Not A Success Story: Why Philosophy For Children Did Not 'Take' With Gifted Students In A Summer School Setting

During the summer of 1986, I was invited to become a Master Teacher in a summer program for gifted and talented children because of my experience and expertise with the Philosophy for Children program. Although this program is not designed specifically for gifted students, it is one which, in a regular school setting, has been seen to be particularly well-suited to their needs. I was curious to see whether implementation of the *Pixie* program in this setting and with these students could be as successful as I had seen it be in the regular classroom.

Success was anticipated given the clientele and the time emphasis that would be possible. There would be few interruptions and there was also the possibility of doing the program daily for five days a week instead of three. I fully expected to be 'spoiled' by the experience in view of the many constraints I had become accustomed to in the regular school setting. Such was not to be the case, however, and what follows is an exploration of the possible reasons for the disappointing experience.

The Summer School Setting

During the month-long summer program, the students were offered an academic program in the morning and an optional recreational program in the afternoon. The age-range of the students was from 5 to 16 and the maximum class size was 23 students. Teacher or parent referral constituted the only criteria for selection, the reliance on parent referral as a primary means of identifying gifted and talented students being based on a research-supported belief that parent referral can be as reliable a means of identification of gifted children as other means.

One of the purposes of the school was to provide an opportunity for teachers in training to observe and work with gifted and talented children. It constituted a rare single-site opportunity for such observation and training since resources for gifted and talented children in the local public school system are severely limited.

There were three categories of teacher-students: advanced, introductory and clinical. The advanced students were assigned to a Master Teacher and his/her class of students for four mornings a week and were expected to become as fully involved as possible, gradually assuming the responsibility for teaching at least a part of the program for that class. The introductory students attended their own classes regularly in the mornings and observed and/or participated to a minimal degree in the school at other times. The clinical students were more involved in specific research projects and were hoping to work with gifted and talented students in a more peripheral way, perhaps with individual students on a clinical basis. The program for these students was tailored to their individual needs.

Philosophy for Children at a Summer School For Gifted Children

The class which was assigned to me consisted of 23 eight- and nine-year-olds, six of whom had completed grade three in their regular school setting while the others had completed grade two. Two teacher-taining interns were assigned to the class — one in the advanced program and the other a clinical research student.

The children came from a variety of different schools and came with a wide range of abilities to read and write in English. Many could not be expected to do so at all given their previous school history in a unilingual Francophone school, in a bilingual French Immersion school program in which English was not yet taught on a regular basis, or in a quadrilingual parochial school. By contrast, children from private schools or regular English schools were able to read and write in English very well.

There were serious problems with the implementation of the program from the very outset. This became apparent very early as many children voiced their objections to it by saying it was "boring". There was "too much talking" some said. This well before the end of the very first week!

Because this reaction set in so early, it was difficult — if not impossible — to effect a recovery. Boredom can be contagious and the declarations of a few set the tone for the many. Although there was identifiable improvement in their participation and interest over time and exposure, they never demonstrated that eager anticipation that is so often characteristic of the program.

Possible Reasons:

Six possible reasons for the children's apparent rejection of the philosophy program are reflected upon in what follows. They include:

1) the presence of a school-phobic student,
2) the children's expectations,
3) an inadequate initiation period,
4) factors inhibiting the successful formation of a Community of Inquiry,
5) time factors, and
6) possible implementation errors.

1) The presence of a school-phobic student

One child in particular, "K", was severely school-phobic and dominated the class sessions no matter what we were doing by making such shock-value statements as, "I want to drug all teachers with cocaine." It was very clear midway through the first day that he was present against his will ("My mother *forced* me!!!") and that he had decided *in advance* that he was not going to like anything about his situation and say so as often as possible.

My approach to K was to be non-confrontational and understanding. He did not have the option of leaving the summer program, however, since he had agreed with his parents (who were desperately trying whatever they thought might help) that he would come for one summer only.

Interestingly enough, K participated readily and frequently in discussions apparently enjoying the attention he could get by expressing his often unorthodox views. He was

respectful of the procedures and seemed to enjoy the sessions in which he contributed — despite his determination not to do so. In keeping with the pedagogy of the program, all his views were treated seriously in dialogue some relevance being assumed, however obscure that relevance might have seemed at the time.

