

# Searching for Meaning in Teacher Training

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**I**n my experience in teacher training I © experience a certain amount of frustration when I can't find a way to share how wonderful it is to be part of a Community of Inquiry in P4C. In an attempt to discover a solution, I went back to the specific actions I took in a particular workshop, and the way I related to each of the participants, trying to evaluate myself in the conduct of the sessions, preparation of materials, and so on. But I was unable to find a key answer as to why all the teachers, or at least the majority, did not stay with the program.

I keep a personal journal during workshops, and during the sessions I register some of the things expressed by teachers that catch my attention. These notes are not necessarily related to the didactic of the workshop, but to the personal impression I get from the teachers. When my first attempt to evaluate the workshop didn't help my understanding of what was going on with the teachers, I began a careful study of my personal notes and found that there are three main components in teacher training:

**1- The knowledge and familiarity that a teacher gains about the P4C curriculum:**

novels, manuals, exercises, theoretical fundamentals, papers about the methodology, etc.

**2- The attitudes shaped in and by the teachers in the Community of Inquiry:** patient listening, respect, and in general the "Progress Indicators" that the IAPC offers to keep track of the process of the individuals and the group in a Community of Inquiry.

**3- The meaning of being part of a Community of Inquiry.** I place here the joyfulness or the pleasure experienced by the teacher, as a person, in wondering and in doing philosophical inquiry. The experience at this level goes beyond the teacher's intention to be trained as a P4C teacher. It is not related to the ability to work with children, and to participate in inquiry as part of his or her own training. It is related to the personal experience in which a teacher gets involved - sometimes unconsciously - and the way in which he or she deals with a personal transformation, by means of the Community of Inquiry.

When I could formulate these three aspects or levels of involvement in the process of teacher training, some of my journal notes took on another dimension. I evaluated myself as having covered the first two dimensions of teacher training well, but a careful consideration of the third one might help me to gain better answers to my questions: What is going on in the teacher while I'm doing teacher training? What happens with teachers, and why is it that some really like and stay with the program and some others just walk away? What does it mean to train a teacher?

One thing you have to deal with is that each teacher is at the same time three: the teacher he is supposed to be by definition, the teacher he actually is, and his own image of his being a teacher.

Lets take the teacher by definition. In the last paragraph of *My Pedagogic Creed*, Dewey says

*... the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life. Every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth. In this way the teacher always is the prophet of*

*the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God.* <sup>1</sup>

Dewey wrote this document about 1897 and I think it describes strongly but well how much we have deposited in “the teacher.” We can take any teacher training program and we will find that there is a list of characteristics to fulfill in order to be considered a “good teacher”: health, objectivity, dedication, dignity, pedagogical strength, intelligence, common sense, tolerance but leadership, etc. The social role of the teacher has been defined so well that in many cases, to be a teacher means to be an impersonal entity acting out the qualities, and doing the “right’ things to facilitate others’ growth. In this sense, going into teacher training implies a confrontation between the abstraction, the image, and the actual person of the teacher (and the trainer).

Teachers are trained to be an abstraction. There are many attempts to define them - not to understand how they experience their profession, but to make them better. Teachers have learned to say they want to be better, but at the same time, they consider themselves as “very good teachers.” They have learned to say they need and want training so they can improve their teaching, but we hardly know their real feelings and necessities. So when we receive a teacher for teacher training, we have to be aware of this internal process lived by the teacher, even though few of them are aware of it.

Furthermore, when we work in teacher training in P4C, we have to deal with “the abstraction” - there are characteristics to be developed as a P4C teacher - and the “real teacher” we’ll discover in each of them, and we have to “be there” accompanying the teacher in the personal process of self-evaluation and change. In the process of constructing a Community of Inquiry we are compelled to “ask” the teachers, to “invite” them, and “induce” them to inquire about their own meaning, experience, knowledge, thinking, etc. in a way in which we all have to deal with the “real teacher,” but mainly, with the “real person.”

Let me try to illustrate this point. I offer at the Center in Guadalajara Introductory, Middle and Advanced level workshops. Each of them last 40 hours, on weekends, plus the practice time, at least once a week, that teachers have to do at their own schools. There is a language and literature teacher, secondary level, that was selected in her school to be trained in P4C. She has about 15 or more years of experience, and her practice is recognized and appreciated in the school. She went into the workshop and during the first two sessions she seemed confused because when I asked questions of the group, she went back to the novel, and tried to find the right answer. I frequently asked her questions such as “What do you think? Do you agree with...?” etc. By the third meeting, she started to relax a little. She started to talk, to participate with questions, and it seemed she was having a good time.

Near the end of the workshop I asked the teachers to say something about the work we had been doing. What she said was: I’m having a good time, I mean, talking and thinking... But I’m not sure I will practice this with my students on a regular basis. I think it is not right to let them leave, as you let us leave: questions in our heads, but not answers at all, and each of us with their own thread of thought. It won’t be fair for children, it won’t be fair for teenagers. I’ve always cared about my students’ feelings. How can I let them go home in confusion?

