Philosophy for Children and Other Progressive Pedagogies

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Philosophy for Children, at least in the United States, appears to be at a standstill with regard to new program adoptions. This paper explores one possible reason for the lack of the growth of the program, that is, its isolation from other programs and movements that are "kindred spirits" but which for one reason or another are put off by Philosophy for Children or, more positively, that Philosophy for Children has not yet reached. While Philosophy for Children has been successful within the thinking skills programs and specifically within the informal logic movement, it has not been accepted within the larger and more teacher accessible movement of the whole language movement.

One reason often reported by teacher and curriculum specialists for not exploring philosophy for children is that they see the Philosophy for Children program as "another set of basal readers" and therefore a step backwards: a step away from what they are trying to accomplish within their classrooms. They do not want to "go back" to basal readers, no matter who wrote them. Further, they appear reluctant or totally unwilling to explore the possibility that a program which includes what they consider to be a basal reader, that is, the novels of the Philosophy for Children program, can accomplish their main task which is to get kids interested in reading "good literature," and generally interested in participating in a reading culture.

The whole language approach should be a natural ally of Philosophy for Children. It can be be seen as an approach to reading which is organized around a "natural" extension of the spoken language into reading and writing. Whole language can be further defined as more of an attitude of the mind than a specific set of guidelines and this mindset helps students and teachers shape the experience of the classroom which they share (Smith, 1986, p. 189). Children in whole language classrooms read and write about what is of interest to them; they read and write several times during the day. Talk, that is, classroom conversation, is essential to the whole language approach. Therefore, children have many opportunities to discuss their reading, as well as their writing, with each other and with the teacher. Quiet corners are filled with children's books available for reading. Teachers and children keep journals about their reading and their conversations (Smith, 1986, p. 189).

Supporting the idea that whole-language approach requires a change of heart and head, Howard Gardner in *The Unschooled Mind* (1991) reports that whole-language can work only if the teacher embodies the values of a competent literate adult who appreciates reading and writing in her/his own life. Gardner finds it heartening that classes are filled with students writing and "prewriting" which exemplifies a major change in American education over the past 25 years. Though he does not see a whole-language em-

phasis as being universally practiced, he argues that it is being used in many places where it was not seen before (Gardner, 1991, p. 211).

It appears that an underlying principle of the whole language program, at least as seen by Smith and Gardner, is that reading is not an isolated school subject but rather a part of the way that children relate to the world; reading is a part of talking and writing — not a separate subject or discipline. Lipman, while not addressing reading per se, sees thinking as embedded in discussion, and discussion, reading, and writing are intimately connected. Discussion is important to the improvement of thinking because, contrary to popular opinion, thinking can be made public, and writing and discussion are two important methods of public and therefore, self-correcting thinking. To make his point about the connection of thinking and public discourse Lipman states the negative case as follows:

> *Since we often assume that thinking is private and internal, we also view it as something mysterious and baffling. Under these circumstances, people are unable to apply criteria that would enable them to distinguish better thinking from worse thinking because the reality itself is not apparent to them* (Lipman et al, 1980, 22).

Lipman's idea, positively stated, is that thinking aloud makes thinking open to correction and particularly open to self-correction. It is this connection, among others, between the public nature of language and thinking as well as the learning within a community of learners who are spread on a continuum of competence which potentially joins whole-language with Philosophy for Children.

