PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN: Training of Teachers for the Singapore Programme

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The Philosophy for Children (P4C) project was initiated in January 1992 in two schools in Singapore: Pandan Primary and Bedok South Secondary. A primary 5 class in Pandan Primary did *Pixie* (Lipman, 1981) and a Secondary 2 class in Bedok South did *Harry* (Lipman, 1974). In January 1993, two additional schools, Henry Park Primary and Raffles Girls Secondary, joined the programme. I selected the P4C programme, developed by Matthew Lipman, a former professor of philosophy at Columbia, as I felt from a cognitive psychology perspective, that it was an excellent thinking programme. Its strength lies in teaching children how to think through dialogue, through creating a community of inquiry in the classroom. While most thinking programmes teach heuristics, the P4C programme works towards facilitating students to discuss philosophical issues for which there are no right or wrong answers (Lipman, 1991).

Pandan Primary did *Pixie* as it was designed to initiate inquiry on the acquisition of meaning. *Pixie* depicts a group of nine- to ten-year-old children considering problems of classification, definition and concept development. Philosophical puzzles are used to generate diversified classroom discussions and to develop children's awareness of logical, social, familial and aesthetic relationships (Lipman and Sharp 1982). Bedok South Secondary did *Harry*, where children, eleven to twelve years of age, are engaged in discovering what it is to reason and to apply the process of reasoning to problems they face in their own lives. *Harry* is written in such a way that it introduces the students to techniques of critical thinking and both formal and informal logic by modeling a community of inquiry as students and teachers begin to think about thinking (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyon, 1984). Johnson (1984) pointed out that in both novels, the characters struggle to figure things out by seeking reasons for things they do not understand and by assessing the reasons given them.

INFORMAL TRAINING OF TEACHERS

The P4C programme adopts a Socratic structure, a process approach where the teacher becomes the facilitator of investigation. The teacher generates discussion as well as prompting students in a Socratic manner with open-ended questions to draw out ideas. In this way, students are encouraged to discuss, listen, clarify and justify their thinking (Fisher, 1990). Thus, teachers play a significant role in the classroom — not to teach, but to facilitate the discussion. Since teachers are accustomed to teaching students rather than facilitating discussion in class, teacher train-

ing is vital.

When the P4C programme started in January 1991 as a pilot project, we did not have the funds to carry out formal training of the teachers. Instead, I carried out informal coaching, somewhat in the style of Brandt (1987). Using Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyon (1980), I explained the P4C programme to the teachers and gave them the rationale for creating a community of inquiry in the classroom. I discussed the exercises and the reasoning activities in the manuals (Lipman & Sharp, 1982; Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyon, 1984) to sort out what could be used to help the teachers facilitate the discussion in the class. We all found the manual very useful. The programme in each school started with two teachers co-teaching in one class, as the classes involved were large. More importantly, I felt that the teachers could give each other moral support.

TABLE 1: Feedback From Pandan Primary Teachers on Lessons on *Pixie*

I think at the beginning we were a bit lost and at times, we were a bit frustrated after the lesson. We wondered why we were telling them and asking them so many questions and why they were not responding. Now it's not such a conscious effort — it is quite natural for us to just ask them about their feelings and guide them on from them — although not as a facilitator, but guide them on from there.

They can offer counter examples or something opposite, sometimes, but they don't challenge. They can offer counter examples spontaneously.

But another child said, I disagree with you. There were about one to three to four of them, speaking. In fact, five different children spoke. They could piggyback on each other's comments.

I have a few in my class, you know, they are very sharp and from their facial expressions, I know that they grasp it. When you ask them they cannot explain it properly because they are not very fluent in their spoken English. Basically, they are just afraid of being laughed at by others. It is very important for them at this stage.

They can ask relevant questions, they can ask sequential questions. They still find it difficult to ask people to justify what they say. They find it difficult to ask people to clarify what they say.

I met the two teachers from each school every three weeks to discuss what could be done in the next few lessons. The teachers would discuss problems that they had encountered over the previous weeks. In some sessions I met the teachers of the two schools together so that we could all share our experiences. Initially, the teachers found their experiences in the programme to be extremely difficult at the beginning (Lim & Koh, 1992). Classes in Singapore schools tended to follow a usual pattern of the teacher asking a question and then selecting a child out of several children (who had their hands raised) to answer a question. What we had then was a series of disconnected answers, and teachers repeating the students' answers. This was illustrated by the transcripts of the first few lessons.

At the beginning, the teachers found the students giving monosyllabic answers and themselves talking more than the students. They felt lost and were not too sure about what was happening. Their comments, given in an interview at the end of the year, are set out in Table 1. The Bedok South Secondary teachers also were struggling. They found the going tough and did not know when they needed to change to another topic (see Table 2).

Students found it difficult to take turns in discussion during the lesson. It was also hard to try to get a "real dialogue" going, to persuade the students to follow a line of argument through and to get them to listen to the ideas of others. The students needed to learn to listen to each other and the teachers needed to become sympathetic listeners and to be facilitators. We found that the success of a discussion depended very much on the teacher's skill in facilitating dialogue. As I continued with the sessions to try to develop discussion skills in children, the situation gradually improved. As shown in Table 1, Pandan Primary teachers could feel that it was no longer such a conscious effort and that it was quite natural for them to just ask the students about their feelings and guide them on from there.

