ILLITERATE ADULTS AND PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

Illiteracy is a concrete and real problem, which involves nearly one thousand million people in the world. And, according to UNESCO statistics, this number, far from decreasing, keeps increasing in undeveloped countries as well as in the industrialized ones.

At the international Symposium about illiteracy which took place in September 1975, elimination of illiteracy was defined as an attempt to "answer to the fundamental needs of the human being, from the immediate necessities of his daily life to the need to actively participate in the changes of his society" (Hautecoeur, 1987, p. 288).

According to this viewpoint, the elimination of illiteracy must be, "over and above the learning of reading, writing and counting, a way of liberation and of accomplishment for the human being" (Hautecoeur, 1987, p. 288). It must contribute to the development of moral and logical reasoning of the individual and stimulate his creativity so that henceforth he might act on the environment instead of being subjected to it. The elimination of illiteracy must therefore first and foremost touch the development of some characteristics relating to self-confidence, coherence and autonomous thinking.

At this same Symposium, it was declared that elimination of illiteracy is efficient insofar as the illiterate participates in this process, meaning as far as he or she is the subject of his education and not only the object. It was also declared that elimination of illiteracy is efficient insofar as the methods and the material, are adapted to the needs and the interests of the learner, and insofar as the educator establishes an even relationship with his students instead of an authoritarian relationship. Finally, it is efficient insofar as it favours a real dia-logue (Hautecoeur, 1987, pp. 287-292).

Already here, we have an inkling of the relationship existing between the expressed modalities, which I have just reviewed from the Symposium about illiteracy, and the aims of Philosophy for Children!

In Quebec, at a Center called Champagnat, a group of illiterate adults experienced, during the 1986-1987 academic year, the method conceived by Matthew Lipman and the IAPC group. The experience only lasted a few months, but was sufficient to demonstrate that the Philosophy for Children concept was more than helpful to these "functionally illiterate" adults. In other words, we believe that Philosophy for Children is, if not "the" answer, at least is one very promising avenue for giving to all human beings the right of being, the right of being in evolution . . .

In this presentation, we will first try to globally define the problem of illiteracy in Quebec. Then, we will see to what level Philosophy for Children answers the needs of illiterate adults. Finally, we will look at some of the results from our experience at Champagnat Center.

1. ILLITERACY IN THE CONTEXT OF QUEBEC

a) statistical and sociological data (Hautecoeur, 1987)

Concerning illiteracy in Quebec, an investigation undertaken in 1979, revealed some major variables: almost half of the respondents were less than 30 years of age; one quarter declared they already had been in special institutions for the handicapped, for juvenile delinquents, for orphans, etc.; 40% declared being coming from families in which one or more members were at least functionally illiterate; and the majority of respondents appeared to be from the most disadvantaged classes of society.

We must specify, here, that Quebec's illiteracy is not a "total illiteracy," like the one rampant in Third-World countries for example, but it is rather what we call a "functional illiteracy", meaning that an individual is able to read the letters of the alphabet, but is unable to understand, let us say, the meaning of a short text, concerning daily information. The functional illiteracy is hardly measurable because it refers to qualitative notions. So we use an indirect criterion to approximate it, namely the

schooling declared in the population census. This criterion is less than 8 or 9 years of schooling in Quebec and in Canada and less than 12 years in the United States.

According to a population census, made in this same province in 1981, upon its 6 million inhabitants, there were 1,335,200 persons with less than 9 years of schooling. If we link the underschooling to the illiteracy, then Quebec would have 30.4% of its population which is functionally illiterate. Obviously, this includes different degrees of illiteracy.

The major cause of the worst forms of illiteracy would essentially be due, on the one hand, to an inadaptation of the school system to the disadvantaged social classes and on the other hand, to the poverty of the cultural environment in some strata of society.

This leads us to say that illiteracy, in a rich and developed country as Quebec, is not an accidental phenomenon, but an "inheritance"; a burden passed on by way of the family and the environment. Illiteracy is not an individual phenomenon, but a "social fact". Or, more exactly, a "sociolinguistic fact" because the gap between the "formal language", used by the medium and rich social classes, and the "common language" used by the poor constitute the major barrier to the adaptation of the disadvantaged child to the school. Illiteracy is a negative attribute of a sub-class which ignores the normative use of language: a negative attribute which is becoming more apparent each and every day. By means of speech and of gesture, the disadvantaged child maintains his/her rejection and marginality and maintains an obvious difference in his/her whole relationships between his/her second-class culture and the one found at school.

