Training Teachers for "Philosophy for Children": Beyond Coaching

The present article is an attempt to put together our collective reflections about the experiences of the past three years with teachers we have introduced to the "philosophy for children" program. Each of us has some experience working with an element of supervision, and we have brought our problems together at our weekly research meetings. We have also been involved in analysing video-recordings of experienced teachers, with the aim of clarifying what we mean by a good philosophical discussion.

What we find in our videos corroborates our individual experiences with teachers. There is a profound feeling of dissatisfaction: some quality is missing, but we cannot precisely say what it is. As we watch the videos, and sense the enthusiasm of these experienced teachers, we have to consider their level of competence. Although we believe they had been adequately initiated to the materials, most of the classroom discussions are lacking that elusive "philosophical" character.

Our malaise watching the videos is borne out by our individual reports. One teacher is unsure how this new "program" fits into the requirements of other programs. A second teacher is convinced that children cannot have the level of discussion which adults can. A third teacher finds himself immersed in dictionaries, to have the meanings of terms well at hand. He wonders whether philosophy is worth doing. Here we have a parallel malaise in the views of the teachers to that which we were finding in the videos.

Out of these experiences and discussions has begun to emerge a new model of teacher-supervision. We are here sketching the main elements of that model, and then applying it to the kind of problem-cases mentioned above.

Since all of our initial experience in supervision and training for this program was inspired by the suggestions of Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, we can usefully contrast our present views with what we (always respectfully) call the "official" view.

As our title indicates, the first main feature of our present view is the deemphasis on the notion of a "coach". The importance of coaching in the official view is linked to two tasks, modelling and observation. In our initial phase, we attempted to follow these guidelines, and conceptualised our supervision in this way. Although there are no doubt useful benefits from coaching, particularly in the early stages, we have come to feel that the role of the supervisor is much different, and much more, than coaching.

In our view, the role of the supervisor must be much more like a collaborator, or co-philosopher than a coach. What our teachers have seemed to be most in need of is the ability to have a follow-up resource person with whom to continue reflecting about their action. This reflection might center upon philosophical issues arising from the material, but might also concern itself with two other sets of issues. The first set of issues are mainly pedagogical ones; the second set concern general problems in the philosophy of education.

Although the official view frowns on mixing philosophical and pedagogical matters, our experience shows that these are constantly concerns of teachers at every stage of their education. Even when initiated to the program, many of them have an overwhelming need to use the discussions to talk about classroom matters. At later stages there is somewhat less need for this, but is is always somewhat present. Our view is that a revised model of teacher-training must acknowledge and incorporate these pedagogical concerns. The "philosophy for children" approach *does*, of course, have a specific pedagogy, and there are explicit steps to follow in one's teaching-methods. These, however, remain implicit in the training-sessions: they are neither discussed nor questioned, they are simply applied. There is also the implicit assumption of "adhering" to the model, which is

sometimes seen by teachers as a technical role different from other roles they have adopted as educators. Seeing the teacher as a mere technician is, of course, nowhere advocated in the Lipman approach. Paradoxically, however, this mechanical view is implied by the official model of training.

The second set of issues which are not sufficiently addressed by the official model concern general questions in philosophy of education. We refer here to discussions about the general orientation of the approach, and its links or contradictions with other "philosophies" within the school. Included here one also finds concerns about the teacher's personality and relations with individuals and the group. These types of worry are particularly important at later stages of supervision. Once a teacher has already been initiated into the program and has worked with it for a while, there is still important work for supervision. It is here, perhaps, that the official model errs most, because of its emphasis on the stage of initiation. At that earlier stage (initiation) coaching may indeed be particularly appropriate. Later on, however, reflective co-philosophy seems to be what is called for. Another way to put the matter is that the official model emphasizes the technical side (in the sense of an emphasis on the familiarization with the materials and specific methodology of the program) so that there is little time or tendency to reflect and ask, "Why are we doing this?" Perhaps the official model is correct to put aside these kinds of queries in the early period of training. They will, however, have to surface sooner or later.

Many of the teachers with whom we have worked have expressed the required enthusiasm for the program. We hasten to say that without this necessary component no supervision can help, nor can any model of teacher-training be adequate. Some of the teachers, we feel, come to the program not entirely with a free choice. That is to say their choice may be more or less voluntary. Typically, the most motivated are those with some background in philosophy and/or commitment to the philosophy of education expressed in "Philosophy in the Classroom". They are not the most experienced of our teachers. Among this latter group we have many teachers who are attracted by the "Philosophy for Children" approach and are willing to make the attempt in the classes in morals, science, language arts, etc. They also seem enthusiastic, although some of us sometimes have doubts about the type and degree of their motivation.

