cover: picasso, *las meninas* (1957)

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*dossier racism, colonialism and philosophy for/with children: praxis in non-ideal contexts*

# neutrality or complicity?

## a critical-reflective look at philosophical practice with children in puerto rico

**authors**

**erick javier padilla rosas**

marquette university, college of education
milwaukee, wi, usa
e-mail: erick.padillarosas@marquette.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8005-3828

**zorayma z. navarro otero**

zona-filo: filosofía para niños puerto rico
puerto rico, usa
e-mail: zorayma.no@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6944-9846

**editors**

darren chetty
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8943-6876

rose-anne reynolds
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0775-3318

jonathan wurtz
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7930-9227

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**abstract**

This article offers a critical reflection on philosophical practice with children and youth in Puerto Rico, grounded in personal, community, and institutional experiences. Through projects such as Guailimanai, Philosophy for Children Puerto Rico (FpNPR), and ZONA-FILO, it explores how philosophy can serve as a transformative pedagogical tool from an early age. The importance of philosophical dialogue, family participation, and critical thinking rooted in contexts of oppression is emphasized. Inspired by the work of Walter Omar Kohan (2018), the article establishes a dialogue between the proposals of Matthew Lipman and Paulo Freire. While Lipman aimed to develop cognitive skills through logical reasoning, Freire advocated for an education oriented toward critical consciousness and social transformation. The article expands on Kohan's discussion by addressing the notion of educational neutrality, arguing that neutrality is an illusion in contexts marked by structural inequalities. From a critical pedagogy perspective, it asserts that education is inherently political. Neutrality, rather than ensuring equality, can become an ally of oppressive power. Therefore, the article proposes a committed philosophical practice, where educators and learners take

ethical stances on issues such as colonialism, gentrification, femicide, racism, and adultcentrism. In this framework, philosophy does not seek to impose viewpoints but to foster sincere dialogue, deep questioning, and transformative action.

**keywords**: philosophy for/with children; critical pedagogy; neutrality; educational transformation.

**¿neutralidad o complicidad?**
una mirada crítico-reflexiva a la práctica filosófica con niñas y niños en puerto rico

**resumen**
Este artículo ofrece una reflexión crítica sobre la práctica filosófica con niños, niñas y jóvenes en Puerto Rico, basada en experiencias personales, comunitarias e institucionales. A través de proyectos como Guailimanai, Filosofía para Niños Puerto Rico (FpNPR) y ZONA-FILO, se explora cómo la filosofía puede ser una herramienta pedagógica transformadora desde edades tempranas. Se enfatiza la importancia del diálogo filosófico, la participación familiar y el pensamiento crítico enraizado en contextos de opresión. Inspirado en el trabajo de Walter Omar Kohan (2018), el artículo establece un diálogo entre las propuestas de Matthew Lipman y Paulo Freire. Mientras Lipman buscaba desarrollar habilidades cognitivas mediante el razonamiento lógico, Freire abogaba por una educación orientada a la conciencia crítica y la transformación social. El artículo amplía la discusión de Kohan al abordar la noción de neutralidad educativa, argumentando que la neutralidad es una ilusión en contextos marcados por desigualdades estructurales. Desde una perspectiva de pedagogía crítica, se afirma que la educación es inherentemente política. La neutralidad, lejos de garantizar igualdad, puede convertirse en aliada del poder opresor. Por ello, el artículo propone una práctica filosófica comprometida, donde educadores y aprendices asuman posturas éticas ante temas como el colonialismo, la gentrificación, el feminicidio, el racismo y el adultocentrismo. En este marco, la filosofía no busca imponer puntos de vista, sino fomentar el diálogo sincero, el cuestionamiento profundo y la acción transformadora.