ARTICULATING A COMMON GROUND

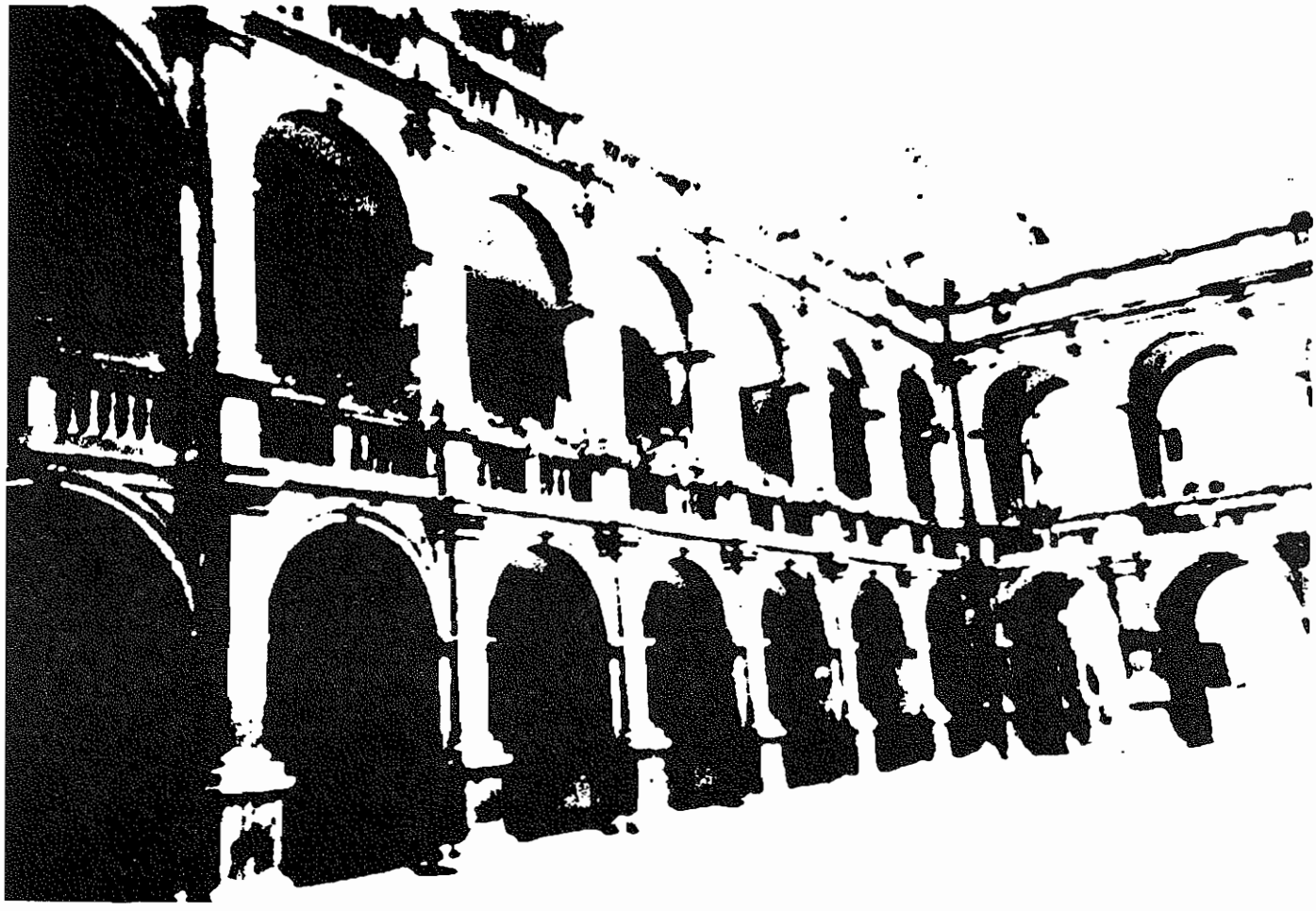
If Philosophy for Children and the whole-language approach to reading are "kindred" spirits, why have the two groups not joined forces to further what both groups would consider a better way of teaching children? One answer is that the common ground has not been articulated. To get at that common ground it is important to move beneath the surface of the natural approach to language in the whole language program and natural approach to thinking in Philosophy for Children to see more clearly the connection between the two curriculum approaches.

At this point it might be helpful to stop and consider more specifically the philosophical nature of Philosophy for Children. Philosophy begins in wonder (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyn, 1980, p. 31). Further, it is a discipline which asks questions of metaphysics, ethics , logic, epistemology , and aesthetics. Questions of metaphysics can be overheard in children's conversations about ghosts and other creatures or events on television (What is real and what is make believe?). Questions about what is right and what is fair are a part of daily conversation among children. It is not uncommon to hear a child say, "How do you know that?" or "Prove it!" Finally, kids are likely to "fight" about which is the "neater" car or dress — which is after all a question of aesthetics.