During the childhood of the eventual illiterate, we usually find the same negative cumulative evidences to a varying degree (Cloutier, 1983, pp. 187-203 and Belanger et Rocher, 1975, pp. 358-360 and 326-332): physical deprivation (bad nutrition, lack of medication, many infectious diseases, etc.); sensorial deprivation (lack of adequate stimulation for the development of the senses, lack of educative toys, lack of temporal and spatial organization); emotional deprivation (lack of parental care, continuous absence of one of the parents, frequent movings in the same year or month, etc.); social and cultural deprivation (lack of motivation from the family to academic success, lack of encouragement for the child's integration to the new culture which the school represents, lack of intellectual stimulation, etc.). But the most negative evidences, those which have the greatest negative impact on the child's integration (or non integration) to school are, without any doubt, linguistic deprivation (non-formal language, poorness of the vocabulary, weakness of the syntax, speech defect, etc.).

So we encounter in this transmissible phenomenon, in this sociolinguistic phenomenon which is illiteracy, a central problem, namely speech. For the illiterate, it is not as a liberating experience or as a revealing expression of the self, but dominated speech, the speech which hides poverty, alienation. It is speech characterized more by pauses, by silences, by interjections and by swearwords than by appropriate and comprehensible words. It is speech which denotes (and which provokes) the lack of self confidence, the shame and the fear. Yes, illiteracy is (everywhere in the world, including in Quebec), more than the inability to read and to write, it is, beyond anything else, "the deprivation of the most fundamental social means of interaction: language" (Hautecoeur, 1987, p. 87), dialogue, dia-logos.

b) the dia-logue

To dialogue in an efficient way, is an apprenticeship. It is not something innate, but something that we must acquire. According to John Passmore (Passmore, 1980, pp. 19-37), in every teaching where dia-logue is encouraged, the apprenticeship of the child is increased. According to him, it is only under this condition that the child learns to articulate an emergent thought, to understand the opinions of others and to objectively criticize others and himself. Indeed, Passmore points out, in teaching where the dialogue is favoured, the child does not learn logic, but learns, instead to be and to act logically; the

child does not learn philosophy, but learns to think in a philosophical way and in this sense, to enrich his daily experience.

Also for Lipman and Sharp, dialogue is the royal way leading to the holistic development of an individual. They advocate that it is dialogue which leads to reflection (Lipman, Sharp, Oscanyan, 1980, pp. 22-23). In fact, when on the one hand, a person is speaking, a process of active listening is automatically formed within him or herself: it is by verbalization that an individual clarifies his or her implicit concepts, opinions, ideas or emotions. In other words, he or she clarifies all the intuitive thinking which had been present before the verbal exchange. When, on the other hand, two persons discuss together, there is mutual listening, concentration, comprehension and finally judgment before transmission of a response (Sharp, 1987, p. 15).

If, in this sense, dialogue is an endless process which enables everyone to accede to a higher level of reflection, of comprehension and of knowledge of oneself, of the others and of the world. And if, as we aid before, it is possible to learn how to dialogue. Then why not have our illiterate adults benefit from this socratic method? Furthermore, why not use the Philosophy for Children curriculum in our literacy classes? Before we answer this question, it appears essential to us, to look at the inherent component of the apprenticeship of dialogue, namely school integration.

c) school integration

Concerning school integration, let us say that for the disadvantaged children of a city, for instance, of the size of Montreal, school is not always synonymous with social insertion, as it should be. It is quite often, too often as a matter of fact, synonymous with humiliation, with incomprehension. In fact, at the compulsory school where they register, disadvantaged children are quickly identified by the teachers and the other students because of their physionomy, their ways of dressing, their ways of expressing themselves; their lack of cleanness, their high rate of absence, etc. Most of the time, they end up in special classes, in institutions, in trade schools, or, in short, in all kind of "nurseries" until they reach the age of 16. In reality, these children coming from the lower classes of society are rejected by social institutions. They do not voluntarily retire from the majority groups and their institutions, but they have been unable to become integrated into them (Hautecoeur, 1987, pp. 81-82).

