dossier "philosophy with children across boundaries"

may i kindle a light?

sitting at a table with hannah arendt and philosophy for/with children in dark times

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abstract

This paper draws on Hannah Arendt's notion of "dark times" to explore how philosophy for/with children (P4wC) can serve as a space for sustaining plurality and connection in a politically sensitive context. Using retrospective qualitative analysis of autoethnographic data, we examine the lived experience of a P4wC facilitator navigating the challenges, tensions, and ethical dilemmas of conducting philosophical dialogue with young adult female students during the 2022 unrest in Iran. Through a philosophical reflection on these experiences, we proposed two essential roles for P4wC facilitators in politically sensitive environments. First, the "Light-Keeper" preserves thoughtfulness and hope, ensuring that philosophical inquiry remains possible despite external and internal pressures. Second, the "Light-Intensity manager" carefully balances the freedom of inquiry with the cultural and political sensitivities of the context, safeguarding the long-term sustenance of the community of inquiry. Although these roles may seem paradoxical, they reflect

the complex realities of facilitating dialogue in sensitive or repressive conditions. By engaging in a shared reflection, facilitators themselves, too, can resist isolation and contribute to a broader discourse on philosophy of education in dark times.

posso acender uma luz?
sentar-se à mesa com hannah arendt e a filosofia para/com crianças em tempos sombrios

resumo

Este artigo baseia-se na noção de "tempos sombrios" de Hannah Arendt para explorar como a filosofia para/com crianças (FpcC) pode servir como um espaço para sustentar a pluralidade e a conexão em um contexto politicamente sensível. Utilizando uma análise qualitativa retrospectiva de dados autoetnográficos, examinamos a experiência vivida de uma facilitadora de FpcC navegando pelos desafios, tensões e dilemas éticos ao conduzir diálogos filosóficos com alunas jovens adultas durante os protestos de 2022 no Irã. Por meio de uma reflexão filosófica sobre essas experiências, propomos dois papéis essenciais para facilitadores de FpcC em ambientes politicamente sensíveis. Primeiro, o "Guardião da Luz" preserva a reflexão e a esperança, garantindo que a investigação filosófica permaneça possível apesar das pressões externas e internas. Segundo, o "Gestor da Intensidade da Luz" equilibra cuidadosamente a liberdade de investigação com as sensibilidades culturais e políticas do contexto, salvaguardando a sustentação a longo prazo da comunidade de investigação. Embora esses papéis possam parecer paradoxais, eles refletem as realidades complexas de facilitar o diálogo em condições sensíveis ou repressivas. Ao engajar-se em uma reflexão

compartilhada, os próprios facilitadores também podem resistir ao isolamento e contribuir para um discurso mais amplo sobre a filosofia da educação em tempos sombrios.

puedo encender una luz?
sentarse a la mesa con hannah arendt y la filosofía para/con niños en tiempos oscuros

resumen

Este artículo se basa en la noción de "tiempos oscuros" de Hannah Arendt para explorar cómo la filosofía para/con niños (P4wC) puede servir como un espacio para sostener la pluralidad y la conexión en un contexto políticamente sensible. Utilizando un análisis cualitativo retrospectivo de datos autoetnográficos, examinamos la experiencia vivida de una facilitadora de P4wC navegando por los desafíos, tensiones y dilemas éticos al conducir diálogos filosóficos con estudiantes jóvenes adultas durante las protestas de 2022 en Irán. A través de una reflexión filosófica sobre estas experiencias, proponemos dos roles esenciales para los facilitadores de P4wC en entornos políticamente sensibles. Primero, el "Guardián de la Luz" preserva la reflexión y la esperanza, asegurando que la investigación filosófica siga siendo posible a pesar de las presiones externas e internas. Segundo, el "Gestor de la Intensidad de la Luz" equilibra cuidadosamente la libertad de investigación con las sensibilidades culturales y políticas del contexto, salvaguardando la sostenibilidad a largo plazo de la comunidad de investigación. Aunque estos roles puedan parecer paradójicos, reflejan la realidad compleja de facilitar el diálogo en condiciones sensibles o represivas. Al participar en una reflexión compartida, los propios

facilitadores también pueden resistir al aislamiento y contribuir a un discurso más amplio sobre la filosofía de la educación en tiempos oscuros.

palabras clave: tiempos oscuros; hannah arendt; comunidad de investigación; filosofía para/con niñas y niños; facilitador.

may I kindle a light?

sitting at a table with hannah arendt and philosophy for/with children in dark times

> In this rough blind alley with a twist of cold,
> they keep the fire
> burning on the fuel of
> songs and poetries.
> Do not risk to think!
> Strange time it is, my darling.
> He who knocks the doors at nights,
> has come to kill the lights;
> Light shall be kept concealed in corners of closets.
>
> Ahmad Shamlou, *In this Blind Alley*

introduction

We would like to begin our discussion with a synopsis of the science fiction drama series, Silo (Yost, 2023–present), which, we believe, has succeeded in dramatically depicting the core concept of our discussion, that is, "dark times." The events of Silo take place in a dark and dystopian future, depicting a society of people living deep beneath the Earth's surface. These people do not know exactly how long people have been underground. It is also unknown to them who built the silo. They just know that their silo is safe, and the world outside is fatally dangerous due to its toxic air. Life in the Silo is handled and controlled by strict rules and regulations. The residents of the silo are happy as the rules and the heads of the silo keep them safe. The silo's leaders control the information, rules, and structure of the community. The authoritarian order of the Silo is preserved through secrecy, strict regulations, and punishment for any violation of the rules. People who seek to know about the history of the Silo and the time before it (including a group of women named Flame keepers) expose themselves to prosecution and execution. The population, who are kept ignorant of their history, live under a constant state of surveillance, social stratification, and lack of autonomy. Being "ignorant of the history" resonates with the famous statement by French historian and political philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, who in 1838 wrote, "If the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit walks in darkness."

