THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY: WHERE DOES IT BEGIN?

In the traditional classroom, students sit in rows and face the teacher. The teacher is the one who is considered to have amassed a great amount of knowledge and must share that knowledge with students who have had less experience. The process is based on the theory that the mind of a child is like an empty vessel into which the knowledge to be acquired can be poured. And not until a person has acquired a certain amount of information in this manner, is he considered able to pass on the information to others in a similar fashion.

The Philosophy for Children program, however, takes a different approach. Inherent in its philosophy is the notion that from the moment that children are born, they begin to acquire knowledge about the world through the simple act of perceiving through the senses. By listening to the sounds made by his parents, an infant learns to imitate them and to speak. He learns to recognize different objects and persons such as distinguishing a table from a lamp or his mother from his father. These are not things which require a "teacher" to impart to him. Instead, they are learned from simple experiences.

As a child grows, he discovers that the world in which he lives contains many puzzling phenomena. He may ask, for example, what causes time or what makes humans different from animals. We then respond by sending the child to school to learn from his "all-knowing" teachers how to read a clock and learn what a genus and species is. And yet, in this process, we never address his fundamental questions: What is time? What is a human being?

Do we not address them because the questions do not seem to have any definite answers? After all, these are questions which philosophers have tackled for centuries and have as yet been unable to solve. Are we afraid to admit to ourselves that our knowledge is limited, and thus try to find contentment in repeating over and over what little we do know about the world of our experience? And if this is the case, then how do we hope to ever learn more?

Our present educational system does not address our desires to make sense of our experiences; it only seeks to appease them. Subjects are taught as a matter-of-fact, as if we already know all that there is to be learned in a given field. The sense of wonderment is stifled to such a degree that creativity and imagination which are so apparent in the young child become almost non-existent in the adult. And when by some "flaw" in our educational system, an adult emerges with such qualities still reasonably intact, we marvel and exclaim at how unique this person is. But because this person is unique in that he is able to see things in a different light from most of us, we become frightened and shun him; he poses a threat to our society and way of doing things. We are afraid of change and strongly resist it.

We live in an age, however, in which we have begun to recognize that we cannot continue to exist like a turtle hiding in its shell from the world outside. The knowledge which has been gained in the past is not enough. We must learn more if we are to continue to progress. The solution? Our schools say that we will add critical thinking to the curriculum. We will teach our children how to think so that they can go after that elusive information when they become adults. The result is that we ask our children to show their comprehension of a creative story written by an adult or to name all the uses they can think of for a paper clip. But are we really teaching the children to think for themselves? Are we truly changing our methods of education to produce the results which we claim to desire? Or are we merely teaching more of the same old things under a new guise?

The approach of Philosophy for Children to education offers the alternative we are seeking. Classrooms no longer consist of the traditional teacher-student

relationships. Instead, the classroom becomes transformed into one in which teacher and students alike draw on their ideas and experiences and place them into a "pool" for all to gain from. Students are now teaching each other and learning from each other's experiences, not only those of the teacher. Furthermore, the teacher now becomes cast into the role of an equal with her students, learning and sharing with them as they do with each other. And by tackling such philosophical problems as what time is or what a human being is, the sense of wonderment and imagination are retained and strengthened. The "community of inquiry," as it is called, serves as a means for a child to draw upon not only his own ideas and experiences, but on the ideas and experiences of others, so that they may be taken into account to construct a view about the confusing world in which we reside.

The transformation of the classroom into a community of inquiry begins with the teacher. Without her willingness to relinquish control of the lesson to the students and to become a member of the community herself, the transformation cannot occur. This does not mean, however, that the teacher merely sits back and allows the students to do whatever they please. The teacher must also have a strong commitment to the procedure, necessary in order to build a community of inquiry and must strive to develop that same sense of commitment in her students. If all the students talk at once, for example, then no one can be heard and nothing will be accomplished. Similarly, a few students cannot be permitted to dominate the discussion at the expense of not permitting the shyer, more quieter students to participate as well. Just as a person is limited by his own experiences, if he tries to solve a problem by himself, so a group is limited if only a portion of its members participate. Other behaviors which have been identified as indicative "that a child might be experiencing what it is to participate in a community of inquiry include:

accepts corrections by peers willingly
able to listen to others attentively
able to revise one's views in light of reason from others
able to take one another's ideas seriously
able to build upon one another's ideas
able to develop their own ideas without fear of rebuff or humiliation from peers
open to new ideas
shows concern for the rights of others to express their views
capable of detecting underlying assumptions
shows concern for consistency when arguing a point of view
asks relevant questions
verbalizes relationships between ends and means
shows sensitivity to context when discussing moral conduct
asks for reasons from one's peers
discusses issues with impartiality
asks for criteria" (Sharp, 1987, pp. 23-24).

The community of inquiry is still dependent on the teacher for a certain amount of guidance. She is to be considered as a role model. And just as small children learn to speak by imitating the sounds made by their parents, so school children learn to participate in a community of inquiry by imitating the "moves" of their teacher.

