REFLECTIONS ON TEACHER FORMATION:

When School and University Enter Together in a Process of Continuous Thinking

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In Quebec, a Committee on Teachers' Formation and Improvement suggested to the Ministry of Education, in 1979, that university research be carried out in collaboration with teachers and contribute to the improvement of the quality of teacher formation. The Committee proposed that university and school work together, think together and discuss together problems related to children and education.

Through the years, researchers have realized that teachers' active involvement in the different steps of the process of inquiry regarding improvement of school curriculum or of school life has high positive effects on their motivation, on their ability to think in an autonomous and critical fashion, and on their self-esteem.

A research team from CIRADE (Interdisciplinary Center of Learning and Development in Education) affiliated with Université du Québec á Montréal, directed by Anita Caron, decided to put a particular emphasis on collaboration among school teachers and university researchers in its 1990-1991 research project. The Philosophy for Children program, with its practical emphasis on the community of inquiry, offered the ideal paradigm for this project.

The following relates the process of formation of six teachers in one rural school of Quebec, called St-Samuel, during the academic year 1990-1991. This school has 80 students and is the only school of the village. All teachers, from grade one to grade six, use the Philosophy for Children program in their classroom. Therefore, all children of the village are doing philosophy.[1]

PRELIMINARY SETTINGS

The six teachers of St-Samuel school had been introduced to the Philosophy for Children program through an article describing the impact of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) approach on students' cognitive and social development. After discussing among themselves about getting engaged in such a project, they asked Anita Caron for an introductory workshop. Two one-day workshops (the first one at the end of June 1990 and the second at the end of August of the same year) were given by Anita Caron for these teachers. Also present were a few teachers from the surrounding schools. Then, convinced by the Philosophy for Children approach, all six teachers decided, without exception, to introduce it in their classroom at the rate of one hour session per week.

However, they needed more skills and formation to develop the Socratic art. I was assigned to "coach" them. I use the word in quotes here because I have difficulty considering myself a "coach."[2] Rather, I see myself as a co-researcher who "accompanies" teachers in the evolution of their teaching process. At St-Samuel, my role was (and still is) to share with the teachers what I know, what I question, what I wonder about.

But whether it is called "coaching" or "accompanying," the number of times I could work with the teachers presented a problem. St-Samuel is quite far from where I live in Montreal (six hours by bus, round trip). Accordingly, I could visit the school only four or five times during the year. And that was obviously not enough for teachers who barely had been introduced to the Philosophy for Children approach.

Strongly influenced by the democratic process inherent to philosophical communities of inquiry, I decided to work this out with the teachers. My problem thus became our common difficulty. And, together, we came to the conclusion that we should find someone who would serve as an intermediary between St-Samuel school and the university. A teacher from one of the surrounding schools — who had been present at the two introductory workshops given by Anita Caron, who seemed most at ease with the program and who had a few free periods in her schedule — offered to go to the classrooms of the six teachers (to observe and to report back) whenever they were working with Philosophy for Children. Administrative arrangements were secured with the School Board to lighten her schedule. And at the beginning of October 1990, Mrs A. was starting her individual "accompaniment."

A SUPPORTING TEACHER IN THE CLASSROOM

Mrs A.'s (individual) accompaniment consisted, firstly, in observation of students' interest and participation in the philosophical community of inquiry and of teachers' implementation of the democratic process. Secondly, it consisted of meeting each teacher after class hours, noting positive elements she had observed and pointing out those which did not appear to be in accordance with Philosophy for Children methodology or ideology. The third part of Mrs A.'s accompaniment was to encourage the teacher to reflect on the causes (and the consequences) of her or his difficulties, and on some means to correct them. This last aspect of Mrs A.'s role at St-Samuel was accomplished by recording the major elements of her observations in a diary so that we could discuss them together whenever I went to the school.

Looking back at her work, I would say Mrs A. acted at two levels with the teachers: a professional one and a personal one. She accompanied them in their apprenticeship in the Philosophy for Children methodology and she also motivated and encouraged them whenever they were discouraged. Indeed, experience shows us that when teachers meet difficulties in the application of the Philosophy for Children program, they often come to question and doubt their professional and (even) personal competencies. Why so? Because people do not teach philosophy as they teach other subjects: philosophy is a state of mind, a state of being. And, as they teach, people get involved in a process of self-inquiry which requires the involvement of their whole person. This is why I am convinced that for those who begin working with the IAPC approach, a regular and individual accompaniment — as provided by Mrs. A. — is essential.

