

Development of Children's Thinking and the Reform of Education in China:

A PIONEERING INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN IN KUNMING, CHINA

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One of the first workshops on philosophy for children in China was held in Kunming, Yunnan Province, July 25-31, 1997. Although there were only 7 days of training, it was a great success. A summary of our experience of the workshops and the deeper and wider implications for Philosophy for Children and the reform of Chinese education follows.

THE PROCESS OF PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN IN CHINA

The seven day workshop was preceded by more than 7 months work by many people. The efforts to introduce Philosophy for Children to China began more than 7 years earlier. In 1988, we got to know Professor Lipman and began to write material to introduce his thoughts to China and to translate his writings. We received 13 texts books from Professor Lipman with the help of Dr. Dengpeng. These works were: (1) Kio and Gus, (2) Wondering at the World, (3) Pixie, (4) Looking for Meaning, (5) Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery, (6) Philosophical Inquiry, (7) Lisa, (8) Ethical Inquiry, (9) Suki, (10) Writing: How and Why, (11) Mark, (12) Society Inquiry, and (13) Philosophy in the Classroom. Professor Zhangshiya has begun to organize all translation work on the 13 books. In 1992, we finished all translation and editorial work, but the printing of the books was delayed because of financial problems. The first opportunity to publish these works was in July of 1996 when we got to know Mr. Li Liming in Kunming, principal of Railroad Middle School at that time. Mr. Liming wanted his school to be the first to receive training in Philosophy for Children. We told the news to Professor Lipman and editor Lijian at the Shanxi Education Publishing House. In order to make the first step to developing Philosophy for Children in China, Professor Lipman donated his copyright to the Shanxi Education Publishing House. At the same time, the Principal Li Liming and Peng Kun made a promise to support the workshop and purchase 680 (60 series) of textbooks. Meanwhile, all translators promised to sell a quantity of books, thus editor Lijian was successful in persuading the head of the publishing house to print all translated books. Furthermore, our excellent trainers, Dr. Philip Guin from America and Dr. Laurance Splitter from Australia, received financial support to come to China for the training.

THE FEEDBACK FROM THE TRAINING

There were about 60 primary grade teachers who attended the training workshop. It may have been the first time for the trainers to train so many trainees, but they managed very well.

At the end of the workshop, we administered two types of questionnaires: open-ended and closed-ended. Most teachers answered that they were very interested in the training and that they hoped to attend this type of training again. They thought that the most notable characteristic of the training was the Community of Inquiry; the most exciting thing was that they could think very fast in the discussion; and the most surprising thing was that they could not get «correct» answers from the trainers. They said that they would like smaller groups for the next training sessions so they could have enough time to express their opinions.

Teachers were asked to answer the closed-ended questions anonymously. The questions and statistical results of those questions are found in Table 1.

These 22 closed-ended questions were answered by 48 subjects (teachers in primary school) in their meeting room without names on the answer sheet. There were five choices to every question, which were: [0] no, absolutely, [1] little, [2] can't say yes or no, [3] a little, and [4] yes, absolutely, in the order for left side to the right side.

In addition, we got mean marks and standard deviations from every question answered by the 48 subjects as shown in table 2.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FEEDBACK

In Table 1, the results showed that the feedback about the training was quite positive. From the questions 1, 6, 17 and 19, we can see that before the training 59.6% of the teachers knew nothing about the aim of Philosophy for Children; 51.1% of the teachers had no technical ability for helping students to discuss in a Community of Inquiry; 72.5% couldn't do the training independently and 31.9% of the trainees felt it was very difficult to understand the philosophical concepts. But after the training, the answers became positive. For example, 50.0% of the trainees thought that they had a little ability and 10.6% of the trainees were very sure that they could help their students to conduct a discussion. Likewise, 51.1% of the trainees admitted that they could do a little training independently and 58.9% of the trainees thought it easier to understand philosophical concepts after the training. The facts illustrate that the trainees considered that they had benefited from the training, especially in practical aspects.

