

Does Philosophical Dialogue Cause Children to Reject Adult Authority?

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Annie's classroom was a special environment, it was full of animals during what she called the "animal project." That week, a crayfish was killed by other crayfish as it was put into the tank. The children saw that and Annie started the philosophy session with this event. To start a philosophy session, as Annie always did, she used two puppets to make a little theatrical dialogue on why the crayfish may have killed the other one: they don't have enough space, they don't have enough food, but they also happened to fight for a girlfriend... Annie's story evolved to explore why people fight, which then became the question picked up by children. They first gave answers to address why people fight, but quickly moved toward exploring if there are good reasons to fight. (Field notes)

—Kindergartner in Annie's classroom¹

The fact that the topic of fighting was raised in a school is not in itself surprising, since schools are likely to plan interventions to reduce violence, intimidation and bullying within their walls. Yet, it may appear odd that children engage in dialogue about the meaning of violence and of its positive use in the classroom. The major difference between this philosophical context and an educational program that aims to purposefully teach values to children is significant: the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI) aims to open a space for children to reflect about values, not to tell them what to think about these values. As such, children discussing the reasons for fighting and, even more radically, whether there can be good reasons to fight, is quite a different perspective from the likelier, simpler and more absolute school commandment: "Don't fight!" These instances underline a problematic dimension of bringing philosophy into schools, especially given fighting is often forbidden and non-negotiable—a sacred law not to be broken.

One possible critique of Philosophy for/with Children (P4wC) is that it teaches children to question school rules and the adults who issue them, and thus should not be included in the school curriculum—or elsewhere for that matter. For those who hold this view, a prerequisite of good education appears to be strong authority of adults over children. The excerpt above would thus serve as evidence of how problematic it may be to introduce philosophy into schools as it may lead children to question the moral order that structures their schooling and is required for its good functioning. Accordingly, the concepts of moral order and authority in school become intimately related; they both must be transmitted to children—not discussed, questioned or negotiated. On this view, imposition is not wrong or miseducative, but the normal way to structure the educational relationship between adults and children. Perhaps some reasons could be presented to explain why fighting is forbidden, but in the end, its proscription must be accepted.

¹ All names in this text are pseudonyms.

This article aims to reject the assumption that philosophy causes children to reject authority. There are different ways to respond to that assumption. One way would be to engage with it theoretically, challenging it by offering a different view of what it means to educate, of how individuals learn, of the relationship between adult and children, and of the place and nature of authority in education.² In this article, we will take a different perspective on the issues of authority and moral order with regard to P4C in schools, presenting how the tension appeared in a specific classroom through data collected by the first author using qualitative research methodologies. The claim we will propose in this article is a nuanced one: on the one hand, it is true that P4C can create a radical space for children to question authority and moral order at school, yet on the other hand, this space itself is not void of any form of authority. Paradoxically, P4C may teach a certain form authority by inviting children to be critical of authority, as our research findings suggest, which we think is particularly favorable to the education of future democratic citizens.

The first part of the article will present the major lines of debate between the traditional view of authority in education and the one found in P4C. The rest of the article will illustrate how the collected classroom data confirmed but at the same time nuanced the theoretical claim we will have presented. It is our hope that this article will not only offer a response not usually presented in P4C literature to the critique that incorporating philosophy in schools will lead children to reject adult authority, but that it will, by the same token, clarify the relationship between P4C and authority in general for practitioners.

A Traditional View of Authority in Education

We may miss the significance of P4C if we do not situate it in the specific historical, social and philosophical context from which it emerged. P4C is part of a larger pedagogical movement attached to the development of modernity, at the center of which is the notion of authority and how it should be understood in education. We could summarize modernity as the long process of calling into question the authorities that used to structure the old world: tradition, religion and aristocracy. Individuals are now able to criticize everything or are recognized in principle to do so: they are expected to be autonomous beings.³ This movement has also affected education and led to questioning the nature of the authority that teachers hold over their students. Such a discussion is fundamentally about the reasons why we think one form of power is more appropriate than another in an educational relationship and, by extension, about the moral beliefs that might justify such a position.