The eradication of the past leaves people in confusion and terminates their capability to shape their future. Tocqueville's metaphor of "walking in darkness" brings to mind the disconnected, detached people who, despite walking and living alongside, are incapable of communication and collective action. The structure of the silo also, from its architecture to its governance, ensures that individuals are powerless, isolated, and fearful. However, things start to change when a young woman, Juliette, begins asking questions, covertly seeks to solve mysteries of the Silo and pays the price for her disobedience. Her action also inspires other individuals who gradually become suspicious of the order and dare to think in their solitude and/or with others.

What is portrayed above brings us to a famous thinker who investigates and writes about darkness extensively in her work. "Dark times" is a key concept in the political philosophy of Jewish German thinker, Hannah Arendt, who strives to delicately explain the conditions that lead to dark times. Her reflections on this concept most poignantly appear in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1951), *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958), and *Men in Dark Times* (Arendt, 1968). By dark times, simply put, Arendt means those moments in history when public life is eclipsed by oppression, moral collapse, and the erosion of collective values. Borrowing the term from Bertolt Brecht's poem "To Posterity,"[1] Arendt applied it to the unrestrained political landscapes of her time, particularly the rise of totalitarian regimes. In a time of extreme political repression, individuals lose their agency and capacity for action – "vita activa" – and are stripped of the public spaces where they can engage in meaningful dialogue, collective action, and political life with their fellow beings. In these contexts, Arendt feared that individuals could be reduced to "masses" without individual agency, and political life would be dominated by bureaucratic structures that manipulate and suppress human freedom. In her book, *Men in Dark Times*, she writes:

> If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by "credibility gaps" and "invisible government," by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of

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[1] Or "To Those Born Later," in other translations.

upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality. (Arendt, 1969, p. viii).

Arendt uses the term in plural form to stress that dark times are not unique or limited to a specific time or period. Dark times go beyond the rise of totalitarianism to include periods when people refrain from thinking critically, abandon their agency, and live in constant uncertainty. These times make themselves visible in thoughtlessness, "the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of "truths" which have become trivial and empty" (Arendt, 1958, p. 5). Dark times, for Arendt, are not a "rarity in the history of the world" and "does not name the genocides, purges, and hunger of a specific era. Instead, darkness refers to the way these horrors appear in public discourse and yet remain hidden" (Berkowitz, 2010, p. 3). Human loneliness and isolation, absent the public sphere, and the "crisis of philosophy [that] may have prepared the ground for a totalitarian state devoid of critical reflection" (Weissberg, 2002, p. 278) are among other characteristics of dark times. When people are isolated from one another, deprived of public spaces for action, and reduced to ordinary objects of state control they lose their humanity; we have the privilege of being human as long as we are capable of discussing the affairs of our shared world with others.

Uncertainty of dark times inflicts on people a sense of anxiety and fear that induces them to cease thinking and follow the masses. When individuals, unthinkingly follow the values and beliefs provided by an authority and conform to its demands, they cease to exist as humans and their world disappears, because they do not have anything to share with others. The only way to regain the subjectivity is to think, the virtue by which people can leave their caves or as Arendt puts it, "when everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action" (Arendt, 1981, p. 192). Here, Arendt highlights the political implications of thinking as she considers moving and acting against the prevailing conformity is political. Further, she explains the significance of the Socratic method of thinking, known as midwifery, in questioning and unveiling unexamined opinions. She thinks, when exposed to the Socratic method, the "values, doctrines, theories and even

convictions" are destroyed bringing about a liberating effect of discerning "right and wrong" (Arendt, 1981, p. 192). Arendt is against withdrawing from the real world into a world of sheer contemplation and reflection. She believes in the dignity of political life and engaging with reality, even when inconvenient or ugly. Thinking is inherently political for Arendt and, when she refers to the Socratic Method, she is highlighting and valuing it as a disruptive political action. The Socratic Method is a thoughtful procedure of asking questions to examine a concept, situation, belief, etc. Arendt identifies how establishments or systems use their efficient rhetoric to darken and hide horrific public facts. She explains that through "highly efficient talk and double-talk of nearly all official representatives, who, without interruption and in many ingenious variations, explain away unpleasant facts and justified concerns" (Arendt, 1969, p. viii). Therefore, the Socratic Method is designed to unveil and to interrupt, but, since the hiding efforts are done by "highly efficient talk", men/women who dare to interrupt and challenge the manipulative rhetoric should learn to do it efficiently. Resistance requires not only courage but also skill in engaging with prevailing discourses. Thus, despite her extensive writings on dark times, Arendt is not a cynical thinker. She is against both false hope and false despair. What she seeks to explain is the importance of thinking and the need to take responsibility for our lives and the world. She positively writes that,

> even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth … . Eyes so used to darkness as ours will hardly be able to tell whether their light was the light of a candle or that of a blazing sun. (Arendt, 1969, p. ix)

