Philosophy for Children: Some Problems

I.

Philosophy for Children has a short but interesting history.[1] It began in the late sixties when Matthew Lipman, a professor of philosophy at Columbia University, noticed and became upset about two problems in primary education. The first problem had to do with the fact that children did not seem to be thinking as well as (a) they had been, or (b) as educators would like them to think. Lipman looked at scores on standardized tests, observed children in and out of the classroom, talked to teachers and concluded that there were significant problems with the way education sought to encourage thinking skills.

The second problem had more to do with the affective side of education. Stated most simply, Lipman noticed that when children entered school, once they got over the trauma of being separated from their families, they seemed to enjoy school, and they seemed to enjoy it for some fairly good reasons – it was a good place to learn some new things, make some new friends and have some fun. However, the longer children were in school, the less they seemed to like it. Moreover, the longer they stayed in school, the less apt they would be to like school for the (good) reasons that kindergartners might.

From approximately 1969 to the present, Lipman has been developing a program that, among other goals, is meant to deal with what we might label the cognitive and the affective problems. The program is based on the assumption that children are curious about the typical problems of philosophy and that most of them would be eager to talk about philosophy if that subject could be divested of its forbidding terminology. Philosophy for Children is, in effect, such a divesting. In novels from *Harry's Stottlemeier's Discovery* through *Kio and Gus* to the revised version of *Lisa*, Lipman has shown children talking, in very ordinary language, about problems in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, social and political philosophy, and so on.

In turn Lipman, his associates at the *Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children* and affiliate centers throughout the world, through the production of novels which not only expose philosophical issues but which also model what a philosophy discussion could be like, through the production of teacher's manuals which are meant to facilitate the classroom use of the novels, and through an intensive teacher-training program which is meant to aid teachers in developing the sort of skills that are essential to developing a community of inquiry, have been trying, with a good deal of success, to put children in a position where they could talk about the issues that have interested philosophers for centuries.

There has been a good deal of research done on Philosophy for Children. Most of the research shows that when Philosophy for Children is implemented using the appropriate curricular materials (the novels that have been written by Lipman), along with the corresponding teacher manuals, by a teacher trained in Philosophy-for-Children methodology, the program works. It does, for example, generate a statistically significant improvement in scores on standardized tests and it does seem to lead to an enhancement of children's attitude towards their other academic subjects.[2]

And yet, given the impressive test scores that the program generates and given the fact that Philosophy for Children proponents can produce a list of glowing testimonials, one wonders why the program has not developed faster than it has. In this paper, I will attempt to deal with some of the factors that might get in the way of the development of Philosophy for Children. Stated another way, I will try to give some reasons that might explain why talking with children, in the special manner we call "Philosophy for Children", is so hard in the public schools.

II.

Philosophy for Children is, in many ways a movement of more-or-less like-minded individuals. In such a movement, there will always be in-fighting, political machinations, disagreements over style and substance, and so on. Such factors will contribute to the success or failure of the movement and such factors probably could and should be studied in so far as they relate to Philosophy for Children. This paper, however, will not concern itself with those matters. Instead, it will concern itself with those factors which are more directly involved with the relationship of the schools to Philosophy for Children.

The first, and the most obvious problem, involves the sharp contrast between the very notion of scholarship that is mandated by Philosophy for Children versus that which is practiced in far too many classes. Philosophy for Children demands the creation of a community which actively seeks to discover (or invent) meanings, which actively tries to figure things out. This means, of course, that each member must, to some extent, be ignorant of the solution to the problem. In a Philosophy for Children classroom, ignorance is and must be prized because it is a necessary condition for the educative process to begin. The person who has all the answers is precluded from membership in the group.

This is precisely when the difficulty appears. The teacher in a Philosophy-for-Children discussion is a member of a community. Thus, she must, *to some extent*, be ignorant about what is being discussed. There must be something which is really *problematic* for her, she must be as much of a student and scholar as her students. In a public school classroom, however, the kind of ignorance which is prized in Philosophy for Children is denigrated there. The good public school teacher may try to make things problematic for her students, but it is the rare teacher who will value (and convey to her students that she values) the very fact that she may be in the very same cognitive "boat" as her students.

The second problem has something to do with the very nature of talk in the public school classroom. In general, there are two fundamental kinds of talk in the public school classroom. The first, and the most prominent, is the sort of talk which is based on the notion that the teacher's task is to transfer, by linguistic means, that which he knows to the student. Students are viewed as Lockean empty vessels and the teacher's task becomes that of filling up those vessels (with knowledge). The teacher may either lecture at the children or she may indulge in what Dewey calls "suggestive questioning".[3] In either case, she is primarily concerned with a cognitive transfer.

