

The Philosophy for Children Center as a Networking Process

Philosophy for Children has been firmly established as a leader in educational reform.¹ It is a model curriculum which has been a determining force in defining the general field of Reflective Education.² Philosophy for Children differs from many other educational approaches in its attempt to avoid the folly of dichotomizing the theoretical and the practical. It has also tried to graft the fragmentation manifest when we fail to allow for the continuity of affect, thought, and action in planning our educational strategies.

The historical place of Philosophy for Children in education and philosophy can be conveniently summed up by the figure of Rapunzel. Like Rapunzel, philosophy is born of a desire. We usually identify this desire as wonder or a craving for meaning. Unfortunately, superstition has long imprisoned her in a tower of ivory. She has grown lonely. Her natural urges have been repressed and she has come to feel empty and barren. However, the passage of time has been marked by the growth of her hair. She now manifests the pre-adaptive condition necessary for reaching out from her lofty prison into the day to day lives of every person.

What we can do to speed her rescue is provide the Prince with a map and some inside information about the movements of her jailer, the Sorceress.

What offspring might the re-union of Rapunzel and the Prince produce? The restoration of vision is one that the fairy tale suggests. Whether Rapunzel and her family remain healthy and dynamic or become dysfunctional will depend upon our assiduous nurturance.

I've used the story of Rapunzel because it helps define a "Zone of Proximal Development" in education and philosophy--the point at which mediation can nudge philosophy into being recognizable and respected as an integral force in ongoing human development (which just happens to be the overall thematic focus of education).

The purpose of this paper is to provide a map for negotiating the practical demands of the contemporary educational terrain. The overall questions I have been guided by in my day to day work and which this paper will address in a limited way are: How are we best to disseminate Philosophy for Children and how can we further stimulate the development of Reflective Education?

One fertile way to encourage the well being of philosophic inquiry is to organize activities through the development of a Philosophy for Children Center.

Just what is a Philosophy for Children Center? The responses I will offer are based upon my experiences implementing the Philosophy for Children program in the Buffalo Public Schools and with the formation and ongoing activities of our center, the Western New York Center for Reflective Education.

When I started to think about the question "What is a Philosophy for Children Center?" I was reminded of the dynamic process orientation of the Philosophy for Children program. It seemed reasonable that a center ought to reflect this orientation. Consequently, I came to think about a center in terms of its purposes or functions.

Through a series of informal conversations with various educators in the Western New York area and with corroborating feedback from the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children in Montclair, N.J., my friend and colleague Dr. Richard Perkins and I sensed a strong interest in the area of thinking skills generally and in Philosophy for Children specifically. In January of 1989, Dr. Perkins and I produced a plan for the implementation of the Philosophy for Children curriculum and for the establishment of a center which would promote and provide training in Philosophy for Children. The Center would also encourage local efforts at developing Reflective Education. We presented our

plan to a group of local educators at the Department of Educational Studies at the University at Buffalo. The proposal was enthusiastically received and it helped to initiate the all important process of networking. In fact, much of what follows is a possible story line for how networking can take place fairly effortlessly. But first I want to share the purposes which Dr. Perkins and I listed in our proposal. These purposes are arranged from the specific to the general, as this is the direction we think the center ought to grow:

- 1) To centralize and consolidate the efforts of educators already involved in Reflective Education.
- 2) To encourage and supply training to currently active elementary and secondary school teachers who want to engage their students in Reflective Education.
- 3) To make methods and research opportunities available to those entering the field of education at all levels.
- 4) To stimulate continuing research and development in programs fostering Reflective Education.
- 5) To promote a general restructuring toward Reflective Education both in schools and in teacher education preparation.
- 6) To strengthen the role played by the humanities in formal education.

Our first activities were designed to locate people in the local area who were sympathetic and supportive of our efforts. This included the many teachers who had already reasoned out for themselves the premises and assumptions of Reflective Education and were either practicing these techniques or were struggling to 'put it all together'. Also included in this initial group were the few astute educators who recognized the need for programs which foster critical consciousness. Likely they had already been looking around for a program and someone to implement it.

