Reflections on Harlem

Alice and I were asked if we would like to start going to Harlem in October 1982. We had heard some comments about Harlem from the students in the Philosophy for Children Program that had been there the year before. They said that the experience was very rewarding and unique. However; they had many discipline problems and at the end of the day they were exhausted.

Dr. Moody is the principal of P.S. 207 in Harlem. He greeted us cordially, and explained what our schedule was going to be. We would have 5 forty-five minute periods during the day, and two free periods, one between two classes, and the other one was lunchtime. The classes started at nine and they ended at three. He was very excited about the Philosophy program, and wanted it to be part of what he called a renaissance curriculum. The children were taught French, Russian, and chess, among other things. During the time that we were there, we always had Dr. Moody's support and advice.

Since most of the kids had had Philosophy the year before, during my first day of classes I decided to ask them about what they had done the year before, if they had liked it, and what they thought Philosophy was. Most of the responses to this last question was appalling. "It is Psychology!; It is Psychiatry!"; "No!" said another one, "It is astrology"; "It is reading". In general, they gave me as responses words that sounded like Philosophy. It was obvious that they didn't have a clue about what Philosophy was. However, when I asked: "What did you do during your Philosophy class last year", the responses were very different. "We discussed, we talked, we did exercises that make you think."

During my experience in Harlem I realized that the children work with philosophical and logical concepts, and they are able to tackle them in a reasonable way without knowing that this is what they are doing. They draw inferences and conclusions from syllogistic postulates, they distinguish between causes and reasons, they deal successfully with part-whole relationships; but when they are asked for what they did or learned in their Philosophy class, they don't come up with these big words; and they don't do it because we don't use them during the class. We don't think that they need to know them in order to work with the skills that these words represent. They are sharpening their thinking skills anyway. This is a process whose results can not be as objectively seen as the example rote learning. In rote learning the teacher "knows" that the child has learned if he can "spit out" the information on the day of the test. It doesn't matter for the teacher if the child forgets the information two days later. On the other hand, the sharpening of thinking skills is more of an internal process that permeates the whole cosmovision of the child. It transfers to each and every one of the activities in which he is consciously engaged.

He is so used to thinking in terms of categories, that when he is confronted with his faulty generalizations, and gets acquainted with the different uses of qualifiers, he experiences an enlightening insight: "It is true! Not all tall people are good basketball players. I only need to find one tall person that is not good at basketball to prove it."

Children in Harlem liked this kind of exercise, and when they were attentive and relaxed, they learned how to deal successfully with them in no time. The problem was that when we first got to Harlem, the children were not willing to be attentive and relaxed. No way! They were testing our limits, we were outsiders, and in a way, we were violating their territory.

Our first day in Harlem was like many first encounters. The children were cautious, trying to get cues from us about what to expect, and so did we. During lunchtime, a concerned teacher offered us to go to a quiet classroom and eat our lunch there. We told her that we preferred to have lunch with the children. We thought that a way of getting to know them would be to share with them some of their activities outside the classroom.

The lunchroom consists of fourteen large tables, where boys and girls are seated separately. The quietest table gets its lunch first. The noise in the lunchroom is so loud that you can hardly hear yourself talking. I could see children chasing each other, dancing, singing, playing basketball, or fighting because "Johnny stole my apple" or "Brunilda is calling me names." Some of the fighting is serious, but most of it is done in a playful way. After a couple of times in the lunchroom, we became used to the idea of having to interrupt our meal to stop a fight. It was part of our routine there, and we eventually came to see it as something natural. Some of the incidents in the lunchroom and in the playground served as good motivational incentives for the discussion in the Philosophy class because they could relate to them easily and were eager to talk about them.

After our first day in Harlem, the discipline problems became worse and worse, specially with the third and fourth grades. They took the classroom as an extension of the playground, and the Philosophy class as an extension of the recess period.

What the teacher in Harlem did in the classroom with the children, and what we were trying to do, were a world of difference. Confusion and disruptive behavior were the way in which the children were telling us that they didn't know what was going on, annd that, if we wanted them to trust us, we would have to work hard for it. And we did work hard, they gave us a very hard time. I think that the only things that enabled us to get close to those children and eventually build a good relationship with them, were tons of patience, consistency, and faith in them and in the Philosophy program.

We were not threatening as the others teachers, we didn't want to be. We wanted to respect them! We told them that they could talk with each other during the class in an orderly manner, that their opinions were important, and that in this class we usually didn't have right or wrong answers. I think that they were confused, and that the great discrepancy between what their teacher expected from them and what we on our part did, was a main factor in our discipline problems. A teacher should teach something, and that something has to be right. Furthermore, you should be able to answer it in a test.

In contrast, we didn't punch them when they "misbehaved", we didn't pour water on their heads, take away

their gym period, suspended them, call their parents, scream and threaten them, ridicule them in front of the class, etc.

