# nurturing communities of inquiry in Philippine schools

featured essay

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## Abstract

Philosophy for Children is working because it is focusing on thinking which is the essence of education. Communities of inquiry are the ways through which training in thinking is done, and they are going to help significantly transform learning. Collective epistemic progress is possible through craftsmanlike thinking leading to better judgments. Certain processes are needed in the Philippines for these communities of inquiry to be firmly in place.

## Keywords

Philosophy for Children, Philippine education, communities of inquiry, meaning-making

## Introduction

The essential contribution of the Philosophy for Children program is the thesis that thinking is the essence of education, that to improve the quality of thinking is the purpose of education. This quality of thinking is shown in the quality of judgments, in professional and civic life, in how citizens relate with one another, and in the quality of collective decisions as well. When the quality of judgment has reached this point, it can be said that thinking has become the essence of education and the Philosophy for Children program is working.

> [H]igher-order thinking . . . will happen only if students are given access to the tools of inquiry, the methods and principles of reasoning, practice in concept analysis, experience in critical reading and writing, opportunities for creative description and narration as well as in the formulation of arguments and explanations, and a community setting in which ideas and intellectual contexts can be fluently and openly exchanged.[1]

This goal of Philosophy for Children, to focus on thinking in education, will never lose favor, and becomes an important criterion by which educational systems will be evaluated—to what extent educational systems improve the quality of thinking in a society.

The question for many educational planners however has been, not that they do not see the nature of and the important role of thinking in education, but that they have to be shown examples and models of classroom experiences focused on thinking and how it can work. In this regard, Lipman's philosophical novels for children, including the teachers' manuals, are really important resources as to how it can be done.[2] That Lipman's children's novels have spawned so many other resources and books, based on how educators in different countries have adapted his ideas and the methodologies available for the implantation of thinking in schools, is a testimony to the radical reorientation in educational frameworks that Philosophy for Children has achieved.[3]

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[1] Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 172.

[2] *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, Montclair State College, 1982), as well as *Lisa* (IAPC, 1983). There have been other philosophical novels for children developed consequently.

[3] Not only translations of *Harry* and *Lisa* into other languages but the writing of books that have become source materials for teachers doing Philosophy for Children programs. Examples of these are: Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp and Frederick S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Robert Fisher, *Teaching Thinking: Philosophical Enquiry in the Classroom* (London: Continuum, 1998); Ann Margaret Sharp and Ronald F. Reed (eds.), *Studies in Philosophy for Children: Harry*

After working with Lipman's novels for many years, and observing the responses of teachers and students to the novels, an important question for me has been whether the *presentation* of the philosophical issues embedded in ordinary daily situations, in the family and school, and among friends, for example, also has a cultural or even *zeitgeist* dimension, hence the philosophical novels that might capture the lived world of the child would also have to take this issue of the background culture more significantly, or more purposefully.

While some philosophical (ethical, logical, epistemological, etc.) questions may have general and even universal appeal (questions about inequality, power and wealth, relationships, what can be known, what criteria are reliable, etc.), it matters what the specific statements and cultural contexts those issues are phrased in so that the questions that arise may be easier for children of a particular culture and context to relate with, because the predicaments that children confront are "truer" to 'where they are'. The ability to tap into that deep culture would be required of those who will write philosophical novels that hope to arouse sufficiently profound questions.[4]

The question becomes (in being able to demonstrate how thinking skills can be cultivated and enhanced, using philosophical novels for children), is cultural context important in writing stories for children so that it becomes easier for them to resonate with the issues and dilemmas that children are confronted with?

The sensitivity to mental acts and the confidence provided by the logical rules are buttresses that can sharpen thinking and self-awareness, and provide further confidence to the children as they tackle contested concepts and enlighten themselves further in dealing with many problematic situations.

What would be some of the manifestations of having been able to think better about a particular situation? One manifestation would be the ability to view a situation from more than one perspective, and yet at the same time also to allow these

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*Stottlemeier's Discovery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Laurance J. Splitter, Ann M. Shar, *Teaching for Better Thinking* (Melbourne: The Australian Council for Educational Research, 1995).