Contacting building administrators and setting up awareness sessions or teacher training workshops are good ways to draw your allies together. You will also accomplish several other goals:

- 1) You will strengthen your bond with those who are already leaning towards the reflective education approach.
- 2) You have to throw out a net in order to capture others in the community who also might be supportive of Reflective Education and Philosophy for Children. Parents, local business people, local boards of education, and so on.
- 3) You will be laying a foundation for a much later step. Teacher education departments, that you can interest in allowing a focus on Reflective Education (including training in Philosophy for Children), will need a place to send their student teachers which is supportive of a new teacher's skills. An environment vital to the neophyte trying to take his or her first steps in a system where blind tradition often rules and where constant demand for product devalues the developmental process. Tacitly, the message is that development is just something to 'get through' until one enters the adult world, in the case of the child, or the professional world, in the case of the teacher. There is a naive teleology embedded

in this outlook that ignores contemporary understandings about human growth and development and the truth that development ought to be continuous throughout life. Setting up our institutions to give another impression is reprehensible, for it creates what we might term developmental oppression.

However, to return to our more practical narrative, you are also creating a place for these new teachers to have preference for placement as they will have the requisite skills needed to teach in a school committed to Reflective Education.

Philosophy fills many gaps which have appeared in contemporary life, generally, and in education, specifically. Philosophy is, in a sense, the mortar which holds together the edifice of the disciplines and our human relationships to them. Note what Jacob Needleman³ has to say about the repression of the philosophic urge:

Man cannot live without Philosophy. This is not a figure of speech, but a literal fact [that will be demonstrated in this book]. There is a yearning in the human heart that is nourished only by real philosophy and without its nourishment man dies as surly as if he were deprived of food or air. But this part of the human psyche is not known or honored in our (American) culture. When it does break through to our awareness, it is either ignored or treated as if it were something else. It is given wrong names; it is not cared for; it is crushed. And eventually, it may withdraw altogether, never again to appear. When this happens, man becomes a thing. No matter what he accomplishes or experiences, no matter what happiness he knows or what service he performs, he has in fact lost his real possibility. He is dead.

Philosophy in contemporary culture suffers from the type of invisibility oppression creates. We need to find the openings--the gaps, crevices, voids and spaces into which Philosophy has long been absent. Again, Needleman⁴ states:

The fear of this inner death has begun to surface in the modern world. In quiet moments, an individual senses this fear of dying inwardly and sees that all the other fears of his life--his physical and psychological fears--are in no way related to it. At the same time, he senses--along with this fear--a yearning or love unknown to him in his ordinary life. He sees that no other loves of his life--his family, his work, perhaps not even his God--are related to the yearning for something he cannot name. And he wonders what he can do to heal this profound division in himself between the wish for being and psychosocial needs. Nether ordinary religion, nor therapy, nor social action, nor adventure, nor work, nor art can bridge these two fundamental motivations within him.

We have patterned the re-introduction of Philosophy after a seepage image. Philosophy seeps into those gaps from which it has long been absent. What is required, on the part of those implementing, is dogged persistence and patience--after all bringing people back to philosophic life isn't easy!

We have lightly referred to this model as the "seepage model of implementation". This model has its source in Lipman's paper called *Philosophic Practice and Educational Reform*⁵ where he observes:

The contemporary educational system is frequently depicted as being mono-lithic, inflexible and impenetrable. However, it is considerable more pluralistic than these accounts suggest--more loosely woven, open-textured and diversified. Within its many crevices and interstices are school administrators to whom Philosophy for Children, for whatever reason, seems irresistible. Some prize it for its promise of improving reason skills; others admire it because students seem to enjoy it for its own sake rather than for

the sake of grades or because it is relevant to their vocational aspirations. Some see it as the stem of the elementary and secondary school, out of which the specialized disciplines can emerge; others see it as a wholesome preventative to drug and alcohol abuse. These educators may have some familiarity with the traditional rejection of philosophy for children, but they are pragmatic enough to reject it in turn. They like what philosophy does when children do it.

Philosophy, like a diamond, is made up of many facets. Light may refract off any facet in many startling and brilliant ways. By focusing light on one or another facet of Philosophy for Children, to the extent it is philosophy, it will appeal to those whose educational and developmental perceptions are so attuned. So ubiquitous is the role of philosophy in the development of persons that virtually any cause may be addressed in its philosophical dimension by Philosophy for Children. For those uncomfortable with this retail approach to dissemination, for concern with maintaining philosophic integrity, I refer to our diamond analogy. Any facet of a diamond will not be in the respect it is without the whole diamond and all of its internal relationships. All we are doing is allowing it to sparkle by shifting it around in the light. One may 'seep' into a system by highlighting the instrumental or the consummatory aspects of the program, but once implanted, and implanted properly, all the other aspects of the program have an opportunity to become visible.