The fact the children are not always skilled at answering these questions should not discourage us from helping them to think more clearly about these points. Quite the opposite. The point is that children are philosophers in some important ways, that is, they have a sense of wonder about the world, and they ask important philosophical questions. Where they need the help is in developing the skills to think effectively about those issues which interest them.

The whole-language approach makes a similar argument about children and readers. That is, children can "read" the world, and they can articulate that "reading" in spoken sentences. Therefore, language is "natural" to them. What they need is a chance to write (or prewrite) and read their stories, their "reading" of the world. In this way, they will learn to break the code of reading. Further, if they come to understand that they live in a reading culture, they will extend their skill of reading. Reading is done to understand and to communicate, not as an end in itself (Smith, 1986).

The above discussion helps us to see that the question should not be "How can we get kids to think philosophically?" or "How do we get kids to read and write?" but rather "How to we get students to think **well** about philosophical problems?" and "How do we get kids to **expand** and **improve** their reading skills?" Philosophy for Children uses philosophical novels, inductive and deductive reasoning activities, and philosophical



questions within classroom discussion to help kids think well. The whole language approach uses reading corners, a variety of non-basal reading materials, and student writing (self-published books and journal writing) to improve reading skills and to get children to see reading as a part of who they are and what they do. The whole-language program immerses children as early as possible in the world of texts. Children are encouraged to become meaningful apprentices to competent literate individuals (Gardner, 1991, p. 211).

The meaningful apprentices and the classroom containing a continuum of competence point to the underlying Vygotskian principles of both programs. Both Philosophy for Children and whole-language approaches to reading work because of an implicit or explicit understanding of Vygotsky's ideas about zones of proximal development, the presence of more competent adult and child models of learning, problem solving and practice, as well as the strategy of assisted instruction.

"For Vygotsky, the contrast between assisted performance and unassisted performance identified the fundamental nexus of development and learning that he called the *zone of proximal development*" (Trap & Gallimore, 1988, p. 30 emphasis added). Assisted instruction occurs when a child can complete a task with help from another person or from the environment but not on her own. The community of inquiry is a multidimensional, multi-voiced assistance to performance; the community, when it is working at its best, more-or-less intuitively identifies zones of proximal development and implements strate-

gies for assisted instruction (Morehouse, 1985). The community of inquiry is made up of learners who are at different levels at different points of the discussion. Therefore, each child is likely given a number of experiences on different topics and arising out of different experiences to be a more knowledgeable peer (one of the sources of assisted instruction) by modeling, rewarding, giving feed-back, direct instruction (i.e., telling), asking questions, or providing cognitive structures for new information and new processes within community of inquiry discussions.

The community of inquiry is well suited to assist the student who is on the verge of knowing, in other words, a student at a zone of proximal development. The advantage of a discussion with a community of inquiry is that what one student knows about one part of the discussion, for example, a concept or a strategy, can help another student who will in turn be helped by another student in a circle of "assisted instruction." The teacher can also aid this process by modeling and providing cognitive structures in particular.

A similar pedagogy is manifest in the whole-language approach, that is, children tell stories, write them down, and read them aloud to their peers. Further, fellow students and teachers are likely to read each student's stories with a focus on understanding the meaning that the writer is attempting to convey. It is in the process of trying to convey meaning that assisted instruction occurs. In this process, children learn new words, standard spellings, and new forms of pragmatics and syntax.

Perhaps the most compelling connection between the two approaches is their focus on meaning. Children are starved for meaning according to Lipman (1980). Children are seekers of meaning — logical, psychological and personal. Meaning is gained by exploring relationships: whole-part, means-end, process-product, critical-creative and exposition-narrative (Lipman, 1992). The following quote from Lipman and colleagues could have also been written by any number of advocates of the whole language approach to reading:

> *If, on the other hand, it is meaning for which children thirst and have a right to expect from the educational process, then this enlightens us about the legitimate incentives that might be employed in motivating them. ... Instead of insisting that education is a specific form of experience that only the school can provide, we should say that anything that helps us discover meaning in life is educational, and that schools are educational only insofar as they do facilitate such discovery* (Lipman et al., 1980,p. 6).