What was odd was that he apparently was not fully aware that he was participating *at all.* We had an exchange one day in which he seconded another child's view that doing *Pixie* was boring. I responded that I thought it funny he should say that given his frequent and interested participation. He seemed amazed and only when I offered to produce the "name-recorder" lists (on which we kept track of who wanted to speak) did he cease claiming that he didn't participate at all. It seemed that he was doing so without being able to help it and without even *realizing* he was involved to the degree that he was — so strong was his determination to be bored. This conversation may have back-fired later as his participation seemed to lessen with time. He would continue to pronounce that he was bored always prefacing it with a disarmingly polite, "I really don't want to insult you, but ... "

Two other observations with respect to K in general are worth making. One is that, although orally he was extremely articulate with almost an adult vocabulary and sentence structure, he appeared to have pronounced difficulty, and was therefore reticent when it came to any pencil and paper activity (text or graphics). His ability to read in English was virtually non-existent due to his previous schooling in a Francophone school where English was not part of his program and he was apparently not one of those children who had managed to pick up the skill on his own.

A second observation is that K's attitude seemed to be rooted in a fierce desire not to be in any way associated with childhood. He objected to my addressing the students as "boys and girls" and was shocked to learn that his new best friend in the class went to movies "designed for kids". The very name "Pixie" turned him off instantly, therefore, and the content of the first two chapters simply seemed silly to him and he said so. He could not relate to it. He was one of those children who would by-pass childhood if given the opportunity. Ironically, the philosophy program is one which usually accommodates students with this attitude because of its emphasis on the students' own interest and experience.

2) The children's expectations

Although K may have been an extreme case and one who exerted pronounced negative influence on the attitudes of many of the other children, I sensed that the others too each reflected the fact that this summer "school" represented an artificial situation for them. They were familiar with summer "camp" situations, but summer "school" was something else. Although I did not encourage the children to express their views on this point since they essentially had no choice at that stage, I had the distinct impression that given the choice, many if not most would rather have been somewhere else. After all, they were only four days into their summer 'vacation' time and attending 'school' at such a time must have been a contradiction for them.

The effect this had was for the children to resist any activity or event that had a 'school' flavour to it. With respect to the philosophy program in which the springboard activity involves 'oral reading' in community from a 'book', the association with regular school was probably clear and they responded to it as if it were inappropriate in this setting. The same was true of the exercises which were either posted on chart paper or reproduced for the children. In fact, anything involving *questions* smacked of school and met with subtle but clear resistance. It was as if they had come to play, not to think or 'work' in a way they associate with regular school.

This was unexpected and devastating. It was also ironic for in a regular school setting, one of the very reasons why the children seem to respond *well* to philosophy is precisely because for them it seems to *differ* significantly from regular school fare. The unexpected revelation here is that the philosophical dimensions of the program might not be intrinsically interesting to the children. If they were, they would be found to be interesting regardless of the context in which they were encountered. Rather it would seem that the degree of interest generated may be relative to the *lack* of interest of the surrounding program. Thus, in a summer program which is supposed to be "fun", i.e. play, the intrinsic interest of the matters up for consideration becomes at best, irrelevant.

Another possible interpretation of this phenomenon, a more optimistic one, could be that the interest potential of the content of the program remains intact but overshadowed or neutralized by the presence of other expectations. It was not as if the children even gave the program a chance and *then* rejected it. They rejected it first. (The same seemed to be true, incidentally, of many other activities conducted by other Master Teachers including organized large-group games in the park or simple, individual drawing activities). Their reticence seemed to be *a priori:* the more 'like school', the more to be resisted. They then seemed to look for justification for that position and found support and leadership from K and others who saw fit to speak out.

3) Period of initiation

There is a period of adjustment which seems to be necessary when the program is first initiated with a group of children who have not been exposed to it before. The first indication that this initiation period is at hand is the reaction of many children to the nature of the questions and issues which are raised. Often someone will say that the questions are "weird" and it will seem like a put-down until they express curiosity in exploring more weird questions. Pixie is weird because she is preoccupied by such questions and issues and the questions in the exercises which are provided as food for thought are also considered to be weird. A common reaction to weirdness in their experience is to reject it so this phase can seem like rejection too until the children have had some experience with the playfulness and puzzlement that comes with such questions and until they learn to embrace the enterprise.

This summer on day 2 or 3, I had early morning visits from parents wondering about their children's expressed

"boredom" with the program. Some wondered if they were too young for it or if it weren't too inactive for them. My response at this stage is usually to say that it is a program which "feels different" from what they might be used to and that they need to have the time to become familiar with this shift. Unfortunately, the parents' intervention at this stage was seen by some children as endorsement of their 'complaints'. They felt further justified in expressing them and this simply led to more contamination of the attitudes of the others which must be at the very least receptive if the program is to 'take'.