There is an idea from Ada Abraham<sup>2</sup>: the personal satisfaction with a teacher’s profession is intimately related to self image and the required characteristics of good teaching. The closer the match, the greater the satisfaction. By definition, a teacher is supposed to guide, to lead to knowledge, to answers, to abilities. For this teacher, the inquiry approach of the workshop had created an internal conflict - she was not supposed to be confused, she was supposed to be trained to teach something, to teach Philosophy for Children. But she wasn’t “learning” things to teach her students.

When she shared with us her practice with P4C, she always remarked on her difficulty in modifying the discipline in the group. If the students were accustomed to be seated, and silent, how could she “let them go, thinking around” and lose control? In Spanish we have a way to speak in second person which is very formal and polite. We use the word “usted” to talk to somebody we are not familiar with, or to someone who deserves respect and distinction. This was the way she was accustomed to speaking with the students and the students with her, and this use of language was her way to be in control of the situation, and to keep “the teacher” and “the students” in the proper place.

We began the Middle Level workshop. Fortunately, I had agreed with the principal of this teacher’s school that she had to go through all training levels, so she had to continue her training. Her attitude was changing almost imperceptibly but clearly and smoothly. By the middle of the 40 hours she stopped calling her students

“students,” and started to talk about them by their last names, and in one session she started to cry. She was really confused because she had always been so sure she was doing “good teaching,” but now she was feeling not bad, but different. She said: “The other day I was thinking. How is it that I forgot this much about myself? When I was young at the Universidad Autonoma de Mexico I participated in student political movements. I remember my teachers, and while not all of them helped our generation to think for ourselves, some of them did. I was an activist in the 1968 Movement in Tlalteloco.<sup>3</sup> And now as I look at my teaching to my students, I almost forgot that they have the right to think about things, and that it is not fair for them that I only teach them literature and language, there are so many other things to think about... and, do you know the worst of it? I thought I was a teacher who helped students to reflect, to be respectful, to trust in themselves.” Again, the teacher has to deal with the three teachers she actually is.

When a teacher goes into a Community of Inquiry as a part of a training process she can access the knowledge of others and her own knowledge in a different way from the one she is used to. Her sharing, her talking and her perceiving of the classroom and the school is a different one. This implies an unfolding process for the teacher and her experience, and places her in a structure of relationships that is not as safe and known as her previous teaching experience.

By the end of this second workshop she stopped calling her students by their last names and started to talk to them by their first names. She started to smile during the sessions, to make jokes, to enjoy herself.

We went into the Advanced level. She was surprised at the writings from her students. They started to hand in short poems, short essays, short notes taken during their P4C sessions, but she hadn't asked them to do it. She said in one of our sessions: I don't understand - why are they writing? Why is it so important for them for me to read their poems and things? But she felt good about it, and I'm sure she won't walk away from P4C now. My point is that it was along the process that I had access to what was going on, because in between the three training workshops, and in between the things she said about herself, she said nothing, but lots of things were going on inside her mind and her heart. We have been working together for more than 60 hours. But, would have she stayed in the training if we hadn't had all this time together, and if we hadn't formed a “permanent” Community of Inquiry to be there in the personal process of transformation and negotiation with herself?

Another thing expressed by some teachers at the end of the advanced level was that there was a loneliness-like feeling. The training to identify implications, presuppositions, to be sensitive to the context and to be responsible for their judgments and opinions put them in a different position from the rest of the people they live and work with. So they felt there was a distance between them and the people they care about because they were trained to go into the meaning of things and not to stay at the level of “words.” So, what can we do as teacher trainers to help teachers to deal with these feelings? What strategies could we develop to help them discover that this “loneliness” may lead them to more companionship and commitment in relationships? What are the things we might use to show them that there is a process by which in the first moment we place ourselves apart from the others - like having a treasure in perceiving things in a more profound way - to be able in a second moment to give it back by sharing acceptance and tolerance, and to find out the power and the potentiality of growth that we find in our need of others?

Not all teachers are able, or willing, or simply easy going enough to allow themselves to get in touch with the person they are, and to walk away from that “abstraction” into which society has pushed them. At the introductory level, there were eleven teachers, only six went into the middle and advanced level, and only five are still members of the Community of Inquiry at the Center. But following their process along the workshops, I would say that they have a strong commitment to work with Community of Inquiry with their students - whether they use the P4C program or not - and have been transformed by the experience of being part of one. I really think that as teacher trainers we can't limit ourselves to facilitate the dimension of knowledge and attitudes of the Community of Inquiry, and P4C. We have also to develop strategies to follow the process of each teacher, and to get professionally and pedagogically involved with the personal process of the teachers we are training, facilitating their coping with the internal confrontation that takes place. I think we have to find out alternatives to be aware, to be able to deal with situations along the process of personal discovery and change and to take care of this dimension of teacher training, so we can better understand its meaning.

## NOTES

1. Dewey, John. *My Pedagogic Creed*. (The Philosophy of John Dewey. John J. McDermott. Univ. of Chicago Press.)
2. Abraham, Ada. *El Mundo Interior de los Ensenantes*. Ed. Gedisa.
3. The 1968 Movement took place under the presidency of Gustavo Diaz Ordaz in Mexico City. It was a students' representatives and public demand for the right to "talk" and "group." It was strongly repressed by government and thousands were killed.

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