[4] An interesting thesis, for example, about Filipino culture is that while on the surface the Spanish and American influences are pervasive because of the colonial experiences, and that while Filipinos are racially and linguistically Asian, the mind-set is actually Iberian or even European; more perceptive cultural commentators would say that the Hindu and Buddhist influences from pre-colonial times are part of the deeper *ethos* that Filipinos have. This is shown arguably in being open and receptive to other cultures, being not so rigid in moralities but rather more relationship-oriented and community-centered. Furthermore, there is a profound emotional stability and peacefulness with the surrounding natural environment. Such a description proposes that the 'archaeology' of cultural influences runs deep and would have to be unearthed too.

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perspectives to intersect and not to remain separated. And when the perspectives intersect, can they mutually challenge each other such that not only a multi-perspective can arise but a more 'objective' and less partisan point of view can arise. "All things considered" can be the phrase that can aptly capture what a multi-perspectival outlook can be concerned with.

Experience with facilitating various communities of inquiry, with students and public school teachers, has afforded this writer with occasions of exhilarating joy of synergies arising out of authentic exchanges. Thoughts are provoked or inspired within the community itself as it journeys through various questions and proposals. And there are convergences and disagreements that are all contributory to a sense of a larger appreciation of a more complex phenomenon to which each one has contributed a perspective or a point of view. A sense of intellectual empowerment develops. Most everyone is engaged and involved in the discussion at hand and awaits what idea will arise out of the discussion, articulated by one and enhanced and built upon by another. The experience of an open and liberating philosophical discussion within a community of inquiry is perhaps one of the most profound intellectual and emotional experiences one can have, and when it is fully relished can yield vast insights and personal changes.

The community of inquiry can engender synergy in thinking. The quality of learning can be seen through the quality of questions propounded as well as the depth of the responses evoked. There are also accompanying emotional realizations, and when there are opportunities for students to then write their reflections, writing becomes the encoding of thoughts and organized thinking.

There is also collective epistemic progress in a community of inquiry. The philosophical dialogue builds on what the community has affirmed to itself. When it can occur in several minds that the intersections of perspectives can occur, the result can be a clarification and affirmation of existing points of view. A new perspective can be constructed from the elements that are offered, especially when there are disagreements or opposite positions held. Starting from a provocative question that opens up several possible answers and the impetus towards a resolution that satisfies as much as possible the concerns, worries and anxieties of those involved, the inquiry leads to wherever it can legitimately support itself. As incremental contributions and clarifications are made, the possibility that the understanding occurring in several minds is shared, means that a measure of collective objectivity will have been achieved. Difficult questions become relatively manageable because several minds are pondering the same predicament.

It is an achievement of the community of inquiry when realizations arise, borne out of specious and competent thinking, and these realizations would not have been possible without the interplay of mental acts and the articulation of several perspectives that can provoke an 'enlargement of horizons.' This enlargement of horizons is a

collective achievement that each participant realizes and can now provide a further rampart from which to pursue further and other, more difficult issues.

## Mental Acts

The reflective model of educational practice through the working and active community of inquiry can become an excellent venue for self-knowledge and intellectual growth. Not only through the collective epistemic progress, but through greater sensitivity to mental acts. Transformation is demonstrated through realizations, and realizations are expressed in thoughts. Emotions become triggers and hallmarks of learning, punctuating what are significant and meaningful.

The articulations made by the participants in communities of inquiry of what they have realized affirms more and more that thinking in education or criteria-based thinking will have vast implication for what need to be done and can be done within the classroom. The philosophical novel for children when it exemplifies the mental acts and logical rules for sound and robust thinking, as elements and grounds for a solid thinker, provides the venue for this self-knowledge and intellectual growth. Provided the novel can also incorporate and articulate a culturally-sensitive and aware context, the stories of the lives of children can depict the situations and dilemmas that children find themselves in. The illustration of various mental acts becomes a mirror through which children can also become aware of their own mental acts. And when they are able to identify their own various mental acts and the choices available to them through this awareness, a vast repertoire of responses becomes available to them. The familiarity with logical rules can provide greater confidence in their own ability to recognize bases for what we can know and why.