**palabras clave**: filosofía para/con niñas/niños; pedagogía crítica; neutralidad; transformación educativa.

**neutralidade ou cumplicidade?**
um olhar crítico-reflexivo sobre a prática filosófica com crianças em porto rico

**resumo**
Este artigo oferece uma reflexão crítica sobre a prática filosófica com crianças e jovens em Porto Rico, baseada em experiências pessoais, comunitárias e institucionais. Por meio de projetos como Guailimanai, Filosofia para Crianças Porto Rico (FpNPR) e ZONA-FILO, explora-se como a filosofia pode ser uma ferramenta pedagógica transformadora desde a infância. Enfatiza-se a importância do diálogo filosófico, da participação familiar e do pensamento crítico enraizado em contextos de opressão. Inspirado na obra de Walter Omar Kohan (2018), o artigo estabelece um diálogo entre as propostas de Matthew Lipman e Paulo Freire. Enquanto Lipman buscava desenvolver habilidades cognitivas por meio do raciocínio lógico, Freire defendia uma educação voltada para a consciência crítica e a transformação social. O artigo amplia a discussão de Kohan ao abordar a noção de neutralidade educacional, argumentando que a neutralidade é uma ilusão em contextos marcados por desigualdades estruturais. A partir de uma perspectiva de pedagogia crítica, afirma-se que a educação é inerentemente política. A neutralidade, longe de garantir igualdade, pode tornar-se aliada do poder opressor. Assim, o artigo propõe uma prática filosófica comprometida, na qual educadores e aprendizes assumam posturas éticas diante de temas como colonialismo, gentrificação, feminicídio, racismo e adultocentrismo. Nesse contexto, a filosofia não busca impor pontos de vista, mas fomentar o diálogo sincero, o questionamento profundo e a ação transformadora.

**palavras-chave:** filosofia para/com crianças; pedagogia crítica; neutralidade; transformação educacional.

## *introduction*

In the early 1970s, Matthew Lipman, along with Ann Margaret Sharp, Frederick Oscanyan, and other colleagues from the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) at Montclair State University in New Jersey, USA, began developing an educational and curricular program called Philosophy for Children (P4C) (Pineda Rivera, 1992). The main goal of the program was to teach children and youth to think logically and meaningfully (Lipman et al., 1980), and to make them aware of their capacity to philosophize—something that begins with their question "why?", with their desire to understand their world, their reality.

To achieve this, the goal was not to teach academic philosophy to children, but rather to provide them with the space, time, and necessary stimuli to think philosophically in a collaborative, autonomous, and conscious way (Lipman, 1988). Thus, the P4C program not only adopts a participatory paradigm in which reality is constructed collaboratively, but also places a strong emphasis on the use of critical thinking.

To encourage participation among children, P4C uses communities of philosophical inquiry, a pedagogical method in which children, together with educators, engage in reasoning and foster philosophical reflection among themselves (Lipman et al., 1980). In other words, the community of philosophical inquiry is the central methodology—the "how" or the way in which educators and children proceed to discover knowledge in P4C.

Within these communities, children are encouraged to:

- accept peer correction,
- listen attentively to others,
- revise their views in light of others' reasoning,
- take others' ideas seriously,
- build on others' ideas,

- develop their own ideas without fear of rejection or humiliation by peers,
- care about others' right to express their opinions,
- detect underlying assumptions,
- show concern for coherence when arguing a point of view,
- formulate relevant questions,
- verbalize relationships between ends and means,
- show respect for community members,
- demonstrate sensitivity to context when discussing a point of view,
- ask peers for reasons,
- discuss topics fairly,
- and request judgments (Sharp, 1987).

In order to facilitate the development and sustainability of philosophical dialogue among children, facilitators are responsible for listening to multiple perspectives rather than imposing a single one (Lipman, 1988), and for avoiding the manipulation of children's thinking within communities of philosophical inquiry (Lipman et al., 1980). In this way, the educator acts in a "neutral" manner. This form of neutrality is related to the notions of impartiality and objectivity, which allow children to think freely, without being conditioned or influenced by the facilitator's way of thinking.