² For a theoretical presentation of the issue of authority in P4C, see Michaud, O. and Vălitalo, R. (2017). Authority, Democracy And Philosophy. In M. Gregory, J. Haynes & K. Murriss (dir.), *The Routledge international handbook of Philosophy for Children* (p. 27-33). London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *De La Démocratie En Amérique*, ed. André Jardin, vol. II, Bibliothèque De La Pléiade (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1840/2004). Arendt, H. (1961). What is authority? In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Between Past and Future* (pp. 91-141). New York: Penguin Books. Robert Legros, *L'avènement de la démocratie*. (Paris: Grasset, 1999). Charles Taylor et Amy Gutmann. *Multiculturalisme : Différence et démocratie*. (Paris: Aubier, 1994).

Here is a clear and precise definition of authority by Mary Haywood Metz:

Authority is distinguished from other relationships of command and obedience by the superior's *right* to command and the subordinate's *duty* to obey. This right and duty stem from the crucial fact that the interacting persons share a relationship which exists for the service of a *moral order to which both owe allegiance*. This moral order may be as diffuse as the way of life of a traditional society or as specific as the pragmatic goals of a manufacturing organization.⁴ (p. 26, italics original)

In the traditional model of authority in education, the educator is deemed to have an authority role in the classroom *because* she has knowledge judged as valuable that she must transmit to her students. The educator is definitely not equal to the children because she possesses something of extreme value: knowledge. This value gives sense to the moral order that situates her in a superior position over the children. The main philosophical reference for this educational perspective dates back to Plato and, more specifically, to *The Republic*.⁵ In the allegory of the cave, a man finds a way to escape and reach the external world to contemplate the Ideas: pure, eternal and absolute truths. The man who has reached true knowledge then has the obligation to go back in the cave to educate others. We can use this allegory to think of the model of the teacher: she has escaped the cave and accessed *real* knowledge, and thus has the duty to pass it on to those who are still stuck in the cave—the children. Her role is to help the children escape the cave themselves. Though this Plato reference can be criticized, we can see why his allegory may be used to justify such a position. Over time, Plato's notion of a "world of ideas" has transformed into the notion of a body of knowledge that should be possessed by future citizens, workers and human beings generally—one that is settled on by experts and through social consensus. The teacher is the representative of the culture in which children must be educated to become autonomous beings.

The traditional model is usually attached to a certain idea of the classroom, caricatural to a certain extent: An educator at the front, giving children information or exercises to do, as they sit in rows facing her, silent and listening carefully, taking notes and trying to assimilate the information she imparts. They may be seen as having a passive role in the sense that they are not creating knowledge or interacting with the educator, but they are working hard and obediently on the given task. This view of education is very close to what Dewey calls traditional education, in which "the subject matter of education consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore, the business of school is to transmit them to the new generation."⁶ It should be noted that this view is also very similar to what Freire identifies as the banking model of education: "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositaries and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and make deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. This is the banking of model of education."⁷

⁴ Mary Haywood Metz, *Classrooms and corridors: The crisis of authority in desegregated secondary schools*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978)

⁵ Platon, *La République*, 2e ed. (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 2004); Eliyahu Rosenow, "Plato, Dewey, and the Problem of Teacher's Authority," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 27, no. 2 (1993); Nigel Tubbs, "Chapter 3: The Master," *ibid.* 39 (2005).

⁶ John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1938), p. 17.

⁷ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 1970), p. 73.

The rejection of the traditional model is rooted in the larger social movement of progressively minded democratic societies, which involves at its most fundamental level the development of the principle of equality in all domains of social life.⁸ Whereas the inequality between educator and children may not be put into question in a more traditional system as previously described, in societies built on equality, it becomes problematic. In such contexts, all forms of inequality between individuals must be questioned, notably the belief that some people are fundamentally inferior to others on the grounds of their age, gender, ethnicity or economic status.⁹