This initiation period needs time and a supportive environment both at school and at home. Initiation, by its very nature, can be threatening. Here we are asking children to re-enter exploratory "why" territory which was natural to them when they were first learning language but which has already become unfamiliar to them. It is almost a reawakening process and it is entirely understandable that they might experience some disorientation before they become entirely comfortable. Some voice "confusion" as if that were a bad thing. It need not be, however; rather this "confusion" might be a vestibule to understanding.

4) Community of Inquiry formation

The pedagogical foundation of the Philosophy for Children program is the formation of what is called a Community of Inquiry within the classroom. Briefly this involves helping the children to recognize other people as legitimate sources of learning by virtue of their years of life-, language- and thought-experience and by virtue of each person's distinct style of thinking. To mobilize the resources that exist within any group of people in the pursuit of understanding with regard to matters that are of importance to them is the nature of the enterprise.

In my experience with both children and adults, this is a process which is delicate, time-consuming and dependent on a minimum degree of continuity. It is delicate since it requires successful initiation; it is not a process to which people are accustomed. It is time-consuming because it is not something people come to do just by being shown how or by being told to do it. And it requires continuity because it involves building gradually on that which is already there and on that which comes to be there as a result of the gradual building. In a regular school setting this process takes time but it seems to happen as a natural outgrowth of the activities of the program in which we engage together.

In the summer school setting, it became apparent that there were major obstacles to the successful formation of a Community of Inquiry. One mitigating factor, for example, was the fact that the students and the teacher(s) were all utter strangers to each other and found themselves in an unknown (to them) physical and educational setting. This can be contrasted with other classes which embark on the philosophy program in which the students and teachers may be relative strangers but at the very least they may have seen each other around as it were. They may have been together with some of the others in previous classes or at least in the school playground and corridors. Here it was as if every person was a "new kid" in the school. The effect this could be expected to have is to slow down the process, make it more difficult perhaps. It should *not* prevent it from being successful, however.

A second mitigating factor has to do with this particular population of children. The degree to which these children may or may not have been "gifted" should have had little or no bearing on the implementation of the philosophy program since my own experience testifies eloquently to the fact that it 'takes' very well with a full range of students within a regular classroom setting. Nevertheless, this summer school experience provided a number of new insights for me with regard to the implementation of the program *with* gifted children, in particular with respect to the growth of a community of inquiry.

Teachers who are experienced with the theory and practice of programs for gifted children often say that those children who qualify when a *number* of criteria must be met are often not the co-operative "bright lights" of a class but rather those children who are extremely problematic. Looking at just the problematic children children in the present group, for purposes of gaining insight, I chose to assume them to be gifted — a further mitigating factor here being that four weeks of a summer program hardly affords the opportunity to appreciate the degree to which each child may or may not be gifted.

Three particular children come to mind. M was a young boy who was notorious for finishing little if anything and who related almost entirely to adults only. He revealed an intense interest in trains and when engaged in at least the initial stages of a text or graphics activity, became completely absorbed giving his full attention to meticulous detail. He did, however, only what *he* chose to do when he chose to do it and quite often would happily mark time. In a regular class setting, I learned that he would wander around at will and become a behaviour problem in the class. During philosophy discussions it was apparently remarkable that he didn't do that. He chose instead to sit, often with his back to the center of the circle, and listen. He reported at home that the discussions "confused" him and that he didn't like them. At school he reported that he was bored and was delighted on the one occasion when he had to miss the philosophy session. However, the marked change in his characteristic behaviour at least allows for the possibility that he might have been more interested in what was going on than he may have realized himself.

E was a young girl who demonstrated considerable capacity to initiate activities — both text and graphic — for herself. She was very stubborn when it came to engaging in any activisty which she had not initiated and she would respond by being oblivious to what else might be going on with the group acting as if no-one else was there or indeed only those people she chose to recognize when she wanted to. She summarily rejected any suggestions, however negotiable and helpful in intent, apparently on the grounds that they originated outside of herself. She would reject them without even considering them. During philosophy discussions E would participate if and when it interested her — occasionally — and rather than listen quietly in order to allow those interested to participate, she would engage the person beside her in irrelevant conversation thus providing a distraction both to that other person and to the group.

By contrast a third child, L was not problematic and participated readily in discussions when she had the opportunity. She seemed confident of her own knowledge and was more than willing to express that knowledge with respect to different points under discussion. What she did not do — yet — was reflect *about* what she knew. She was content to 'give the right answer' without further inquiry into the bearing the information she had might have on the issues being raised.