EXPLORING DIFFERENCES

Although the two programs have some important similarities, they also have some significant differences. Two differences stand out as having the potential to keep practitioners of the two approaches from joining forces: (1) the role of the self-reflective text in Philosophy for Children and (2) the almost total self-selection of materials and methods (anything a competent literate adult might do) of the whole-language approach. While these two impediments do not necessarily create insurmountable roadblocks, they do create barriers which need to be first understood and then dismantled if any cooperation is to be established between the two programs.

One of the chief strengths of the Philosophy for Children program is the novels written by Lipman. These novels, while perhaps not essential to initiate a philosophical discussion among elementary aged students, clearly provide a model for such discussion as well as a beginning point to "mine" the text for leading ideas, that is, ideas which have philosophic content and which are interesting to the children who have read the chapter of the novel together aloud. If teachers committed to the whole-language approach are to examine Philosophy for Children materials, they need to understand what the Lipman novels do within the novels — that is, the novel itself creates a learning community. To restate that point, the creation of meaningful apprentices of skilled thinkers and literate individuals is an essential part of the Lipman novel.

But all the thinking models do not happen in the novel — though importantly they begin there. Lipman argues that we learn to think by thinking aloud with others. This thinking aloud in a classroom has a dynamic which implicitly builds on a Vygotskian understanding of zones of proximal development and assisted instruction. Lipman states that in conversation or a dialogue with others that no one person knows all the premises and therefore the reasoning process has much more vitality, and the conclusions

come with considerably more surprise (1992, p. 41). Further, these surprising conclusions are derived from a dialogue with others whose skills and knowledge are at different levels of competence and expertise so that everyone potentially learns.

The whole-language advocates need to look at the value of the novel as a model — a first model for thinking aloud with others. On the other hand, Philosophy for Children advocates need to see the potential for other ways to access initial models of thinking aloud.

Philosophy for Children advocates also need to look at the almost total self-selection of materials and methods of the whole-language approach and to understand it in context. If a competent literate adult is the model which we hope children will aspire to become then it is reasonable to allow competent literate adults to decide how and what to do to develop that competence. I would argue that this is true at least on face value. Further, there is most likely not one good way to think or to read. However, there do appear to be some skills, and some techniques for teaching those skills which might provide a good, if not a better, way of teaching thinking.

The question is how can the whole-language approach come to see the connection between competent adults as models in the classroom and competent thinkers in the novels. The dynamic part of the Philosophy for Children approach is the community of inquiry which finds its beginnings in the novels. These novels therefore are not like the typical basal reader but more like a springboard for discussion. The discussion techniques presented in the novels and developed within classroom communities of inquiry can provide the basis for extending the realm of the competent reader to that of competent thinker if the Philosophy for Children materials and approach are used along with "good" literature within a whole-language approach.

A MODEST PROPOSAL

> *A curriculum ... is the enterprise par excellence where the line between subject matter and the method grows necessarily indistinct* (Jerome Bruner as quoted in *Toward a thinking curriculum,* 1989).

In what way does the line between subject matter and method grow thin in curriculum? Further, and more directly connected to our concern about making connections between Philosophy for Children and the whole-language movement, how does exploring that thin line help bring these ideas together? Perhaps a further exploration of Vygotsky's learning and development can provide a way to answer both questions.

A curriculum can be seen as a theory of socialization, that is, as a theory for moving children from one level of social and cultural competence to the next level of social and cultural competence. A child develops her higher order thinking abilities by shared activities with adults and competent peers. Vygotsky sees this most evident in problem solving situations. The child first experiences dynamic problem solving activities in the presence of others. Over the course of time and with repeated experiences, the child comes to perform these functions independently.

> *The process of internalization is gradual; first the adult or knowledgeable peer controls and guides the child's activity, but gradually the adult and the child come to share the problem-solving function, with the child taking initiative and the adult correcting and guiding when she falters. Finally, the adult cedes control to the child and functions primarily as a supportive and sympathetic audience* (Brown & Ferrara, pp. 281-282 in Wertsch, Ed., 1985).