However, the idea of the "neutral educator" has been documented as controversial, as it is not sufficient to counteract the hegemony of the status quo (Kohan, 1995). Neutrality implies certain ontological, epistemological, and methodological paradigms that are not dedicated to addressing philosophical issues related to racism, colonialism, and structural violence, thereby perpetuating oppressive power dynamics within communities of philosophical inquiry (see Chetty et al., 2022; Elicor, 2019; Kennedy & Kohan, 2021; Kohan, 1995, 2018; Padilla Rosas, 2023; Rainville, 2001; Reed-Sandoval, 2019). The major flaw of neutrality, then, is not in promoting a diversity of perspectives, but in ignoring the political nature of education and the commitment to the disadvantaged and marginalized of the world.

It is important to note, however, that for Lipman (1988), neutrality is not simply impartiality; it is a condition that motivates reasoning, inquiry, and critical

self-evaluation among children engaged in philosophical dialogue. In other words, the educator's impartiality aims to ensure that it is the children—not the facilitators (adults)—who self-correct their arguments and viewpoints through dialogue. Nevertheless, in this article, we question the self-corrective capacity of the community of inquiry, because we recognize that structural violence (such as colonialism, racism, sexism, adultism,[1] among other forms of violence) also self-corrects through political, economic, social, and even educational structures that perpetuate power dynamics which marginalize, oppress, and exclude. If we speak of philosophical discussion as self-corrective, should we not also speak of the self-correction of falsehood and social injustice? In other words, is the self-correction of philosophical discussion enough to counter and overcome the "self-corrective" mechanisms of racist, genocidal, colonialist, sexist, and adultcentric structures operating in non-ideal contexts?

From this perspective, the article proposes a situated, ethical, and committed philosophical practice that recognizes education as a political act. Through lived and community-based experiences in Puerto Rico by one of the authors, it is argued that educational neutrality is not only illusory but can also become an ally of oppressive power. Therefore, it is proposed that to educate philosophically means to take a stand against injustices, to foster sincere dialogue, and to promote social transformation from childhood.

## *reflections on education from lived and community-based experience in puerto rico*

My approach to education began in an intimate and transformative way in 2006, when I experienced the pregnancy of my son. It was that process that led me to understand that, by default, I would become an educator. This personal revelation became intertwined with a broader reflection on the meaning of education and the sociopolitical context of Puerto Rico, recognizing that education does not occur in a vacuum, but is deeply shaped by the country's historical, cultural, and structural realities.

[1] Adultism reveals the domination exercised over minors and all those considered children or "child-like" by adults, while also exposing the intrinsic violence within the adult–child binary that justifies and perpetuates entire systems of power and knowledge (Wall, 2025).

By 2009, already immersed in homeschooling, with a child in the developmental stage and having been certified in permaculture, I decided to begin a master's degree in philosophy. In that context, I joined the Passiflora project of the Casa Escuela de Puerto Rico for a year—an alternative community education initiative developed at the Botanical Garden of the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras. This space brought together families who, along with their children, worked collectively in an ecological garden, promoting values of sustainability, collaboration, and experiential learning.

At the end of that stage with Passiflora, four mothers who had shared the experience decided to continue the project's goals on a farm located in Toa Alta. Thus, Guailimanai was born in late 2010—an educational space that integrated ecology, sustainable living, peace education, and, for the first time, the practice of philosophy for children, inspired by Matthew Lipman's approach and other contemporary currents (80grados, 2011).

Although I cannot precisely determine how long the Guailimanai project lasted, it was a period of profound change for the families involved. Nevertheless, the friendships and gatherings continued. With the children of Adriana Vélez, one of the collaborating mothers, I held several philosophical sessions alongside my son. Although there were only three children, their dialogues on topics such as violence, parenting, and justice sparked new questions and motivated me to explore more deeply the field of philosophical education and its application in childhood.

This experience allowed me to understand that philosophy is not only an academic discipline, but also a powerful tool for developing critical thinking, empathy, and ethical reflection from an early age. Philosophical practice with children, in community and ecological contexts, opens up possibilities for rethinking education from a more human, situated, and transformative perspective.

