

Philosophy for Children Teachers as Collaborative Researchers

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In an article published in *Analytic Teaching* (Schleifer, Lebuis, Daniel, Caron, 1990), we argued for a model of ongoing supervision to complement the “official” emphasis on coaching and modelling in teacher-training. We acknowledged that coaching was important but only for the initiation period. After two or three years of experience, however, we had found that the role of the supervisor was much more of a collaborator, or co-philosopher than a coach. What our teachers seemed to be most in need of was to have a resource-person with whom to continue reflecting about their action. This reflexion might centre upon philosophical issues arising from the material, but might also concern itself with two other sets of issues. The first set of issues are mainly pedagogical ones; the second set concerns general problems in the philosophy of education. We argued that our model of supervision (or accompaniment) had to be flexible and ongoing. It had to be flexible enough to adapt to the needs of individual teachers in individual circumstances. It had also to be ongoing in order to continue to serve teachers who had already gone beyond their novice apprenticeship and initiation. The model we advocate is an extension of the community of inquiry. Rather than simply using this at the initial period of initiation, we see it as an ongoing enterprise. Thus the teachers can continue to consult the university professors (supervisors) concerning each of the three types of considerations mentioned above (philosophical materials and issues, pedagogical matters, and philosophy of education). The present article provides a report of how that model has worked in practice.

Since 1990, about forty teachers in different areas of Quebec were invited to collaborate with the “Philosophy for Children” resource-team at the Universit du Quebec i Montreal. As in the past, these teachers received accompaniment according to the model described above during the first year. The participation of these teachers in an ongoing collaboration has been assured under the umbrella of several research projects. The first of these, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, had as its aim the investigation of collaborative research (1990-1993). In the current year (1993-1994) several school projects investigating the integration of philosophy to the curriculum have been funded partly by the Ministry of Education of the Province of Quebec and partly by local school districts.

Although the teachers in these projects are now quite familiar with the Philosophy for Children approach, they continue to show the need for ongoing discussions. Here are some typical examples of problems raised by some of these experienced teachers:

Teacher 1:

“I love doing philosophy with the children, but it often interferes with my responsibilities. I have to do an evaluation of oral language for their report cards. Where do I find the time?”

Teacher II:

“I am really bugged by some kids. They take advantage during the philosophy class. I notice a few children drawing or scribbling, I feel they need to be disciplined. “

Teacher III:

“What are the manuals and exercises really for? I have to admit I haven’t used them for a long time. Is that O.K?”

These examples show that even the most experienced teachers need a forum for the discussion of the three areas mentioned above. The philosophical issues themselves are handled, as traditionally, in a community of inquiry. The other two types of discussion (those centering on pedagogy, or on wider issues in the “philosophy of education”) need additional avenues. It was partly to provide these avenues that the contract of collaboration was established.

The contract provided for areas of responsibility for the teachers and the university personnel. For the first year, the teachers were introduced to Philosophy for Children with the coaching and modelling model (about one month) followed by individual accompaniment (about once a week). For subsequent years, all of the teachers were asked to continue keeping a written record of their observations, and of questions concerning the experience in class. These questions could then be raised either in the individual accompaniment meetings held from 4-8 times a year, or in the monthly meeting of the entire staff with the university resource-person. Typically, this staff-meeting was divided into a community of inquiry to deepen philosophical awareness, and a second meeting to discuss pedagogical concerns. Finally, a one-day session was organized at the university at least once a year (for each of the years 1990-1993) for all the teachers working with “Philosophy for Children.” The accompanying-team was composed of university professors and others equally experienced who were hired as research-assistants. The role of these personnel was to continue individual accompaniment of the teachers, to preside over the school-meetings which included a community of inquiry as well as a general discussion of pedagogical concerns, to keep a written record of observations made in the milieu, and to coordinate the larger discussions held at the university mentioned above.

The problems expressed by the three teachers mentioned earlier are typical of those raised by our participating teachers. There are no easy answers to these questions which are raised despite experience in Philosophy for Children and in general education. They are all, furthermore, illustrations of the kind of discussions which have become examples of collaborative research.

The problem of evaluation raised by Teacher I is very complex. In order to begin to discuss the specific problem raised by this teacher, questions concerning the aims and objectives of evaluation are relevant. Since oral communication was the issue, specific questions concerning the criteria used to evaluate quality are also relevant. Many of these questions are of the ongoing variety and susceptible to being the object of further research. Indeed the preoccupation of this one teacher became the more generalized question regarding the connection between communication (written and oral) in philosophy-discussions, and more traditional communication-abilities. The presently-used government evaluation criteria for primary-school language typically asks the child to answer two or three standard questions to “demonstrate” his/her linguistic proficiency. For example, after Halloween, the child is asked: Who made your costume? (answer: my mother bought it at Sears), What colour was it? Not surprisingly, these standardized government criteria are under critical examination at present.