In more detailed terms the seepage model of implementation is an attempt to discover and later invent forms through which methods of Reflective Education may manifest. Progress is virus-like--each unit cluster 'infects' the others around it. Each is transformed as it remembers Philosophy.

The starting cluster begins with awareness sessions and teacher training. Teacher training necessarily includes classroom practice. The model philosophy teacher is always seeking better ways of teaching and of deepening their understanding of the philosophic dimension of being.

Often teachers feel discouraged when first soloing with Philosophy for Children. Some think the program is ineffective or purposeless. Still others report they feel like the 'bottom had dropped out'. Regular follow-up sessions which address the underlying theory and practice of Philosophy for Children and which allow for trouble-shooting are a must.

Opportunity must also be created for teachers to experience a catharsis. The repression of the philosophic urge can be as unhealthy as repression of any other natural urge and its release equally as powerful. With this observation in mind, we designed the follow-up sessions to appear *prima facie*, like a traditional college course, so they didn't feel too foreign to the participants, but they were actually designed to model Philosophy for Children methodology while dealing with the theoretical underpinnings of Philosophy for Children and the general Reflective Education approach. The follow-up sessions were sequenced so the participants progressed from looking at the program from the outside in to levels of self-awareness, thereby producing a shift in perspective. At the end of the process teachers were able to look out from the inside of a newly forming critical disposition.

Teachers try, understandable, to force Philosophy for Children into the ways they normally think about teaching. They make demands for scope and sequence to be provided and continue to ask how the program must be taught (e.g. what algorithms are appropriate). One third of the May 1990 issue of *Analytic Teaching*⁶ was devoted to explorations of teacher training models in Philosophy for Children. The stress was again and again on constant follow-up. We have come to believe that there is a 'missing link', if you will, in teacher training. There may be a need for a preparatory stage which would make the transition from traditional teaching to Reflective Education and Philosophy for

Children smoother and may eliminate the need for such extensive follow-up, which is often difficult or impossible to provide.

Other difficulties also exist. Teachers with little philosophy background have difficulty "hearing" philosophy. This insensitivity is almost a disability (even though many insist that the opposite is true). Unless teachers' philosophic sensitivity is nurtured they will deprive themselves and their students of one of the conceptually richest disciplines there is.

These three practices, teacher training workshops, follow-up sessions, and classroom practice, comprise a self-reinforcing unit. It seemed obvious that our next move would be towards research and testing so that we could establish our own data base and allow for further development.

Research needs a vehicle for expression. Traditionally the professional journal has served in this capacity. Expression in a journal means reaching beyond the local setting. Naturally, this would include the university.

During this time it is also a good idea to start trying to tap into the media for support and to draw parents in who really understand the benefits of the program, as well.

University affiliation, and all that it entails, can lead to offering credit for teachers involved in training and implementation. Eventually, undergraduate and graduate degrees--perhaps not in Philosophy for Children specifically (University faculty usually dislike "canned" programs) but in Reflective Education--can eventually be designed and offered. This could mean sorely needed changes in teacher education. This series of developments may lead to the writing of books, texts, and other formats appropriate to Reflective Education. One effect this may have is the introduction of a lay audience to Philosophy for Children.

Of course, it would be easy to lose sight of the original purpose of Philosophy for Children--namely, to benefit children. The whole edifice we have constructed serves as a foundation for schools based around methods of Reflective Education.

In this vein we have started other projects related to philosophic education in both form and content. I conduct a Philosophy club which meets to talk about the history of philosophy with a focus on problems.

I have also set up a speaker series in philosophy. Philosophers from local university faculties speak to our high school students about selected philosophic topics. The students in attendance respond to the speaker by writing a brief paper. The best of these papers are then selected to be published in our in-house philosophy journal called *Reflections*. *Reflections* is then used as a basis for lessons appropriate to the speaker's topic. This year, for example, we had a specialist in medical ethics address the topic of animal rights. After the student response papers were collected and published they were distributed to English and biology classes in order to build upon student work. More importantly it is a step towards forming a school-wide community of inquiry. For the same reasons that students become critically self-conscious in a classroom community of inquiry, (e.g., knowing others would be critically listening and responding) so, too, they would become self-conscious about their writing, knowing that their papers would be read critically by their peers.