In reflecting on these children, it occurred to me that the degree of "self-containment" (as distinguished from self-centredness normally attributed to young children) might be a factor worth looking at more closely. Might it be true that "gifted" children who are aware of their own intellectual capabilities might have a degree of self-satisfaction that might mitigate against their participation in group exploratory activity?

The contributions of a number of the children who did participate in the class discussions this summer further suggest that this might be the case. When discussing what happens when a part of the body "falls asleep", for example, some contributors demonstrated a fairly sophisticated understanding of the circulatory system of the body and of the convention of describing such phenomena using *expressions* such as "fall asleep." What was interesting about their interventions, however, was a degree of certainty which effectively counteracted cultivation of puzzlement. What was contributed here was factual information in such a way as to eliminate the need for further exploration. The "discussions" therefore were not "discussions" but information exchanges. To the extent that no further questions were raised, the discussion ceased to be a discussion at all much less a philosophical one.

All this is to suggest that philosophic inquiry might be more difficult with 'gifted' children depending on their degree of satisfaction with the accuracy, completeness and limitations of their existing knowledge. If it is the case that gifted children know a lot and are recognized to be often 'right', then we have here a big challenge to be met in the formation of an effective community of inquiry. The Philosophy for Children program offers gifted students an opportunity to learn in a way which differs significantly from looking up required information, or finding existing but unknown-to-them 'answers' to questions by consulting experts or by having first-hand experiences. Philosophical inquiry involves sometimes risky reflection about what it is we know or think we know and the more convinced you are that what you know is substantial or in some sense 'right', the more of a challenge that might present — therefore, all the more susceptibility to uncomfortable confusion which might understandably result in rejection of the entire enterprise.

5) Time factors

It is common when implementing the Philosophy for Children program to complain about and be continually frustrated by limitations the remainder of the school curriculum places on the time available for doing philosophy. In this summer situation I looked forward to the absence of such constraints and a freedom to program as appropriate given the situation in which we found ourselves.

The structure of the morning sessions for the children was for Master Teachers to implement their programs with the children daily from 9:00 am to 10:30. On Mondays and Fridays additional time was available from 10:50 to 12:30. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, the children were regrouped with different teachers throughout the school in order to allow them to pursue an identified interest of their own. Out of the Master Teachers' time with their own classes came two half-hour physical education periods and any visits to the local library or field trips. On the face of it, there was ample time for the implementation of the Philosophy for Children program — certainly a lot more than is usually available in other settings.

What I soon discovered, however, is that more was far from the answer. Since the children had a negative *a priori* attitude, they could only sustain any philosophy at all in very small doses. This meant that an alternate program of activity had to be provided which they could do when not doing philosophy, one which involved very little reading or writing since the range of abilities was so great. The children were encouraged to be as creative as possible generating ideas for a "portfolio" of their 'works' which could include anything they liked. We brainstormed a number of possibilities and they were encouraged to make their own choices.

Some children had little difficulty with this but the majority did. There was not "too much drawing", drawing also being considered to be in some sense a way of passing time when you are otherwise bored. It too seemed to be devoid of intrinsic value. In the absence of their ability to initiate their own projects, I provided a skeleton set of activities with the predictable result that many chose to do those and only those. Against my better judgment, others had to be 'required' to do only those since they demonstrated an inability to find constructive things to do. I wondered what had happened to children's abilities to think up fun things to do for themselves. Some even articulated for me the fact that they 'couldn't' do anything *unless* told what to do.

In order for this Portfolio set of activities to amount to anything significant in terms of the activation of the children's creative talents, it meant that the total time available for my part of their program be divided between philosophy and portfolio activities as appropriate. This was not a big problem and it was positive to be able to change from one to the other.

In terms of the philosophy program, it was clear, at least at the early stages, that more than a little time at a time can be too much. I anticipated that as the sense of community and the familiarity and enjoyment of philosophical deliveration increased, the children would naturally ask for more and I was happy to know that it would be there to give.

They didn't ask for more, of course. Well, they did once — but not nearly to the extent that has become a hallmark of this program. On the contrary, there was a stage at which the mere mention of *Pixie* would elicit groans. This problem was solved by providing the children with a

somewhat negotiable "agenda" for each day. When they saw "Pixie" situated within the total context of the day, the objections subsided although the participation in the actual sessions did not appreciably increase.