The traditional model of authority has been challenged by different educational movements. Of course, a first reference may be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*, which portrays the education of a fictional student who will not have to face the authority of an adult until his adolescence.¹⁰ Dewey also proposes an alternative perspective on authority in *Experience and Education*, where he argues that the authority of the teacher should not be imposed on the group, but should emerge from the activity of the group itself, an activity in which the students are the most autonomous possible and interacting with their environment.¹¹ Alongside progressive education, we can see that different teaching methods inspired by constructivism and socioconstructivism have led to placing children in the center of their learning, through educational projects or experiential learning. In such pedagogies, the teacher's role is to guide students rather than direct and control their learning experience.¹² Relatedly, critical pedagogy sees traditional education as having as its function to make students adapt to the world instead of leading them to change unjust and oppressive situations. On this view, transforming the authoritative structure of schooling is vital to transforming society.¹³ Although rooted in a different political trend, anarchist thinkers have also seen the transformation of authority in schools as a necessary means to transforming a society structured on inequality, domination and oppression.¹⁴ Finally, by investigating deviant forms of authority in contemporary society, critical theorists of the Frankfurt school have led to rethink authority in schools in order to counter perverse tendencies, such as those leading to fascism.¹⁵

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *De La Démocratie En Amérique*, ed. André Jardin, vol. II, Bibliothèque De La Pléiade (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1840/2004).

⁹ Albert Jacquard, Pierre Manent, and Alain Renaut, *Une Éducation Sans Autorité Ni Sanction*, Nouveau Collège De Philosophie (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2003); Myriam Revault d'Allonnes, "Ouverture," *Le Télémaque*, no. 39 (2009).

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile Ou De L'éducation* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard 1762/1995).

¹¹ John Dewey (1938). *Experience & education*. New York: Touchstone.

¹² Carole Raby and Sylvie Viola. (2016). *Modèles d'Enseignement Et Théories d'Apprentissage: Pour Diversifier Son Enseignement*. (2nd ed.). Anjou (Québec) Canada: Les Éditions CEC; Raymond Vienneau. (2017). *Apprentissage Et Enseignement : Théories Et Pratiques*. (3rd edition). Montréal (Québec) Canada: Gaëtan Morin éditeur, Chenelière éducation

¹³ Freire, *ibid.* Laurence de Cock and Irène Pereira. *Les pédagogies critiques*. Marseille, Paris: Agone; Fondation Copernic. (2019)

¹⁴ For an excellent presentation of anarchist education, see Judith Suissa: Anarchist Education. In C. Levy & M. Adams (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism* (pp. 511-529). Cham, Switzerland Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Following the detailed account of Suissa, we can see that there is not a unifying vision in the anarchist schools on how authority should be enacted in them, but they all agree that rethinking authority is necessary to create a new form of society.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that critical theorists of the Frankfurt school have written little on the subject of education and on the issue of authority in them. One of the rare texts on that matter is the one by Theodor Adorno: *Education After Auschwitz*. In T. E. Lewis, J. G. A. Grinberg, & M. Laverty (Eds.), *Playing with Ideas: Modern and Contemporary Philosophies of Education* (pp. 222-231). Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2007. For an overview of the concept of authority in the Frankfurt school, see Jessica Benjamin, *Authority and the family revisited: Or, a world without fathers?* New German

The traditional model of authority, and debates surrounding it, should not be seen as a thing of the past, as they remain a controversial and central theme of contemporary education. How should we envision an educator's authority? Hannah Arendt, Marie-Claude Blais, Dominique Ottavi, Marcel Gauchet and Normand Baillargeon have all defended the perspective of traditional authority.¹⁶ They affirm that education has to be conservative, in the sense that children, as newcomers to society, can only become adult citizens by integrating its culture. Education is not about teaching children to question or transform the world, but rather making them acquire the knowledge, beliefs and values socially judged as worthwhile. Only then will they become able to be critical of their society and transform it. The movement toward more equality and democracy is completely justified in the realm of adult citizens, but it goes too far when it attempts to restructure education and the adult-child relationship.

