

Book Review

*Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp:
Philosophy for Children's Educational Revolution*

Authored by Roberto Franzini Tibaldeo
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If I had to define this volume with only one expression, I would use the word “dense”. When I read an essay, I usually highlight or underline the salient points to consider for a more systematic study. However, as I was reading, I realized that I was underlining pretty much the whole text. Indeed, there is no part in which the difficult journey of the reconstruction of the pedagogical methodology and the fruitful encounter between Lipman and Sharp is not worthy of note, with the author adding, paragraph after paragraph, an important element for the understanding of the complexity and novelty that the construction of the curriculum of Philosophy for Children (henceforth P4C) has constituted initially in the USA and later in the rest of the world. To address the “educational revolution” of P4C, Tibaldeo travels through the times and the spaces it has occupied (and still occupies). And he does so with a style worthy of a thriller writer, who gradually reveals the unfolding of the plot until its completion. In just a hundred pages, all the reasonings, doubts, sources and theoretical and practical attempts which have characterized the growth of the curriculum to its present form are masterfully described.

P4C had a complex history. The idea and the need that Lipman felt - and that converged with those of Sharp - to create a pedagogical tool aimed at the cultivation of complex thinking passed through years of study, experimentation and reinterpretation which gradually led to the form now inherited by the current P4C practitioners. A flexible form, adaptable to each context and age of the participants at the various communities of inquiry operating around the world.

However, the merit of the development and dissemination of the curriculum is undoubtedly attributable, as Tibaldeo points out, to the tireless work of Ann Sharp. The program, in fact, would not be the same without her. First, because the continuous confrontation with Lipman has been a generator of careful reflection and experimentation at the base of the research for the construction and the good functioning of the curriculum - from the creation of stories and manuals to the training of teachers.

Secondly, for her constant dedication to the implementation of the program and its communication and dissemination. One of the purposes of the book, indeed, is precisely

to underline that the whole of Philosophy for Children [...] relies entirely on the fruitful cooperation between Lipman and Sharp-an enduring interpersonal and philosophical partnership that has been generally overlooked by scholars until the recently published *In Community of Inquiry with Ann Margaret Sharp* [...] (Gregory & Lavery, 2018)” (p. xi of the introduction).

It is also the intention of the author, through an approach of historical-genealogical reconstruction of the educational and philosophical perspective of Lipman and Sharp, to offer a space for pedagogical reflection in a historical moment like the current time in which a dangerous reductionist trend is affecting teaching and education (ibid.).

The text - the result of extensive research also in the IAPC (Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children) archives - is developed in five chapters. The first two (*Intellectual-Biographical Sketch* and *The Contest of Lipman and Sharp's Educational Revolution*) are dedicated to a biography of the two scholars - with the anecdote related to their meeting in 1973, which the author defines as “providential” - to the foundation of the IAPC at the Montclair State College (where Lipman had moved from Columbia University) and to the historical framework, within which their reflection on the need to make a renewal in the field of education was inserted.

It was a period in which scenarios of war ignited moral dilemmas and the struggle for civil rights pressed on the consciences of North American society. The political and intellectual commitment of Lipman and Sharp necessarily led them to reflect on the responsibilities that the school system had in the formation of the citizens of the future. The school, as structured, lacked commitment to the development of critical thinking.

Their reflection was included in the pedagogical debate that, from the end of the Second World War onwards, discussed which educational structure should implement the school system to ensure equal opportunities for all in order to overcome economic inequalities and train responsible citizens. Educating to critical thinking seemed the leitmotif of the educational reflection of that period, because, starting from the argument that the Piagetian paradigm was unsatisfactory, a preference for the influences of the thought of Vygotsky and Bruner was being expressed. The watchwords in the educational field - states Tibaldeo quoting Lipman - became “*thinking, cognitive skills and metacognition*” (p. 21). However, recognizing such a theoretical centrality would not have been sufficient if a way had not been found to reform the same educational paradigm on the one hand and teacher training on the other. In order for the assimilation of critical thinking to take place, it was necessary to rethink the curriculum from a philosophical perspective and at the same time also involve elementary school students.