What I came to realize over the session was that this situation was very complex and that *globally* the time was not available to address the problems identified. The children knew they were there only for a month. The book was much larger than we could ever finish. And it was not enough time for them to formulate even a notion of what it is we were trying or expected to do. Given the self-containment characteristics of gifted children identified above, it became apparent to me that we could do little more than dabble under the circumstances.

The time needed had to be stretched-out time. Even consecutive *days* at the early stages seemed to be counter-productive. Incubation time was needed. It soon dawned on me that nothing was to be gained by compressing the time.

Also what was needed was the full ten-month framework in which to develop the community of inquiry dimension at whatever rate might be appropriate for the given group. It is not a program which can or ought to be force-fed under any circumstances depending, to the extent it does, on the dynamic interests of the children. If they aren't interested, you don't do it today. At the same time you ingeniously seek ways to pique their interest understanding that initial disorientation might be at the root of that apparent lack of interest or resistance — discomfort which can turn to excitement once the period of initiation has been successfully traversed.

These were significant reflections for they have a bearing on the advisability of offering the program in a summer school setting at all. It seems to me now that that the children themselves together with their inhospitable attitudes need not be considered a decisive factor. What is decisive is the lack of availability of stretched-out time. It now seems that this program is too comprehensive and too dependent on long term development of skills and attitudes to be capable of effective implementation in such a compressed time-setting as this. It was probably the *combination* of these two factors, inhospitable children's attitudes and an incompatible time-framework, that resulted in the demise of this particular effort to implement the program.

6) Possible implementation errors

In addition to the above considerations, it is important to take a look at another possibility: some errors of implementation might have been committed, extensive experience and expertise notwithstanding. Given a difficult situation, the best anyone can do is attempt to identify the problem and choose a course of action which might possibly provide a solution.

The first decision I made was to begin the program as soon as possible. Given the short time available and the probability that these children would readily take to the program, it was decided to make maximum use of the time that was available. In retrospect there were two things the matter with this choice. First, it did not account for the fact that the children were such strangers to each other. And secondly, it did not allow for the determination of the degree of *a priori* negative attitude and differing expectations which might exist within individual children.

A second choice was to proceed one episode at a time from the outset. The problem with this choice was that it did not allow the children to get a real 'feel' for the story. It was as if the call for their reactions was premature — they didn't have enough to go on. This made Pixie, the character, seem to be someone not to be taken seriously and some children saw fit to ridicule the story rather than to give it thoughtful consideration. The call for reactions in the form of "What is there in this episode that we could talk about?" is in itself an odd question for children to respond to it seems, and they needed more to chew on at the beginning. Once they are familiar with different possibilities of response, then it might be in order to slow down to one episode at a time.

A third possibility, one that must be considered but also taken within the context of the whole, is the possibility that a teacher's extensive experience with the Philosophy for Children program might in fact become counter productive. One of the salient features of this program is that the teacher and the students explore together. The more familiar the teacher is with the program itself and with possible reactions to it by children and/or adults, the less able the teacher might be to truly accommodate the children's lead.

The degree to which accumulated expectations based on previous experiences with other children are referred to (even if only implictly) as some sort of norm, the less effective, perhaps, that teacher's leadership might be. It is a question which is simply raised by this first-time negative encounter. It is to be hoped that the more experience the better — but the possibility that the opposite might be true must at least be considered. In either case, the important thing is to reflect as objectively as possible on the complexities of the entire experience with a view to discovering hidden secrets of successful implementation.

Conclusion:

It seems that, all things considered, the Philosophy for Children Program requires some minimal conditions to be met in order to be reasonably expected to succeed. Of the possible reasons for its lack of success identified above, the most important would seem to be the inability to provide an adequate global time framework. Because of the comprehensive nature of the program, because of the necessity for an initiation period which can accommodate the students and their expectations making allowances for the time of year and the gradual formation of a community of inquiry, it is essential that more than four weeks of sessions be provided. It is not a question of making better use of the time available. Given an adequate time framework, I suspect that the other problems, those involving the presence of children wtih negative attitudes as well as the 'self-containment' characteristics of gifted children could be addressed.

The lack of success of this particular initiative has been very informative, providing as it has, the opportunity to examine and reflect upon minimal criteria for success. I am not prepared at this time to draw any conclusions, however tentative, about the implications this experience may have

for the implementation of Philosophy for Children with gifted children. If anything, there would seem to be all the more reason to continue the search for successful implementation for them. All that can be said here is that one month last summer was not an answer.

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