with which they express them.

When children are allowed and encouraged to express their ideas, it is inevitable that conflicting viewpoints are going to appear. Piaget suggested in 1977 that conflicts in viewpoints between children could provoke cognitive development. This assertion goes hand in hand with what Vygotsky and Luria, as well as philosophy for children say about social interaction and the power of philosophical dialogue for the enhancement and development of cognitive competencies.

Vygotsky mentions the importance of social interaction when he talks about the "A zone" of proximal development; this concept is a product of his analysis of the relationship between learning and development. He contends that what children can do with the assistance of others — peers, teachers, or other capable adults — can show to us more accurately where they stand in terms of mental development, than what they can do alone.

Motivation theories have stressed the importance of cooperative over competitive learning in developing a positive attitude towards academic learning.

In a community of inquiry, children work with each other and the teacher in a cooperative fashion. Trust, readiness to listen, attentiveness, and respect for others are some of the dispositions that have to be present in a community of inquiry. Besides these, there has to be a commitment to inquiry; this means trust in the self-correcting nature of the method of inquiry, "considerateness of other's points of view; and a readiness to apply the same critical spirit to oneself as one does to others" (Lipman). A thinking skills program like philosophy for children has the responsibility to develop these habitual dispositions, and not only to train children on the reasoning skills themselves.

The quality of the questions addressed by the teacher in-

fluences to a large extent the quality of the dialogue in which the children engage themselves. Questions that "pose contradictions, create discrepancies and require shifting of perspective, are believed to have maximal impact on cognitive growth." (Sigler)

Challenges to the knowledge of domain specific content by children has not until lately been considered as an important factor in the development of reasoning. Changes in this kind of knowledge may be responsible for changes that were formerly attributed to the child's acquisition of new capabilities and strategies. "Change occurs when theories are confronted by specific challenges and contradictions to an individual's knowledge." (Glasser, 1984)

In his strategies for inducing motivation to learn, Brophy mentions the importance of letting students know about instances when their existing knowledge is internally inconsistent or that it is inconsistent with certain new information. He mentions the importance of asking questions that point to unexpected, incongruous, or paradoxical aspects of the content to be learned. This strategy will produce cognitive conflict that the students will want to resolve by investigating the content actively.

Question asking provides a direct confrontation to the child's points of view. It helps him/her clarify and expand them, and it leads to a restructuring of thought.

Students should realize that they do not know everything that there is to know about the material that they are studying. Exceptions to general rules, contradictions between two sets of facts, and challenging the students to solve the "mystery" that underlies a paradox (Brophy), are some of the strategies to induce motivation to learn.

In the P4C program, the teacher expects the children to be able to deal with uncertainty, with the fact that there are many issues for which there is no ready-made answer, and what is more important, with acknowledging that it is all right not to have an answer for everything.

Our educational system has trained students to expect that there is always an answer to every issue presented, and that we should feel embarrassed, guilty, or ignorant if we cannot come up with it. This attitude is so ingrained in the children that when we discuss metaphysical or aesthetical issues for which there is no easy yes or no answer, they feel cheated and want the teacher to give them a yes or no, a right or wrong, a black or white answer. Philosophical issues lend themselves to desensitize students from this expectation. Furthermore, they give them back their confidence in asking questions, in doubting and wondering about things.

Lipman offers the example of a conversation overheard by some children: "He is just a vegetable, he has been in a coma for years." The adults engaged in this interchange leave things at that. However, children have a spontaneous desire to inquire further, "but a vegetable is a living thing" says one, "sure, but it is not a person." "What makes a person a person?" and so on. We adults struggle over such kinds of questions, and no consensus is in sight, no clearcut answer can be found. However, this does not diminish the value that dialogue has in and of itself.

Meaning and truth are different things. The more the children learn and practice being part of a community of

inquiry, the less easily they will agree on this or that matter as absolute truth. They are able always to make room for new evidence, for further review of procedures, and for considering new theories that are far-reaching and that demand reconsideration of knowledge that had previously been considered firm and secure. Lipman argues that children are not as hot for certainty as many adults think they are. They can cope, without problems, with the idea that truths that are not truths by definition can always be explored further. Meaning has for them more value than a frozen chunk of final evidence on some issue.

One of the major pedagogical features that Lipman talks about is modeling. What this implies in the philosophy for children context, is that the teacher has to be open to new ideas, has to respect the different points of view of the children, and try not to lecture or impose his own way of understanding the issue under discussion. This poses a major problem for the teacher that is used to being the one that is always right, and has an answer ready for any question that might be posed to him by the children. It requires a great effort for a teacher to change his attitudes concerning power, control, and authority. In short, the teacher that is willing to try the philosophy program has to be willing to become one more member of the community of inquiry. This does not mean that there is not going to be any structure or control during a philosophy session. There is going to be a discipline style that utilizes inductions, "explanations of the reasons for following rules in terms of consequences to others" (Blumenfeld).