The other kind of classroom talk, which was probably more popular in the late sixties and early seventies than it is today, is the brainstorming or rap-session kind. Here, there are really no right or wrong answers. If everyone gets to say whatever is on his/her mind, then the conversation has been successful.

Obviously, those two kinds of talk are not the only kinds possible and, it is just as obvious, those kinds of talks are distinct from Philosophy-for-Children ones. Philosophy-for-Children discussions do have their own characteristics. While specifying those characteristics is an ongoing process[4] (the process, in other words, is not complete), a cursory look at writings that deal with the characteristics of Philosophy-for-Children discussions will show that such discussions involve a sustained attempt to discover truth. A group of people sit down and over an extended period of time attempt to discover what in educational circles is called the right answer(s). There is more involved here than brainstorming. There is something involved here that is different from being "lectured at".

In a very important sense, the sorts of conversation that Philosophy-for-Children proponents demand of teachers are precisely those that do not exist on a continuum with other public school classrooms conversation. If Dewey is right about the importance of the "continuum",[5] about the importance of the gradual growth from one condition to another, then a

reason for the relative lack of impact of Philosophy for Children on the educational scene would be precisely because Philosophy-for-Children discussions are so different from other public school discussions. The task ahead for Philosophy-for-Children proponents might be that of building a "bridge" from the conversations at hand to the preferred conversations.

The third problem has something to do with the role of disciplinarian that the teacher fulfills in the public school. For better or worse, a large part of the teacher's job in the public schools involves keeping children "in line" and parcelling out rewards or punishments for their behavior. Given that role, it is far-fetched to believe that students might view the teacher as a member of the community who, in many senses, is equal to other members of the community. And yet, this is precisely what a Philosophy-for-Children discussion demands. It demands among other things that the teacher exist on the same "cognitive" level as his students, that his idea, reasons and positions be given no special weight simply *because* they came from him. Simply, the teacher's reasoning is and should be placed under the same sort of scrutiny as other members. If the community of inquiry that is essential to Philosophy for Children is to thrive, if children are to feel confident in rejecting their teacher's position as they might reject any other community member's position, the teacher must act in the special community in ways which are decidedly atypical. Philosophy for Children does demand a significant change in the teacher's role. He must either stop being a disciplinarian altogether or create a "place" and "time" in the school day where his students will have adequate reason to believe that he will not be a disciplinarian.

A fourth problem walks in a kind of lock-step with the third. Just as teachers dispense discipline, they also give out grades. Historically, there has been no "conflict" between Philosophy for Children and grades. Virtually all graduate classes on the methodology are graded and many, if not most, elementary schools either grade philosophy for children as an independent subject or pack philosophy for children into, say, language arts or social studies, and then grade them. Thus, there would seem to be little reason for claiming that there is an historical conflict between the two.

There is, however, what might be called a conceptual conflict. In a Philosophy-for-Children discussion, the child is encouraged to "play" with ideas, "try on" various positions, see how a given concept "feels". To do all of that involves a great deal of risk-taking. The student is asked to make public, to talk about, ideas which may very well be half-baked or poorly thought-out. A Philosophy-for-Children discussion serves, in effect, as a kind of reporter's notebook – a place where

ideas are stored and developed. Just as it might be disastrous to good writing to grade reporter's notebooks, it might be just as disastrous, even though we do it frequently, to grade a Philosophy-for-Children discussion.

If this is the case, if there is a conceptual conflict between Philosophy for Children and the grading system, then one would explain the relatively slow growth of Philosophy for Children, in part, by pointing to the (correct) perception on the part of teachers and administrators that Philosophy for Children does not fit easily into the academic environment. A Philosophy-for-Children proponent then would either have to argue that the environment has to be radically changed or the environment must allow for and make room for sub-environments that do not share all the characteristics of the larger environment.

A fifth problem involves the authorship of the primary material. In the United States, as opposed to parts of Europe, all of the published primary materials are written by one author - Professor Lipman. Good as that material is and as explicit as the attempt to avoid writing from a specific school of philosophy is, there is, almost unavoidably, a sort of "oneness" to Philosophy-for-Children primary material. Lipman is neither existentialist nor phenomenologist nor positivist. It might add some vigor to the corpus of primary material, if, at least, some of it came from philosophers other than Professor Lipman. For example, it would be interesting to see, say, an Hegelian Harry Stottlemeier.

