

# When Teachers Philosophize on their Practice:

## Collaborative Inquiry Research and the Professional Development of Teachers

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Pierre Lebuis

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*This article is a reworked version of a communication given in French, under the title of «L'expérience d'une communauté de recherche philosophique: contribution au développement professionnel des enseignantes et des enseignants. « This communication was delivered at a meeting of the Quebec Philosophical Society in Montreal (Quebec, Canada): the focus of the meeting was the teaching of philosophy.*

The reflections presented in this article stem on a research-project carried out with elementary teachers, and are based on transcriptions of what we call «reflexive practices». These transcriptions are part of a larger research conducted in collaboration with a group of teachers that use the approach of Philosophy for Children. These two elements, research in education, based on the reflective practice of teachers, and the educational use of the approach of Philosophy for Children have mutually enhanced each other during the course of our research.

People in Quebec who dealt with the approach of Philosophy for Children are aware of the interaction that occurs between research and educational practices. Michael I. Chervin and Judy Kyle, in an article relating their experience conducting research on the philosophical reasoning of children (1993) tell us that their way of «doing philosophy» became a way of «doing research» and vice versa.

Marie Bolduc and Gilbert Talbot, in their account of their research that dealt with the experimentation of the Lipman approach at the college level (1997), agreed with the remarks of Chervin and Kyle, adding that «it is a path that most of us in Quebec have followed (Bolduc & Talbot, 1997, p.22).»

We must agree with such conclusions. Working within an interdisciplinary research center in education, we were fortunate to collaborate with people belonging to disciplinary fields different than our own. Together, we were able to perceive that similarities exist between the conception of the learning in children, and about research in education. This fundamental link raises questions concerning both the contribution of a disciplinary field - in this case philosophy - to the sphere of research in education, and the professional development of teachers.

## ONE OF THE AIMS OF PHILOSOPHY: SHEDDING LIGHT ON EXPERIENCE

We would first like to stress that our own interest in philosophy has always been marked by «practical philosophy». Thus, we are comfortable with a conception of philosophy that ascribes as one of its primary aim shedding light on experience. That is to say, understanding what is happening to us by actually stopping and examining what is going on around us, taking into account both what seems to take place «naturally» - on its own - as well as the different problems that confront us. The words of Thomas Nagel translate well this conception of philosophy:

*The center of philosophy lies in certain questions which the reflective human mind finds naturally puzzling, and the best way to begin the study of philosophy is to think about them directly. (...) The main concern of philosophy is to question and to understand very common ideas that all of us use every day without thinking about them. (Nagel, 1987, pp. 4-5)*

The question of meaning, the one that we build through our social interactions, makes up the fundamental query that appeals to us and which seems to emerge from our research preoccupations. From this angle, our research in the school sector has always been marked by the yearning to make sense of experience, whether it means the pupils' ethical experience in the context of the moral and philosophical class, or the professional experience of teachers within the context of their educational practices.

## PHILOSOPHY AND THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OF TEACHERS: THE SPECIFIC CONTEXT OF EXPERIMENTING WITH THE PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN APPROACH

In this text, we will focus on the professional training of teachers. More specifically, this article will deal with the contribution of philosophy to the continuing education of teachers. We have used for this research the specific context of the introduction of the teaching of philosophy at the elementary school level, using the Philosophy for Children program as established by Matthew Lipman.

In recent years, the Lipman's program of Philosophy for Children has been generating several experiments in different school settings throughout Quebec. An important aspect of these experiments has been to ensure that the teachers have an adequate training which allows them to, on the one hand, familiarize themselves with the material and the pedagogical approach of this particular programme, while, on the other hand, develop the skills which will permit interventions that foster, in a class environment, the creation of a philosophical community of inquiry. Thus, an essential component of the teachers' training is to have them live through the experience of such a philosophical community of inquiry, using the material that would eventually be used in class by the pupils.

In this context, it is conceivable to ponder over the training given to the teachers: it is truly a *philosophical training*, in the sense that the teachers are learning to *generate philosophy*, to *philosophize*?

Or is it rather a *pedagogical training*, whereby the teachers learn to master this educational approach, this educational technique, which aims, amongst others, at the fostering of the pupils' development in critical thinking? And what happens when, specifically, the teachers set aside the methodology and the tools developed by Lipman to favour their own pedagogical practices as topics of discussion within the philosophical community of inquiry? According to which criterion can we say that the reflective practice that inhabits these philosophical communities of inquiry *are* a philosophical practice?

