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Transformative Learning for Parents and Teachers in a Philosophical Community of Inquiry: A Practical Application

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers a model of practice that promotes teacher-facilitated liberating democratic dialogue between parents and teachers that is based on the fundamental principles of Socratic dialogue that Matthew Lipman incorporated into an educational model for schoolteachers, and their students. Use of the process of philosophical dialogue – not study of historical philosophy – to explore and evaluate alternative actions and concepts between both children and adults is highly innovative because until very recently, it was unimagined that children could think abstractly let alone compare and balance philosophical concepts. In this innovative model, *Philosophy for Parents* (P4P), teachers employ adult-adapted versions of Lipman's principles, entangled with Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory and its dialogue circles, and, to some extent others, might likely prove, under further study in practice, to elucidate and positively inform the process and evolution of P4P. Stories and art are used as a tool that assist the facilitator in leading this practice.

KEYWORDS:

Community of Philosophical Inquiry, CPI, Democratic Dialogue, Transformative Learning, Parents.

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RIASSUNTO: Il lavoro presenta un modello di pratica diretto a promuovere il libero dialogo democratico tra genitori e insegnanti basato sui principi fondamentali d'ispirazione socratica che Matthew Lipman ha integrato nel suo modello educativo per insegnanti e studenti. L'uso del dialogo filosofico - non lo studio della storia della filosofia - utile per esplorare e valutare alternative concettuali e pratiche tra bambini e adulti è altamente innovativo, in quanto fino a poco tempo fa era inimmaginabile che i bambini potessero ragionare in modo astratto, e tanto meno confrontarsi con concetti filosofici. In questo modello innovativo, *Philosophy for Parents* (P4P), gli insegnanti utilizzano versioni adattate agli adulti dell'approccio di Lipman, intrecciate con la teoria dell'apprendimento trasformativo di Mezirow, e i suoi circoli di dialogo, nonché altre istanze che potrebbero rintracciarsi nell'utilizzazione pratica, per chiarire ulteriore il processo e lo sviluppo della P4P. I pretesti adoperati come spunto per le sessioni in questo caso sono storie oppure materiale artistico.

PAROLE-CHIAVE:

Comunità di Ricerca Filosofica, CdRF, dialogo democratico, apprendimento trasformativo, genitori.

1. Introduction

This article aims to amplify information, pertinent to the original large-scale intent of a doctoral study. That was to investigate and compare the effect of dialogue and critical reflection in groups of parents, facilitated by schoolteachers with the goal of creating a collective school-family “Community of Philosophical Inquiry.” Moreover, that research sought to leverage the now well supported benefits of parent engagement in enhancing students’ academic performance and the well-being of all participants in the school community (students, teachers, parents, and administrators). As foundation for the researcher’s intention, are the unique benefits that can accrue from the active participation of parents and their children’s teachers in a framework of mindful adult learning within the school community, as outlined by Langer (1997, p. 4) – one that will involve an implicit awareness and recognition of the potential validity of more than one perspective, openness to emergent insight, and reflective thinking all of which, together, may exert a transformational effect.

Most often, today this partnership appears to encounter, a multitude of disturbances that research ascribes to the lack of a trusting high-quality school-family collaborative relationship and, as Kluczniok (2013) finds in her review, fostered by a persistent alienation between teachers and parents that promotes uncoordinated and sometimes contradictory school-learning and home-learning environments. This fracture has been proven to carry major negative social and learning impacts for the children involved.

This family-school gap that has been extensively explored, especially in the United States, has sparked researchers’ curiosity and prompted intense study of parent-school engagement strategies and models (i.e., Epstein’s model).

Therefore the researcher focused on creating an innovative model of practice directed toward promoting teacher-facilitated liberating democratic dialogue between parents and teachers, which is based on the fundamental principles of Socratic dialogue that Columbia University professor of philosophy, Matthew Lipman, incorporated into an educational model for teachers and their students, where the teacher facilitates formation and fosters a Community of Philosophical Inquiry among students from preschool age to adolescence. Use of this model – termed Philosophy for Children, or P4C – has been found in research (Lipman et al., 1980, p. 15; Vansielegheim & Kennedy, 2011) to upgrade and cultivate children’s innate abilities in questioning, reflecting, and thinking critically if they are given the chance and appropriate prompts at school and home.