Indeed, as a result, each of the six teachers learned to lead philosophical dialogues in a personal and original way — a way which does not constrain their personality, nor their educational principles, nor the Philosophy for Children methodology.

FROM UNIVERSITY TO SCHOOL

My participation in the St-Samuel teachers' formation required that I spend time with Mrs A. (individual accompaniment) and with the teachers (individual and group accompaniment). On the one hand, I played the same role with Mrs A. that she had played with the teachers. As I said before, she recorded everything she had observed in classrooms and whenever I went to St-Samuel, we took time to discuss it. Her formation in Philosophy for Children was continuing through these meetings.

On the other hand, I spent as much time as I could with the teachers. I visited the school four times during the academic year 1990-1991 for a total of eleven days each visit which lasted two or three days. This kind of arrangement gave us the opportunity to really form a community of inquiry. During school hours, I could participate in each classroom's period of Philosophy for Children and take part in each community of inquiry. After three o'clock, it was group meeting time: the teachers and I continued discussing and reflecting about Philosophy for Children — from questions they had written down or from tapes

they had produced in class. Then, when dinner time came, the community of inquiry continued — usually on the theoretical aspects of the program and in discussion of papers related to Philosophy for Children. Even late at night in my hotel room I received phone calls from teachers who wanted to check their philosophical preparation for the following day. Each time I visited St-Samuel school, the community of inquiry was always as intensive. So, it would be fair to say that in this case, the reflective practice which is proposed by the Philosophy for Children program did not only involve students: teachers and university researchers also formed a genuine community of inquiry.

SOME PROBLEMS

However, everything was not perfect at St-Samuel. Indeed, if in most classrooms Mrs A.'s role consisted in observing and then discussing what was observed, she was often asked, in one or two groups, to lead the discussion among children because the teachers were not at ease with the IAPC approach. Unfortunately, it appeared that these persons, who felt insecure with the approach at the beginning of the academic year, remained insecure and reluctant to lead the community of inquiry until the end of the year.

I believe the cause for this reluctance was as follows: these few teachers were not genuine "volunteers" in applying Philosophy for Children in their classroom. If they had agreed to participate in the school project, it was probably because of collective enthusiasm. Consequently, instead of considering the Philosophy for Children period as a privileged hour with their students they saw it as another subject-matter added to their already overloaded school curriculum — a subject-matter which meant, moreover, a lot of preparation, stress and confusion.

This leads me to believe that even if individual accompaniment in classrooms is essential and this, as we have seen, is necessary at every stage of apprenticeship — initiation to philosophical questioning, reflective practice about philosophical and educational activities, continuous formation of the teacher — it is still not sufficient if a teacher does not wholly agree to apply the program. Philosophy for Children is a new educational approach which implicitly supposes the will to progress (as a teacher and as a person) and the will to get involved in a democratic community of inquiry with students — which means the will to modify one's own perception of her or his teaching role and also one's perception of children's possibilities and capabilities. Yet, the will to change cannot be imposed: it is a personal decision; it is a free will choice. Therefore, I believe the first and fundamental condition to the application of Philosophy for Children becomes the voluntary engagement of the person and not necessarily, as we might have come to think, the quality of individual accompaniment one gives to teachers.

I would add that voluntary engagement of teachers becomes even more problematic when a whole school decides to include Philosophy for Children in its curriculum. In such a case there is pressure (although tacit) by the school principal who desires her or his school to be a (homogeneous) model; pressure by students, who were acquainted with the program in previous years; and pressure by peers, which is subtly transferred by fear of marginalization or rejection by the group.

Because of these tacit but effective pressures, it should be clear to teachers beforehand why they agree to integrate Philosophy for Children into their classrooms. The program needs to be an answer they were searching for within their hearts and their minds.

My experience leads me to think that if after one or two sessions of "modelling" in her or his classroom, a teacher still says she or he is not ready to lead philosophical discussions, then it might mean this teacher does not perceive Philosophy for Children as the answer she or he was waiting for. Consequently, she or he might never be at ease with the program. In these conditions, children's interests, as well as their cognitive and social development, are rarely well served.

Thus, I believe the role of university researchers is not only to implement the IAPC program in classrooms, but to be alert and vigilant to teachers' motivations to use it.

