

Introducing Philosophy for Children to a Conservative Australian State: the Mission of a Novice Philosopher

Eighteen months ago I agreed to take on the mission of introducing the Philosophy for Children program to a rather conservative state of Australia. This presented quite a challenge for me, particularly since I am not a philosopher (in the professional sense) but a mathematics educator. My reasons for accepting this challenge were two-fold. Firstly, I was attracted to the program because it gives children credit for being able to think. In contrast to many traditional programs, Philosophy for Children does not use children's cognitive "deficits" as the yardstick for designing learning experiences. Secondly, I could see the program having the potential to enrich all curriculum areas, and in my case, to provide new avenues for exploring the teaching of problem solving and the development of mathematical thinking.

Philosophy for Children has been operating in schools in the southern part of Australia for about seven years (reference to this can be found in Splitter, 1985). However, in my home state in the northern part of Australia, the program had remained virtually untapped until the beginning of 1990. My attempts at introducing the program a couple of years ago were not received too favorably by curriculum developers. While our syllabus documents have, for a number of years, adopted a "process approach" to learning, the idea of using a program to foster the growth of thinking was not entertained. Over the past twelve months, however, innovations within our educational system have resulted in a greater awareness and acceptance of the teaching of thinking skills. One of the contributing factors to this changing climate has come from the work of the Center of Philosophy for Children. The Center was established in Melbourne, Victoria (a southern Australian state) in July, 1988, under the directorship of Dr. Laurance Splitter. As a self-supporting unit of the Australian Council for Educational Research, the Center has been actively promoting Philosophy for Children throughout all Australian states. A major activity of the Center was its inaugural six-day intensive workshop for teacher educators conducted in July, 1989. The Center was fortunate in obtaining the services of Professors Ann Sharp and Ronald Reed, whose leadership in the workshop sessions contributed greatly to the success of the week. My participation in the workshop started me on my mission to establish Philosophy for Children in my home state.

I set things in motion in January, 1990, by inviting Dr. Splitter to conduct a summer workshop on Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery. The three-day workshop was designed primarily for teachers, but attracted parents and other interested community members. This proved to be highly successful and, in effect, was the start of the "Philosophy for Children movement" in the state. In conjunction with the workshop, Dr. Splitter conducted a community awareness evening which we managed to advertise through the media (at the last minute!). This session was very well received, with over 70 adults and children attending. The highlight of the evening was Dr. Splitter's lesson with the children, none of whom knew each other. Taking the first chapter of Pixie, Dr. Splitter was able to skillfully transform the initial atmosphere of bewilderment into a lively, frequently humorous, community of inquiry. It was fascinating to witness the change in the nature of the children's responses as Dr. Splitter's lesson progressed. In their initial attempts to come to grips with the storyline of Pixie, the children's early response lacked a certain depth of thought. However, after about 20 minutes into the lesson, there was a distinct change in the quality of the children's responses; they were clearly relishing in the thought-provoking challenges that Dr. Splitter was presenting to them. They were now questioning the issue of their personal identity, were grappling with the notion of ownership, and were beginning to analyze their thoughts and feelings in a way that was

obviously quite new and exciting to them.

As a result of Dr. splitter's evening session, a community group, comprising teachers and parents, was established. The group has met on a monthly basis for nine months now and is using the program as a basis for philosophical discussion, as well as learning the skills of promoting philosophical inquiry in the classroom. The group also looks at ways in which the program can be extended to a greater number of schools. The varied background of the group ensures lively discussion at each of our meetings. Members include a farmer, radiographer, librarian, homemakers, student philosophers, business personnel, and teachers. Over the months, membership of the group has changed and expanded, with a core of original members continuing to assume responsibility for the group's progress. Some of these original members have since formed a second group in their own district and are enjoying strong support from the community. It is interesting that, at present, this support is coming more from parents than from teachers.

Another facet of my Philosophy for Children mission involves a series of after-school workshops which a colleague and I offer for children aged 11 to 13 years. Using Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery as our basis, we have been conducting one-hour sessions at our university over the past five months. I commenced the sessions with a fair degree of trepidation. Being a novice philosopher, I was concerned that my impoverished philosophical background would lessen the quality of the activities I could provide the children. I found, however, that the excellent material presented in the accompanying instructional manual, Philosophical Inquiry, gave me the guidance and confidence I needed to build a community of inquiry with the children. I was further assisted by working with a colleague who has background in philosophy. By taking turns in leading a session, we were able to offer each other support and were also able to critically evaluate our performance at the end of each lesson.

The after-school workshops have proven popular with parents and children, many of whom travel long distances to attend. A new set of after-school workshops is to commence shortly. The response to just one brochure sent to schools has been most encouraging, with a sizable increase in the number of students wishing to enroll in the second round of workshops. In our very first session some months ago, we had such a large number of participants that we had to divide the children into two groups and organize a parallel set of sessions; the latter were conducted by two teachers who attended Dr. Splitter's January workshop. Attendance at the sessions has been quite consistent over the months, although there were a couple of times when participation declined. Apart from the usual reasons such as bad weather, clashes with other activities, etc., there were a few children who either lost interest in the program or never really felt "comfortable" with it. There were a couple of children who had been sent by their parents in the hope that the program would remediate particular learning problems. It was these children who expressed their concern over the oral reading of Harry; they did not wish to read aloud and, of course, were not made to do so.

The amount of interest being generated in Philosophy for Children in our state now seems to be snowballing. This interest has been further kindled by a recent state-wide, inaugural workshop/seminar on the teaching of thinking. I was invited to speak on P4C and, as a result, have had numerous requests to conduct workshops for both teachers and children in elementary and secondary schools. Such requests continue to besiege me. While I try to meet as many of these as I can, my teaching and research commitments prevent me from devoting the amount of time the program deserves. Other obstacles facing me include the vast size of our state and the consequent difficulties in reaching a large percentage of the teaching population. This is coupled with a current lack of personnel trained in Philosophy for Children and insufficient funds in several schools,

preventing them from implementing the program fully. In spite of these obstacles the progress that has been made in a short space of time is encouraging and, hopefully, indicative of positive things to come.

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References

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