Along with the problem of authorship comes a sixth problem. Professor Lipman, in the unpublished "Philosophy for Children and Creativity" argues, in effect, that powerful children's literature can overwhelm the child's imagination, thereby stifling his/her creativity. Attempting to avoid this "stifling", Professor Lipman has deliberately downplayed the literary aspects of the novels in favor of their pedagogical ones. Lipman may be right to do this, but it should be pointed out that one of the nicer things about children's classics is that they are, in effect, timeless. *Alice's Adventures* do not have to be updated. *Stuart Little* does not have to be modernized. Harry Stottlemeier, however, is more time-dependent. A complaint uttered by many children and teachers is that *Harry* seem dated. Ways around this problem would be either to underscore the topicality of the primary material and issue frequent revisions *or*, perhaps, rethink the argument in favor of downplaying the literary aspects of the primary material.

A seventh problem has something to do with the fact that Philosophy for Children is innovative *and* time-consuming. The teacher and, by extension, the district are asked to spend a great deal of time – two or three class periods a week – on a methodology that is quite distinct from other methodologies operative in the public schools. The methodology does not, however, generate very quick results. If one is thinking about something as elementary as an improvement in test scores, one really has to wait a year or, in many cases, two to come up with any quantifiable results. If one is after something that may be more important, and is certainly far less tangible, i.e., the creation of a community of inquiry, then one must be willing to spend weeks or months before one will even achieve a glimmer of success.

Educators are willing to be patient when it comes to established subjects. Not very many principals demand that a marked improvement in thinking skills be exhibited by students who have attended an algebra class for a few weeks. Educators are far less willing to be patient when it comes to innovation. A program that can generate *quick* results, a program such as *Assertive Discipline*, will stand a greater chance of rapid and extensive growth than Philosophy for Children. There is nothing wrong with that, of course, if *everything else being equal*, the programs are alike. If, however, Philosophy for Children generates the kind of significant growth that other programs do not, then it seems incumbent on Philosophy for Children proponents to "educate" educators to the fact that, although speed is desirable, our desire for speed may preclude our achieving other, and perhaps more worthwhile, goals.

An eighth problem (in this incomplete list) has something to do with the amount of training needed for Philosophy for Children. Lipman and most of his associates recommend the equivalent of six graduate credits in Philosophy for Children. This represents a sizable investment in time, not to mention money, on the part of the teacher. Many teachers, even some good ones, need some incentive, whether it be in released time or financial increments, to get the sort of training that Philosophy for Children demands. That sort of incentive typically comes from the school district. In many cases, especially given the current political climate in the United States, that incentive has not been forthcoming. Subsequently, the growth of Philosophy for Children may have been hampered.

Still, it would be misleading to leave the impression that more money would solve the problem of training. Philosophy for Children is based on two technical disciplines – philosophy and logic. Lipman has attempted to make those disciplines accessible to children through the novels. The philosophy for children teacher soon discovers that if she is going to do a good job, she is almost forced to go beyond the novels, the manual and her training. Indeed, some of Lipman's later manuals (most notably the manual

accompanying *Pixie*) urge the teacher to study the great works of philosophy. And, at that point, we arrive at the very thing that generated Philosophy for Children *viz*, the claim that problems that are "naturally" interesting are rendered inaccessible because they are couched in technical language. The Philosophy for Children proponent, of course, should argue for more economic incentives for teachers to get training in Philosophy for Children. At the same time, he/she would be wise to argue for further training, along with corresponding financial inducements, in philosophy and logic. Failing that, and this is only said partially in jest, the proponent might urge Lipman to write a novel that would do for adults what *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* does for children.[7]

III.

The preceding has been an attempt to give a partial listing of some of the reasons why Philosophy for Children has not grown as quickly as some of its proponents would like. Along with that list comes a series of recommendations for proponents of Philosophy for Children and for other educators. The paper is based on the assumption, it goes almost without saying, that Philosophy for Children in an invaluable tool for educators.

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NOTES

1. The history is based on numerous discussions among Matthew Lipman, Ann M. Sharp, and the author of this paper.
2. Much of that research has been published in various journals and books. The easiest way to get an overview of the published results of that research is by writing to the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. The Institute will send, upon request, a folder containing reprints of most of the articles published before 1984.
3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 57.
4. For some of the attempts at specification, see Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1982), pp. 102-130. Also see Ronald Reed "Discussing Philosophy With Children: Aims and Methods," in *Teaching Philosophy* 8:225-35.
5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 10 ff.
6. Unpublished paper presented at American Philosophical Association Meeting, 1987.
7. Indeed, with the new publication of *Harry Prime*, that is coming to pass.