2. Entangled theories required to engage parents

The research agenda shows that parents understand more clearly how to enhance the educational experience of their children through cooperation processes within the school community and offers different models of intervention (Papathanasiou, 2019). Recapping the problem – bridge the gap on parents’ involvement in kindergarten, grade, and high schools, and strengthen the school-family relationship – the researcher was directed toward developing and refining an innovative model of teaching practice for kindergarten through high school that would bridge a now widely recognized gap in communication and cooperation between parents and teachers and convert all people in the into a well-bonded community. One that is actively engaged via “philosophic” Socratic dialogue with problematic questions in their own and mutual frames of reference. And one in which parents will have direct involvement with their children’s curriculum.

There is, however, additional knowledge that is required for this partnership to succeed while all actors are building up their skills. Parents would need to elaborate and liberate their knowledge in their own distinctive role in education, administration, and parenting. In parallel, teachers would need to transform their interaction with their students’ families and, as much as possible, dissipate any mistrust and misunderstanding which will be replaced, for all by the sense of mutual knowing, caring, and respect (Mapp, 2002).

The above-mentioned goals are expected to be reached with the use of the innovative Community of Inquiry for parents and teachers’ model, which is referred further down, and that has been generated of Lipman’s Community of Philosophical Inquiry model (CPI) which is at the core of the Philosophy for Children program (P4C) (Lipman, 1982). The pedagogical framework of P4C determines a way, children can learn how to think, analyze, and argue from an early age, before, otherwise, their inherent ability to think abstractly is lost. Their abstract thinking brings them to “philosophy,” familiarizes them with discussion, critical thinking, and their “reasoning” skills, it leads them closer to the Socrates Dialogue (Lipman & Sharp, 1994). In addition, as it has been pointed out by Lipman himself (2003), P4C is characterized by reflective, deliberative, communicative, and dialogic actions, which concludes in both reinforcing individual judgment and meanwhile solidifying the community. Specifically, in the researcher’s *Philosophy for Parents* (P4P) model, parents, as individuals who are diverse (i.e., in ideas, beliefs, socio-economic backgrounds) are given the chance to voice their ideas in a warm, democratic, empathic, and respectful manner and co-construct a community with the teachers that promotes trust and well-

being, while building a Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI) (Lipman, 2009), a dialogic community.

The nature of the Socratic dialogue sponsored by Lipman's P4C takes us back to the original meaning of the word philosophy that "comes from the Greek roots philo-meaning "love" and -sophia, or "wisdom." When someone studies philosophy they want to understand how and why people do certain things and how to live a good life. As a noun, philosophy entails the rational investigation of questions about existence and knowledge and ethics (Vocabulary.com, 2021).

In this sense, philosophy, and dialogue itself, becomes the methodology and practice of human education. Practically it means that it motivates the interlocutor to participate in the abstract work of logos and to be tested in the autonomous production of knowledge; in this test it should not depend on ephemeral accomplishments, but to distinguish the subtle signals of the world of language, to be fully open to the conceptual depth and through the clarification of philosophical propositions to make it accessible to language the common drive toward the essence of the self.

In that context, children have been reported asking questions demonstrating sophistication and a sometimes-startling degree of abstraction. A few examples excerpted from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

Philosopher Gareth Matthews argues at length that Piaget failed to see the philosophical thinking manifest in the very children he studied. Matthews (1980) provides a number of delightful examples of very young children's philosophical puzzlement." For example:

- TIM (about six years), while busily engaged in licking a pot, asked, "Papa, how can we be sure that everything is not a dream?" (p. 1)
- JORDAN (five years), going to bed at eight one evening, asked, "If I go to bed at eight and get up at seven in the morning, how do I really know that the little hand of the clock has gone around only once? Do I have to stay up all night to watch it? If I look away even for a short time, maybe the small hand will go around twice." (p. 3)
- JOHN EDGAR (four years), who had seen airplanes take off, rise, and gradually disappear into the distance, took his first plane ride. When the plane stopped ascending and the seat-belt sign went out, John Edgar turned to his father and said in a rather relieved, but still puzzled, tone of voice, "Things don't really get smaller up here." (p. 4)