### AN EMERGING PREOCCUPATION: THE NATURE OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE, OR ON THE *KNOWING HOW TO PHILOSOPHIZE* THAT IS PRODUCED WITHIN THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

Questions thus arise, and there is concern about the nature of the philosophical knowledge that is likely to emerge from the community of inquiry. Such a preoccupation regarding the philosophical knowledge does echo the apprehension associated with what we shall call the reductionist interpretations of the nature of a philosophical community of inquiry. These apprehensions may stem out of the practice of teachers within a class set-up at the elementary or secondary level, or they may arise from practices of adults within the context of training sessions within a school or a university context. The risk of drifting exists if one insists on wanting to identify and qualify as a philosophical community of inquiry any types of educational interactive and co-operative practices, though some may contain in part characteristic of the philosophical community of inquiry. Each manifestation, taken individually, may not be sufficient to recognize the acquisition of a certain philosophical knowledge, or of a *philosophical know-how*. For example, it is not because one puts into application the pedagogical method or the methodology developed by Lipman - reading a text, collecting questions, discussing - that we automatically find ourselves within a philosophical community of inquiry. Similarly, it is not because people respect each other that they are building upon each other. Likewise, because people are exercising various reasoning skills, including higher order thinking skills, it does not mean that they are participating to a philosophical community of inquiry.

Our concern for philosophical knowledge that is co-built within a philosophical community of inquiry has developed out of the particular context of an interdisciplinary research project with colleagues at the Centre interdisciplinaire de recherche sur l'apprentissage et le développement en éducation (CIRADE). Our research bears the title of *Recherche collaborative et formation continue du personnel enseignant: contribution: a la restructuration du savoir enseigner*, which can be loosely translated as «Collaborative Research and Continuous Education of Teachers: Contributions to the Restructuring of the Teaching Know-How». A structure of collaboration has been set-up with teachers involved in two different mechanisms of Collaborative Research, one in mathematics and a second using the approach of the Philosophy for Children (Bednarz, Desgagne, Lebus, 1998). What these two have in common is that they offer a socio-constructive approach to teaching, which may be resumed by the action-reflection dynamics for the construction of professional knowledge, as described by Schon (1983, 1987, 1988, 1991). Such reflective action dynamics were experienced in meetings that have been planned and held at regular intervals between the leader-researcher, and the group of teachers-practitioners. In such meeting the situations explored in class are examined, using the proposed approach, leading in turn to a new investigative situation. This structure renders possible the restructuring of a certain teaching know-how

and its enhancement - development of knowledge, pedagogical interventions related to the approach - through a process in which researchers and teachers play an important role.

We have embarked on the analysis of the interactions between the researchers and the teachers-practitioners within the collaborative research in order to clarify the process of co-construction of knowledge that emerges:

- *How is the co-construction of knowledge emerging between the different partners involved in these collaborative researches?*
- *What is the role of each individual?*
- *What is the nature of the know-how that is emerging from this interaction?*

This last question has allowed us to consider the disciplinary field of our project, being mathematics and philosophy: it has led us to ponder over the contribution of mathematical knowledge and philosophical knowledge to the teaching know-how within the context of our interactions with the teachers. Thus, the fundamental point that has stimulated our research has been that interdisciplinary work was required in order to clarify the philosophical knowledge that emerges or that is co-built in a community of inquiry.

In the context of this particular text, we want to focus on two questions in particular that stem from the Philosophy for Children project. How does the co-construction operate, in the sense of what mode of thinking is operating? And what is the focal point of the interactions: what subject is at the center of the reflections, and what is the nature of the knowledge that emerges?

### THE SPECIFIC CONTEXT OF THE COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH: AN ANALYSIS

The collaborative research to which this article refers to took place in an elementary school in Montreal in the middle end of the nineties. A monthly meeting was scheduled, in which ten teachers, a researcher and his assistant participated. During the school year, some trainee teachers implicated in the selected classes also participated in the monthly meetings, while a post-doctoral student joined the research team. The researcher presided at all of the meetings, most of which were recorded and transcribed. This research is the result of the analysis of those transcriptions.