This traditional view of education and the kind of authority attached to it present a critical lens on P4C, including the view that the CPI should be rejected as an educational approach because it leads children to question adult authority. Some advocates of the traditional perspective might even see the integration of P4C into classrooms as the ultimate corruption of the schooling mission, since the CPI model can lead children not only to question authority, but also the most fundamental ideas and beliefs that give sense to the structure of schooling and of their social lives. Such interrogation can extend to a questioning of the school authorities and the institution in general. In the hands of children, philosophy can therefore be seen as a dangerous tool that should be left to adults, or at least to adolescents who are near graduation, as is the case in most educational systems that have integrated it into their curriculum.¹⁷ On this view, the only time philosophy is allowed, even required, is when young adults graduate from school and become full members of a community of equal citizens.¹⁸

P4C and Authority: A Theoretical Overview

Part of this critique of P4C is descriptively sound in that P4C is indeed part of a larger movement aimed at replacing the traditional model of authority in education—or what has been labelled a teacher-centered classroom—with a child-driven approach.¹⁹ As Ann Margaret Sharp (1993) put it,

Critique, (35-57) Winter, (13) 1978, and Stéphane Habe, *Pathologies de l'autorité*. Cités, (pp. 49-66). 2(6), 2001. For a reflection on the issue of authority from a thinker of the Frankfurt school, see Eric J. Weiner (2003). Paths from Erich Fromm: Thinking authority pedagogically. *Journal of Educational Thought*, (p. 59-75) 37(1), 2003.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, "Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961); Marie-Claude Blais, Marcel Gauchet, and Dominique Ottavi, *Conditions De L'éducation* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2008); Normand Baillargeon, *Liliane est au lycée : est-il indispensable d'être cultivé?* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011).

¹⁷ We can think here to the province of Quebec, where philosophy is mandatory subject matter, but only for the students who reach college.

¹⁸ And even then, philosophy may be taught in a traditional manner: the teacher presents the mains ideas of the important figures of the history of Western philosophy that students have to memorize.

¹⁹ Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Nigel Tubbs, "Chapter 4: The Servant," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39, no. 289-285 (2005).

If we assume that the purpose of education is not only to transmit a body of knowledge but also to equip children with the skills and disposition they need to create new knowledge and make better practical judgment, than the traditional classroom of 'telling' is not appropriate (p. 572).

This is first realized in P4C through the symbolic transformation of the classroom itself: for a CPI, the set-up changes from its regular rectangular organization to a circle.²⁰ The circle is pedagogically significant and symbolic since all children occupy an equal position in front of each other and stop facing solely the educator. Further, the educator herself is not above the circle but rather within it—not in front but among her students. Finally, the first role of the teacher is not one of transmitting knowledge, but rather of creating a space for children to engage in philosophical inquiry.

The whole CPI is then constructed on the idea that it is not up to the adult in the room to transmit knowledge that has been sanctioned by traditions: she is not there to lecture on important concepts or thinkers in the philosophical tradition, but rather to create a space for children to think for themselves with one another.²¹ To this end, a CPI begins with a subject of interest to the children: after sharing a stimulus, like a story or art work, they are invited to formulate questions and vote on the one they would most like to discuss. The process is constructed from children's interests and reflections rather than through the imposition of what adults think they should learn.

During the dialogue—the most important and longest phase of a CPI session—the educator refrains from telling children what to think on the chosen subject. Though she does not have authority over the dialogue content, she should however have authority over the process: she will invite children to develop their reasons, to link their comments to those of others, or to ask them to consider an issue from another perspective. This transformation of the educator's role in P4C has led to a change in title: she is no longer a teacher but a facilitator—someone who facilitates the dialogue. She then becomes the guardian of the procedure rather than the guardian of the content to transmit. Sharp has argued that the teacher should work toward her own disappearance: as the community becomes more mature, the facilitator should become a co-participant with the other members of the community, who can take charge of the dialogue's direction.²²

In progressive education, authority should not be imposed by the educator but rather arise from the activity in which the children are involved. It is the children's engagement with topics that matter to them that gives meaning to the CPI experience as well as to the facilitator's function. This may explain why the problematic dimensions of adult authority in a CPI are rarely noticed as there appears to be nothing wrong with it: it naturally emerges from the classroom activity. While advocates of traditional education are right to point out that P4C rejects the traditional authority model, as previously intimated, it is incorrect to claim that P4C rejects *all* kinds of authority. In fact, it does

²⁰ Maughn Gregory, *Philosophy For Children: Practitioner Handbook* (Upper Montclair: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 2008); Topping, K. J., Trickey, S. and Cleghorn, P. 2019). *A Teacher's Guide to Philosophy for Children*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group; Michaud, O., & Sasseville, M. (2017). *Introduction à La Philosophie Pour Enfants : L'approche Lipman*. Diotime(71). <http://www.educ-revues.fr/DIOTIME/> AffichageDocument.aspx?iddoc=108616&pos=1

²¹ Michel Sasseville, *La Pratique De La Philosophie Avec Les Enfants*, 3e ed. (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2009).