## *the institutionalization of philosophy with children at the university of puerto rico: a pioneering experience*

Thanks to the support of Professor Anayra Santory Jorge, who at the time was serving as Director of the Department of Philosophy at the University of

Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, it was possible to organize an academic certificate program in September 2015 aimed at children between the ages of 6 and 14. This course, titled *Filosofía para Niños: Acercamiento a las herramientas del dialogo filosófico*, consisted of 12 contact hours, equivalent to 1.12 continuing education units, and was offered through the Department of Continuing Education and Professional Studies of the institution.

The course included 18 children from the Casa Escuela de Puerto Rico community. Over 12 sessions of an hour and a half each, we introduced fundamental tools of practical philosophical thinking, such as the development of dialogue, attentive listening, the formulation of good reasons, conceptual clarification, and the encouragement of questioning. In addition, we offered a parallel component for the participants' family members, with the goal of enabling homeschooling educators to continue the process of philosophical inquiry in their everyday contexts. This part of the program was proposed and facilitated by Alejandro Toledo, then a graduate student in the Department of Philosophy. At that time, we were not aware of other international experiences in philosophical education that structurally included the active participation of family members. The reception of the first certificate was so positive that both the children and their families requested the continuation of the program. In response, in February 2016, we offered a second certificate titled *Filosofía para Niños: Desarrollo de la comunidad de indagación*, with a duration of 24 contact hours (2.4 continuing education units), distributed over 12 sessions of two hours each. This second course allowed for a deeper engagement with reflective, critical, and analytical processes through the application of discussion tools in a cooperative environment.

In the following years, I continued researching the relationship between philosophy and childhood, offering introductory talks and workshops to promote the Philosophy for Children initiative in Puerto Rico. During that period, my work was strongly influenced by Matthew Lipman's approach, although I chose not to directly use his model based on philosophical children's literature. Instead, I focused on developing dialogue communities adapted to our local context.

*consolidation of networks and expansion of philosophical practice with children in puerto rico*

Starting in 2019, meaningful exchanges began to take shape among colleagues who, like me, were interested in promoting philosophical practice on the island. These dialogues led to concrete collaborations aimed at coordinating efforts to raise awareness of and strengthen philosophy as a pedagogical tool from early childhood.

In January of that year, we facilitated a workshop at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico, inspired by the artwork "Los discípulos" by artist Rigoberto Quintana. This activity was part of the museum's Family Saturday program and the Meeting on the Teaching of Philosophy organized by the Puerto Rican Society of Philosophy. The event represented a point of convergence between art, philosophy, and education, allowing us to explore new approaches to critical thinking in non-traditional spaces.

In May 2019, we founded Philosophy for Children Puerto Rico (FpNPR) as a nonprofit organization with the purpose of promoting philosophy as a pedagogical alternative from early ages and contributing, through our activities, to the transformation of both formal and informal education in the country. The founding team included attorney Julio Villalona, teacher Kemely Cruz, and philosophers Alejandro Toledo, Jorge Graterole, Yiselle Suárez, Jearelys Irizarry, and myself.

FpNPR made various appearances on radio stations such as Radio Universidad and Radio Isla, and facilitated workshops with children and youth from homeschooling groups, at the Bayamón Museum of Art, and in local communities. These activities aimed to democratize access to philosophy and foster spaces for reflective dialogue in diverse educational contexts.

In 2021, we held a virtual philosophical dialogue with teenagers from Mexico (Filosofía con Niños y Adolescentes), Uruguay (Liceo Faustino Harrison), Argentina (Colegio Modelo Parque Barón / Filosofía para Niñ@s Zona Sur), and Puerto Rico (FpNPR and Bilingüe Homeschool Puerto Rico). This international experience allowed us to explore topics such as culture, history, and the diversity of contexts, enriching philosophical practice with an intercultural and collaborative perspective.

*organizational transition and new pedagogical proposals*

Despite the enthusiasm and commitment of the team, the legal and administrative costs of maintaining the FpNPR organization became unsustainable. Each of us had to support ourselves financially through external jobs, which made it difficult to maintain the organization's operations. For this reason, in 2024 we made the decision to formally close the organization. At that time, the team consisted of Alejandro Toledo, Yiselle Suárez, Jorge Graterole, Erick Padilla—who had recently joined—and myself.