A second element I would like to point out refers to the place Philosophy for Children should occupy in the school curriculum. In other words, in which subject-matter area should teachers include the Philosophy for Children program period? Should it be in language arts (which is given by the teacher herself or himself), or in moral education, which is usually given by a specialist teacher once or twice a week and outside the

classroom? In my opinion, Philosophy for Children must be done by the regular teacher (versus a specialist). Indeed, if a specialist is hired to get classes to practice philosophy (as we said before, only one or two hours per week and outside the classroom), students will hardly feel the essence of the community of inquiry because when the period is over, the specialist leaves and the children go back to their regular teacher (who has not been sensitized to the Philosophy for Children approach) and to their traditional classroom.

This means that for a significant impact on students, it is fundamental that Philosophy for Children be given by the teacher. Indeed, it is by practicing the IAPC methodology in the classroom that teachers will come to change their "habits" of teaching and will transfer the democratic as well as the Socratic approach to the rest of the school curriculum. In other words: when the regular teacher engages herself or himself in philosophical inquiry, it usually follows that her or his vision of education changes and, consequently, that her or his pedagogic acts become more meaningful in the whole curriculum.

So, in my opinion, whenever the choice is offered to the teachers, it is preferable — for children's progress — that regular teachers lead philosophical dialogues in their classroom.

FOUR BASIC AND RECURRENT QUESTIONS

As I wrote previously, my visits to St-Samuel were always very rich in reflections, in discussions and in questions. Some of these questions were more fundamental than others. I say fundamental probably because I see them as more representative of the difficulties beginners usually have with Philosophy for Children.

Question 1: "What does it mean to do Philosophy for Children?"

In October 1990, the six teachers from St-Samuel were beginning to implement the Philosophy for Children program in their classrooms. Most of them were aware they were not really doing philosophy with their students. In fact, they barely knew what the word "philosophy" meant. And many were looking for a "technique" to proceed from factual exchanges or from linear discussions to philosophical dialogues. When I visited them for the first time, at the beginning of the academic year, I found them in individual research about that specific (and fundamental) problem. But, as I told myself at that time, the good will they had demonstrated to do philosophy with children, their awareness of the fact they had not yet reached a philosophical level of discussion in class and their open-mindedness to all kinds of suggestions, were in themselves promises of success. So, what was left to be done was to help them build a philosophical community of inquiry about it.

After a few communities of inquiry on the meaning(s) of the word "philosophy" — including chapters 6 and 7 of *Philosophy in the Classroom* — and group exercises (for example, on how to look for criteria, how to define concepts, how to look for counter-examples, how to build argumentation, etc.), teachers became more and more capable of recognizing the nature or the essence of a philosophical dialogue. In doing so, they became more and more capable of leading children to it. And, at the last meeting, in June 1991, when we had the *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* exercise about "What is a philosophical discussion?" each one of the six teachers could add a different and personal element in answer — an element she or he had experienced in her or his heart or in her or his mind, and also in her or his classroom.

In short, let us say that within the first year of reflective practice in common, teachers really "learned" (in the pragmatic sense of "constructed") what philosophical questions were, what philosophical dialogues meant. This does not imply each discussion they had with their students was philosophical, but it supposes they all knew where they should lead young students with the Philosophy for Children material. They were not teaching blindly just another subject-matter: they had integrated the Socratic aims of teaching.

Question 2: "Are children able to participate in a philosophical community of inquiry?"

A second question most of the teachers asked concerned children's ability to think by themselves and to respect others' points of view. In October 1990, some teachers expressed (implicitly or explicitly) their doubts about children's capacity to do philosophy within a community of

inquiry.

We have to remember St-Samuel's context here. First, it is a rural village. This means most parents' interests are directed towards concrete work and not intellectual work. In other words, most parents do not foster verbal exchanges at home and they are skeptical about philosophy at school. Second, St-Samuel is a small village with a population of about 200 people. We all know that in small villages clans often form — which means that in these conditions, it is not easy to build a community of inquiry. Third, the socio-economic profile is rather low and instruction does not mean much to the parents.

Yet, although skeptical about their students' capacity to form a philosophical community of inquiry, St-Samuel's teachers remained open to the benefits of the Philosophy for Children program. They agreed to transcend prejudices and to give the program a chance. They tried their best to follow the IAPC methodology and to observe, in an objective and impartial way, children's comments and behaviors. After only a few months, all of them admitted their astonishment about student's possibilities and capacities. This does not imply that the teachers went through the year with the Philosophy for Children program without any difficulties, but it means their perceptions and prejudices about children's intellectual and social capacities changed.