Teachers had to learn to encourage children to build on one another's ideas and to see the implications of what they were saying. The teachers taped some of the lessons and these transcripts proved to be valuable guiding tools. I also joined in some of the lessons in both the schools. At the end of a year in the P4C programme, the Pandan Primary teachers felt that the students could piggyback on each other's comments and could disagree with each other (see Table 1). The students could also ask relevant questions but found it difficult to ask their classmates to clarify or justify what they said. As shown in Table 2, the Bedok South Secondary teachers felt that some students could challenge one another for reasons and examples.

TABLE 2: Feedback From Bedok South Secondary Teachers on Lessons on *Harry*

Sometimes we are at a loss ... we ourselves, we do not know. It's tough. We let them wander around and sometimes when we do that the point all is forgotten. We do not know whether we need to change to another topic.

You can find them, you know, you can see it's ticking. When you bring up a topic you can see them ticking away, they are sort of absorbed in what we are going to bring up like: Oh, I've never thought of it before, for example, this is about what makes you ... one idea just grow out from another. One student will prompt this, and another will prompt that.

The thing is that some people just don't contribute, but they could be benefitting. They may be silent listeners, for example, Benny absorbs a lot, only he does not contribute. When you talk to him, you realise that the boy thinks a lot ... These are people who can be slowly encouraged to contribute and share with the others.

Some students can challenge one another for reasons and examples. Students can offer counter examples, they can offer counter instances, they also can offer counter arguments. They still can't piggyback on other's comments, that is, they can't build up.

They can tell the person outright: we don't understand what you are saying so we ask them, O hey please explain again, still don't understand or we don't agree, we end up by saying.

The teachers from both schools also brought up a problem that we need to address in Singapore: students who did not respond during the session. The teachers were aware that these students were the typically "shy and introverted Asian" students who could follow the sessions but were afraid of speaking up for several reasons, including the fear of being laughed at. The Pandan teachers knew that some of the quiet ones in class were very sharp from their facial expressions; however, they were not very fluent in their spoken English and were afraid of being laughed at by others (see Table 1). The Bedok South Secondary teachers pointed out that there were silent listeners who could be slowly encouraged to contribute and share with the others (see Table 2).

FORMAL TRAINING OF TEACHERS

Towards the end of 1992, when Raffles Girls Secondary and Henry Park Primary decided to join the P4C project, I felt that there would be far too many teachers for me to continue with individual coaching. As Raffles Girls Secondary had the funds to invite P4C trainers, we invited Ann Margaret Sharp and Laurence Splitter to come and give a week's training on *Harry* (Lipman, 1974) and *Lisa* (Lipman, 1983). A total of 17 teachers from the three schools attended the training; Pandan Primary decided not to continue with the programme. In the evaluation form, all the teachers felt that the 5-day course met or exceeded their expectations. They were very satisfied with the trainers' presentation and group discussion/interaction, but they expressed the need to have hands-on skill practice.

Table 3 sets out the strengths and weaknesses of the training, as well as the improvements for the training. The teachers were free to give as many responses as they wanted to in the free-response section of the evaluation form. There were far more open-ended responses coded for strengths (29 responses), than for weaknesses (13 responses) or recommendations (10 responses), reflecting the satisfaction of the participants with the course. The teachers were happy with the discussion and interaction (38% of responses) and the highly competent trainers (31% of responses). While half the responses on weaknesses focused on the lack of time for queries and clarification of thought and recommended a longer course, one-third of the responses focused on the lack of variation in methodology. The teachers would have also liked to know more philosophy and P4C experiences overseas (60% of responses). On the whole, the teachers were enthusiastic with the training.

As the teachers conducted the P4C sessions in 1993, they found, as suggested in Phillips (1993), that their lack of formal background in philosophy was hampering their ability to facilitate the sessions properly. This was also in line with Munby (1979) who pointed out that the suggestions in the manual could be inadequate for those without philosophical training. As shown in Table 3, some of the teachers had already seen the need for introductory philosophy in their initial training. In September, I invited a philosophy lecturer from the National University of Singapore to give two sessions on introduction to logical thinking, arguments, and good reasoning. Since the teachers found the sessions interesting and worthwhile, we continued with further sessions in philosophy, particularly in Asian philosophy.

TABLE 3: Strengths, Weaknesses and Recommendations for Improvement

	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	
STRENGTHS		
Active dialogue, discussion and interaction, thought provoking	11	38%
Highly competent trainers, systematic, good classroom demonstrations	9	31%
Active participation, foundation for community of inquiry	6	21%
Texts and notes, refreshments	3	10%
WEAKNESSES		
Not enough time for queries, discussion, clarification of thought and practice	6	46%
Little spontaneity and variation in methodology	4	31%
Need more reading materials	3	23%
RECOMMENDATIONS		
Longer course	4	40%
Introduction to philosophy and logic	4	40%
Sharing of P4C experiences	2	20%

CONCLUSION

The teachers have found that the P4C sessions in all the schools have added a new dimension to the ways the students think (Lim, 1993). As the students develop a community of inquiry, they develop trust in one another. They cooperate by working out answers with one another and respect views and suggestions that are offered. I conducted a workshop to share the experiences on P4C programmes in the other countries which I had learned of in the 1993 ICPIC conference in Spain. We continue to sort out the problems we encountered with P4C during the last two years. The programme is expanding with Raffles Girls Secondary introducing P4C into the curriculum in its Secondary 1 classes next year. There will be a new class of Primary 5 students in Henry Park and a new class of Secondary 2 students in Bedok South starting in the programme next year. All of the students in the three schools involved in this year's programme will continue next year. In Bedok South the first group of students will be in their third year of their programme.

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