With such encouragement, what we intend to delve into throughout this paper is the investigation of possible ways of kindling the light in dark times through education, especially through the Philosophy for/with Children (P4wC) program. Facilitators of communities of philosophical inquiry in formal educational institutions have to deal with the persistent twofold problem of the demands of the fixed curriculum and the responsibility they feel towards their students and their community of inquiry. They have to respond to the past/tradition while they must nurture the new/students. Also, a

responsive/responsible facilitator knows that "without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance" (Arendt, 1961b, p. 149), therefore they must make every arrangement to authorize this appearance. This situation is even worse when they live and move in dark times where they have to cope with their fears, uncertainties, and bureaucratic pressure. The enterprise of P4wC invites the facilitators to assist students in their journey of free, collective, and dialogic thinking which is essentially against the demands and directives of ideological educational institutes. Here the facilitators' crisis intensifies as they find themselves morally committed to maintaining the freedom of the students and democratic values, while, at the same time, they are righteously anxious and concerned about their own safety and the consequences of their practices. Therefore, what a facilitator has to deal with becomes more complicated, especially when there are different layers and crises in dark times.

Drawing inspiration from one of the authors' challenging experiences of navigating CPI sessions in a school during the 2022 political unrests in Iran, this paper aims to view CPI in a new light to answer how P4wC facilitators can navigate politically sensitive discussions in dark times while preserving both plurality and community sustenance?

methodological approach of the study

This study employs a qualitative approach that integrates critical philosophical inquiry and autoethnography to explore the theory and practice of P4wC in critical situations under restrictive political conditions. As Oberg (1982) states, the definitive purpose of critical philosophical inquiry and educational criticism is to enhance educational practice. Educational improvement, as a result of this, entails the inquiry to "include recommendations or at least discussion of implications of the findings of the inquiry for improvement of practice" (Haggerson, 1991, p. 49). Through retrospective reflections on one of the authors' experiences conducting P4wC sessions with young adult female students, we analyze this experience through the philosophical lens of Hannah Arendt. By engaging in both philosophical/theoretical argumentation and personal narrative, this study contributes to discussions on how P4wC facilitators can navigate

politically charged environments.

Since autoethnography foregrounds self-reflection and the researcher's lived experience as a means of generating knowledge (Chang, 2008), the personal and classroom notes of one of the authors, who is a P4wC facilitator, were used to revisit this experience with the philosophical distance necessary for critical analysis (Adams et al., 2015). These reflections examine:

- The students' reactions and their quality of engagement in community dialogues
- The challenges of managing discussions amid political surveillance,
- The personal concerns and ethical dilemmas of a P4wC facilitator working under restrictive political conditions,
- The evolving interpretation of these experiences in light of Arendt's philosophy.

By combining philosophical inquiry with autoethnographic reflections we aim to provide a deeper understanding of the realities of facilitating P4wC in schools in critical situations/dark times. We also manage to offer insights and strategies for educators navigating similar challenges doing philosophical inquiry with young adults in schools.

education for/in dark times equipped with p4wC

In dark times, where misinformation, polarization, and authoritarian tendencies threaten democratic values, the role of education is more important than ever. As mentioned earlier, Arendt believes that even in the darkest of times, human beings have the capacity to find moments of illumination. Therefore, education, as a process of enlightening, plays a pivotal role in cultivating this potential. It can provide individuals with the tools to think critically, question, and engage in meaningful dialogue. As Arendt (1961a) writes in "The Crisis in Education," education provides children with the "chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us" and preparing "them in advance for the task of renewing a common world" (p. 196). Education, then, is seen as a process of preparing young people to think independently and participate actively in public life. In her original German version of Crisis in Education, "Die Krise in

der Erziehung" Arendt uses the word "Erziehung", which comes from the verb "ziehen," which means "to pull." This metaphor suggests that education is a process of "pulling" or guiding the student into the public sphere. While we often think of education as simply imparting skills or knowledge, at its core, it is about introducing individuals to a shared way of life. For Arendt, education assumes the existence of a public world with authority, and its purpose is to lead the student into this world and prepare them for taking responsibility for the shared world they will inherit. It is the responsibility of adults and teachers to prepare young people to navigate and grow within the world that already exists (Berkowitz, 2020, p. 18). Therefore, teachers will have a dual responsibility for the world and for children. In Arendt's words:

> Insofar as the child is not yet acquainted with the world, he must be gradually introduced to it; insofar as he is new, care must be taken that this new thing comes to fruition in relation to the world as it is. In any case, however, the educators here stand in relation to the young as representatives of a world for which they must assume responsibility although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly wish it were other than it is. This responsibility is not arbitrarily imposed upon educators; it is implicit in the fact that the young are introduced by adults into a continuously changing world. (Arendt, 1961a, p. 189)

Veck (2013), drawing on Arendt's analysis of authority in education[2], suggests that if an education focuses on including the child, but ignores the world, the young are left in restless meaning-seeking. On the other hand, an education exclusively dedicated to what is to be taught, neglects the distinctive potential of each child and results in an empty experience for the learner. In both cases, the educator's twofold responsibility to the world and the young and, therefore, to the educator's authority is transgressed (p. 40). Thus the educator's failure in either respect undermines their moral and intellectual responsibility to both learners and the world. As Araújo and Auer (2022) put it, education, in Arendt's view, should be able to introduce children to a public culture that allows them, in turn, to appropriate it. Thus, "only an education founded on a public horizon is able to educate children in a way that allows them the opportunity to act in the world" (p. 1). Therefore, when Arendt refers to the *crisis* of education, she is primarily

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[2] This concept of authority is deeply influenced by Arendt's philosophy of education, where authority is neither authoritarian control nor mere influence but rather a responsible and trusted position that connects the past (the world as it is) with the future (the new generation).

highlighting the failure of educators to take on the responsibility of showing students the world as it truly is. This failure is a result of the loss of authority, which, according to Arendt, means that both the demands of the world and the need for order are being rejected—whether consciously or unconsciously (Berkowitz, 2020, pp. 18–19).