The second question cited above similarly involves complex issues. We began with the teacher’s specific anxiety about two girls scribbling (but were they bothering others?) This led to the question of whether children benefit from discussions even if not participating “actively.” Could they have been listening “actively”? Of more general concern, of course, is the issue of discipline. The following question had also to be considered: Is discipline more of a problem in philosophy-discussions periods than in the more traditional academic periods?

The third question concerns the use of manuals or exercises. One might anticipate this question with beginners. It is more surprising coming from relatively experienced teachers. It is, however, a very typical worry. (see Daniel 1992) At one level, one can respond about the use of exercises and manuals and their relative importance. Quite quickly, however, one finds the discussion goes beyond technical considerations (Which exercise?, Which page?), to issues of more general importance. The problem of the teacher’s autonomy, (her/his right to make decisions concerning teaching, pedagogy etc.) is often the next immediate domain of concern. Even after quite a few years of “doing philosophy” there are still vestiges of the traditional teacher more bound to the manual, the program etc.

The attempt to reconcile these two roles (traditional teacher, and philosophy discussion-leader) poses a fundamental conflict for almost all the teachers with whom we work. It is of note that all three questions reflect a more general worry about the relationship of the teaching of philosophy to the traditional roles of the classroom teacher. Both the worry about evaluation, and the one about discipline can be subsumed under the worry of having two roles, regular teacher, and philosophy animator. We subscribe to Ann Margaret Sharp’s definition:

“A competent teacher is capable of teaching all the elementary school disciplines in a reflective and philosophical manner, using the community of inquiry approach throughout the entire day. “

(Analytic Teaching, 7(2), May, 1987)

Some of the teachers who had been trained in Philosophy for Children and had two or three years experience were far from this ideal, as we reported in 1990. In a similar report with different teachers, Daniel (1991) found that they saw Philosophy for Children as “another subject-matter added to their already overloaded school curriculum” (1991, p. 41). These earlier reports concerned teachers who, although not beginners, had only one or two years experience. We wish to add, now, that even among teachers who are quite experienced with Philosophy for Children (two to five years), many are still striving to attain the kind of competence defined by Ann Margaret Sharp, in the definition cited above.

As the title of this article suggests, we have considered teachers doing Philosophy for Children also as collaborative researchers. We have already mentioned several examples of research-areas which reflect the concerns of both university professors, and teachers in the school. Some of these questions such as those concerning learning and evaluation of traditional subject-matters (math, language) originated primarily from the teachers. These concerns have led, as noted, to wider preoccupations with philosophy’s relation to language and communication. Similarly, the teachers’ concerns with discipline have led to a broader research-question concerning the integration of philosophy into the curriculum.

These research-areas are very much collaborative action-research projects. This is true in the sense that the areas of concern are discussed in the avenues where university and primary-school personnel can meet together. The funding, furthermore, for these projects, has come in part from the schools themselves. They constitute part of a school education project.

Our teachers were collaborative researchers in two ways. Firstly, they have learned to articulate problems and questions to be posed in the light of the specific conditions of their milieu and their experience. These questions (and the possible solutions) had also to allow for a more generalized articulation so as to engage the interests of the research group. Secondly, the teachers were called upon to be observers, as well as describers of these observations. These observations and descriptions also had to both adequately reflect the specific conditions of the individual school, while also permitting a more generalized consideration.

Over and above the reflection concerning these wider research-areas, there is also a reflection about the development of the teachers themselves as what Schon (1983, 1987) has called “reflective practitioners.” In our kind of ongoing accompaniment, we have provided a forum where the teachers were encouraged to reflect upon their experience in the classroom, as well as upon the changes in their own professional development. This reflexion in the course of the individual accompaniment-meetings, was joint reflexion about the lived experience in teaching philosophy, as well as in preparing to teach philosophy. Just as teaching philosophy involves reflexive activity, so the accompaniment-meetings were seen as reflexive encounters.

The experience of our teachers can be seen in the light of Schbn’s “ladder of reflexion.” In our context, there is first a philosophical discussion in the classroom which is above all a reflexive process aimed at autonomous thinking. This is followed by the description and evaluation of the teaching, by a reflexion about this description (in individual meetings), and finally a reflexion concerning these reflexions. Although the first rungs of the reflexive ladder are mainly in individual meetings, the latter steps depend above all on the group meetings, held periodically in the school and at the university.

Our model, then, favored a space in which teachers had to find their own coherence to give sense to their practice and experience instead of simply confronting a set of predetermined parameters. Our ongoing accompaniment is thus long past the stage where teachers are called upon to model or reproduce. In this new model, teachers continue to question the kind of “knowledge” transmitted by the school, as well as their own relationship to this body of knowledge. This ongoing reflexion opens a new spiral of reflexion which concerns itself with the methods and ends of education. From reflexion about teaching philosophy to reflexion about personal experience, we now arrive at reflexion about integration of critical and creative thinking to the entire curriculum. At this new level of reflexion, the concerns of the university researchers, and those of the teachers have become one.

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