It is here that we discover a serious flaw in the argument offered by the Philosophy for Children program: It is assumed that children will naturally "want" to imitate the person among them who has the most experience! But why should they do this if that same person tells them that her experience is to be given equal weight

as their own? Of course, an argument could also be offered in which it is claimed that the students will eventually establish their own rules when they discover that they cannot discuss their ideas. But again, this assumes that children "want" to discuss their ideas with each other. Sure, they do this on the playground all the time. But, are not such mini-communities of inquiry always held with their friends? What happens when a child is disliked by his classmates? Do the children suddenly come to realize that their discussions at recess-time would be enhanced if she were to be included as well? Not too likely, I'm afraid.

Philosophy for Children insists, then, that the teacher must be pedagogically strong and philosophically self-effacing. This is a fine line to walk, however, and one in which no guidance is offered. In my own experience of student teaching this last spring, for example, a group of twice-repeating fifth graders with whom I'd also worked in the fall were merged with a group of "regular" fifth grade students. Immediately, I found myself plunged into the middle of a "cold war" in which the students would respond to others from their own group but would not respond to those in the other class. The former group considered themselves to be inferior since this was their third year in the fifth grade, and the latter felt likewise inferior because they were younger. Students who had been shy about sharing their reasons at the beginning of the fall semester and had been slowly and painstakingly drawn out of their shells so that they not only participated but enjoyed it as well, suddenly became introverted again. When I asked them how the class might be improved so that more people would participate, the silence which would envelope the classroom became almost menacing. I could not model a technique to children who had no interest in responding to it! There were deeper problems in my classroom, which the Philosophy for Children program was unable to address, based on its assumptions about the nature of children.

When I later began to teach a creative writing course with Philosophy for Children as a stimulus for provoking ideas for stories, I was determined to not have the same problems occur a second time. Thus, I instituted an ice-breaking game as our first activity. It required the students to continuously re-group themselves in different combinations, and then once in a groups, they had to communicate with each other on some level, some forms of which were unexpected. One group, for example, was asked to shake hands with everyone. Another group was asked to think of a song they all knew and to perform it. In some cases, the children felt awkward and did not wish to participate, and often I found myself doing a solo act as I tried to help the children get over their shyness and join in the game. I wondered if I had failed in my attempt to get the children to open up and be willing to share with each other. But to my surprise, when we moved from the game to reading and discussing the first episode of Pixie, the children participated with an enthusiasm which I had encountered only once in my student teaching experience. I can only speculate that this was because it did not make them feel as self-conscious. Discussing the novel did not make them sense that they were the center of attention as everyone was equally involved in the process.

It is impossible for me to know for certain if my games had anything to do with the quality and enthusiasm of our discussions. I can only assume that it did based on the experience of one particular class in which I did not have a game planned which related either to the particular episode we were discussing or to developing thinking skills and creativity in general. I had hoped that the children would suggest a game to play, since in previous classes they had indicated that they wanted to teach one of their own or to repeat one I had taught. Unfortunately, the group was not yet ready to follow through with the community of inquiry as a means to reach any consensus when it came to planning an activity. Each child wanted to play

something different. As a result, we ended up not playing anything, and our discussion that day went equally as poorly, with some children lapsing into interminable accounts which illustrated the point they were trying to make. When asked to cut the story short, the ones who had been listening looked relieved, but the "story-teller" displayed some resentment at having been cut off.

It was then that I returned to a resolution which I had developed as an undergraduate student of peace studies. I believed then, as I do now, that education, whether it be traditional or a community of inquiry, cannot begin unless all students can feel not only that they themselves are important, but that they also develop a respect for their peers. Philosophy for Children assumes that these events will occur naturally if only the students are discussing a topic which has importance and relevance to them. This is achieved by allowing them to set the agenda for each class meeting. But is it really that simple? Can we honestly expect people to readily engage in a community of inquiry out of mutual interest? If this were so, then it would also seem to follow that our world leaders could reach a settlement about the issue of nuclear arms buildup!

Unfortunately, psychological problems often have a greater influence over us than a mere interest in the topic at hand. People must learn to get along and respect each other at least to a minimum degree before dialogue of any sort can begin. What would I do differently with my fifth graders now, were I able to go back and work with them again? Two different simulation games immediately come to mind as a way to begin to break the barriers which existed. Both proceed from the traditional competitive spirit on which our society lays so much stake in, and then through interaction and follow-up discussion, the children come to realize that they will actually gain more points for their own team if they cooperate with their competitors. It is activities such as these which are sorely lacking in the Philosophy for Children program; activities which help to foster and to lay the foundation for the development of a community of inquiry. It is not enough to merely conceive of a means to teach our children to think for themselves. The community of inquiry, if we are to adopt it, must be carefully conceived and nurtured . It cannot be expected to occur by itself.

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