In my opinion, the reason for this change was that the teachers' own self-esteem had grown through their formation in Philosophy for Children. Indeed, the IAPC approach gives as much freedom and autonomy to teachers as it does to students. In addition, the teachers felt that we, as university researchers, had respected and esteemed them as professionals and as persons. And it is when one builds such self-respect and self-esteem that one comes to care for others, to believe in others and to help others become what they really are.

Question 3: "What are the Manuals for?"

The other element which appears very problematic to most teachers is the proper use of the Manual. In October, the few teachers that were using the Manual did not seem to gain much from it. Indeed, they were using discussion plans and exercises in the traditional academic fashion (one question equals one good answer). The Manual — whenever it was used — was not a means to philosophical discussion, but a substitute for it.

I had assumed teachers would know how to use the Manual. I had forgotten that many recent programs do not care very much about teachers' autonomy and critical thinking. Indeed, it is School Boards, Ministries of Education and Universities who propose (not to say impose) to them the programs they should use in their classroom, the precise objectives they should reach within each period of time and the means to reach them. As a consequence, teachers are less and less autonomous with their school material. Because of this lack of autonomy, teachers encounter strong difficulties when using Manuals as voluminous and complex as those which are part of the Philosophy for Children program.

At St-Samuel, these difficulties were expressed as follows: some teachers were submerged by the number of exercises and discussion plans that were offered to them; others were discouraged by the degree of difficulty of the philosophical questions. They opted for two radically different solutions: one group, following the traditional approach, systematically used all the exercises; the other group closed the Manual, forgot completely about its content, and tried on its own to do philosophy.

As soon as I became aware of the situation, I decided to sit down with the teachers to study the Manual's content. We reflected together about relationships between the novel and the Manual; about the progressive degree of difficulty implied in the exercises and discussion plans; about the objective and the aim of each one, etc. When I went back to St-Samuel, it was obvious most of the teachers were efficiently using the IAPC material. Not because I had told them to use this exercise or that one, but because they had themselves made personal efforts to think about the material in order to understand and to appropriate it.

Question 4: "Where is my place within the community of inquiry?"

In Philosophy for Children, the place teachers should take within the democratic community of inquiry is not obvious. Where is the equilibrium between traditional teaching (where adults

have all powers) and the kind of teaching advocated in the IAPC program (where adults are only guides)? It is my opinion that equilibrium comes as a result of reflection (in common) and from experimentation in the classroom.

At St-Samuel, the tendency was to go from one extreme to the other: either one kept on giving answers to students, or one accepted any comment from children. But both tendencies are pedagogically questionable because one promotes authoritarianism, and the other encourages lazy thinking on the part of the children. If, at the beginning of October 1990, most teachers from St-Samuel were not comfortable within the new role Philosophy for Children suggested to them, by the middle of the year, all of them had found their right place in the community of inquiry. Moreover, by this time, they had enforced this place while teaching other subject-matters of the school curriculum. The transfer had happened naturally. And they found themselves asking students philosophical questions during the science period or the mathematics hour and so on.

As these teachers mentioned themselves, their vision of teaching had changed with the regular use of Philosophy for Children. Their conception of their role as a teacher had also changed. And, consequently, their relationship with students had changed. As a result, children of the 1990-1991 academic year appeared more curious, more autonomous in their thinking, more critical, and also more self-confident than they usually were. The teachers do not know yet if the progress is directly due to the use of the program or if it is because they have changed their mind about education since they worked with Philosophy for Children.

CONCLUSION

To sum up these reflections about St-Samuel's teacher formation, I would say that even if Philosophy for Children sometimes caused disenchantment among teachers, each one kept on with their efforts and with their (individual and group) reflection. As a consequence, they came to the following principle: the most fundamental mission of schooling is to make children autonomous; and since the basic form of autonomy is thinking; it thus follows that we all should pursue our efforts and keep on working with Philosophy for Children.

I believe that when teachers rediscover their educational aims and when they believe in the children's capacity to think by themselves, there is no doubt for me that the involvement of the teachers in the university research is a special mode of continuous formation and that Philosophy for Children is the best tool one could use.

NOTES

1. Since this fall, a longitudinal study of six years is also in process to verify the impact of Philosophy for Children on the student's long-term development of logical reasoning and of self-esteem.
2. See also: Schleifer, Michael, Pierre Lebuis, Marie-France Daniel, Anita Caron, "Training Teachers for Philosophy for Children: Beyond Coaching," in *Analytic Teaching*, volume 11, number 1, 1990, pp. 9-12.

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