

PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: THE PHILIPPINE EXPERIENCE

In this paper I will explore three major issues that confront the implementation of Philosophy for Children in a developing country, using a recent project that I helped initiate in the Philippines as indicative of the importance of these issues. The three issues are: (1) modification of the curriculum materials to meet cultural conditions (in particular, I shall focus on the choice of language for the materials and instruction); (2) differences in pedagogical methods, teacher expectations and classroom dynamics; and (3) the effect of nationalism on attitudes towards educational curricula "imported" from the developed world. This third issue is of profound philosophical importance, because it suggests the need to defend the Philosophy for Children program in light of charges that they threaten the cultural integrity of the host culture.

Before broaching any of these issues let me first remark that this short essay does not attempt so much to resolve any of these problems as to sensitize others to the important philosophical and political matters that confront the implementation of Philosophy for Children (or any other educational program, for that matter) in developing countries. Also, the comparison of Philippine conditions to those in other developing countries can be carried only so far, yet I suspect that these issues present commonalities that apply to most of the developing world (if not beyond).

At this point, I should describe briefly the Philippine project to date. The project is sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme and the Filipino-American International Transfer of Help (FAITH). An exploratory phase was implemented in a three-month period (January-April, 1988) at the Laboratory School of the Philippine Normal College. Fourth and fifth grade students were instructed with the Pixie and Harry programs. This exploratory phase yielded very positive results (as measured by the New Jersey Test of Reasoning Skills), indicating a high potential for success in Philippine classrooms. The Laboratory School faculty were trained in the Pixie and Harry programs. These faculty members are conducting a year-long experiment to study further the elements of implementation of Philosophy for Children in the Philippine curriculum. Strong support for the project has been communicated by the Department of Education in the Philippines and a full-scale implementation of the project is being considered (perhaps funded through UNESCO).

This brings me to my first topic. So far, the materials used in the project are precisely those used in American classrooms. It is widely recognized that some modification of the materials is necessary to meet Philippine conditions, yet among Filipino educators there are great differences with respect to the degree of modification required. Let me focus on one issue. In the Philippines, as in other countries, there are pedagogically and politically important factors in choosing a particular dialect or language as a medium of instruction for Philosophy for Children programs. There are over two-hundred dialects in the Philippines and a strong movement to remove English as the medium of instruction and replace it with Pilipino (Tagalog).

The use of Pilipino has several advantages, not the least of which is the social and political unification of the disparate social groups in a country of over seven thousand islands. By far the most important reason, however, is the fact that most Filipino children today consider Pilipino their native tongue, the language most widely used at home, and thus the language which comes closest to the essence of their experience. Since philosophy begins in wonder, there is no doubt that Pilipino predominates as the language of wonder in Filipino children.¹

On the other hand, English is the gateway to higher education and life beyond. English is, and will be for the foreseeable future, the medium of instruction in the nation's colleges and universities. For this, and other reasons, English fluency is greater among

the privileged classes. The children of middle-class and upper-class families are far more likely to be fluent in English than children of poorer families. English, like Spanish before it, has become a class demarcator. Failure to prepare children as speakers of English is to cut off educational possibilities, and thus to stultify the upward mobility of the underclasses. For this reason, some administrators would like to use the Philosophy for Children curriculum as a means for instructing English. As I see it, this poses a serious problem for Philosophy for Children, since the children are supposed to identify with the children in the novel, not see them as from another section of the country or even a foreign land. Philosophy for Children is different from other curricula in that it starts where the children are, cognitively culturally and linguistically.

To sum up: the modification of the materials poses many significant problems. Should they be rewritten in English and discussion allowed in both or written wholly in Pilipino? Happily, this is not my decision to make, since it must be Filipino educators who make the programs their own. As a consultant to this project, however, I would like to have some ideas to offer towards the resolution of this difficult matter.

My second topic concerns pedagogical methods currently used in Filipino classrooms and, I presume, in other developing countries. Perhaps it is true that nowhere do the theories and ideals of education match perfectly with pedagogical practices, yet in the Philippines the disparity is tremendous. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that almost all of the teachers I came into contact with had been trained in progressive pedagogical theories--such as Dewey, Piaget, Kohlberg, etc.--but were expected to practice teaching in the traditional methods. Drill and rote learning are still the predominant methods of teaching in elementary school classrooms in the Philippines. Discipline, regimentation and conformity are very high on the list of priorities in these classrooms. The teacher's control over the classroom, behaviorally and as the fount of knowledge, is considered the mark of a good teacher. This standard is explicitly applied in the training of student teachers. Class discussion rarely occurs. In fact, many teachers remarked to me that I would find little success in holding discussion-oriented classes with their students, because the students are reticent to discuss matters in class. (Of course, this turned out to be very far from the truth--even in the first class, I found the students more than willing to offer their ideas in class discussion.) In short, many teachers espoused theoretical allegiance to Dewey and others, but had no curriculum materials or practical methods available whereby these theoretical models could be translated into actual classroom practices.

Now there is nothing inherently wrong with traditional didactic practices with appropriate limits as to context and extent; in fact, the class discussions were aided by the respectful and orderly manner in which the children conducted themselves. But for the group of teachers I worked with, the introduction of Philosophy for Children program comes as a long-awaited revolution: finally, here is a full-fledged curriculum that infuses their ideals of education into classroom activities. The obstacles to educational reform in the Philippines are not so much theoretical differences in philosophical orientation, but involve the development of effective materials that follow through with the abstract ideals in practice. Hence, I view the introduction of Philosophy for Children as a catalyst for great educational reform in developing countries like the Philippines.