All in all, education is not a panacea but a vital starting point for cultivating the resilience and creativity needed to confront the challenges of dark times. As Nixon (2022) argues, thoughtfulness becomes a crucial tool for resistance and hope in dark times. Without it, there can be no careful judgment or coordinated action based on reflection and considering different options. Arendt argued that education serves as a space for fostering thoughtfulness; a safe environment for the young and a more developed forum for those transitioning into adulthood. She would caution against the idea that we are naturally thoughtful. Instead, thoughtfulness is developed through our initiation into and participation in a supportive learning environment that resists the thoughtlessness of routine behavior and the allure of detached thinking (Nixon, 2020, p. 60). Therefore, education, when aligned with the principles of critical thought, ethical responsibility, and plurality, serves as a beacon of hope. By empowering individuals to think, act, and care for the world they inhabit, education fosters the resilience and renewal necessary for overcoming moments of crisis. As both a means of personal growth and a foundation for collective action, education is a cornerstone of humanity's enduring fight against oppression and darkness.

However, while education has transformative potential, it faces significant challenges during dark times. Authoritarian regimes often co-opt educational systems to propagate ideology and suppress dissent. Teachers and students may be persecuted for promoting critical thought. Moreover, the erosion of public trust in institutions can undermine the effectiveness of educational initiatives. In response to these challenges, educational programs must be reimagined as acts of resistance. In our opinion, the Philosophy for/with children program can play such a role. As Vansieleghem and Kennedy (2011, p. 179) say:

> This is to suggest that the discursive form that characterises philosophy for children—communal dialogue in an ideal speech situation—is inherently

subversive of the goals of biopower, and as such represents a sort of Trojan Horse wheeled into the ideological state apparatus of Western schooling.

Not only for Western schooling, but also for all kinds of schooling P4wC, we argue, can play the role of Trojan Horse; bring light into dark times. Since dialogue and philosophy are intertwined in the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI), a key concept in P4wC, we draw on one of the authors' experiences of navigating CPI in dark times to argue that, with certain considerations, P4wC can be a good educational candidate for navigation discussion during such times.

gaining new insights through the reflection on past experiences

In this section, we reflect on the experiences of one of the authors, a P4wC facilitator who is experienced in doing philosophy with young female adults, through the lens of Arendt's philosophy. The data is collected from her personal and classroom notes, followed by dialogue with the other author and philosophical reflections, leading to the emergence of the following insights.

conditions a p4wc facilitator might experience in dark times

The famous song *The Sound of Silence* begins with the haunting line, "Hello darkness, my old friend," evoking a world where "people talking without speaking," "people hearing without listening," and "no one dared, disturb the sound of silence." Similarly, Arendt's reflections on dark times resonate today, where political polarization, censorship, and the erosion of the public sphere threaten democratic values. She emphasizes dialogue, ethical responsibility, and the preservation of public spaces as essential strategies for navigating crises. As Arnett (2013) argues, Arendt's work represents "an existential intellectual journey" that provides ethical strategies for responding to darkness with thoughtful action and authentic communication (p. 3). Totalitarian systems thrive on suppressing public discourse and dismantling the public sphere, silencing individual agency, and enforcing conformity. This results in a loss of plurality, which Arendt (1958) defines as the human condition— "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (p. 7). Plurality, as an expression of human freedom, is something totalitarianism cannot tolerate (Arendt, 1951, p. 377). The survival of totalizing ideologies depends on the destruction of public life through the isolation

of individuals from their political capacities (Arendt, 1951, p. 457). When people are deprived of spaces where they can appear before one another, express opinions, and act collectively, they lose not only their political agency but also their shared world.

Arendt (1951) makes an important distinction between isolation, loneliness, and solitude. She explains that isolation prevents action because there is no one to act with, while loneliness is the experience of being abandoned by human companionship (p. 474). Isolation is limited to the political sphere, whereas loneliness affects human life as a whole. Totalitarianism is unique in that it fosters both: it isolates individuals by dismantling public spaces for action and deepens loneliness by eroding private life. In doing so, it cultivates a profound sense of "uprootedness" (the loss of a recognized place in the world) and superfluousness (the feeling of being unnecessary). Just as isolation can lead to loneliness, uprootedness can lead to superfluousness. The ultimate goal of totalitarian regimes is complete domination—reducing individuals to mere instruments of state control, depriving them of political and personal agency, and pushing them into a state of profound loneliness, where they cease to recognize their role in shaping the world. While loneliness erodes the human condition, solitude has the opposite effect. Inspired by Epictetus, Arendt (1951) describes solitude as the ability to be "together with oneself" in reflective thought (p. 476). She argues that all thinking, strictly speaking, happens in solitude, as it is a dialogue between oneself and oneself. However, this two-in-one dialogue ultimately depends on others to confirm one's individuality. The presence of others—those who see as we see and hear as we hear—assures us of the reality of both the world and ourselves (Arendt, 1958, p. 50).