Maintaining orderly procedures for learning by the group is necessary for achievement by individuals within it. The teacher is a member of the community that has extra responsibilities; these include the introduction of leading questions that are relevant to what the children want to discuss. Maintaining control in terms of turn taking, respect for others' ideas, allowing equal opportunity for everybody to talk, encouraging children to participate in the discussion, preventing the monopolization of the discussion by a few students, etc.

Lipman stresses modeling as a teacher training technique, "teachers should be taught in the same manner as they are expected to teach their own students." He argues that if teacher trainers are to see the value of a community of inquiry, they should be able to form one and undergo their training in this fashion.

The impact that the role of the teacher will have on the students is most significant. The teacher has to let the students know that he/she regards learning as a rewarding, self-actualizing activity that produces self-satisfaction and enriches life. The sharing of interests with the students by the teacher are an important factor in achieving this goal. "If you treat your students as if they already are eager learners, they will be more likely to become eager learners." Conveying to the students certain expectations is going to have an impact on their self-concept, and on their overall attitude toward learning.

In order to enhance motivation to learn, the teacher should include demonstrations that make overt and observable for the students the information processing and pro-

blem solving strategies that he uses covertly during the activity. In a community of inquiry, strategies are not covert, and they are constantly being used by the children, thinking skills are constantly being polished, arguments put forward by the children are checked, amended, accepted or discarded by the other members of the group. Children learn during this process to identify, among other things, false generalizations (all firemen are brave), to provide counter examples (I know a fireman that is not brave), to question the assumptions of the other members of the community by asking questions like: How do you know? Where did you hear that? Who says that? etc.

One of P4C's major strengths is that it induces curiosity and interest in the students, two of the main factors in inducing motivation to learn. "Learning efforts are more likely to be active and intrinsically motivated when students feel a need for more information about a subject or need to answer some ambiguity" (Brophy). Some of the strategies suggested by Brophy to enhance curiosity and interest are an essential part of the P4C program, like putting students into an active processing mode by posing questions or problems, using the principles of inquiry teaching, personalizing by telling anecdotes about real people in concrete situations or by asking students to imagine themselves in situations in which they would have to deal with the content or skills to be taught. The advantage that P4C has on the use of these strategies is that it is the children themselves — and not the teacher — that uses them constantly through the reading and discussing about the philosophical novels that talk about children like them dealing with problems that lead to the thinking skills that the program is trying to polish.

Motivation to learn is enhanced by showing the students that there are general rules, concepts, or procedures that will simplify and clarify their knowledge or problem solving abilities (general principles that subsume a great many specific examples, procedural shortcuts, etc.) (Brophy).

Some of the skills taught by the philosophy for children program have application on a variety of areas. Children learn to classify and categorize, to use ordinal and relational logic, draw inferences from hypothetical syllogisms, understand part-whole and whole-part relationships, and about the construction of hypotheses.

These general principles and strategies will provide them with a set of tools that will help them think in a more organized and logical manner. Thinking entrusted with these capabilities would then be applied to the academic or any other area.

There are a number of ways in which issues stemming from research on motivation confirm and coincide with issues related to philosophy for children.

One of the reasons why learning activities are shunned by students is because of the emphasis that teachers and schools put on the adequacy of performance. When all that teachers and children are concerned with is outcomes, they are overlooking the importance of the learning process. Eventually, a learning process that is conceived in this fashion can become a source of anxiety, especially for children whose expectancy for success is low.

In order to get away from this practice, academic activities

should be structured as learning experiences, and not only as performance tests.

Errors should be treated as diagnostic feedback, and responded to with appropriate help and reteaching. This practice would provide students with the opportunity to learn from their errors instead of avoid thinking about them.

In a community of inquiry, there is constant feedback going on, and whatever corrections or disagreements appear among the group during the dialogue are dealt with in an atmosphere of respect for persons and a commitment to learn from each other.

A teacher who is truly concerned with motivating his/her class, will try honestly to find out what the concerns of the children are. This can be accomplished by asking the children to identify questions that they would like to get answered in relation to the topic, to list their own interests in the topic, to note things that they find to be surprising, etc. (Brophy).

Feedback is an important factor in the process of learning. Students have the right to receive feedback concerning their learning activities. Ideally, this feedback will occur immediately following responses.

In any regular classroom, as well as in one where a community of inquiry is trying to be formed, the teacher has to pinpoint to the children instances in which their use of strategies or concepts has been erroneous. In a community of inquiry, it is usually the children themselves that play a major role in providing these kinds of feedback to each other.

Once the rules of a classroom discussion have been clearly identified and stated by children and teacher alike, and the consequences for violating them have been agreed upon and carefully explained, feedback concerning the performance of the children in accordance to the rules should be provided not only timely, frequently and consistently, but it should also be clear, specific and constructive.

The importance of expectations and attributions concerning success and failure for the determination of performance outcomes has been amply ratified by research on motivation (Dweck, Harter, DeCharms).