The educational promise of the development of critical thinking, in fact, had failed, according to the two scholars, because it was based on a vision of thinking understood too narrowly as logical thinking, it did not take into account the imaginative, emotional and value-based component, it did

not acknowledge that the training of teachers was not adequate for such a purpose and, ultimately, it was not “supported by an appropriate pedagogy [...]. As a result, although critical thinking had been successfully included in many educational (high school and college) curricula, it had mostly been reduced to a school subject among others, taught in a traditional educational context” (pp. 21-22).

Sharp and Lipman were therefore looking for a radically different approach, which was able to combine the acquired knowledge of school subjects with the reasoning process, which adopted the guidelines of the debate on higher-order thinking dating back to Bloom and others, which had a strong practical component and which involved students in the same process of acquiring higher-order thinking (later reformulated as multidimensional thinking) starting from the elementary school.

As was mentioned above, a pedagogy founded on philosophy would be the tool capable of achieving the objectives by which the debate begun in the post-war years had been nourished.

A philosophy *for* (and not *with*) children would finally respond to the need children have to ask and search for meanings. It would be a pedagogical means that would transform students into young philosophers able to discuss philosophical ideas and at the same time it would be the instrument to improve the learning of all the disciplines of the curriculum (p. 23). It would be a proposal that would constitute an education philosophy rather than a renewal of the philosophy of education. The intention and the realization of these goals are discussed in the next chapter (*Lipman and Sharp's Philosophical-Educational Vision*), in which the author traces the genesis of the creation of the P4C program. Lipman and Sharp's idea was to operate an inside-out transformation of education, which meant making the student an active participant in the learning process, shifting the axis from the individual to the community, and enriching the learning contents with the experience of the students themselves. Liberating, rather than indoctrinating, in a relational and community context would mean a significant development of higher-order thinking. This objective was also a subject of reflection for Lipman and Sharp, since they believed that the function which rationality should play in the development of critical thinking was not sufficient to justify the learning of reflective habits that should have a lasting influence on children's behavioral habits. Although they recognized that the rules of formal logic were necessary for the development of higher-order thinking, the question was how to transmit the rules of logic in a form that was not the result of indoctrination, moving beyond the idea of mere rational education.

The philosophical inquiry would shift the focus onto reasonableness, thanks to the multidimensional thinking approach, and the narrative text would have the task of conveying the rules of formal logic, where experience would constitute the starting point (and the arrival point) of the investigation.

And here begins the outline of the profile of Lipman and Sharp's educational project. It is precisely in this chapter that the very essence of P4C is discussed, starting with the debt of the two creators to pragmatist thought. Philosophy, in fact, as understood in the program, constitutes the fulcrum of the community of students who dialogue, precisely, philosophically. Here, through the description of the steps that led to the completion of the program as we know it today, the author identifies the fundamental issues on which Lipman and Sharp's project is based, primarily their debt to Dewey, in particular to his *Democracy and Education*, “and especially to the idea that achieving democracy

required citizens to be properly educated” (p. 32). A better education meant making the class itself more democratic and, in order to reconstruct the Deweyan democratic ideal, it was necessary to think of a type of school oriented towards the education of active citizenship and participatory democracy as well as the acquisition of civic values. However, this could not happen through direct teacher-student transmission, but through the democratization of the class itself, which would be transformed into a community (the community of philosophical inquiry) in which dialogue between peers would put into practice the activity itself of democratic participation. In this way there would be no teaching of dogmas, but students would be encouraged to think for themselves through practice. This was an important point for Lipman and Sharp, in order to let children acquire freedom and autonomy and to defend themselves against the manipulations of an adult-centric and consumerist society. Even the texts of the curriculum had to fulfill this function: contrary to traditional texts (which are themselves manipulative), those of P4C had to induce critical reflection about the established order and, at the same time, lose their centrality because they would constitute a simple stimulus, a support for the common inquiry. And it is here, with the concepts of community and inquiry, that we arrive at another key point of the P4C program, the result of another debt contracted with pragmatist philosophy and in particular with Peirce. The philosopher, in his essay *The fixation of belief*, had shown that the best method to fix beliefs was through (scientific) inquiry shared within a community (of scientists). And Lipman and Sharp made the Peircean combination of community and inquiry their own but overcome the scientific connotation -which also Dewey had proposed- and instead recover philosophy as its fulcrum. They in fact deemed that Dewey in “his inquiry-based proposal had resulted in him neither recognising philosophy’s educational potential, nor conceiving of the possibility of enacting it with children” (p. 37).