These insights are particularly relevant for a P4wC facilitator, who must be careful not to become isolated in their practice. The challenges of facilitating dialogue in dark times can create a sense of disconnection, but maintaining relationships with other facilitators is crucial. Regular engagement with a community of practice—whether through discussion, reflection, or collaborative problem-solving—can sustain a facilitator's motivation and deepen their understanding. Thinking and writing about experiences after each session in

solitude, then sharing reflections, and exposing them to the insights of others not only prevents isolation but also ensures that facilitation remains a dynamic and evolving process rather than a struggle in loneliness. In the face of the disorienting forces of dark times, the act of thinking together—both within and beyond the classroom—becomes an act of resistance against fragmentation and despair. Facilitators should also take diversity and plurality within their CPI more seriously and avoid using philosophy and dialogue as instrumental for producing and forming a child with specific features—an important issue to which we will return later.

sources of hope for a p4wc facilitator to continue in dark times

In dark times, facilitators may feel a sense of meaninglessness of their work and lose the motivation to continue. The feeling of ineffectiveness and doubt about the impact of philosophical dialogues can push them toward isolation and despair. However, recognizing that the very act of facilitation and creating space for dialogue is a form of resistance and a source of hope, even in the most challenging conditions, can encourage them to persist. They should remember, even in the darkest times, Arendt asserts, that "we have the right to expect some illumination." This illumination emerges from human resilience, creativity, and the capacity for new beginnings—a concept she calls "natality" (Arendt, 1958, p. 9). For Arendt, history is not predetermined; the capacity for renewal through action means that no situation, however dire, is entirely without hope.

Another insight that Arendt can give to facilitators is viewing their community of philosophical inquiry in a new way: a table for kindling the light of a candle/a blazing sun on it. Since the world is a network of embodied, concrete relationships among a plurality of beings who are equal and simultaneously absolutely different and unique; it is a space where human existence and the meaning of life are sought, discussed, and witnessed (Masschelein, 2001, p. 9). Human beings are exposed to and appear to each other in this shared world that separates and relates them simultaneously. It is the right of each individual to have their own place in this world. This place is where individuals appear to each other and make their voices heard. So, both the world, as the space of appearance, and

the unique places inhabited by individuals are significant. "The fundamental deprivation of human rights takes place first and above all in depriving a person of a place in the world which makes his opinions significant and his actions effective" (Arendt, 1949, p. 29). In *The Human Condition*, she writes:

> To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. (Arendt, 1958, pp. 52–53)

Inspired by Arendt's metaphor, CPI can be perceived as a table that gathers children and young adults together and lets each of them have their own unique place in it. CPI sustains the human plurality and connects/relates the participants when they engage in dialogue. It also can create a "community of action" (see Makaiau, 2016). Individuals are dragged out of their loneliness to expose themselves to each other by talking and thinking. Solitude, though a valuable opportunity for thinking, needs a community for evaluation and examination of thought. One can do the thinking in solitude but only when she encounters the others and expresses herself can she know herself. Kant praises the efficacy of community when he says: "Yet how much and how correctly would we think if we did not think as if it were in community with others to whom we communicate our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us!" (Kant, 1996, p. 12).

All together we can say, CPI can provide a safe environment for collective action and developing four dimensions of thinking (the 4Cs: Caring, Critical, Creative and Collaborative), tolerating uncertainty (see Michalik, 2022), practicing ethical reflection, natality and new beginnings, questioning and problematizing, and practicing living together in a world of differences. CPI is a shared safe space for trying to humanize a world that is undergoing dehumanization. With some crucial considerations, it can make new beginnings possible but does not guarantee it as there is no certainty—especially in dark times—rather we enjoy a plurality of chances for unknown beginnings. For a P4wC facilitator, embracing these perspectives can be a source of hope. Recognizing that one's efforts contribute to a larger, shared project of thinking and acting in the world can

sustain motivation and perseverance. Dark times may obscure the horizon, but the mere act of facilitating dialogue, keeping the "table" open, and fostering plurality is itself a form of resistance and renewal. Holding onto this vision allows the facilitator to continue, even when immediate outcomes seem uncertain, knowing that each conversation, each moment of shared inquiry, plants the seeds of transformation.

crucial considerations a p4wc facilitator should pay attention to in dark times

Facilitators, especially the ones who trained in the Lipmanian tradition, may have an analytical and structured view of philosophy and dialogue that limits their potential for acts of resistance in dark times. Their focus on following specific steps (see for example Gregory, 2007) might prevent them from embracing the unpredictability and transformative potential of dialogue. To fully realize the power of philosophy and dialogue in such times, they must expand their perspective beyond procedural facilitation and cultivate an openness to the unexpected. They may need to start a new way of engagement with philosophy and dialogue. As Biesta (2011) warns against the instrumentalization of philosophy in education, where it is reduced to a tool for developing specific skills and qualities rather than fostering freedom and openness. Drawing on Arendt and Levinas, he advocates for an educational approach that prioritizes action, uniqueness, and exposure. Vansieleghem (2005) similarly argues that philosophical dialogue should not be confined to structured methods but should serve as a space where the question of meaning itself can emerge. In dark times, when philosophy risks becoming an instrument for conformity, these perspectives remind us that dialogue must remain open to interruption and transformation. Facilitators should consider this new way of engaging with philosophy and dialogue that can be more helpful in dark times; philosophy and dialogue that are more than mere instruments for cultivating different skills and can celebrate differences, plurality, freedom, new beginnings and newness. They should also remain open to the unpredictable—a stance that is crucial in times of crisis when the temptation to retreat into certainty and uniformity is strong.