Finally, we come to my third and most important topic. The emergence of nationalistic sentiments in developing countries has engendered considerable cynicism about "imported" educational curricula. The controversy over "imported" curricula has been particularly fierce in the Philippines. In my opinion, this cynicism is largely justified, as many programs in the past have had a disguised political or cultural agenda which sought to promote ideas and values that are harmful to the Filipino psyche. The range of harmfulness and intention in these educational programs has been great; some were merely ignorant of the indigenous cultural values (for example, several programs aimed to "christianize" Filipinos in spite of the fact that 90% of the population is

Catholic), while others actively sought to remake Filipinos into optimal consumers of American products. 2

In light of this cynicism, the charge must be answered whether or not the implementation of Philosophy for Children is yet another form of "neo-colonialism," intended to inculcate a "foreign" (read: submissive) attitude on the host culture. This raises the important (philosophical) question of whether Philosophy for Children is essentially culture-neutral and adaptable. A related question emerges: Is thinking, as an educational ideal, culture-dependent or should it be the goal of education in all cultures?

I have neither the space nor the capacity to offer an adequate resolution of this difficult problem, yet I believe I can trace some important features of the problem and suggest a few possible leads towards its solution.

As I see it, this criticism can have two interpretations: (1) such a criticism may imply that thinking itself is a non-indigenous activity, and that the production of good thinking skills in the culture's children would subvert or undermine the cultural traditions and values; or (2) it may be meant that the kind or style of thinking promoted by Philosophy for Children is a foreign or non-indigenous style--here the need for thinking skills is recognized, but it is held that there are significant cultural differences in thinking, so that the values imparted by the Philosophy for Children program will inevitably reflect a culture-dependent perspective alien to the host country.

I have the following comments to make concerning the first criticism. In its strongest form, where the rejection of the need for thinking skills programs is adamantly held throughout a culture, there is no way of resolving this first criticism--it is not the prerogative of any outside agency or consultant to insist on an unwanted educational reform. In other words, there is no room for paternalism in such development work.

One is not likely to run across such a pervasive and strongly held rejection of thinking skills, however. Rather, this criticism is most likely symptomatic of fears that thinking skills will subvert the cultural values and traditions. One effective response to these fears is to demonstrate that thinking is always to work and the only distinction to be drawn is between better and worse varieties of it. Furthermore, no culture is devoid of revered thinkers--e.g., Jose Rizal in the Philippines. The main point to get across is that thinking is among those facets of human existence that are universally evident in all cultures. Thinking, of itself, is not western nor eastern, secular nor religious, conservative not liberal, etc.

One of the underlying themes often heard in cultures that place a large emphasis on authority in familial, religious, and political matters is that thinking is subversive of authority. In part this is true, if the authority is illegitimate. On the other hand, reasoning is the truest friend of legitimate authority, since in such cases thinking can be used as a persuasive force in justifying the exercise of power. Hence, reflective thinking poses no inferent threat to authority.

Of course, there is no denying that social values will be changed by educational reforms that include thinking skills programs. Indeed, there should be such changes or there is little value in making the effort. Thinking is a process wherein social values may be realized. It is not whether new values result, but what kinds of values result, that is really the heart of the matter. The imposition of foreign value systems and the diminution of revered indigenous, value systems, are the genuine causes for concern.

This leads us easily to the second area, as I divided it above: that a thinking skills program like Philosophy for Children involves the imposition of "foreign" values, and the loss of existing positive values. I have several general comments in this area, too. If thinking is seen as Dewey and Lipman view it, as the shift or amplification of meanings through individual or collective inquiry, then thinking is essentially an evaluative activity that appropriates the meanings latent in the context. As such, in the Philosophy for Children programs, thinking begins where the students and instructor are. In other words, the criteria for evaluation of arguments will be their criteria, not necessarily what

a foreign textbook author says it should be. Good thinking will thus be an affair of amplifying the indigenous meanings, not of adopting another set of meanings or structures.

Philosophy for Children programs are designed to maximize the role of indigenous values in this process. For example, the problems that are formulated for discussion in a Philosophy for Children classroom are the children's own. Sensitivity to a problematic and the ensuing formulation of the problem are perhaps the most crucial phases of the thinking processes. Philosophy for Children is unique among thinking skills pedagogies in emphasizing these phases of thinking. This has the further effect of guaranteeing the continuity between the thinking skills that emerge and the meanings imbedded in the cultural context.

It would be fruitless to contend that foreign values are not taught by Philosophy for Children by arguing (in a positivistic vein) that thinking is pure method with no content. No thinking (not even logic) ever occurs without a context of values. (Without values there could be no evaluation.) The response we offer can only hope to show that, in Philosophy for Children, the values are provided in large part by those who participate in the inquiry, and this will guarantee a certain cultural integrity. Certainly, the textbooks and teacher's manuals do offer a certain "model" for the process of inquiry, and also other characteristics (such as styles of social interaction, character development, attitudes, etc.) that may very well be culture-dependent in some important sense, yet these can be appropriately modified by educators in the host country to suit the cultural conditions. It is thus the process of reflection within the culturally shared system of values that is central here. Philosophy for Children does not attempt to inculcate a certain agenda of beliefs nor even a set of logical methods divorced from culturally imbedded evaluative processes.

As I said at the beginning of this short talk, it is my task here only to open up some fruitful areas for discussion concerning the introduction of Philosophy for Children in developing countries. I hope you will join with me now in confronting these questions, as the success of Philosophy for Children in the developing world depends to a great extent on the answers that we give.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In my experience at the Laboratory School, the children had some difficulty in expressing their ideas in English so I instructed them to speak in Tagalog if that suited their ability to express the idea. The children took me up on this offer and the level of discussion improved dramatically.

REFERENCES

Constantino, R., & Constantino, L. R. (1978) The Philippines: The continuing past. Quezon City, Philippines: Foundation for Nationalistic Studies.