²² Ann Margaret Sharp, "The Community of Inquiry: Education for Democracy," in *Thinking, Children and Education*, ed. Matthew Lipman (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1993).

promote a certain form of authority, although often implicitly. Yet this debate centers on two distinct visions of the child, of the adult-child relationship, of good education and, interrelated with these concepts, of what educational authority ought to be. As mentioned, one way of resolving the clash between these two views is to analyze their central concepts from a theoretical perspective, but this article proposes an alternative route: thinking about that matter through a case study in which issues of authority appeared and unfolded naturally in a classroom setting.

Inside a Democratic Classroom

The data presented in this article comes from a larger study on issues of authority, democracy and philosophical practice in a kindergarten classroom over several months in the spring of 2012.²³ Situated in the suburb of a major city in the northeast of the United States, the classroom was chosen because the educator had a master's degree in P4C and had been integrating the CPI model in her classroom for many years.²⁴ The point of qualitative studies is not to produce generalizable conclusions that can be applied to different populations but rather to push theoretical understandings of certain subjects through empirical data collected by a researcher immersed in a natural setting.²⁵ The collection of data from this study therefore aims to contribute to a better understanding of authority issues in P4C, which may arise in any country or context where the CPI model is practiced.

This section will first examine the classroom in which the data was collected and, more specifically, the educator's various efforts to offer children a democratic educational experience. These details will permit us to see how P4C can be part of a democratic classroom culture, while giving us a vantage point from which to observe the specificity of P4C in its relationship to authority in other classroom activities.

In this particular classroom, P4C was representative of a larger perspective on education: the educator Annie wanted to offer an experience of democratic education to her students with the objective of making them good future citizens. Her pedagogical approach did not start with the idea that she should be the "boss" in the classroom: throughout the research period, she constantly questioned her own authority and tried to make sense of it.²⁶ Annie's conception of authority was linked to another one of her educational principles: she believed that her students should have "ownership" over their education.²⁷ It is possible to see a certain link between these two ideas: if an educator questions her authority, she may be led to think that children should have power inside their

²³ Olivier Michaud, "A Qualitative Study on Educational Authority, Shared Authority and the Practice of Philosophy in a Kindergarten Classroom: A Study of the Multiple Dimensions and Complexities of a Democratic Classroom" (Montclair State University, 2013).

²⁴ If the location where data were collected was outside of Canada, it has to be noted that the researcher who collected them—the first author of this text—is Canadian and, as the researcher subjectivity is the first tool of data collection in qualitative methodology, he brought his Canadian perspective in the data collection.

²⁵ See Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative Research : A Guide To Design And implementation* (4th edition). Jossey-Bass; Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design : Choosing Among Five Approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.

²⁶ Interview May 7.

²⁷ Interview April 11.

classroom and, if she thinks they should be involved in their education's direction, she may be led to reflect on how her authority is or is not creating that democratic space for them.

Taken together, these two elements create a certain view of education that is directly opposed to the traditional authority model. Annie's philosophy of education—including her conception of authority—led her to structure her classroom in certain ways. First, she asked the children what they wanted to learn at the beginning of the year. This is a significant move since it involved them in the creation of the moral order that gave sense to their schooling experience—one not imposed on them but emerging from them. Further, she structured the year's lessons from their chosen themes—what she called “projects”—rather than cover the activities according to the mandated curriculum. Through this intentional involvement, she was striving to make the children's education most attractive to them and as close as possible to their experiences. To this end, she also moved the classroom outside the school walls whenever possible through field trips related to the year's larger educational projects. In addition, Annie included in the daily life of the classroom other elements that aimed to create a space for students to “own” their education. She encouraged children to take various decisions in connection with the classroom functioning and listened to them when they had something to propose. There was “center time,” during which students were free to engage in the activity of their choice. Finally, she included at least two sharing activities per day that students directed, during which they could say something about their personal life, allowing them to bring their lived experiences into classroom life.