Philosophy in the community practice, recovering the Socratic model, overcomes, through the dialogue between equals, the individualistic tendencies and develops the sense of solidarity. Moreover, its ability to support reasonableness contributes to the development of “better thinking”, which means self-correction, sensitivity to context, reasonableness and fallibilism.

In their new and different way of understanding childhood Lipman and Sharp opted for a type of child-centered and bottom-up education, a generative education, in which children, through reflection on the problems coming from their everyday life experience, were able to develop their own personhood together with the foreshadowing capacity fed by “imagination” - another concept borrowed from Dewey. This idea, dear to Sharp, denotes the ability to imagine oneself and others in a possible future, something that goes beyond putting oneself in the other’s shoes, where the validity of one’s position is evaluated with and through the relationship with the others. For the development of higher-order thinking, imagination has an important educational role in the vision of Lipman and Sharp: it implies an open door to value and creative reflection. However, the concept itself of higher-order thinking, reinterpreted under the Deweyan lens of reflective thinking, was, in 1995, reformulated by Lipman and Sharp with the concept of multidimensional thinking, constituted by three dimensions: the critical, the creative and the caring.

The features of these three dimensions, (overlapping and developing together), can be summarized as follows:

- Critical thinking is, among other things, inquisitive, deliberative, justificatory, conducive to judgment, self-corrective and sensitive to context. Moreover, it is rule-governed and devoted to problem-finding and solving.
- Creative thinking's characteristics are originality, productivity, imagination, independence, experimentation, holism, expression, self-transcendence, surprise, generativity, maieuticity and inventiveness.
- Caring thinking, finally, has to do with the sphere of values and emotions: it is appreciative or valuational, affective, active (in the sense of "taking care of"), normative and empathic.
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Tibaldeo focuses on this last point to frame Ann Sharp's peculiar contribution. The author repeatedly underlines how the development of the P4C program was the result of a continuous confrontation between the two founders and, in particular, Sharp's contribution to the framing of caring thinking was fundamental. Sharp's vision is undoubtedly (albeit subtly) different from Lipman's. For Sharp, indeed, the focus is on the interrelational character of caring thinking. Tibaldeo analyzes very well the differences in perspective between the two, finding the genesis of Sharp's vision in her feminist studies and identifying how this distinction actually meant an enrichment of their educational project. For Sharp care is an ontological category of human beings which cannot be realized without inquiry toward what is valuable, and such inquiry involves an intentional reaching out to the world and to others with curiosity and trust. Caring thinking enhances communality, understood as the relational environment where people can commit themselves to practice.

This attention to care leads us to understand how the educational approach of both scholars is oriented by moral education: it is the structure itself of the P4C program, which is strongly connected to moral education. In Tibaldeo's words,

the core of Lipman and Sharp's normative approach to education was the relationships between the members of a community, who could benefit from the tools of inquiry provided by philosophy to achieve relational awareness and mutual recognition, be engaged in a joint quest for meaning, and ultimately be transformed and capable of transforming society. This entailed a dynamic and evolving view of morality, based on the persons' capability to jointly conduct an attentive and meaningful inquiry (pp. 61-62).

Now, achieving the goals of this educational philosophy depended on two important factors: the first was the transformation of the class in a community of philosophical inquiry and the second was the role of the teacher. It was (and still is) a very delicate and important issue, because the teacher has the difficult task of granting the flourishing of children's inquiry without imposing any predetermined

and pre-established vision, while taking care to give voice to everybody. S/he should ensure the free expression of children's ideas in a safe environment in which solidarity and caring attitudes are fostered through inquiry. For this reason, Lipman and Sharp, and in particular the latter, worked hard and continuously in training teachers in the new pedagogical approach. The teachers, in fact, in fulfilling their delicate role, "had to be trained from both a pedagogical and philosophical point of view to comply with the educational vision developed at the IAPC" (p.87)