However, the closure of the organization did not mean the end of the project. On the contrary, it represented an opportunity to rethink philosophical practice from a more flexible, collaborative, and contextualized perspective. With more accumulated experience and a deeper understanding of the challenges and possibilities of philosophy in the context of the Caribbean archipelago, we decided to continue as an independent collective.

In February 2025, we held the workshop Futuriando: filosofía lúdica, diálogos y creación de futuro at the Luis Muñoz Marín Public Montessori Middle School in Comerío, Puerto Rico. This activity marked the beginning of a new phase under the name ZONA-FILO, a pedagogical proposal aimed at creating community spaces for thinking both individually and collectively, based on relevant philosophical themes.

ZONA-FILO is grounded in a critical integration of various pedagogical approaches, including philosophy for/with children, philosophical literacy, critical pedagogy, and popular education. Its goal is to foster autonomous thinking, reflective dialogue, and transformative action from an early age, while recognizing the importance of Puerto Rico's sociocultural context in shaping judgment and critical consciousness.

## *reflecting on structural violence in philosophical dialogue with children*

Since ZONA-FILO's pedagogical paradigm is focused on transformative action, facilitators take responsibility for addressing topics related to structural violence—such as racism, colonialism, sexism, adultcentrism, and other forms of social injustice. For example, when discussing racism, the philosophical challenge lies in defining what racism is and how to conceptualize it. If, on one hand, a

narrow definition of racism is assumed—meaning racism is only those actions that reflect the most severe racial harms (e.g., murder based on race) (Urquidez, 2022)—then the educator must intervene by expanding that definition through a question. This intervention stems from an ethical responsibility that compels the educator to engage with racial justice.

The problem: under a narrow definition of racism, less severe racial harms may be described as non-racist (e.g., making "jokes" or "comments" based on race) (Urquidez, 2022). If, on the other hand, a broad definition of racism is assumed in the philosophical discussion, then the complex network of interactive categories that historically and socially constitute the concept of "racism" is acknowledged (Urquidez, 2022). This broader view includes institutional/structural definitions of racism, which recognize the contingent and temporal nature of racism, rooted in a history of long-standing oppression. Under this broad definition, racism cannot be reduced to a set of individual actions. Rather, racism is socio-historical—that is, it is tied to a globalized Eurocentric history in which people have been racialized based on socially invented categories such as "Black," "Indian," and "Barbarian"—just to name a few—in order to enslave, colonize, oppress, exclude, and even kill them.

According to Urquidez (2022), white people—and we can also include those who align with white colonial hegemony—are more drawn to the narrow definition of racism, as it allows them to promote their interests without feeling implicated or offended by the contingent and temporal nature of racism. As a result, they continue to promote a more individualistic definition of racism, which in turn undermines the goals of racial justice.

At ZONA-FILO, we ask: How can we promote philosophical dialogues about racism, especially when the children participating in the community of philosophical inquiry have inherited and adopted a narrow definition of racism that prevents them from discussing its structural roots? What role does neutrality play in these cases? If the community of philosophical inquiry is self-corrective, and racism—as a form of structural violence—is also self-corrective, what ethical responsibility does the facilitator have?

Furthermore, in contexts where white facilitators and students see their interests challenged by a broad definition of racism, how can we promote

philosophical dialogue that does not rely on a narrow definition of racism? Finally, what can be done in the face of white individualism and the problem of white co-optation of the term "racism," which reveal the limits of neutrality and the self-corrective nature of the community of inquiry?

To address these and other questions, it is necessary to understand what neutrality is and how it has operated based on the assumption that education and politics are separate spheres.

### *neutrality vs politicidade*

One of the main defenders of neutrality in education is Robert Ennis. According to Ennis (1969), the thesis that "neutrality is impossible" is false. He argues that this claim serves a liberal agenda aimed at persuading people who already hold a particular stance to cling to and defend it, while pressuring those who have not yet taken a position to do so. The idea that neutrality is impossible, therefore, is an invention—one that both educators and schools can escape if they recognize the fallacies this thesis assumes to be true.