Another crucial consideration in dark times is about facilitators' authority. For this, we introduce a dual role: A Light-Keeper and a Light-Intensity Manager. Earlier, we discussed Arendt's idea of authority and the dual responsibility of teachers. Now, we can apply that framework to these two roles:

a) **The Facilitator as a "Light-Keeper"** aligns with the role of creating space for innovation and critical thinking. Similarly, facilitators foster an environment where students can sustain and develop their own thinking and creativity. They encourage students to explore, question, and discover while ensuring that their curiosity and critical thinking are not stifled. In Greene's (1997) words, if teachers begin to see themselves as capable of kindling the light Arendt described, or as those ready to face the dread and nurture the idea of "a possible happiness," they may start to reimagine their life's purpose and engage more proactively with the world (p. 15). In this way, facilitators can take on the role of Light-Keeper—those who keep the light of hope, philosophy, and thoughtfulness alive. This role can be similar to shared authority models (Michaud & Välitalo, 2016, p. 28) with the emphasis that the reason behind this sharing is keeping the flame of thoughtfulness alive. However, a light-keeper should not only ensure the flame remains lit but also prevents it from either extinguishing or turning into a destructive fire. The world discussed here is experiencing dark times, which can easily harm children, especially adolescents, in different ways. A facilitator engaged in P4wC during dark times, particularly within formal educational institutions, faces an ethical dilemma: On the one hand, children should be allowed to discuss and explore a variety of topics, as long as they do so with respect and sound reasoning. According to Gregory (2008), restricting the scope of children's philosophical inquiries not only weakens the P4wC program but also undermines the broader goal of fostering critical thinking and promoting democracy. Encouraging children to think critically and ask insightful questions about science and history while avoiding topics like religion, morality, and politics creates confusion about the nature of

thinking and the significance of those subjects. It also implies a lack of trust in children's integrity, which can lead to resentment and, ultimately, a loss of interest in engaging in thoughtful discussions (Gregory, 2008, pp. 53–54). Thus, facilitators should remain committed to preserving this openness. On the other hand, dark times are not ordinary circumstances—they are times of crisis. Facilitators must also protect both the children and themselves. They and the CPI may face real risks if sensitive topics are discussed without careful consideration. Here is where considering another role will be necessary.

b) **The Facilitator as a "Light-Intensity Manager"** corresponds to the responsibility of preserving tradition and transmitting the shared world. Just as a light-intensity manager regulates brightness to create an optimal environment, facilitators must carefully balance the transmission of cultural, political, educational, and historical sensitivities so that students can understand the world without feeling overwhelmed or manipulated. Importantly, we are not suggesting that, due to the sensitivities of dark times, certain topics should be completely eliminated from philosophical inquiry or deemed taboo. Such an approach would contradict the spirit and values of P4wC. Children need a safe space to think and express themselves. We argue that facilitators should consciously and strategically adopt the role of a Light-Intensity Manager. In this role, and particularly within schools, they must sometimes involve themselves more deeply in the inquiry process—on occasion, even deciding to interrupt it. Although this role may be similar to traditional models of authority (Michaud & Välitalo, 2016, p. 28), the facilitator should not forget the reason behind this role: guaranteeing safety.

All in all, in dark times, navigating both of these roles becomes particularly crucial. Facilitators must strike a delicate balance—safeguarding open dialogue while remaining mindful of the risks inherent in their context. Now that we have

explored all these insights, in the final section, through the lens of personal experience we try to gain a perspective on how these theoretical insights manifest in action.

final words: from one facilitator in dark times to another

In "A Letter to a Novice Teacher", Sharp (2008) engages in a friendly and practical conversation with teachers who are just beginning their journey in P4wC. Her writing acknowledges the emotions and concerns of new educators, offering reassurance that they are not alone on the path ahead. Building on her approach, what follows are some final words from one facilitator to other facilitators who may face dark times, offering insights and support as they navigate the challenges ahead:

Looking back, I (Mahsa) became acquainted with the P4wC program in 2017 and completed facilitator training courses based on the prevalent interpretation of Lipman in Iran. Since then, I have been working in this field. From the very beginning, I kept a notebook where I recorded my reflections before and after each session. These reflections included my initial expectations for the session, the chosen stimulus, and the resources I studied in preparation. I also documented how the session actually unfolded, the challenges that emerged, possible solutions, and, finally, my personal feelings about the experience. At that time, I was not familiar with autoethnography and did not know the value of my documentation. According to Izadpanah (2025) promoting an autoethnographic method for teachers to reflect on their practice and challenge centralized norms in education is necessary. It can empower educators to embrace cultural sensitivity and authenticity. By thinking with Arendt—the philosopher introduced to me that same year by Amin, my doctoral supervisor, and reflecting on my notes, I now realize that this solitary practice has allowed me to remain in constant dialogue with myself and my values. However, it never crossed my mind that I should share my notes with my colleagues and engage in dialogue with other facilitators as well and this was my missing piece. Maybe I was afraid of making myself vulnerable but now I can see over time, this avoidance led to a growing sense of

isolation and loneliness, especially when I started working at a private girls' high school where I had no colleagues whom I could sit at a "table" with.