Quite often, as adults, they encounter the same difficulties when they intend to go back to school. Going back to school involves, for many of them, the necessity to assume the shame of their origins and of their illiteracy; it implies the necessity to assume their inability to express themselves properly at the registration office and their difficulty in becoming integrated tot he formalism of the school. Going back to school also involves the necessity to assume their lack of motivation ot attend classes during a year-long period, their lack of intellectual attention, their fear to make mistakes and to have others laugh at them; and it also means they must take risks of education: the risk of changing, the risk of trying, the risk of failing, etc.

So if, in the past, school had been synonymous with failure and humiliation, it retains the same image for illiterate adults who go back. In fact, it represents, for them, a foreign country where all the gestures, the words and the rites differ from theirs. In this sense, education is rather a formal ceremony than a tool to learn to be, to learn to become.

This is why we believe, with Hautecoeur, that elimination of illiteracy must, before anything else, "be clearly considered as an approach of inclusion to the culture and to the society" (Hautecoeur, 1987, p. 97). For Dewey (Dewey, 1983, pp. 19-24), also, the terms society and education are indissociable. He says "education is to social life what nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life" (Dewey, 1983, p. 24). And because society (in the sense of community) is the normal and essential environment for the opening out of all human beings, it therefore belongs to school to position the student

(and more so the adult student) in life conditions reflecting those of his or her society-community so that he might become a useful member to it. But Dewey (1983) adds:

> Individuals do not form a society because they live one besides the other. (. . .) Individuals do not even form a social group because they all work for a common aim. (. . .) If however they were all conscious of the common aim and if they were all enough interested to that aim to set their specific activity in regard to this aim, then they would form a community. But this would imply communication (p. 19).

Thus, school can and ought to be a community (I believe this applies more strongly in the case of our illiterate adults), that means it can and ought to use communication (dialogue) as a foundation.

In this sense, elimination of illiteracy is "the learning of a foreign language (the formal language), but at the same time and first of all, a reappropriation of his or her own language (. . .), a resumption of the speech, where it has been prohibited, censured" (Hautecoeur, 1987, p. 197). Elimination of illiteracy then might help in the discovery of the self. To the acceptance of the self. Because, beyond teaching to read and write, it is a process of creation, of creation of the self. It is in this sense, I believe, Philosophy for Children was essential to the group of adults at Champagnat Center.

2. ILLITERATE ADULTS AND PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

At the Champagnat Center, about 30 adults, of grade 2 level, who had never been able to express themselves, who had always been hiding their personal ideas and their opinions, who had never dared to "communicate" in the sense mentioned by Dewey, discovered, with Harry, the magic of the community of inquiry. Indeed these illiterate adults feel, like every other human being, the need for dialogue: the need to listen and the need to speak. A gallery is then necessary, but not any gallery. A gallery where the dialogue could go on in all security. The security is essential to them because, of course, their anxiety is deep . . . deeper than the majority of the literate adults. Their wound, from their previous experience in school, had been deep . . . deeper than the majority of literate adults. For many of them, previous school failures has been directly attributed to them: if they did not succeed, it is because they were not intelligent, because their thinking was lacking in common sense and because their opinions were as much superficial as insignificant . . . and still are. Of course, their self-esteem is low. No wonder they are standing aside.

But the community of inquiry of Philosophy for Children offers them the kind of security they need. In fact, Philosophy for Children always takes place in an atmosphere of respect and of confidence: this is the first rule of the game! No tolerance, no open-mindedness, no mutual respect equals no community of inquiry. And indeed the individual motivation of the illiterate adults from Champagnat Center developed because it required the respect of the group.