From children with different learning styles or thinking personalities, how a community of inquiry arises shows sound reasoning principles in action. Setting up routines that demonstrate that reflectiveness makes for reasonableness, because the reasons I provide myself must have been reflected upon and considered, makes it not difficult to incorporate into daily life the reflective practices that have been engaged in.

The upshot of such practices becoming more predominant within a society will be more reflective, and craftsmanlike thinking and judging, citizens. Together with different sorts of mental acts and logical rules applied to ordinary and commonplace situations where there are plenty of opportunities for children to problematize their situation and reflect more deeply on those situations they find themselves in, children will definitely find themselves equipped with facility to think through the problems they confront.

The different mental acts become part of the repertoire that any member of the community of inquiry can use in order to make a discussion more holistic and cover a larger scope. By doing so, it will be possible for the quality of deliberation to improve and

attain a more sophisticated and complex level, that would not have been possible without the array of mental acts.

The repertoire of mental acts includes the following, even if some might be more significant than others:

1. thinking for oneself
2. thinking about the self
3. articulating what the problem is
4. clarifying the meaning of concepts
5. giving feedback
6. asking for evidence, proof, warrant
7. proposing criteria for evaluating reasons
8. providing alternative interpretations or points of view
9. articulating inferences, implications, consequences
10. taking context into account, etc.

What would be the factors that contribute to productive discussions? As a reflection on my practice as facilitator in philosophical discussions, it is very important that through listening one is able to accompany the student. Through affirmation and feedback, through giving a signal that what has been said has been understood genuinely, acceptance and understanding of what has been said is communicated. This helps build confidence in the student that what has been shared has been taken on its own merits, and it is furthermore possible to convey what one truly thinks and be assured that this will not be distorted nor misinterpreted.

What needs to be constructed is an environment wherein the participant in the community of inquiry strongly believes that she will be understood and her ideas taken as they are, and that there is openness to a variety of perspectives, since they are authentic expressions by real persons of what their viewpoint is. But this is only the initial moment of the growth of the community of inquiry: the willingness and openness to articulate each one's authentic viewpoint. What is then possible is an intersection or connection among the viewpoints presented. There must be opportunities for the different perspectives to interrogate each other.

For this to happen, not only must authentic presentations be possible, there must be openness to further inquiry by allowing, especially opposing, points of view to confront and engage each other. Conceptually one would assume that there will be have to be a "larger" scope that can accommodate the opposing perspectives and through which then both can be assessed and evaluated such that a convergence becomes possible, or if not, that where the essential differences are can be identified and a divergence is

acknowledged. The role of the facilitator at this juncture is to articulate where the group discussion is.

By posing reflective and reflexive questions, the facilitator (and the group) helps develop greater self-awareness and contribute to more reflectiveness. If lesson are more meaningful if they arise out of one's own reflections and realizations (rather than being told from the outside, or from outside of one's own realizations), the thrust would thus be towards evoking from the thinker what her own realizations are.

## The Process of Meaning-Making

Every so often it is important to articulate what are the meanings that are being generated by the philosophical exchanges within a community of inquiry. How a person makes sense of what is going is vital. A qualitative dimension is sought over and above the particular arguments that are presented. What does it mean for me? What sense do I make out of all this discussion? Every so often there is a need to make sense of what is going, and this meaningfulness would be important to share. The same questions and similar questions cannot always be assumed to have the same significance to different persons, primarily because each one would have a lens with which to view these questions and answers. How that lens is engaged and then made to articulate what its present state is, is part of the how the community of inquiry gathers together the meanings that emanate from each of the participants.

The sharing of meanings could possibly be the most intimate part of a community of inquiry.