Ennis (1959) maintains that neutrality can be observed at the interpersonal level when educators act as referees in a discussion, without favoring either of the opposing positions presented. In such cases, the educator's goal is to be a good referee. According to Ennis (1959), the fact that one position defeats another does not imply bias on the part of the educator, but rather the greater strength of one of the arguments. Thus, educators cannot be judged as biased when their objective is to remain impartial as referees.

In response to the view of neutrality as the impartiality of a referee, Hofmann (1964) argues that Ennis ignores the impact of the educator's actions when claiming to be neutral. For Ennis, what matters is not the impact of neutrality, but proving that it is possible and that it is practiced by not favoring either side. Following Dewey's work, Hofmann (1964) asserts that educators should pay greater attention to the personal and social effects of their actions, practices, and the functioning of schools. Thus, to truly build a more democratic education, educators must abandon the view of neutrality that places the possibility of being neutral as its foundation. After all, for Hofmann (1964), the

defense of neutrality seems more like an argumentative game than a tool for achieving the kind of social change that, for example, Dewey aspired to.

Despite Hofmann's critique, Ennis (1969) maintains that the impact of neutrality should not be used against the very notion of neutrality, even when such impact is unintended or accidental. Returning to the referee analogy, Ennis (1969) argues that the fact that a referee calls a foul, for example, does not mean they intend to harm one team and favor the other. This is because not all effects or impacts produced by neutrality are the intended outcomes of that action (Ennis, 1969). Therefore, the fact that an educator's or a school's neutrality ends up perpetuating racism, for instance, should not be used against the educator or school whose actual goal was to remain neutral.

In this sense, neutrality exists when it is practiced, not when it is measured by the outcomes it produces. Given this logic, isn't striving to be neutral already a position in itself? Ennis (1959, 1969) would not deny this. What he would refute is the idea that the act of being neutral should be used against someone or some institution. This kind of stance stands in stark contrast to Freire's notion of political education.

According to Freire (2004), education is political. The *politicidade* (political nature) of education lies in the fact that human beings are ethical and historical beings, which implies that they must choose and make decisions in response to the reality around them. In this sense, reality is political because people are—or at least could be—aware of their unfinished nature. Education, therefore, requires educators to take responsibility for fostering reflective and dialectical dialogue in which they and their students can compare, choose, break away from, and decide between ways of thinking, imagining, and interpreting the world that enable them to exercise their political agency.

Under this notion of politicization, neither students nor educators should hide their political choices; on the contrary, they should embrace their political nature in order to respect one another and cultivate a critical pedagogy. As presented by Morrow and Torres (2002), the paradigm of critical pedagogy—of which Freire is one of the main contributors—studies, analyzes, and critiques the effects of marginalization, dependency, and domination in everyday life and in schools, where economic, political, social, and cultural inequalities affect human

potential for learning. This paradigm has an ontology, an epistemology, and a methodology that justify why neutrality is impossible.

First, the ontology of critical pedagogy consists of theorizing praxis with the aim of emphasizing the reflective and dialogical dimensions of action (Morrow & Torres, 2002). Freire (2005a) points out that human beings, in their relationship with the world, can either integrate into the context or adapt to it. On one hand, human beings are "integrated" into the context when they not only adapt to their reality but also make critical decisions that help transform that reality (Freire, 2005a).

Second, the epistemology of critical pedagogy—which studies the nature of the relationship between students, teachers, and knowledge—requires that objects always be recognized as means, not ends (Morrow & Torres, 2002). In this sense, subjects live in the world and with the world. In this relationship of interdependence, human beings are not determined but conditioned, and therefore must practice a kind of distancing from objects in order to better understand them. By distancing themselves, human beings can separate their existence in the world to reflect and begin a process of *conscientização* (critical consciousness) that allows them to reappropriate reality in a reflective and political way.