This collaborative research followed a previous research project, started in 1990, which aimed at familiarizing the teaching team with the Philosophy for Children approach, and to support the team with their class experiments. The teachers were thus able to sufficiently familiarize themselves with the approach so that three years later, one is able to say that in most cases, the teachers were fairly comfortable with the approach, and the principles behind it were adequately appropriated as to allow them to *elaborate their own style* in animating the community of inquiry within their own classes. From then on,

certain people felt they were ready to move on to a new stage, that is, to incorporate within their *regular* teaching practices the Philosophy for Children approach.

Remarks by teachers have been at the root of this particular project, launched in 1993-1994. Many teachers declared that after having used the Philosophy for Children approach, it seemed no longer possible to teach in the same manner that they were used to. Such an observation, which emerged in many different settings, can be translated, for example, by saying that while they saw their *role as animating* the class when using the Philosophy for Children approach, they viewed their *role as a teacher* in other school situations. This outcome makes one wonder if it is possible to conciliate these two roles, to integrate them in such a way that one could animate - some prefer to use the term «mediate» - the class into learning. The teachers raised many questions: is it possible to teach all of the curriculum's subjects as they teach Philosophy for Children? Is it possible to transfer - or transpose, or integrate - the Philosophy for Children approach to the regular subjects and other elements of class life? Is it possible to extricate a program of teaching/learning, inspired by the Philosophy for Children approach, which could be applied to all of the school curriculum?

#### WHAT ON AND ABOUT WHAT DID WE REFLECT UPON?

In this collaborative research on the Philosophy for Children approach, the purpose was to probe the problematic of the transfer of such a specific approach to other school subjects and to other spheres of pedagogical practices. We used, as starting point, the questions brought forth with the transposition of the Philosophy for Children approach to the school curriculum. The inquiry undertaken along with the teachers could have been viewed essentially from a perspective of practice: this would have meant that research strategies would have allowed the establishment of a pedagogy inspired by the experiences of the community of inquiry in Philosophy for Children.

One must remember that the first hints that emerged and that were retained to pursue this research did have their basis in practices. The task we put forth meant first identifying what occurred in the class of Philosophy for Children from the perspective of the pupil, of the teacher, and then, of the whole class. This was done in such a manner resulting simply in circumscribing what we wish to specifically transpose or transfer to other contexts of learning. In addition, we identified concrete situations where it had been noted that the transfer or transposition had taken place or, on the contrary, had not.

However, our explicit commitment toward the analysis of the transfer of the approach to different contexts found itself having to answer to, simultaneously, a different type of analysis that is just as implicitly tied to the Philosophy for Children approach: the practices of the community of inquiry *are* a «meeting place» where it is possible to stop and consider meaningful implications. From our study of the transcriptions - the results of the reflexive-thinking between the teachers-practitioners and the leader-researcher - emerges a mode that is coherent with the Philosophy for Children approach. This time, instead of starting from the novels of Lipman, we started from the experience in education in order to establish a reflexive exchange. The narrative triggering element was no longer the story that is found in

Lipman's novels, but rather the discourse connected to the concrete experiences of the educational practice.

Starting from this narrative associated with professional experience, various themes were thus explored: the conceptions in teaching and learning; the autonomy of the pupils; the gap between reasoning, deciding and behaving; the problema of values in school; and so forth. The aim of such themes of discussions are surely less important than the manner by which these were tackled.

We attempted to conceptualize the underlying elements of the approach and of the pedagogical practice, in order to better understand its possible transposition. In other words, we appropriated the approach, and we considered its possible transposition by taking into account the underlying concepts of the Philosophy for Children approach, or of the pedagogical practice from a more general perspective. We established a method of reflexive thinking by putting into place a game aimed at clarifying concepts, where a variety of concepts were debated and where their relativity stood out, and from which connections emerged.

The knowledge that is built in this collaborative research project in Philosophy for Children takes the shape of a conceptual network. We may refer here to the use of the *map of concepts*: reflect on key concepts, learn to think, to conceptualize, to analyze the problema so as to better understand it, and this in order to behave better. To achieve this, teachers must refer to their own practices - they forge examples based on personal experiences in order to illustrate, for example, how being responsible can be carried out in class, to clarify the notion of order and the meaning that they attribute to this notion. They also referred to some values, to personal conceptions of humanity, of life in general, which go beyond the day-to-day educational practice. As the knowledge is built, so it becomes more complex; the conceptual network grows and is refined.