What children believe about what they can do is a powerful factor in forming the kinds of behavior that they will display when performing a task, and the amount of effort that they will invest in it.

A child that believes that the potential to control outcomes lies outside himself, and that his own behavior will make no difference in terms of having an influence over these outcomes is likely to have reached this conclusion after more than one experience that has culminated in failure. Our educational system, with its emphasis on competition and its stress on normative evaluation, can be held partly responsible for these kind of attributions and expectations in many children.

We need to encourage students to attribute their successes to the combination of sufficient ability and reasonable effort. During attribution retraining, we have to be careful to plan for success. This means that we have to choose a task where the child will have to use reasonable effort, and we have to be sure that s/he has the necessary ability to accomplish it. If the task is such that the child applies a great

amount of effort, and fails, the result will be detrimental for his/her self esteem and the perception of his/her own ability. On the other hand, if the task is such that the child can successfully accomplish it with a minimal effort, the result will be that he will attribute the success to the easiness of the task or other external factor rather than to his/her own ability or a reasonable amount of applied effort.

During attribution retraining, we should stress the fact that failures are due to confusion or use of inappropriate strategies, rather than to lack of ability or other uncontrollable factors (Brophy).

Another major obstacle for the acquisition of accurate attributions and expectations is the "entity" idea of ability that children acquire approximately during adolescence. Before this period, their idea of ability had been an "incremental" one. This meant that through practice and training, their ability could always improve. They are not concerned at this stage with the amount of effort that they apply in accomplishing tasks. However, during the high school years, effort starts to be seen as the counterpart of ability. "If I require more effort, then I have less ability, and consequently I am less smart." This conception leads to a kind of behavior that has been called learned helplessness. The child prefers to avoid engaging on a task if s/he sees that there is a risk of failing, because then s/he wouldn't appear smart. This is why many students — to give an example — do not study for a test. If they pass, they can attribute it to luck, or to their ability. If they don't pass, they can attribute it to the fact that they didn't study, (external, controllable) and not to lack of ability (internal, uncontrollable).

Learning activities should be geared toward the understanding of ability and intelligence as an incremental, as opposed to a fixed factor. The idea of stages of cognitive development has had consequences that have been detrimental to many children by providing many teachers with a justification for not teaching many tasks, especially abstract kinds of skills. This idea has enabled them to say that the child "is not ready yet, s/he is still in the other stage." This concept of readiness and its relationship with an "entity," or fixed idea of intellectual ability stems from a naive interpretation of the work of Piaget, and it has been one of the main obstacles for the efforts of getting the teaching of reasoning skills into the elementary school classrooms.

The teacher is responsible for providing an environment in which the average child, with a reasonable amount of effort, can succeed in a specific task. However, ability and a reasonable amount of effort are not enough to succeed. These two factors have to be combined with two others: knowledge and the use of appropriate strategies. It is in a community of inquiry that children can acquire these strategies that will serve as tools to combine ability and effort in a realistic and successful manner.

There are many reasons why philosophy for children is such an attractive program for children, and some of these reasons are the same ones that could be argued about any program, academic activity, or subject that is highly motivating. P4C emphasizes meanings, rather than isolated facts; it is concerned with reflective thinking, rather than mere memorizing; it stresses taking up issues that are im-

portant to the children, and not those that are relevant only to the adult world; it helps children find reasons to support their personal views. Furthermore, children in the program get to talk about issues that are a main part of their daily lives, like friendship, fairness, reality, truth, goodness, etc.

Discussion skills are considered by the P4C program as the foundation of thinking skills, and it is by engaging in these discussions that the children get to develop a better way of reasoning.

Even when many of the features that constitute the philosophy for children program are prone to motivate children, the fact remains that it is an activity that takes place in schools, and schools are a place where children are compelled to go. There is no element of choice for them in this matter. Furthermore, schools, as any other institution, have many rules to follow, deadlines to meet, and a specific curriculum to transmit to the children. Time structure and allocation, as well as organization and implementation of academic objectives, are variables with which the teacher has to deal every day. Group dynamics, discipline, and attention to a variety of individual need are some other factors that can not be overlooked when defining teacher role. These are problems that the teacher has to be concerned about, and a teacher training program that does not acknowledge these issues or that considers them out of its realm of responsibility is definitely missing something.

Some time should be allocated during the I.A.P.C. teacher training workshops to mention the relevant findings of research in other related areas like motivation. Areas that deserve special attention are the areas in which this kind of research can be helpful in corroborating and facilitating classroom discussion activities and the use of dialogue as a learning tool.

I have mentioned a number of strategies that incorporated to the repertoire of the philosophy for children teacher, will add strength and confidence to his/her commitment to the program.

When the process of inquiry is internalized, it provides a self-corrective, critical disposition that enhances consistency and independent thinking.

Interdisciplinary research can add insight and relevance to these kind of activities, for which the main beneficiary is going to be, in the long run, the child himself.

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