Student Resistance in Philosophy for Children

A teacher tells me that although she sees the value of the program and enjoys the materials, she is becoming distressed. Her students, she says, groan and complain when it's time to do philosophy. Normally restrained, the students giggle and talk among themselves during the discussion. She is frustrated to the point of dreading the time allotted to philosophy.

Obviously, this is a case for personal intervention by the trainer, working with the teacher to discuss the problems, and observing several classes to point out some suggestions. Perhaps the situation calls for a number of modeling sessions. In time, with the proper treatment, some adjustments in approach, and a rejuvenation of the childrens' enthusiasm, philosophy for children will be back on track in that classroom.

If this were always the case, our jobs as trainers and teachers of philosophy for children would be a fairly simple matter. The reality is far more complex however, and forces us to address some fundamental issues arising from the actual implementation of the program.

Having trained in the Masters program in philosophy for children, I worked for two years at an American international school in Quito, Ecuador. During my time there, I had the rare opportunity to work as both teacher trainer in a full time capacity and classroom teacher. I was able to see and experience up close, for an extended period of time, the actual workings of extensive classroom implementation throughout the school. This experience ranged from kindergarten through high school, employing every facet of the philosophy for children program.

Throughout this period, I encountered limited teacher resistance; in fact, the staff were serious and professional in their work with the program. A good number of these teachers liked the approach, and would call their implementation, to differing degrees, a success. Yet there were, and continue to be, problems. Students often develop a strong resistance to the program. They complain commonly of boredom. They frequently complain about the texts. They resist the necessary structures for the development of a community of inquiry.

I believe that some of these problems can be attributed to specific situations at that school. However, I have little doubt that many of our trials are being encountered all over the world, wherever philosophy for children is being used. I realize that, from a theoretical perspective, such problems can be attributed to inadequate teacher training, and the lack of a sufficient commitment to open philosophical inquiry. These are explanations I have heard and read repeatedly during my time working in the program. Yet I strongly believe that we make a mistake in glossing over practical classroom problems in such a manner. If the program is to move forward to become an established part of the curriculum for democratic education, as it deserves, then we must address these problems.

Like many of you, I have spent many hours of work trying to achieve the goals of philosophy for children. I have, to this point, been unable to satisfactorily overcome some of the problems outlined below. Therefore, I submit these observations, not in the spirit of criticism and prescription, but rather in the form of quesitons for open inquiry. Hopefully, the educators and scholars working in the program can, as a community of inquiry, develop strategies to meet these problems.

Student resistance to the standard school curriculum has been amply documented, and in fact philosophy for children can be seen as one attempt to overcome this problem. We wish to encourage autonomous student thinking by presenting intriguing open issues in a format which hopefully appeals to their own experiences and interests.

Yet, as many teachers will attest, we are often confronted with reactions quite the opposite from those intended. How can this be?

There are several possibilities. Such alienation and rejection of the program is much less common in the earlier grades. Having worked with every grade level, I have found that from the first to fourth grade, students usually manifest the enthusiasm we hope for. This begins to diminish noticeably in the fifth grade, and seems to be more of a problem with each succeeding grade. We can attribute this declining interest to the surrounding curriculum's increasing emphasis on a goal and/or product based experience in the classroom. Grades become increasingly important to students. In a sense, they are conditioned to see value only in activity which is an obvious means to a clearly delineated end. Philosophy, regardless of its inherent qualities, fits poorly into this scheme of things.

Also during this time, students become increasingly alienated from the standard curriculum; it is more and more removed from their out-of-school experience. They adjust to this by developing habits and attitudes of coping. They learn just how much they need to do, and when. They learn how to survive within the framework of school.

Ironically, while we in philosophy for children are attempting to transcend these phenomena (which seem antithetical to a quality educational experience), we are also presenting an experience which lies outside these rules of success. We are not only stimulating students' natural sense of wonder, we are putting demands on them which they have become accustomed to ignore. From this perspective, it becomes apparent why even the more "successful" students react with irritation to the program. While often the "poorer" students are more involved, in addition to the divergent thinkers, these "successful" children are commonly quite influential in moving the entire group to assume a negative attitude. As we all are aware, such an attitude of rejection is utterly fatal to a quality session.

Given these points, how is a teacher to overcome such reactions? We can say that they are structural, that when philosophy is in use from the earliest grades we will no longer have to confront such attitudes. We can assume that once the inquiry method becomes a normal part of the curriculum, students will not have these reactions to philosophy. Yet this is little help to the current classroom teacher, struggling to make happen in the classroom the exciting goals discussed in seminars and workshops.

Our advice may be to return to the student, to her interests and experiences, and to base the discussion on texts written in the students' own language. These are important starting points. Yet how do we really do this? The novels were certainly written with this in mind; yet classroom experience reveals just how far from "student's language" they really are. This is certainly no fault of Mr. Lipman, or any other writer of a similar text. For how are we to know "the language of children"? One inherent quality in the language of children and especially adolescents is a desire to be separate and distinct. Virtually any attempt to simulate this in a school text is bound to sound somewhat clumsy in the classroom.

We can transcend the text; they are, after all, written primarily as "springboards to discussion". The content of the discussions is to arise as much as possible from the students. Yet this helps us little in justifying the reading of the stories to an increasingly skeptical class.

"If that is true", they may ask, "why not just discuss what we want to discuss?" This can indeed be a difficult question to answer without sending contradictory messages.

"Well", we can tell them, "there are certain topics which may be more useful to discuss than others".

"But I thought the ideas were to come from us!" I have had many such interchanges with students.

We place great stress in forming a community of inquiry in philosophy for children,

and for good reason. Such a community and the dispositions which arise from it are an integral part of what we are trying to accomplish as facilitators of open inquiry. Yet how realistic are we being when we explain this goal to our teachers? Are we helping them towards facilitating this end by explaining to them that they must try to be "procedurally strong and content weak"? While this subtle point is vital in understanding a philosophy for children facilitation, it also requires some strong advice in how to cope with the consequences it brings forth.

Children and adolescents do not automatically fall into community of inquiry behaviors. Given this different classroom setting, they are likely to break into small discussions or other diversions without some compensating form of structure. Many fall into a competitive approach, for without the teacher determining what the answer is, there appears to be a race to determine just what that answer will be. Despite continual admonitions to the contrary, the students often simply cannot conceive of the process differently.

Such competition leads to many behaviors antithetical to community of inquiry, such as sarcasm, mockery, lack of listening to certain students, and sometimes outright insult. To my knowledge, there is very little in the literature of philosophy for children which addresses these problems, and others of a classroom management nature. Perhaps this is because we have assumed that such things are the province of standard classroom teaching skills. It is important to realize, however, that facilitating a philosophical discussion with children requires different kinds of management skills. As trainers, it is our task to develop a body of information and ideas, based on experience, which will help the classroom teacher to "manage" the group while doing what he needs to do in terms of facilitating open dialogue.

Students in many educational environments do not automatically respect each other. We may show respect, but regretfully this does not always suffice as a model. Does a teacher then tell the students to respect each other? Is what has to be done to create a trusting atmosphere (need I mention the ugly word "discipline"?) consistent with open inquiry? Often I have told the teachers with whom I work to deal with behavior as they would ordinarily. Is there a contradiction lying here somewhere?

These are some of the major problems that arise in classrooms. There are a host of others, some relating to behavior and interest, some not. As noted above, we must address these problems directly as theorists and trainers of philosophy for children. If we ignore these concerns, abandoning frustrated classroom teachers to their own devises, we may find that many will have justification for disliking the program, confronting us not only with student, but with teacher resistance.

A. T. Lardner