When we place this knowledge in the context of a contribution to the restructuring of teaching know-how through collaborative research, we may say without a doubt that this knowledge is in the order of *knowing how to conceive* what has been co-built within the context of a philosophical debate.

### **THE PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE: A CONTRIBUTION TO A «KNOWING HOW TO CONCEIVE», QUESTIONED AND ARGUED**

According to Michel Tozzi, a philosophical debate is taking place when we are dealing with:

1. *a social interaction, of the oral kind and in one's mother tongue, between many people where everyone,*
2. *starting from one or more notions, or fundamental, thus controversial, questions for mankind;*
3. *implicate themselves personally and genuinely*

4. *using reason, in an emotionally contained manner, in a collective and intellectually challenging way*
5. *so as to grow by listening to the exchanges and to the other's contributions, though they may challenge one's perspective,*
6. *so as to contribute, within this community of beings searching for the truth, to*
7. • *define, distinguish, clarify concepts needed for analysis;*
  - *analyze the relations that may animate them;*
  - *challenge the question put forth, taking into account stakes, assumptions and consequences;*
  - *put forth the dilemma that this question arises;*
  - *aim for an answer that is well founded, amplified rationally, universally applicable,*
8. *within the context of exchanges where cognitive rigor, a coherent progression respecting the topic at hand, and where an ethic of communication is assured. (Tozzi, 1998, p.19).*

For Tozzi, from an educational philosophical perspective, to philosophize implies learning to articulate three thought processes: conceptualizing the notions; questioning the affirmations and formulating queries that are pertinent; arguing, that is offering convincing reasons that would allow one to doubt or to make an affirmation. (Tozzi, 1994, p. 143).

Tozzi's perspectives make it possible to zero in on a few elements concerning the nature of the work accomplished with the teaching team, and within the context of the research we are discussing here.

The concept of «doing philosophy», of «philosophizing» within a community of inquiry - whose goal was to define what «teaching and learning» may be, with the aim of transposing the Philosophy for Children approach to other contexts of learning and of class life - had led us to consider more closely an essential dimension of the philosophical work, that is, conceptual analysis.

We would say that what has generally characterized the work with the teaching team - or rather, what we would like to affirm concerning this work from the viewpoint of the leader-researcher - had been the questioning of the initial representations of the notions used in the discourse of the different partners. This is one of the methods used for conceptualizing that Tozzi has noted: it consists especially in explaining and criticizing the assumed original representations in order to redefine rationally the notions put forth.

This important task of «questioning» the notions that served to express the personal conceptions uses, of course, other methods in order to conceptualize. The transcriptions and their analysis do provide ample examples: exploring the semantics of some of the concepts; resorting to

the lexicon approach (of comparing and contrasting); construction of conceptual networks; detecting fields of application; resorting to images and symbols.

If the «teaching know-how» contains, amongst others, a capacity to reflect itself in a conception of teaching, the exercise of «knowing how to conceptualize in a philosophical manner» would constitute an essential activity in the restructuring of the teaching know-how. This exercise allows us to problematize the common notions that are taken for granted in the principles of active education. It provides the opportunity to explain the initial presuppositions of the definitions/opinions/representations and to examine the translation or consequences of these notions in the practice of pedagogy. It must be, therefore, a fundamental dimension of the collaborative process that is put in motion: the conceptual clarification thus corresponds to an effort of edifying the discourses that are used to reveal the groundwork and the aims of the educative action. It does constitute in this perspective an essential step of a research concerned with coherence in practice.

This work with the teachers-practitioners constitutes a beautiful illustration of an exercise of philosophical arguing. In effect, the team of teachers-practitioners and leader-researcher did implicate itself in an argumentative approach with the aim of clarifying and justifying the positions of each and everyone concerning the different aspects of teaching, that is, those that were retained and submitted to the consideration of the group in the context of those collective meetings. From this perspective, the experience has allowed the team to establish a distance from their spontaneous conceptions and to revise their position. The purpose was to ground these spontaneous conceptions and positions through a process of reexamining preconceptions and their origins. All this in the hopes of permitting a greater coherence, if not in action, at least in their expression.

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*Address correspondence to:*

**Pierre Lebuis**  
**CIRADE**  
**Université du Québec à Montréal**  
**B.P. 8888, Succursale A**  
**Montréal, Québec**  
**Canada H3C 3P8**

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