From the result of questions 2, 5, 7, 9 and 11, we learn that trainees were very interested in the Community of Inquiry which was fresh air blowing into their minds. For example, 89.6% thought the Community of Inquiry was very helpful in the development of children's thinking. 475.7% realized

TABLE 1: Questions and Statistic Results:

Results are reported in percentages (5 point scale: negative to positive)

1. Do you understand the aim of Philosophy for Children? Before training: 59.6 29.8 10.6 0.0 0.0 After training 0.0 4.2 18.8 50.0 27.1	12. Do you think that Philosophy for Children is helpful to the Essential-Qualities-Orientation Education? 0.0 0.0 2.1 22.9 75.0
2. Is the Community of Inquiry helpful in developing children's thinking? 0.0 2.1 0.0 6.3 89.6	13. Do you want to attend this type of workshop again in Philosophy for Children? 0.0 0.0 0.0 25.5 74.5
3. Were you satisfied with this training in Philosophy for Children? 0.0 4.3 17.4 45.7 32.6	14. Can we cultivate children's self-esteem with philosophy for Children? 0.0 0.0 2.2 26.1 71.7
4. Do you think it is possible to introduce Philosophy for Children into our classrooms? 2.2 0.0 10.9 47.8 30.1	15. Can we cultivate the democratic spirit of children with Philosophy for Children? 4.3 0.0 0.0 34.8 60.9
5. Is it possible for us to transfer our classrooms into a Community of Inquiry? 6.5 6.5 30.4 45.7 10.9	16. Is Philosophy for Children suitable for our country? 4.2 0.0 31.3 35.4 20.8
6. Do you have the technical ability for helping students to inquire in a Community? Before training 51.1 29.8 12.8 6.4 0.0 After training 0.0 4.3 34.0 51.1 10.6	17. Can you do the training in Philosophy for children independently? Before training: 72.5 21.3 4.3 2.1 0.0 After training: 0.0 4.3 38.3 51.1 6.4
7. Could we enhance dialogic ability of students by the help of a Community of Inquiry? 0.0 2.1 0.0 14.9 83.0	18. Is the model of Philosophy for children successful in teaching and learning? 0.0 4.5 22.7 47.7 25.0
8. Could the Inquiring Community help you to make problems clear from different angles? 0.0 0.0 2.1 31.9 66.0	19. Do you think it is easy to understand philosophical concepts in Philosophy for Children? Before training: 31.9 34.0 27.7 4.3 2.1 After training: 0.0 8.3 20.9 58.3 12.5
9. Does the inquiring Community promote teaching and learning in the classroom? 0.0 2.1 0.0 52.3 45.8	20. Do you think that open discussion is suitable for mathematics teaching? 0.0 4.3 40.4 34.0 21.3
10. Can you be careful and skillful handling the relationship between the Community of Inquiry and your teaching syllabus? 2.1 10.6 51.1 34.0 2.1	21. Do you think a Chinese trainer is more helpful that foreigners in the training of Philosophy for Children? 0.0 0.0 29.2 41.7 29.2
11. Can a Community of Inquiry improve the efficiency of teaching and learning? 2.2 2.2 28.3 45.7 21.7	Does Philosophy for Children improve "national quality" and help people understand their legal responsibilities? 0.0 2.1 16.7 31.3 50.0

that it was possible to transfer our classrooms into a Community of Inquiry. 83 % agreed completely that they could enhance the dialogue ability of students by the help of a Community of Inquiry, 66% were very sure that the Community of Inquiry could help absolutely to make clear problems from different angles. About half of the trainees recognized that the Community of Inquiry could promote teaching and learning in their classroom and improve the efficiency of teaching and learning.

From question 3, we can see that 32.6 % were very satisfied with the training. This result is not so positive as other responses. However, after checking the trainees' answers in the open-ended questionnaire, we can find that they were a little disappointed that they did not have enough opportunities to express their opinions because training time was short and too many people were attending the workshop. Workshop participants wished that they could have more trainers (like Laurance and Phil) so that they could have worked in smaller groups. To further support that finding, in question 13, 75% of trainees wanted to attend another workshop. These results show that trainees appreciated the training very much, understood the significance of the training, and were eager to participate in further training.