While this exploration of the socialization process called curriculum has not included any discussion of content, content is implied. One can not solve problems without content. The problems are the content. One way of looking at content is as a particular set of problems which can be addressed by organizing and applying a set of procedures in order to gain a particular kind of information. In order to gain this new information, one must already possess some knowledge about the topic.

A fundamental principle of cognitive psychology is that learning requires knowledge. Yet, cognitive research also shows that knowledge cannot be given directly to students. Before knowledge becomes truly generative — knowledge that can be used to interpret new situations, to solve problems, to think and reason, and to learn — students must elaborate and question

what they are told, examine the new information in relation to other information, and build new knowledge structures. Educators are thus faced with a central problem: how to help students get started in developing their base of generative knowledge so they can learn easily and independently later on (Resnick & Klopfer, 1989, p. 5 in Resnick & Klopfer, Eds.).

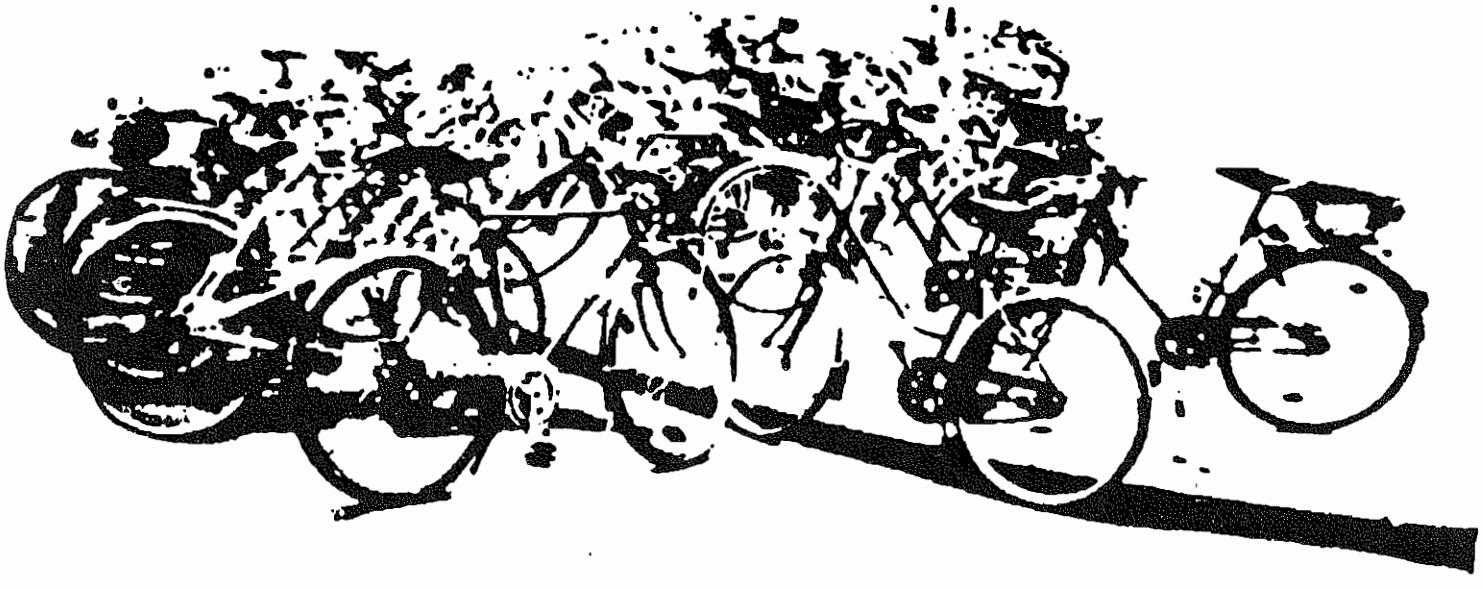
The philosophical novels written by Lipman provide one way of building new knowledge on previous knowledge. Other stories, so called "good" literature, can also provide that connection between what is already known and what is to be learned. But in order to effectively build a community of inquiry it takes a particular kind of story — one that is philosophical. Gareth Mathews in his column in *Thinking* regularly points out children's stories which are good literature and that have philosophical content. Recently, writing about Dr. Seuss, Mathews states:

> *...many of his stories are also philosophical. They are philosophical by presenting us readers with a gedunkin or thought experiment that provokes reflection* (Mathews, 1992, p. 1).