All these daily elements taken together created a particular classroom culture with regard to authority—a culture that opposed the traditional model previously described.

How P4C Sessions Took Place

For Annie, P4C was a kind of “mindset,” in that she infused it into her whole pedagogy, not just her weekly CPI sessions.

Well, we do philosophy in the philosophy session, but when you have that mind-set, philosophy is all the time. Really. It's all the time, there is the Thursday sessions but then these things come up all the time. And usually, if we have done it all year, (...) they know when it's philosophy session. They know even if it wasn't Thursday at 10 o'clock. They know we are talking about something. Like, one thing that, I'm mean as pretty frustrated as I'm, one thing that always sees to come through by the end of the year in a philosophical classroom is that they love to have a talk about what is right and wrong. They usually recognize that, that is dialogue for the sake of dialogue. That they don't have necessarily to get to a conclusion that is definitive at the end. You know what I mean. Like, okay, now you are right, you are wrong at the end. But they get really good at that by the end. Just like, no I think this and I think that. They are really good at that. [Interview. May 7]²⁸

However, philosophy was also noticeably present beyond the P4C sessions: there were many moments of collective engagement in reflecting on open and fundamental subject matter and using CPI-related

²⁸ Interview, May 7.

skills. However, since these other moments could not often be observed by the researcher, this section is based mostly on the Thursday morning sessions.

During the CPI sessions, students were first invited to sit on a large circular rug situated in the middle of the classroom, which Annie had bought especially for P4C. She would then take out a pair of dolls that she only used for these dialogues, which got the children very excited. Annie would playfully talk about the dolls—commenting on what they did during the last week—then put on a little play with them to share the story stimulus, drawing on her strong skills as a storyteller and performer. Annie told the story twice: in her words, once for listening and once for thinking. However, before the second telling, students would ask Annie to make the story longer, indicating how much they liked these moments.

The stories were connected to classroom life, as Annie wrote them based on what had happened the previous week. Most of the time they were about events that contained a philosophical dimension that had not yet been explored. Through these creative choices, she adapted the traditional CPI structure—which usually starts with the P4C curriculum of novels written by Lipman—and, most interestingly, connected the CPI to the children’s recent lived experiences. For example, that spring, a guest came to share an artistic performance. After the performance, students were visibly interested in what parts of the story were real and which were invented. Annie took note of that interest and used it to write the story for the skit between the dolls on the following Thursday morning. The discussion then focused on how to know what is real and not real. Some remarks included: if the story is about something that really happened, then it is not a lie; there are fake stories which are not lies, like the *Ninjagos*; it was a story because the author invented everything; you can make real stories or fake stories. The discussion then moved on to consider how to know whether something seen on TV is real or not.

We can see how Annie adapted the P4C method for her classroom. P4C was part of Annie’s larger intention to have her students experience democracy, notably by organizing the group in a circle, by starting discussions from the children’s interests, and by asking them to think together and give reasons for their assertions. And yet, although Annie’s P4C sessions seemed congruent with her overall classroom culture informed by democratic principles, they also appeared qualitatively different from her other activities.

P4C, Authority and Morality

In comparison to the other activities that Annie put in place to offer children a democratic educational experience, issues of authority were most clear during CPI sessions regarding moral matters. There was already an established character education program in Annie’s school structured around a set of values that had to be transmitted to students.²⁹ For example, the value of “caring,” a certain way of being with others, had to be overtly taught for a certain period of time. Educators had to explain what caring meant and students were expected to integrate it at school, earning rewards when they behaved in ways that reflected the value.

²⁹ Joel Westheimer, *What kind of citizen? : educating our children for the common good*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015).