After a few hours in Harry's company, each one got involved in the game . . ."even shy Denise who never said one word!" according to the teacher. Like children playing with a new toy, our adults discovered that they had ideas. Good ideas. Of course, coherence is still lacking in their reasoning. Of course, logic is still missing in their thinking, but is Harry not there to guide them? "All the cucumbers are vegetables, but all vegetables are not cucumbers" (Lipman, 1978, p. 11). Yes, they understand that. Yet, it is logic! But also amusing. They discuss about vegetables, about daily life, about planets, about moral and philosophical principles. In short, they express themselves beyond their hopes. And with no stress. Because the community of inquiry does not aim at finding precise answers or immediate solutions to a given problem. Because it does not distribute a 100% mark or a 0 mark. Because it is not schooling, nor diminishing, nor restricting.

Instead, it tries to go deeper in the comprehension of the words and of the situations. It tries to discover the many definitions, significations and possibilities of concepts and things. It does not demand a good answer, "the" good answer. You know, the one which is always in someone else's mind! But because it is a community, it helps to think, to find. It offers to each one the opportunity to go beyond his or her own knowledge and to get nearer and nearer reflexive thinking. "I do have some ideas!" exclaims a happy and surprised adult. "Yesterday, my wife asked me: I had never heard you talking as long as that, before! What is going on in your classroom?" reports another one, delighted.

The illiterate adults' speech had been castrated, imprisoned, alienated since their first year at school. They feel it is time to speak. To speak their thoughts. They also need to speak about topics more important and more fundamental than the weather or television series. They are poor . . . and they are hungry for precise vocabulary, for right words, for appropriate sentences. They are poor . . . and they are thirsty to be heard, to be listened to, to be respected in their ideas and their opinions.

And in this sense, contrary to traditional school, Philosophy for Children considers the learner as a unique individual. There is no tension, no comparison. Each one has the right to speak. And each comment is accepted and respected by the group as long as it is pertinent to the discussed topic. Each opinion is important, even necessary, so that the whole of the community might evolve towards a better comprehension of the discussed theme. The adults from Champagnat Center actually perceived this. Each member had his or her own place within the group and, in this sense, felt he or she was essential to it: just like the part is inseparable from the whole. By consequence, each member was actualized . . . at last!

In the context of philosophy for Children, there is neither division, nor classification, nor selection, nor hierarchisation. Ideas are building up in an even atmosphere. Even in the physical disposition of the desks, there is no first and no last: we are all sitting in a circle! Each one sees the other student, each is equal to the other. And most of all, each one is equal to the teacher. No hierarchical gap. No one knows the answer. No one knows the truth. Not even the teacher. "Not even the teacher?!" worried our adults, sceptical and half frustrated. Because, for them, a question necessarily calls for an answer. And an intellectual quest remaining without a final answer is a vain quest. But the frustration the adults from Champagnat Center were living, at the beginning, was a positive one" it was not provoking anger nor renunciation, but curiosity. In other words, it was leading to the will to look for, by and for oneself. Thus everyone was working, thinking . . . discovering! As the community of inquiry went along, the illiterate adults' marginality was decreasing, their inferiority complex easing, their shame and their fear weakening. Because, more and more, like the teacher, they also were thinking. Thinking and expressing their thoughts.

To become aware of our capacity to think is a first step. To express our thoughts is a second step. To learn to think in a critical and autonomous way is a third step. This is what literacy classes from Champagnat Center aim at. This is the purpose of the Philosophy for Children program.

Thinking is a continuous activity of the human being: even when we are not aware of it, many mental processes take place continuously. Thus, thinking is a natural and spontaneous movement. But thinking in an autonomous and critical way is different: it does not incorporate any automatism. It is rather an experiencial process which requires the whole of the individual's faculties and this, with the conscious intention to create, as a unique person, a specific difference on the environment. Thinking in a critical way is a personal task because it takes place when the individual builds inferences, when he or she suggests solutions or when he or she tries to explain facts. In fact, to decide, to choose, to judge, to invent, etc. are mental acts that an individual cannot borrow from his or her teacher or from general opinion: he or she must learn to master them by and for him or herself. In brief, to think in an autonomous and critical way presupposes a

foundation of self confidence, of logic and of creativity, meaning an apprenticeship, an evolution of being. To think by and for him or herself is not solely a matter of method, it is also and mostly the result of a personal experience rich in liberty, in coherence and in significance. And it is all this search for critical thinking, enriched by dialogue, which had been experimented at Champagnat Center, in 1986-1987.