In Autumn 2022, after two years of online teaching during COVID, I started in-person P4wC classes at this school. That year, my work at the school focused on seventh and eighth graders, the majority of whom were new to the P4wC. Although Iran's formal curriculum includes a subject called "Tafakor)Thinking (," this program and its approach, particularly in the context of schools in Iran, has remained relatively unknown. The first challenge I encountered was the architecture of the school. The school was originally a government-run elementary school, which had been rented by our institution. The furniture, decorations, and even the general aesthetic were designed for younger children. Due to the school's rental status, my adolescent students were repeatedly instructed not to leave any trace of themselves in any part of the school, whether on the walls, desks, or even in the restrooms. Another challenge arose when I attempted to organize the class in a circle for philosophical discussions. Not only was the physical space inadequate for such an arrangement, but also I was frequently asked by school administration why I couldn't teach in the same manner as my colleagues. Thus, in the initial phase of my work, I became acutely aware of how both the physical structure of the school and the attitudes of my colleagues upheld an educational system that was at odds with the teaching approach I sought to implement. It seemed that, alongside my students, I too was alienated, with no real part in the public sphere that the school was supposed to provide. My position as the youngest and least experienced teacher who should not be taken seriously and the sense of isolation and loneliness gradually led to feelings of doubt and meaninglessness in my practice. Especially when my P4wC sessions started to face problems as well. By returning to my personal notes, I find myself in this situation: "*A month has passed since the start of the school year, yet none of my classes have progressed as I expected. Anger, fear, and anxiety dominate our discussions, often escalating into fights that require my direct intervention. This year, I feel a deep sense of inadequacy. Due to the sensitivities that had emerged in my context, this was entirely predictable but I do not know what to do. I repeatedly review Lipman's books — I know the theories by heart — but in practice, in the classroom, all of them seem to become*

meaningless. I realize that I may need to forge a new path for myself." Today it is more clear for me that the decision to continue going to school and holding my philosophy sessions—despite my uncertainties—until I found a new path was, in itself, part of my role as a Light-Keeper.

By finding my new path, I began experimenting with different solutions. In my first attempts, I focused on content. I wondered if the issue lay in the materials I was bringing to class. I used stimuli that I thought were "neutral" but soon, I realized there were no neutral stimuli in the sense that they could not be discussed without being influenced by the context in which we live. "*Yet, once again today, the discussion in class veered off course, turning into an argument filled with insults. I hadn't anticipated that a philosophical discussion on beauty would escalate into an intense political debate. I have come to realize that it doesn't matter which philosophical topic we begin with—the students have a strong tendency to connect it to political discussions, which only serves to heighten classroom tensions. Apart from the fact that they still lack the capacity for such discussions and emotions like anger and resentment drive the conversation, I myself am neither adequately prepared nor knowledgeable enough to navigate these topics effectively. I constantly feel anxious and uncertain about the consequences of my actions. I'm not sure if I can call my practice P4wC anymore.*"

Reflecting on this note leads me to two insights: Firstly, I know that one of the reasons I hesitated to call my practice P4wC was my deep commitment to strictly following Lipman's steps and facilitation moves. In doing so, I found myself constantly controlling—and, in a sense, sacrificing—the dialogue and philosophical inquiry to ensure it remained on a predetermined path aimed at developing specific skills. I feared the unexpected and anything that strayed from the prescribed structure. I somehow rushed my students "into the pseudo-security of questions, hypothesis, reasons, examples, distinctions, connections, implications, intentions, criteria, and consistency" (Biesta, 2011, p. 317). I often felt frustrated when my students did not take the "form" I expected (a democratic critical citizen maybe!). I had forgotten somehow that each of them was a unique human being, which was what they were constantly trying to make me understand.

Secondly, I am aware now that by focusing on stimuli, once more I wanted to control the dialogue. The problem was not with the content. I should have considered that our new generation had changed a lot especially after the COVID crisis, however, the educational system and schools still hardly provide space for dialogue and discussions. Therefore, my students' needs were being locked up like water behind a dam. So, when they found a space like P4wC classes, all that energy suddenly poured into the sessions and sometimes it was really hard to manage this energy especially when the crisis reached its peak and it was not safe to discuss everything openly.

I experienced both sweet and bitter moments while doing philosophy that year. From the event of a supportive and safe community, to the moment when my students criticized each other carelessly and angrily, I had to interrupt the class to calm the atmosphere and emotions so that no one would get hurt further. However, I realized that the society was in a state of intense experience, and my students had been affected by it as well. I also was conscious that although philosophical discussions and dialogue can kindle small candles, in my role as the light-keeper, they had the potential to set everything on fire. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that by managing the intensity, I could save more things, albeit being aware that some things were sacrificed too. Like a skilled tightrope walker, I should find the balance to continue the discussion and not fall down. These were some of the ways I have managed the intensity of the light to keep my students and myself safe. I have asked again and again for the following:

- Discussing the topic in a more general way (not in a personal and experience-based way);
- Criticizing the opinion or problem, not the person;
- Reminding the members of the community, the reason we are in this class and have discussion;
- Reminding and clarifying the differences between philosophical dialogue, insults and polemics;
- Paying more attention to fallacies (especially the Ad hominem fallacy, which can often be repeated);
- Minding the language;

- Following the inquiry not emotions (especially emotions based on anger);
- Checking the relationship between the topic and discussion, and even sometimes stopping the inquiry when the discussion became out of control.

In addition to these, I usually dedicate the first few sessions to co-constructing classroom rules with my students to have a better dialogue. In that year, despite this, the rules were repeatedly broken. To address this, I decided to organize the rules, and ask one student to read them aloud at the beginning of each session. Also, I introduced a new rule myself: if the agreed-upon rules were broken, I reserved the right to intervene, and, under certain conditions, even stop the discussion. Ultimately, to reduce tension in the classroom, I began our sessions with meditation and mindfulness exercises. Today I can say I did all of these under the role of a light-intensity manager.