After four or five classes of trying without success to establish enough discipline as to conduct a class, I realized that I was beginning to use with the children the same authoritarian techniques that their teachers in Harlem used, and Philosophy for Children cannot be done in an authoritarian way. But it cannot be done in an anarquic classroom atmosphere either. I realized that I needed to establish some behaviors with the children that would enable them to get something worthwhile from the experience. I took the ten classroom discussion behaviors from the *mark* manual, added more, and made a chart of them on a big poster that I hanged in a visible place of the classroom. I told them that those were the rules of the class, and that we should keep them in mind at all times. I reinforced the rules positively.

CLASS RULES

1. Raise your hand if you want to say something.
2. Don't interrupt while others are talking.
3. Don't fidget while others are talking.
4. Think through what you want to say before saying it.
5. Avoid personal attacks upon your classmates.
6. Listen to others carefully.
7. Don't talk to your neighbors during the classroom discussion.
8. Answer questions seriously when they are addressed to you.
9. Draw out the implications of what other people are saying.
10. When responding to one of your classmate's arguments, direct your response to him, and not to the teacher.
11. Don't take too much time to make your point.
12. Keep your comments relevant to the issue.

This made a great difference in the long run, discipline improved and we were able to have some very good classes.

The fact of having some objective measure for their behavior gave to the class the degree of structure that it needed. I realized then that the children were used to functioning under a considerable amount of restraint and limits, when I withdrew these limits during the Philosophy class, there was nothing there left for them to take as a norm or rule of expected behvaior. Before this, they didn't see any specific content to be learned, and when I explained how the interaction should proceed during the discussion, they interpreted as, "In this class we are free to say whatever we want, to talk with one another, and to do as we please." And so they did. The explicit formulation of the classroom discussion behaviors, and its consistent enforcement, eventually changed this state of affairs. Now it was clear for them what the limits were, and with the security provided to them by these limits, they started enjoying the discussions and participating actively and creatively in them.

They liked to talk with each other, but they didn't know how to do it in an organized way, and most of all, they were not used to giving sound reasons for their arguments. Their responses were impulsive and unreflective; it was very satisfying for me to see how, as time went by, they stopped and thought before refuting their classmate's arguments, and they tried to justify what they were saying.

During the last third of the time that we were in Harlem, the attitudes of the children changed in a very positive way. We had finally been accepted. They talked with us during lunchtime and invited us to play basketball or baseball during recess. The last day we were there they organized a party for us.

Did the Philosophy for Children Program make any difference in their lives? I hope so. But it is very difficult to say. I think that without continuity, the gains won't last for a long time. There is too much against them in the Harlem environment.

Two months after my last class in Harlem have past. However, I can still see James and Brunilda having an argument about life after death, or about education and its possible relation to success in life. Or Nicol and Elaine discussing the possibility of a situation in which stealing would be better than not stealing; or David and Kevin thinking about how to get rid of the junkies and criminals in Harlem.

It was exciting to see how their arguments evolved and matured. How different they were from the ones they had during our first classes! Much of the initial impulsiveness had now turned into careful reflexion. They were dealing now with inferences from hypothetical syllogisms, challenging each others assumptions, predicting consequences, defining concepts, looking for alternatives, and examining potential consequences.

There are many bright children in Harlem. Some of them surprised me with the way in which they grasped concepts and understood different kinds of relationships. Harlem was a unique experience for me, it was definitely a very rich learning experience. It was not easy, it was very difficult, but worthwhile. Some of the things that happened there gave me a lot to think about, and made me aware of my impotence to change them.

I still have vivid images of the face full of tears of a child while a teacher was twisting his arm because he was fighting with another boy. Or the expression of a new boy when the teacher took out his grades from his former school in front of the class and said: "This boy is always boasting about how good his other school was, and how well he did there ... Well, now I want to show you something; I have his grades here." And he proceeded to read them while the other children in the class surrounded him to check if the poor grades that he was reading were true. The screams and threats of the teachers that could be heard all across the hall. The women (aides) on the corridors, with their wooden ruler, ready to slam anybody that ran or fought on the hall.

Or Johnny, a hispanic boy, having to leave school earlier, because some other older hispanic boys were waiting for him outside of the school to "kill" him, the reason being that he always wore very nice clothes. Or the girl that didn't return to school because she was taken to a foster home due to the repeated beatings received by her mother.

And the comment of a fourth grader when we were talking about fighting or being aggressive with other people: "If your parents hit you, it means that they love you, they care for you".

Or the way other children tease Shawnelle and Shawnette, because they have no father and their mother earns her living as a prostitute.

In a way, it is ironic to come here to Harlem and talk with these children about fairness and justice, about equal rights and opportunities, honesty and beauty. Their reality is very different, and when I see how little I can do about it, I feel discouraged. However, when they talk about their plans and aspirations, and I realize that the experience of the Philosophy Program was something meaningful for them, I see that something can be done, and that if there is consistency in these kind of interventions in their environment, eventually, it could make a great difference in their lives.

Eugneio Echeverria