Not infrequently children's questions touch on ethics. Here, in particular is another one provided by Matthews that demonstrates rather complex, philosophical thinking. Matthews (1984) provides illustrations of this, too. Meeting with a group of 8–11-year-olds, he used the following example to develop a story for discussion:

- Ian (six-year-old) found to his chagrin that the three children of his parents' friends monopolized the television; they kept him from watching his favorite program. "Mother," he asked in frustration, "why is it better for three children to be selfish than one?" (Matthews 1984, pp. 92-93).

As Lipman tells us, children, unlike adults, try to understand what lies behind what they see around them. They are constantly amazed and try to face the mysteries that appear in their daily lives with questions that are often philosophical, such as open to reasoning, inquiry, and reflection, for example: What is the mind? What is time? How was God born? Many times, children surprise us with their creative thinking, and it would be a skeleton of human unconsciousness if we tried to impose our own point of view of what is possible for children, while instead what we need to do is encourage them to listen, observe and give them time and space to think, discover, and imagine. School is the place that should provide the venue for practice, where the student will ask his/her questions and will be trained in the formulation of philosophical questions (scientific, ethical, metaphysical).

Encouraging children, however, to ask and explore key questions about life and cultivating philosophical inquiry is definitely not a product of a teacher-centered education that is usually provided in formal education, globally. Because education cannot constitute just the acquisition of knowledge, but also the journey of exploration and its discovery, education needs to be the foundation for the students in search of the meaning of life through the relationships that are created in a vibrant school community with the help of constructive dialogue, critical thinking, and reflection. We therefore need a more targeted form of teaching, an educational method such as that of Philosophy for/with Children, which does not focus on philosophical texts but rather on a special pedagogical management, in the art of the philosopher. It is worth mentioning herein the distinction that Richard Rorty (1981, intro) makes between Philosophy as a Platonic tradition of inquiring knowledge, nature, beauty, etc., with philosophy as the ongoing attempt many people make from a very young age to comprehend the world, *not* as an academic exercise. Many studies in recent years have shown that philosophy, as Rorty has described it, can help by clarifying children's thoughts and paving the way for discovery. Moreover, philosophy as a way of life can transform the student from a passive recipient of existing knowledge to an active seeker and potential creator.

Therefore, if we want to leave the child with an *open* consciousness, in the project of self-discovery and in the use of critical thinking, we must project a philosophically dialectical learning environment. Students will have the opportunity to ask, to listen, to research, to challenge, to reflect, to evaluate responsibly, to structure and deconstruct their thinking consistently using the philosophical way of formulating questions, i.e., the dialectic. This environment of dialogue if successfully organized at school and even extended to the family environment, where the child usually unfolds even more comfortably, with the appropriate information and guidance – both through the agency of the parents and by the teachers aiming for continuity. This could

be a way to build what the consensus of the population, as a whole, conceives as social justice in a multicultural society where different opinions, ideas and thoughts are encouraged. But to do this, the environment in which these children grow up must inspire free inquiry, expression of questions and their interaction with others through dialogue.

In the larger context, it seems likely there is a great need at the same time to integrate emotion and feelings with the critical thinking and reflection to solidify parents' engagement within the school community. Engagement in strong bonded community might possibly result in a transformational effect (Papathanasiou, 2022) – one that might enhance realization Lipman's intention that the dialogue constituting P4C should occur under and further foster democracy.

The main aim of the study is to use the model of the CPI that «fosters critical *self-reflection* and help learners plan to take action» as in Mezirow's Transformative Learning theory (1990, p. 357), which is the adult learning theory that seemed to promise an important contribution to model refinement, particularly including its discourse circles that substantially mirror the concept and execution of P4C for adults.