In the 12th question, 75% of the trainees were aware that Philosophy of Children was helpful to the Essential-Qualities-Oriented Education but only 39.1 % deemed that it was impossible to introduce Philosophy for Children into their classrooms (question 4) and 2.1 % of the trainees were confident that they were careful and skillful in handling the relationship between Community of Inquiry and their teaching syllabus (question 10). This information means that most teachers are interested in Philosophy for Children and are sure that it can promote the development of the Essential-Qualities-Oriented education, but they have some questions as to how they can introduce it into their classrooms. These findings indicate that participants feel that they need some more practical training in Philosophy for Children.

Philosophy for Children emphasizes critical thinking in the Community of Inquiry and asks for equality between teachers and students. Questions 14, 15, and 22 showed very positive results in these aspects. For example 71.7% and 60.9% of the trainees considered absolutely that Philosophy for Children could cultivate children's self-esteem and their democratic spirit. 50% agreed absolutely that Philosophy for Children could improve «national quality» and help people understand their legal responsibilities.

But China has its own culture and can not simply transplant Philosophy for Children in its original form. Thus in question 165, only 20% of the trainees approved completely that the Philosophy for Children program was suitable for China and 41.7% of trainees hoped, to some extent, that they could be trained by Chinese trainers (question 21). In their answer sheets on the open-ended questionnaire they pointed out problems about language and customs. They asked for Chinese textbooks based on the spirit of Philosophy for Children.

The results of question 20 showed that only 21.3 % of the trainees considered that open discussion was suitable to mathematics teaching because correct answers are always searched for in natural science.

In table 2, we see that all means are more than 2 marks (can't say no or yes) except for questions 1, 6, 17 and 19 (before the training). Some means reach nearly 4 marks (yes absolutely), such as questions 2, 7, 8, 12, 13 and 14. The results show again that the feedback is quite positive. The standard deviations explain the discrete factors of the subjects to the five choices in every question. From Table 2, we can see that subjects had very different opinions when they answered question 5 (Std Dev = 1.01), but when they answered question 13 (Std Dev = 0.44) their attitudes were similar.

By the analysis above, we can see that the trainees made great progress during the training not only in theoretical but also in practical aspects. They showed interest in teaching the Community of Inquiry and expressed interest in learning more about it. They also expressed hope that using Philosophy for Children and Community of Inquiry would promote the development of Essential-Qualities-Oriented education. They wished that they could have another session of training based on their own country's situation.

WHY WAS THE WORKSHOP SUCCESSFUL?

We are facing times that are changing at lightning speed. From the teachers and students to the heads in the National Education Committee of China, all are eager to reform the structure of the education system from the Examination-Oriented Education to the Essential-Qualities-Oriented Education. Their goal is to raise the quality of the whole nation to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. But the question remains; how to do this in reality? Chinese people are searching for a practical way. At the time that we are asking these questions, Philosophy for Children is being introduced into China. Philosophy for Children and Community of Inquiry may be short cuts toward educational reform. Schools and universities are anxious to try the methods of Philosophy for Children in teaching and learning.

The training carried out for and by the teachers showed many advantages to Philosophy for Children which participants found to be full of vitality. In fact, «Philosophy for Children is our conviction that the procedures of the community of inquiry, in combination with the conceptual richness of philosophy, offer a unique and crucial perspective on the development of personhood, a perspective that underlies the way we view ourselves, each other, and the world». By the method of «converting the classroom into a community of inquiry, ... students listen to one another with respect, build on one another's ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences for what was said, and seek to identify one another's assumptions». These two ideas were examined in theory and in practice so that the participants really understood them after the training.

Of course, good organization, financial support, and so on are important elements for success. We hope that we can extend the influence of Philosophy for Children to other places, such as Guangdong Province, Sichuan Province, and Shanxi Province. We are looking forward to holding the second workshop on Philosophy for Children in China in the near future.

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