The manifestations that the community of inquiry is working include the quality of the questions and the depth of the reflections. The quality of the questions can be gauged by self-correctiveness on one hand (are we asking the right questions, are we asking the questions that will enable us to get to the more important matters that we can talk about, etc.) and by the range of possible answers that can be generated. The more varied and more profound the probable responses to the question can be, the more complex the matters that can be touched upon are, most probably the better the question is. The depth of the reflections can be seen in the way that various ideas are woven into the response and made coherent because there is a larger scope that will have been reached by the reflection.

When these reflections are shared within the community, the experience of sharing and intimate thoughts because one is assured that the others will accept and understand and one trusts the other members, can exhilarating and even liberating. One will be both profound and transparent in one's thinking to the others. These realizations would not have been possible without the trusting and understanding environment. These intellectual exchanges are actually accompanied by emotional attachments, of

friendships through shared thoughts and meanings that can enable the more mature, "fuller" person to come out. Emotions are triggers and hallmarks of learning, to punctuate what has been realized as significant and meaningful.

Improving the ability to give good reasons is a crucial element in the learning that occurs in the community of inquiry. Seeking reasons and then assessing the reasons provided can be considered the core of learning. The criteria for reasons that are recognized as valid, robust, firm and reliable are continually the results of conception, revision, negotiation and affirmation. What are the meta-criteria for evaluating criteria would be a fantastic achievement if a community of inquiry can proceed in that direction.

Some of the criteria that can be used for assessing reasons are:

1. impartiality
2. objectivity
3. respect for persons
4. providing impetus to search for further reasons.

And the characteristics of good reasons include (being):[5]

1. factual
2. relevant
3. supportive
4. familiar
5. final.

The community of inquiry develops practices that reinforce the assessment of reasons given criteria that are recognized as valid. When the reflective practices become ingrained the deliberations within the community of inquiry acquire a quality that can address more and deeper issues.

## Practice in, and Research into, the Community of Inquiry within the Philippines

The initiative to implement Philosophy for Children in the Philippines came from Philosophy teachers from the University of the Philippines (UP). Three faculty members were able to go, at different occasions, to the Institute for Advancement of Philosophy for Children of the Montclair State University summer workshops at Mendham, New Jersey. Over time, some faculty members from the UP began conducting training programs for various groups, most especially public school teachers from the Manila Division of City

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[5] Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan, op. cit. 143.

Schools. Faculty members also teach undergraduate courses on Philosophy for Children in the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, as well as graduate courses in Philosophy of Education using primarily the texts and resources of the Philosophy for Children program at the UP College of Education.

At present, there is renewed interest in introducing Philosophy for Children among the Manila public schools because, again, it has been realized that focusing on thinking in education will be vastly different from emphasizing rote learning in the public school system. The moment might be especially auspicious because at the present moment (2013), the Philippine government is implementing a new K-12 curriculum and allows for mother-tongue based instruction (instead of the presumed national language, Filipino, or English, which traditionally have been languages of instruction) from Kindergarten to Grade 3 and encourages the teachers to utilize more of the community and local language and culture in their classroom activities.

During a recent training program (April 2013) given to Manila public school teachers, master teachers and school principals, using chapters from *Harry* and *Lisa*, the experiential learning gave the public school teachers themselves an insight into how active and participative their students can be since the learning agenda is not dictated by the teacher (facilitator) but is determined by the questions the participants themselves posed. Immediately what is communicated to the participants is that, what we will talk about will be what you are interested in investigating further. Given their own enthusiasm and active learning, the public school teachers were easily convinced that they should provide this opportunity for their children to develop communities of inquiry.

The further realization is that if they are going to be able to facilitate philosophical discussions among their students, the teachers themselves will have to be better thinkers themselves, and learn how to pursue inquiry better. They themselves need to be able to seek reasons and assess the quality of reasons. The whole school will be vastly different if the focus is on the student's (and teachers') thinking rather than rote learning of inert knowledge found in unreliable textbooks.