The whole-language approach to reading does not, however, have a systematic way of incorporating thinking skills into "good" literature approach to reading, writing, discussing. Even stories that are good literature and have philosophical content do not extend whole-language to philosophic communities of inquiry or provide a vehicle for the improvement of student thinking skills. The whole language approach may provide "food for thought" but it does not provide models either with the literature or within the classroom for the improvement of thinking skills or the development of a community of inquiry.

The teacher's manuals as developed in Philosophy for Children can provide a bridge between a good story with philosophic content and a philosophic discussion. There is a tradition within *Analytic Teaching* beginning with "What is generalizable in the pedagogy of Philosophy for Children" (Morehouse, 1983) and "A bit more on generalizing Philosophy for Children" (Weinstein, 1984) which begins an exploration of the use of non-IAPC material while working toward the same ends as IAPC, that is, the improvement of thinking skills by exploring and creating meaning within a community of inquiry. Ron Reed's *Rebecca* as well as many stories by Ann Sharp and Per Jespersen, to mention two of the more regular contributors of philosophic stories to *Analytic Teaching*, are a part of this tradition.

What is proposed here, however, is closer to what the some Australian participants in the Philosophy for Children movement have been doing — using existing literature and adapting, modifying, or using directly, activities which have been developed for and are published in the manuals of IAPC (Glasser, 1992; de Haan & MacColl,



1991; also see Huffines, 1991; Kennedy, in press).

The teacher in Philosophy for Children, and even more so, teachers using a Philosophy for Children approach with non-IAPC materials, must always be aware of the close connection between method and content in the program. Modeling questions is but one important connection between method and content. Asking for reasons is another closely related method for uncovering philosophic meaning in stories. Assisting students in finding meaning is also essential if we are to develop and maintain a philosophic inquiry. Meaning is constructed by the students with the help of the teacher.

An example may help in understanding the importance of letting the students establish meaning. When I first began teaching in Philosophy for Children, I was not aware of this connection. As a result, after several exciting discussions, the class began to lose some student involvement (Morehouse, 1988). I consulted with several other teachers and invited them to observe me teaching a couple of classes. I found that I was forcing a discussion, that is, discussing points I thought important, and not allowing students to find ideas within the novel which were interesting to them. I was imposing my meaning on the chapter. The teacher's role in a Philosophy for Children discussion is to lead, that is, to aid students in drawing out, ask questions which can lead to organizing themes and getting students to place points in a priority order. This can help "move" the discussion forward. The teacher is not to impose the agenda on the discussion. Rather, the teacher, by modeling, offering positive feedback and appropriate criticism, and by occasionally instructing, can help move a discussion and shape the nature and quality of the inquiry. In this process of shaping and moving a discussion the IAPC manuals and similar material is invaluable.

A NOTE OF CAUTION

> *When children together build a house of blocks, there is a recognition that as the house begins to take shape it begins to lead a kind of life of its own to which some construction ideas are appropriate and others are inappropriate. Each added block restructures the developing house and slightly alters its demand character. New ideas are thereby evoked, which the house may or may not tolerate. What is important, in any case, is that the children are building on each other's ideas as well as on each other's blocks, and they are together learning to take into account* ***the creative requiredness of the schemata they themselves create*** (Lipman, 1992, p. 90 emphasis added).

Lipman's metaphor provides an essential caution to the current proposal. That is, a curriculum approach — like a house of blocks — begins to take a shape of its own after a short while. It is therefore important to pay close attention to the foundation block of this adaptation of the IAPC materials. As we build on the ideas of Lipman, this community will take a new shape. It is important that this new shape be able to support the same structure, that is, critical and creative thinking within a community of inquiry which struggles to create meaning within a philosophical content. If we can do that, and I think it is possible, we can include more teachers and more students in this exciting quest.

This proposal has important and unexplored implications for teacher education and the introduction of novice teachers into the Philosophy for Children classroom. Hopefully, these implications can be pursued in later papers and discussions.

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