This character education program is built on a specific vision of morality, moral education and authority in schools. It is not open to dialogue but rather imposed by an authority—more specifically, a chain of authorities within the school system, from the principal to the teachers. Students are not part of the chain of command, they are the ones expected to be transformed by integrating the program's values into their lives. This kind of authority, clearly functioning within a top-down structure, is attached to a certain moral order: such character education offers a clear and definite vision of what is good and what is wrong, of what is expected and what is forbidden. Doubt is nonexistent—the world of values is depicted as being settled, defined, and illustrated. Children have to act in accordance with that moral order. Interestingly, these two elements are linked together: a precise and official moral order imposed by a hierarchical form of authority.

P4C as a pedagogy challenge these two elements. On the one hand, P4C is built on the idea that no authority can establish in advance the topics or answers to be discussed in a CPI—to be possible, it requires a suspension of authority regarding the subject matter. On the other hand, a structured moral order is likely to be undermined by a CPI dialogue, as its defining elements may be discussed, questioned, nuanced, and even rejected. Defending a specific moral order cannot be the goal of a CPI, since such an objective would prevent children from inquiring freely—a core principle of CPI—while enabling adults to lead the dialogue where they want it to go.

The example presented at the beginning of the article is an illustration of how P4C may allow for inquiry into subjects that are not usually open to discussion. Annie started the session with her dolls commenting on the fact that a crayfish was killed by another when it was put in the classroom tank the previous week. As mentioned, Annie wanted her educational activities—including P4C—to stem from the children's interests and experiences rather than from the mandated curriculum and disciplines. Animals were therefore an integral part of her classroom, particularly during what she called the “animal project,” one of the year's biggest projects. The death of the crayfish was not planned but nonetheless triggered the children's curiosity.

As the dolls recalled that event, they wondered if it was possible to make sense of it. They started to mention the different reasons that could explain why animals fight: animals fight when they do not have enough food or enough space... or when they are competing for a girlfriend. This exchange inspired a CPI question on a similar theme that focused on humans, that is: why do people fight? Thus, the dialogue invited inquiry into one of the school's most sacred rules—we should not fight—and did not result in the only allowable conclusion within school: Do not fight! The value of nonviolence was sacred at the school not only because of the belief that children's physical integrity should never be compromised, but also because of the possible reactions that could occur if children's safety was put into question. If there were nuances to the do-not-fight commandment, they were obscured by the pressure to obey the rule. This CPI dialogue first revealed the nuances of the rule—like the different reasons why someone could be morally justified in engaging in what is forbidden at school—and then opened the possibility of asking whether there were indeed good reasons to fight. Some of the reasons that were given included: we can fight in order to get back something that someone stole from us; we can fight because someone has been unfair to us; and we can fight because we do not have enough food, referring specifically to what had to be done in the “old days.” Some students claimed there was no good reason to fight and it should always be avoided, because you could get into trouble or be

hurt. However, in each instance, the group was not sure whether there was a good reason to fight. As the dialogue was drawing to an end and the children were growing restless, one student said: *“I fight with my cousins, because I like them and they are my best friends—I just fight with them for no reason and it is just really fun.”* The group considered this as a good reason to fight. Yet what matters is not whether a good reason to fight was offered, but that the very topic was opened within a school where fighting was strictly forbidden. Here, philosophy was definitely creating a breach in the solid, certain and non-negotiable moral order of the school.

The Hidden Authority and Moral Order

The data collected in this study confirms the possibility that P4C is likely to undermine the adult authority and the moral order in schools—as advocates of traditional education have cautioned—because it can call into question what is usually assumed as given. P4C does make such questioning possible by opening a space for children to inquire into their school’s most fundamental values in ways educators may not want. However, it remains unclear whether participation in CPI dialogues actually leads children to be more disobedient toward their educators and reject the school’s moral order.

However, the P4C practice in Annie’s classroom did also lead to the construction of a specific kind of authority. Though the content of the CPI dialogues was open, the dialogical form itself was more traditionally authoritative. Children were expected to stay seated and quiet, and to listen to each other speak. They were expected to say certain things in a certain way, raising their hands before they spoke and backing up their statements with reasons. They were not allowed to physically hit each other during the dialogues nor hurt each other’s feelings. Thus, though they could discuss the possibility and legitimacy of fighting at the conceptual level, all literal forms of fighting were forbidden in the dialogical process itself. Some of these rules were clearly enunciated—like procedures for taking turns speaking—while others were generally understood without being stated, like the prohibition against fighting during the sessions. And so, it could be argued that the philosophical content—the open-ended inquiry on virtually any fundamental subject—required an authoritative order.