Research into the applicability of Philosophy for Children in a local school in Daet, Camarines Norte, south of Manila, using Filipino children's stories has indicated that indeed, it is possible to develop a community of inquiry among Grade Two students after even only five sessions using the community of inquiry approach.[6] Using Ann Margaret Sharp and Laurance Splitter's 'marks of philosophical discussion' (reasoning and inquiry, clarification of concepts and meaning-making)[7] as well as Golding's criteria of

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[6] Abigail Thea O. Canuto, "Critical Thinking and 'Philosophical Progress' in Dialogues of Grade Two Children in a Community of Inquiry," Unpublished Master of Arts in Education thesis submitted to the College of Education, University of the Philippines (April 2013).

[7] *Teaching for Better Thinking*, op. cit.

'philosophical progress,'[8] the research amply demonstrates that there is considerable increase in the children's use of the three main critical skills, as well as growth in the way such skills are used and how the children's ideas develop by the fifth session. The researcher did content analysis of the transcribed discussions and the analysis reveals that there is marked improvement in building on each other's ideas and deepening of conceptual probing and understanding. From the fifth until the fifteenth session there was a steady development in the children's critical thinking skills.

Further research among more children and schools will reveal why and how the community of inquiry approach works, but at least for this one instance it has already been shown that it does work. Further investigation will be useful to identify what may have been the factors that contributed to such success. Aside from Golding's criteria for 'philosophical progress' it could also be further investigated whether there are cultural factors that can enhance or hinder philosophical dialogues. Or can there be more culturally-contextualized indicators for 'philosophical progress' that are perhaps more germane to Filipinos. There are philosophical assumptions and presuppositions regarding 'philosophical progress' that need to be made more evident and apparent. Such a theoretical discussion could even have implications for other educational theories as well, e.g., Vygotsky's "sphere of proximal development."

## Challenges for implementation in the Philippines

For communities of inquiry to be further developed and encouraged in Philippine public schools there are certain processes that will have to take place:

### 1. Implantation of Thinking Skills Programs in Colleges of Education.

While there are a number of professors in colleges of education in the Philippine have heard of the Philosophy for Children program, there are as yet no formal training of undergraduate students of education in the Philosophy for Children or other thinking skills programs. For the next generation of teachers, especially in basic education, there will have to be formal instruction and training in Philosophy for Children, or in thinking skills, for them to be better trained in the theory and practice of a thinking skills program that will encourage communities of inquiry.

This would involve a very significant paradigm shift among professors of education and the in-service training of basic education teachers. The professors of

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[8] C. Golding, ""That's a better idea!"--Philosophical Progress and Philosophy for Children," *Childhood and Philosophy* (5), 10, (2009): 223-269; also C. Golding, "A Conception of Philosophical Progress," *Essays in Philosophy*, Vol. 12, Issue 2, (2011).

education themselves would have to be proficient in thinking skills. Ideally, professors of philosophy should be more engaged with the training of education students as well in thinking skills.

Implantation of thinking skills program in colleges of education means that undergraduates will be exposed to thinking skills themselves and will not have much difficulty presumably in being able to model these skills to their students when they eventually teach in the schools. The reflective model of education has to permeate the thinking of education colleges themselves, for there to be considerable impact in the instruction in basic education.

## 2. Best Practices, Models and Paradigms of Schools using the Philosophy for Children

A public school with trained teachers who are eager to use thinking skills in their classes can be an experimental school to validate to what extent thinking skills improve the performance of the students. The implementation of the thinking skills can be monitored and documented, with a control class and an experimental class, at the same grade level, to see to what extent a thinking skills program improves performance along certain parameters.

This research should further reveal how and perhaps why a thinking skills program can work, and with what kind of interventions from teachers. The teachers involved will also have to cooperate with this research endeavor.

A pilot school can be a showcase for how thinking skills can be integrated into the present curriculum and institutional requirements (assessment and minimum learning competencies mandated by the Department of Education). Research can provide the evidence how and to what extent such thinking skills improve the learning process, given certain parameters. The lessons from such a pilot school and the accompanying research can be replicated in several other sites.