3. P4P: A CPI for Parents & Teachers

High standards of school improvement require the collective action of educational leadership and policymakers who are eager to prepare teachers for productive change— a change that might well embrace substantial teacher preparation on innovative strategies in family involvement beyond the traditional approaches which have emphasized a more individualistic and passive role of the parent in the parents-school partnership (Shirley, 1997) and invite parents to actively engage in a wider and more inclusive school community. Such a change could gradually enhance an internal transformation in people's and/or community's core-beliefs, perceptions, expectations, and actions if their social interactions within the school community lead to connecting the individuals' experiences and knowledge that can result in reconstruction or amplification of the sense of community. More profound and sustainable change occurs by creating new ways for people as individuals and in communities and institutions to think and act collaboratively (Warren & Mapp, 2011).

The differentiated model of parents–school collaboration, dialogue and philosophical inquiry that is being presented in this article, as a meaningful passage from adulthood to parenting, constitutes a means for shaping an appropriate family environment to have a positive effect on the social and emotional maturation of the children, while also amplifying their academic performance. The main emphasis of the types of collaboration employed is on the development of reasoning, reflection,

philosophical search, in the sense of a revival of grassroots philosophy outside of Academia (Lipman, 1991).

In simplest “schematic” implementation, the type of CPI that might obtain in this study would involve free and open dialogic discussion between almost any possible grouping of parents, and teacher-facilitators, prompted by anyone’s question, where judgment of “right” or “wrong” is suspended to the point of irrelevance, where there are no a priori “given” answers ever offered such that one person’s question is quite likely to be “answered” (i.e., responded to) by *another* person’s question. In Lipman’s construct, the search is for *meaning*, *not* for some abstract concept of “truth.” And, importantly, as such, it can only productively occur in *community* where individuals’ meanings can be compared with those of others as well as with one that might be seen by many to represent that of the group, or even elements or all of society at large. The search may well entail issues of ethics since, on an adult plane at least, just as was the case with “truth,” the search is not for an abstract *meaning* of life, but rather for the personal or collective meaning of a *good* (productive and harmonious) life.

As Niels (2009) asserts in his article “*we know that the act of storytelling evokes deep listening and deep feeling*”, accordingly, problematizing issues for parents in the same way as with the children, through narratives, storytelling, and art, is a strategy that can stimulate philosophical quests initially, but then validate through reflection and discourse their surfacing of problematic assumptions (Mezirow, 1991, p. 35). This course can then lead them towards and into the acquisition of a habitual reflective pattern that, in turn, can sustain learning and their engagement into personal and family as well as educational issues.

Over time, it can transform an institution, the school, into a well-bonded community that is actively engaged on individual and systemic problematic frames of reference (Mezirow, 2000). Hence the self-directed community that arises, continually encourages discussion, reflection, and empathy among all school participants: teachers, parents, and their children. Nonetheless, reflecting, discussing, and even learning does not lead inevitably to transformative learning, which according to Mezirow is a difficult intentional process, with many stages that the individual must go through to be able to transition to assumption-liberated knowledge (Cranton 2016, p. 2).

Furthermore, to create a community where people feel truly free to exchange honest feedback on theirs and their peers’ experiences and where all feel emotionally capable of change, they need to feel assimilated in a trusting, respectful and safe environment. We usually encounter such feelings within a safe relationship. Taylor too (2002), argues the importance of relationships in the process of transformation.

Mezirow holds that «[r]eflective discourse and its resulting insight alone do not achieve TL. Acting upon emancipatory insights, praxis is also necessary» (Mezirow, 1991, p. 12). Social action, in some form and in certain contexts, to change distorted

meanings and assumptions can also be the purpose of a «consciousness-raising group» in such natural settings as the workplace or family environment (1991, p. 181). A direct correlation between individual and social life is evident in many of Mezirow's written texts; he considers the process of transformation to be a personal affair but one that also requires the acquisition and exercise of social skills. According to Mezirow, the individual cannot act impulsively but in cooperation and interaction with the people around him/her in the wider social context. That is, to be successfully pursued, the transformational process, although a personal matter, must be framed by other people with whom rational dialogue takes place in order to eliminate dysfunctional perceptions and adopt a critical approach to things. In large, Mezirow sees transformational learning as of a kind that transforms problematic frameworks and outdated assumptions, so that they become more inclusive, open, thoughtful, and emotionally ready for change (Kokkos, 2005).