Further, there was a notable difference between the CPI sessions and the other democratically run classroom activities, namely: the special kind of authority underlying them. Philosophy time was not like any other kind of sharing session during the week, only because there was an authority—the educator—requiring children to enter the philosophical dimension of their personal and social lives. Such order was attached to a certain timeframe during which they had to sit with an issue. Though the researcher could observe some CPI elements in other moments, they were clearly more visible during the Thursday morning sessions.

And so, if the content of the philosophy sessions could undermine the school’s authorities and moral order, this was only possible because another authority was enacted to enable the activity itself. We can therefore say that the CPI sessions not only caused children to question authority, but also constructed a specific kind of authority through its practice. Aspects of this authority could be called into question during the metacognitive assessment that followed the dialogue—for example, exploring what rules should be respected during P4C—but even this inquiry would require that children follow

certain procedures or else the session would end. This is not to say that other democratic classroom activities did not have certain forms of authority built into them, as well as certain non-negotiable elements. But our claim is that such authority was enacted differently in P4C sessions. First, these sessions permitted the children to engage with the most central concepts of their social life—for example, why do they go to school. But inquiry into these concepts was made possible because an authority was structuring the process.

How P4C Teaches Us to Both Live with and Question Authority

This article began with the critique that P4C may cause children to question authority in dangerous ways. According to this critique, the educator's authority over her classroom is required to educate children as newcomers to society and should thus not be undermined. On this view, the purpose of education is to pass a certain moral order down to children so they can integrate it into their lives before having the possibility of questioning it as adults. This article has aimed to debunk this critique. If it is true that P4C may lead children to call into question concepts and assumptions that may not otherwise be challenged, it is untrue that P4C causes children to become critical of any and all forms of authority since, as observed in the case study, P4C works toward the construction of a specific kind of authority—namely, the CPI rules and procedures.

Still, this research suggests that P4C can bring something to the democratic classroom that other activities cannot. P4C did lead Annie's children to question authority and the school's moral order in a way that would not have otherwise been possible, as illustrated by the example of fighting. Unlike the character education program, the CPI experience made it possible for children to question what appeared to be beyond question: instead of teaching students why they should *not* fight, it opened a radical space for children to dialogue about good reasons to fight. Yet there was an authority in the classroom's P4C practice, without which the CPI sessions would not have been possible. Annie obliged her students to engage in a certain form of rational dialogue and kept them engaged for a certain amount of time. It was this obligation that made P4C such a unique space of and for authority in her classroom: the children could question anything but they still *had* to do engage in the CPI procedures.

This point has several implications. First, according to the data collected, it is false and simplistic to say that P4C teaches children to reject authority because there is a form of authority embedded in the CPI model. Second, if this authority has sometimes been noticed and criticized by scholars in P4C—such as, Nancy Vansielegem, Gert Biesta, Pavel Lushyn and David Kennedy³⁰—unlike them, we do not think it is possible to bypass it because we believe it is a fundamental part of CPI, at least according to the data collected for this study. We therefore think that P4C practitioners should be made aware of these issues of authority to make sense of their own practice. Lastly, it is plausible to suggest that P4C is intimately linked to children's democratic education in a very peculiar way. If we look at ourselves in contemporary societies, we often live in a constant tension between being critical

³⁰ Nancy Vansielegem, "Philosophy for Children as the Wind of Thinking," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39, no. 1 (2005); Gert Biesta, "Education and the Democratic Person: Toward a Political Conception of Democratic Education," *Teacher College Record* 109, no. 3 (2007); Pavel Lushyn & David Kennedy, "Power, manipulation and control in a community of inquiry," *Analytic Teaching*, 23 no. 2 (2003).

of every authority around us and of knowing—however unconsciously—how or when to submit to it. P4C seems to represent an ideal space to experience and grapple with such tensions toward a more nuanced understanding of our democratic identity.

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