Though a P4wC facilitator can have different roles (for example see Kennedy, 2004; Murris, 2008; Splitter & Sharp, 1995), I understand that offering a light-intensity manager role for a P4wC facilitator may be seen as going against this program's spirit. However, this facilitator's role should not be perceived as contradictory to freedom of speech or children's rights. In the face of dark times, which are not ordinary situations, I advocate for a facilitator who is aware of why and when she/he needs to switch to this role. Children are not tools for supporting or denying an ideology; they just should be allowed to think for themselves and about their favorite topics. Meanwhile, it is essential to ensure their safety, and discussions on any topic should not pose problems for them during such times. The caring approach in P4wC guides the facilitator in playing this role also.

All in all, I should confess that this role was not my favorite. I was feeling a sense of betrayal towards my students. Recalling that Lipman et al. (1980, p. 39) write about "the importance of consistency in our thinking , speaking, and acting" and emphasize that "the consistency has to be *practiced* by those whom the children take as their models of correct conduct-it will not be effective if it is merely advocated to them, or taught to them," (original italics) I had a feeling that

my actions were not in alignment with my beliefs, especially in certain sessions where I had to take on the role of a light-intensity manager more than I would have preferred.

On the other hand, I was also aware that CPI should be a place for building a sense of trust, care, and safety (For example see Splitter & Sharp, 1995, Chapter 1 or Morehouse, 2018). But in dark times, there always is a concern among facilitators who work in formal institutions like schools and even children about how much honesty and trust they should have in expressing their views. There is also the worry that some within the CPI may act as informants! (The Foucauldian Panopticon and a fear of Judas Iscariot's presence in the classroom dynamic come into play). So, the issue is not just what the CPI is doing per se or "follow[ing] the inquiry wherever it leads" (Sharp, 2018, p. 241), but how it operates during dark times and how this situation can affect facilitators' moves unconsciously and consciously. While, as a light-intensity manager, I sometimes found it necessary to step away from the democratic spirit of P4wC to maintain safety, I couldn't overlook the hidden messages I was sending through my actions regarding trust and consistency to my students.

Therefore, to address my concerns, I introduced the concept of a Philosophical Journal to my class. At the end of each session, students were given time to reflect on the class discussion and their emotions, writing freely in any form they preferred. After collecting the journals, I carefully read each one and provided written comments on some entries. This practice established a parallel, transparent dialogue between me, as the facilitator, and my students. Some expressed frustration over being interrupted during discussion, while others wrote about their fears and anxieties. In my responses, I sought to explain my decisions, share my own concerns and emotions, and even ask for their suggestions on how to improve our sessions. A few days later, I returned the journals privately, allowing students to read my comments and, if they wished, continue the discussion—either in writing or verbally—in the next session. Over time, this process helped cultivate a relationship of trust and mutual understanding between me and most of my students.

Reflecting on this journey, I see my various efforts coming together as a meaningful intervention. I can recall sessions where lights were kindled without everything being set on fire. For instance, by the final sessions, my students found a solution themselves, which had never crossed my mind, to the problem of how to sit in a circle to have discussions. In one of the four classes I was facilitating that year, students had developed the ability to engage in a full-hour philosophical discussion on freedom, a topic tied to political philosophy. In another class, my eighth-grade students investigated the concept of peace, maintaining a dialogue without anger or tension. This session also was recorded, and a report was later published in our university journal[3]. Additionally, these students had a productive discussion on school rules and the features of a good teacher and in response to my suggestion, they decided to compile the outcome of their discussion into brochures, which were then distributed to all staff. Although I can't recall many sessions in which the inquiry could be considered ideal, these small lights perhaps indicated that I was fulfilling my role as a light-keeper correctly. I can also acknowledge that gradually in more sessions the light-intensity manager's role disappeared for longer periods, and the "wind of thinking" (Vansieleghem, 2005) could be felt more in the classroom.

concluding remarks

This paper was an attempt to kindle light in dark times through a P4wC educational program. Times that Mohammad-Reza Shafiei Kadkani, the Iranian poet, describes like this:

> *For a lifetime, we sought the sun,*
> *Then came the dark times, and we were undone.*
> *The cruelest torment of all was this:*
> *One by one, we were exiled into our own abyss.*[4]

Drawing on theory and practice, particularly within the Iranian context, we sought to explore the conditions P4wC facilitators may face in dark times, the sources of hope that can sustain them, and the key considerations for facilitating in such contexts. By introducing two new roles for P4wC facilitators—the "light-keeper" and "light-intensity manager"—we aimed to offer insights on how

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[3] See: https://philoedu.ir/
[4] Translated by the authors.

facilitators can navigate politically sensitive discussions while maintaining plurality and community cohesion. We advocate for acknowledging children's voices and enabling their "Critical Songs"[5] to bring light into dark times and with the role of the light-keeper, we envision P4wC sessions as opportunities to kindle light, while the light-intensity manager role ensures the process remains continuous and safe, even in the most challenging circumstances. We also believe that facilitators, by reflecting on their classes, writing about them, and sharing these writings within a community of P4wC facilitators, can continue to suggest insights and strategies for the light-intensity manager role, while these writings will also be inspiring for their colleagues. Ultimately, with the help of CPI and its facilitators, we can be hopeful to go through dark times and reach the times as Hafez describes:

> *The time when men of perception walked aloof passed,*
> *When their mouths held a thousand words but their lips remained silent.*
> *Now we can tell to the sound of the harp those stories*
> *Which hiding them made the pot of the breast boil.*
> Hafez, "Ghazal CCLXXXIII".[6]

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[5] This phrase is inspired from (Weissberg, 2002, p. 278) and Brecht's poem: "In the dark times, will there also be singing? / Yes, there will be singing. About the dark times."

[6] Translated by Reza Saberi.

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