So, for the parents-teachers-school community to transform their perceptions on how their relationship could exist operate in a unified way and best strive, they might need to become a *Learning Organization*—where students, teachers, parents, administrators, and staff can join way together to form a Community of Inquiry engaged in a collective effort with a common vision” (Watkins & Marsick, 1999). The community could then constitute a “circuit” where learning is the ongoing goal for all actors.

4. Conclusions

The key to strong thinking is a strong question and discovering the possible answers. The power of thought is fueled by the dynamics of our questions which guide the course of inquiry. The questions through dialogue invite the other point of view, the different one, which the student listens to, having the choice to either embrace it and build on it, or reject it with an argument. To do this mental exercise, the selection process, actors should have the opportunity and the freedom – and available space and time to at least submit their questions and, hopefully, receive thoughtful responses. When the teacher, the school, the family, and the community where a child grows up, allows the possible questions to be asked, the answers can become an act of change (Papathanasiou, 2022). The questions provoke thinking in dialogue and make any involved person responsible to look at the question from different angles. Simultaneously with the question, an internal dialogue is born (*stochasmos*) in parallel with the external one, which can result in understanding, reflection, learning, and change. The questions that arise through art, literature, nature, can create admiration, question marks, and unprecedented innovative ideas. Children have an ability to see

clearly and to clarify such questions authentically. When a child grows up in such an interactive environment, when students are encouraged by the teacher to think for themselves, then they often react by thinking. The teacher may not be able to teach the thought itself, as also may not the parent at home. However, both can create an environment in which the child can develop the will to discuss, to think, to express him/herself, and to contrast its views with those of others. «As birds learn to fly by flying one learns to think while thinking» (Lipman, 1975, p. 1).

In a real dialogue there is no place for right and wrong, winners and losers. Participants in such a dialogue are not hierarchically divided into students and teachers, young and grown-ups. **The meaning of the dialogue is not found in either of the participants or either in the two together, but in their *interaction*** (see Friedman, 1955, p. 89). Knowledge of ourselves depends on our interaction with others. In a way it is like saying that we exist as a personality only in all the reflections in the personal field. **Our contact and understanding of ourselves and others happens through a constant dialogue.** The self, for Bakhtin, is defined through dialogue and is a more authentic opening to the differences between perspectives (see 1986, p. 169).

Conclusively, what was particularly propitious for the success of this initiative was that, in many cases the issues of ethics and other matters treated dialogically were the same and were introduced into discussion via the *same* fairytales and stories as the ones introducing them into dialogue by the children. Even more positive for family-child(ren)-school relations was the fact that the children were told about this so the kids would ask their parents about, and eagerly discuss with them the very same issues and contexts when they came home from school!

The main benefits and outcomes that comes out of such a collaborative scheme in school if seen as a Learning Organization (Watkins & Marsick, 1999), are the following:

- Empowering parents to develop effective parenting strategies.
- Cultivating group climate for the young & adult students.
- Integration of parents into the educational process inside and outside the school.
- Develop trust relationships in the Educational Triangle: School–Child–Parent.
- Developing a positive climate in school from all participating sides.
- Parents promoted their children academically after assimilating how to enhance and link learning in the family environment with learning at school.
- Parents responded with great enthusiasm to school whenever cooperation was sought.
- The relationships between the parents that participated persevered in the following years.

- The parents who participated were looking for cooperation and remained attached to the kindergarten during the next year, regardless of having their children in elementary school.

It is the writer's fervent hope that while negotiating the desired relational culture within the school community, all actors will realize that their individual concerns, not just those that are communitarian, will be important for society at large. Meaningful parent-teacher partnerships might help all actors think deeply, exchange ideas, argue with respect to their own and others' voices and build relevant capacities such as active listening, reflecting and critical thinking to manage the complexity of modern pedagogy together as allies on a team.

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