Whatever the type or degree of the motivation, however, there remain a number of barriers to competence. Many teachers who have been initiated into the program and have begun to work with it still have a long way to go in constructing competence. By competence, we adhere to Ann Margaret Sharp's definition (Analytic Teaching, Vol.7, no.2, May, 1987): A competent teacher

> "is capable of teaching all the elementary school disciplines in a reflective and philosophical manner, using the community of inquiry approach throughout the entire day." We feel that most teachers can eventually achieve this level of competence providing one commits to a model of supervision-training which is ongoing. It is possible that our proposed model can also effect the degree of motivation as well. One of the ways to accomplish this is to find a meeting-point between the teacher's normal educational practice and the approach suggested by "Philosophy for Children".

The model we advocate is an extension of the community of inquiry. Rather than simply using this at the initial period of initiation, we see it as an ongoing enterprise. Thus the teachers can continue to consult the university professors (supervisors) concerning each of the three types of considerations mentioned above (philosophical materials and issues, pdagogical matters, and philosophy of education.)

Our model has, furthermore, a second strand which has also been neglected in the

official literature. In addition to the ongoing comunity of inquiry which involves the supervisors, we see as essential a second permanent structure. This is a group within the school involving those few who are involved in "Philosophy for Children". Since these teachers may be at very different levels (some just initiates, others more experienced), the role of the supervisor is crucial in coordinating this second group. In our own specific Province of Quebec this also involves bringing together different kinds of teachers with different statuses. For example, many of those doing "Philosophy for Children" in our jurisdiction have their primary responsibility to do moral education. Others are regular classroom teachers who have taken it upon themselves to use the approach within their general language-arts periods. These are our own regional particularities. No doubt others will have their own idiosyncracies. In any case, we believe that this double structure (comunity of inquiry and school community) is essential.

A parallel can perhaps be made here with the experience of alternative or "free" schools. At the very beginning there was great enthusiasm with the introduction of the ideas and methods. This was followed by a "malaise" as those working in the schools felt themselves isolated and betrayed by the university professors who had introduced the approach. Only after a long period of time (10 to 12 years) of ongoing supervision and contact is the required motivation and competence beginning to be acknowledged. In the "Philosophy for Children" approach we work with teachers for a period of 6 months to two years, and then consider them competent. They perhaps need much more,like the ten-year period,before one can speak of competence within the schools.

The teachers quoted at the beginning of this article are in need of the kind of flexible ogoing model of supervision which we are advocating. The key terms are "flexible" and "ongoing". The model must be flexible enough to adapt itself to the needs of individual teachers in individual circumstances. It must equally be ongoing in order to continue to serve teachers who have already gone beyond their novice apprenticeship and initiation. A teacher who begins to worry about the relationship of the Lipman program to other programs can only benefit from a profound discussion about the philosophy of eduacation advocated by the Lipman approach. Gradually this teacher has to come to understand that the Lipman program is not a "program" like the others. In a similar fashion, both the teacher who spent all his time reading dictionaries, as well as his comrade who had doubts about the ability of young children to philosophize needed reflective thought about these issues.

It should be noted that the official coaching model was not designed to handle these kinds of difficulties. The coaching model, with its emphasis on modeling and observation, is essentially a training model, and most appropriate for the earliest stages, as we have noted. In some respects the official model is "behaviorist" in orientation, which is mildly paradoxical given the clearly cognitivist preference of the Lipman approach. In some ways it is perfectly understandably, however, why the official model does not try to answer these problems. The kinds of questioning of our teachers typically do not occur in the early sessions. Only with a year or two of experience do many teachers have the need to engage in the kind of reflection which the three examples above typify.

We noted above that our model proposes two strands. The first consists of the ongoing reflective collaboration of the supervisor. The second, we stress, is equally important. It is the support group within the school and the school district. One of the applications of this second strand was to the three troubled teachers discussed above. We worked hard to arrange that they could meet with each other, as well as with other teachers experimenting with the program. Helping them end their perceived isolation is often a good first step towards improving the quality of classroom philosophical discussion.

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