Continuing research on best practices, models and paradigms of thinking skills programs will be a significant component of how a shift in education from rote learning and memorization to thinking can be carried out.

## 3.  Developing Instructional Materials

At a time when the Philippine educational system is undergoing important changes in basic education, with a redesign of the K-12 curriculum, and the emphasis on the use of the local language (the Philippines has eight major regional languages, with vernaculars in different towns and provinces) for the first three grades, and the need, therefore, to develop instructional materials for the early grades; this would be a good opportunity to develop books that can induce questions that can then be the foci for student-centered learning in communities of inquiry.

The kinds of instructional materials that can be developed can be similar to philosophical novels for children. They depict children undertaking inquiry about ordinary matters in school, in the family, in the neighborhood and community. The children can personify different thinking styles and mental acts, the panoply of which fosters, within a community of inquiry, a more encompassing and well-rounded process of inquiry. And as they interact with one another, a community of inquiry is also evolving and maturing. What can be detailed are not only the situations that induce provocative issues, but also the different points of view and perspectives that are allowed to intersect with one another, and through a simulated resolution, certain possible progressions of thinking are also revealed.

A challenge will be how to include the background culture into the context of the children's discussion, in the manner in which they propound their perspectives, and what kind of cultural presuppositions and assumptions the development of the community of inquiry will involve. A hypothesis is precisely that the discussions of the children within the instructional material will also empower them to delve deeper into the cultural presuppositions of their communities.

The instructional materials should also propose the need to provide reasons for actions, decisions, perspectives and judgments. A high point would be the ability to discuss criteria and meta-criteria, to evaluate and assess reasons. Materials that can induce thinking about thinking, self-awareness, thinking about one's thoughts, would be ideal.

## 4.  Training Public School Teachers in Facilitating Philosophical Dialogue

For the thinking skills program to be undertaken in more public schools, teachers will have to experience how it is for them themselves to undertake learning tackling the questions that interest them. This experiential learning will be their insight into how children might be experiencing their own student-centered learning. The various exercises in identifying mental acts and harnessing expertise in utilizing various ways of inquiry can be the focus of such a training program.

Teachers will have to be trained further in how to focus on the thinking of their students, and their own thinking. Thinking teachers will model what it means for a person to be craftsmanlike in their thinking. For the teachers to be so sensitized, their training even in colleges of education will have to be *significantly redesigned*. The over-all thrust of focusing on thinking instead of rote learning means that teachers themselves will have to be confident in their own ability to question, critique, evaluate existing knowledge and embark on a process where they, in their communities of inquiry, will generate their own thinking and be confident of the veracity and validity of the results of their inquiry. Teachers will therefore not anymore just be purveyors or communicators of existing knowledge, but will have been able to acquire the skills and the confidence to generate new knowledge, or at least be able to critique existing knowledge with reliable methods and tools of inquiry.

To train teachers to be facilitators of philosophical dialogue will mean that they are able to listen to the children and process the children's thinking, think with the children, with respect and at the same time reasoning and rationality. Reasoning and rationality in terms of articulating what is the (inchoate) thinking of the child put in such a form that the statements can be considered, examined, evaluated and put out in a manner that is accessible to the others in the discussion. By putting the thinking in sentential form and being open to review by others, thinking is actually laid out and self-reflexively scrutinized.

## Summary

The focus of education has to be thinking. For thinking to become the focus of education there are certain imperatives. This paper has identified what these imperatives are: implantation in colleges of education; best practices, models and paradigms of thinking education; development of instructional materials that foster communities of inquiry; training of teachers in thinking skills, specially facilitating philosophical dialogue.

The present conditions are auspicious for Philosophy for Children to be better recognized as a significant element in the Philippine basic education system and with the experience of the teachers and students themselves as evidence and support, with focus on thinking, learning is better enhanced and communities of inquiry can flourish.

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