In addition, we also want to introduce college bound students to the function of the professional journal while simultaneously encouraging students to value their philosophic writing.

In keeping with our intent to encourage such valuing, we are organizing a city-wide⁹ Philosophy essay contest patterned after the Ohio contest designed by Dr. Donald Scherer of Bowling Green State University. The winner of the contest is awarded scholarship monies contributed by local businesses and organizations.

We have also been dovetailing with other programs which share the same underlying rationale as Philosophy for Children but which address different needs. In selecting other

programs focused on the creation of critical dispositions, we have avoided the more superficial approaches of instituting a hodgepodge of unrelated programs. At my base school, Buffalo City Honors School, we have tried to integrate Philosophy for Children with the well known International Baccalaureate program and a study skills program called Learning to Learn. The three programs intertwine in cable-like fashion to create a curricular strand which acts as the "spine" of the overall curriculum.

The Center for Reflective Education differs from most other Centers because it is school based rather than university based. I believe that being so situated introduces problems and benefits different from university based centers. Fewer resources, less autonomy, and the competitiveness posed by other programs and school politics all need to be addressed in their own way. However, despite these problems there are benefits--not least among them the opportunity to closely monitor the program, to be sensitive to the needs of the classroom teacher on a day to day basis, and the opportunity to muster in-house faculty and administrative support so the program will stay in place.

It has been my experience that the Center also acts as a type of philosophic counseling center. As I mentioned earlier, teachers and students often feel discomfort in early encounters with philosophy. Rarely does a day pass when a student or a teacher doesn't come into my office with a sincere philosophic concern. A Center is an identifiable place to go with such concerns, to be guided in thinking out the problem or to be directed to the appropriate literature.

In summary, a Philosophy for Children Center, in its most practical dimension, is a continuous effort of networking institutions with a view to unify efforts of educators towards making education reflective and critical.

Certainly no tremors will be felt because of anything I've mentioned in this paper. Indeed, I have kept my observations and planning strategies at the level of common sense. But I do not believe I have been merely being trite. It is important to be able to gauge the growth and health of our center. Aristotle once observed in passing that an archer has a better chance of hitting his target if he is at least facing in the right direction. Detailing a plan and defining goals are posturing processes which help to aim our efforts at the reintroduction of philosophy as an integral part of human development as it is mediated by our educational institutions.

What will be the fate of Rapunzel and her family? That will be up to us to decide.

Robert Budzinski

Notes

1) Hardly a day passes when Philosophy for Children is not cited as a quality educational program. For example, the June issue of *Learning '90* named Philosophy for Children as one of the top ten thinking skills programs available, not to mention a "meritorious" rating by the Joint Dissemination Review Panel of the U.S. Department of Education in 1986.

2) The term is suggested by Lipman in several places. The sources that come to mind are *The Seeds of Reason* (1985) and *Thoughts on the Foundations of Reflective Education* (1986).

3) Needleman, J. *The Heart of Philosophy* p. 3. New York: Harper and Row, 1986.

4.) Ibid.

5) Lipman, M. *Philosophical Practice and Educational Reform* in the *Journal of Thought* pp. 24-25. Vol. 20, No. 4, 1985.

6) *Analytic Teaching*. pp. 5-38. Vol. 10, No. 2, May 1990.

7) For suggestions about sensitizing the "philosophic ear" see my paper *The Kids of Harry: The Embodiments of Philosophic World Views* in Ann Margaret Sharp and Ronald Reed, editors, *Studies in Philosophy for Children*. Temple University Press, in press.

8) Thanks to Dr. Richard Hull from the University at Buffalo.

9) Scherer, D. *Setting Up High School Philosophy Essay Contests* in *Teaching Philosophy*. pp. 21-23. March 1990.

10) Oscanyan, F. *Reflective Teaching in Teacher Training: Three Models in Kentucky* in *Analytic Teaching* pp. 10-14. Vol.10, No. 2. Oscanyan reports severely low program retention rates. Out of 108 teachers trained only 27% were still using the program four years later.

Thanks to the unwavering support of our Principal, Mr. Michael Anelli, and the energetic efforts of our I.B. coordinator, Dr. Josephy Shanahan and our guidance counselor, Mrs. Linda Ennesser, we have been able to keep Philosophy for Children strong in our building.