3. SOME RESULTS

In concrete terms, what has Philosophy for Children brought to the illiterates of Champagnat Center? And what are the positive results of this experimentation?

To answer the first question, let us say through the community of inquiry, the Philosophy for Children program has given the illiterates the necessary time and environment to think as much about daily problems as about fundamental questions.

The program, through Harry has proposed to them a new way to conceive and manipulate ideas. It has offered them an opportunity to look objectively and even to question assets and prejudices. And, further to the criticism of assets and prejudices, the program of Philosophy for Children has placed these illiterates face to face with self-criticism.

With regards to this methodology, are the results convincing? According to the teacher who lived this experimentation, the illiterate adults of Champagnat Center have and their ways on many accounts:

* Start of open mindness with regards to the remarks of their fellow illiterates
* More questioning of oneself before asserting
* More shaded assertions
* More active listening
* Sounder thinking
* Questioning and thinking which go on after classes
* Questioning becoming more philosophical
* More intellectual curiosity
* Opinions generated from fellows' ideas
* More coherence in topics
* More at ease in conceiving and sharing personal ideas.

Self-criticism, according to the teacher, has remained the most difficult objective to reach. Due to their lack of self-confidence and their lack of valid arguments to adequately defend their opinions, these illiterate adults did not easily accept criticism from others. And in the same sense, they did not like to question their own ideas. However, the teacher of the group maintains that even if this phase of the program was only partly attained, the illiterates became at least partially conscious of the notion of self-criticism.

Another major obstacle seems to have been reading. In fact, Harry's language level, which has been conceived for students of grades 5 and 6, was too complex for these illiterate adults of grade 2 equivalent. For example, the interpolated clauses and the comparisons, instead of making the message clearer, made it more confused. The length of the sentences and of the chapters was also a major obstacle to the group. Nevertheless, the ideas behind the novel captivated and motivated them.

As to the influence of Philosophy for Children on teacher herself, she maintains that the community of inquiry she has experienced in the training session as well as with the group of illiterates has marked her deeply. She stated, and I quote: "After having experienced a community of inquiry such as the one proposed by Harry, you just can't be the same teacher afterwards. It's impossible!" She further reflected that now, in her regular classes, instead of giving the answer to her students, she invites them to think together about the question, to dialogue and to find among themselves arguments that might convince the others. She now firmly believes that discussions are not a waste of time, but something enriching for herself and for the group.

4. CONCLUSION

Let us say, in concluding, that the Philosophy for Children program, based on the development of moral and logic reasoning and on creativity, encourages an action and a true reflection on the existential reality. The program considers all human beings as authentic beings, as beings in evolution.

This is how the philosophy for Children program developed, for most of the illiterate adults of the Champagnat Center the desire to learn, as confidence in their own capacity to think by and for themselves.

And this is why we firmly believe, that is the teacher and I, that Philosophy for Children is, if not the answer, at least one of the most adequate answers to the problem of illiteracy in Quebec. And we hope that this experimentation will continue with the same group or be replicated with other groups of illiterates in Quebec.

Philosophy for Children is becoming Philosophy for people!

Marie-France Daniel

REFERENCES

Belanger, P. W., & Rocher, G. (1975). Ecole et societe au Quebec [School and society in Quebec], (Vol. 2). Montreal: Editions Hurtubise HMH.

Cloutier, R. et al. (1983). Analyse sociale de l'education [Social analysis of education]. Montreal: Goreal Express.

Dewey, J. (1983). Democratie et education [Democracy and education]. Traduit et presente par Gerard Deledalle, France.

Hautecoeur, J. et al. (1987). Introduction aux pratiques et politiques en alphabetisation [Introduction in the practices and politics of literacy]. Montreal: Editions de L'UQAM.

Lipman, M. (1978). La decouverte d'Harry Stottlemeier [Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery]. Traduit par Pierre Belaval. Paris: Vrin.

Lipman, M., Sharp, A. M., & Oscanyan, F. S. (1980). Philosophy in the classroom. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University.

Passmore, J. (1980). The Philosophy of teaching. Cambridge: Harvard University.

Sharp, A. M. (1987). What is a community of inquiry?, Analytic Teaching, 8(1), 13-18.