The structure, tools and aims of teacher training are covered in the 4th chapter (*Philosophy for Children's Educational Curriculum*), which also describes the function of the curriculum and how Lipman and Sharp constructed it, starting from *Harry Stottlemayer's Discovery* -the first of Lipman's novels- and then continuing to its completion with the drafting of the instructional manuals. Lipman's first novel, in fact, had served to conduct the first experiment of an *in nuce* P4C with the fifth-grade students of a public school in Montclair. The experiment gave exciting results, but it was after the meeting with Sharp that the curriculum and structure of the P4C sessions took shape. At this stage, during the revision of *Harry Stottlemayer's Discovery*, Lipman and Sharp worked on overcoming the Piagetian orthodoxy, whose paradigm affected the realization of Lipman's first novel, and adopted the perspective of Mead and Vygotsky, thanks to which the categories of abstract-concrete, universal-particular and rational-irrational were resolved in reasonableness (p.80). The relationship between theory and practice was the key, and bearing that in mind, the curriculum took the form we know today.

The stories and manuals that make up the curriculum are designed for the various school stages from kindergarten to high school. The former have the function of modelling the philosophical dialogue that, it is imagined, will develop within the class-community, together with the skills for the development of complex thinking and the behavioral attitudes of the community which will gradually be internalized. However, these also have the function of modelling the heuristic posture of the teacher -who in turn serves as a model for the inquiry of the community. The characters of the stories, in fact, are fictional children who, in a masterful work of translation into an everyday language, embody the theories and epistemic positions of the Western philosophical tradition. The few fictional adults, on the other hand, who mostly personify the figure of teachers, represent a discreet presence that supports in a way which is not intrusive the process of inquiry of the fictional community and thus shape the action of the real teacher. The manuals relating to each novel, on the other hand, are a support to the facilitation. The discussion plans and exercises, focused on students' performances, are the toolbox for the facilitator's moves; the leading ideas are addressed directly to the teacher-facilitator and constitute a simplified guide of the philosophical theory present in the stories, exercises and discussion plans. The manuals, therefore, were designed to support the work of facilitating, in particular for those teachers who lacked a philosophical preparation.

However, the difficult facilitating role could not be learned from leading ideas and discussion plans. Facilitation work is extremely complex, requiring an adequate posture and a set of skills ranging from ensuring that the dialogue is truly philosophical to providing the plurality of voices and opportunities for student expression. Therefore, an appropriate and equally complex teacher training, as well as a control of the procedures exercised in their classes, had to take place with trainers adequately prepared for the achievement of the difficult objectives of the program, to give teachers the pedagogical and philosophical tools for the revolution proposed by Lipman and Sharp.

The volume ends with a brief excursus (*An Open-Ended Educational Proposal*) on the dissemination of the project in the world (UNESCO recognized the program in 1998) and a reflection on the future possibilities of cultivating the great and complex educational initiative of Lipman and Sharp. Although the program is still used in many countries, Tibaldeo warns us, “this proposal remains on the periphery in both present-day school system and academic research” (p. 100). It is a sad reflection which we must be aware of in a historical moment when the neoliberal paradigm has taken possession of most of the school systems in the Western world. Moreover, increasing digitalization is undermining the very existence of the real concept of community, the essence of which is constituted by the corporeality, the gaze and the voice of the Other (Han, 2023: 25). The community of philosophical inquiry consolidates the relationship of otherness. Within it, members recognize themselves and others through looks, voices and emotions and learn, meeting after meeting, to recognize and respect the plurality of values and the freedom of thinking through philosophy not understood as knowing, but as a method of reflective inquiry in the experiential reality. That is why the publication of the text presented here is very important both to continue the process of dissemination of the program, at the academic and non-academic level, and because it calls for a pedagogical reflection through the reconstruction of the educational aims of P4C: a pedagogical program that, through its flexibility, still retains all its revolutionary power.

The book is also an excellent guide for those non-experts who want to approach the methodology. The clarity of the writing makes even the most complex passages of the program’s history and structure easy to understand. The author takes the reader by the hand through the difficult dilemmas that arose for the two creators during the construction of the curriculum and the complexity of the pedagogical and philosophical structure of its entire system. However, the book is also a point of reference for the expert P4C researcher due to the precision with which the author has been able to reconstruct the stages of the development of the project and its sources. I would like to thank Tibaldeo for giving us such a clear and passionate systematization of the educational revolution of P4C.

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