At ZONA-FILO, we understand that neutrality, when assumed as an act of arbitration, ends up distancing people from one another. It also creates a problem of dehumanization, in which neutrality is assumed to be something above human relationships. Thus, critical consciousness and its commitment to political education stand in opposition to neutrality, as they require educators to take a political stance toward reality as a whole.

Thirdly, critical pedagogy has a methodology that responds to the question of how the researcher should proceed to acquire knowledge (Guba, 1990, cited by Morrow & Torres, 2002). Under its methodology, critical pedagogy uses dialogue and dialectics to problematize the topics discussed in class. For Freire (2005b), education must be "problematizing," which means that educators and students must engage in dialectical processes of presenting meaningful dimensions of each individual's contextual reality. In this way, a plurality of viewpoints is achieved, inviting change in social structures and provoking in students and educators new forms of consciousness, of being in the world, and of learning.

Thus, the acquisition of knowledge does not consist of the transmission of knowledge from educators to students — what Freire (2005b) calls "banking education" — but rather in the constant problematization of ideas, experiences, and viewpoints presented in the educational dialogue.

Therefore, the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of critical pedagogy differ paradigmatically from neutrality understood as arbitration. At ZONA-FILO, we understand that the educational relationship between educators and students does not operate under a paradigm of arbitration, but rather of problematization, in which both student and educator question their reality, their beliefs, and their way of interpreting the world — political stances that require social commitment for educational transformation.

### *critical thinking vs. critical pedagogy*

As Kohan (2018) points out, practitioners of P4C in Latin America have shown that there are commonalities between Lipman and Freire. However, these similarities are contrasted by Lipman's focus on critical thinking, as opposed to Freire's focus on education as politics, or on the political-pedagogical nature of education.

As Burbules and Berk (1999) state, both critical thinking and critical pedagogy share a common goal: to provide people with tools to discern inaccuracies, distortions, and even falsehoods in life. However, critical thinking and critical pedagogy differ in that the former has a notion of "criticality" that specializes in recognizing flawed, illogical, and unsupported arguments, while the latter specializes in identifying the influences of the status quo on educational knowledge and on cultural and social formations (Burbules & Berk, 1999). In this sense, critical pedagogues do not reject the proposals of critical thinking, but rather expand them by including the historical, social, cultural, and political power dynamics that condition — though do not determine — the way people think, imagine, and dream.

Freire draws from critical pedagogy to highlight the impossibility of political neutrality in education (Kohan, 2021). In this sense, recognizing the existence of racial, economic, gender and sex-based, political, cultural, and even educational violence requires educators to take a stand in favor of the freedom of

students and of the most socially disadvantaged groups. Moreover, Freire was clear that the notion of neutrality — which might seem useful in the production of knowledge and the development of critical thinking — has never clarified whether a neutral and impartial rationality can help students understand the logic behind the endless brutalities and injustices of the system and move toward a praxis of political liberation (Kohan, 2021).

As Dewey (1937) states, democratic education is not built from nothing, nor from the mere exercise of critical thinking. On the contrary, democratic education assumes as its goal active, dialogical, and collaborative participation, helping to understand the economic, domestic, international, religious, cultural, and political applications that influence education (Dewey, 1937).

At ZONA-FILO, we believe that by placing the issue of democratic education at the center, education can help students make a tangible impact, thereby challenging the status quo. In this sense, the ideals of neutrality and democratic education are fundamentally different. While neutrality feeds the recycling of ideas already present in the status quo — which may appear reasonable — democratic education involves an act of courage, of taking risks, and of maintaining full sincerity in the search for answers that lead to social change. Thus, it is democratic education — not neutral education — that aspires to a more just and free society.

Therefore, ZONA-FILO is grounded in the belief that critical thinking alone is not sufficient for a pedagogical project that seeks to identify, critique, and overcome structural violence. As Ruíz (2024) states, structural violence operates like the roots of a tree that share nutrients and information with other trees to self-heal and stay alive. White colonial supremacy and the persistent power of colonial violence, as forms of structural violence, behave like the roots of the colonial design that operates "covertly" to sustain the structural violence that affects some and benefits others based on race, ethnicity, migration status, and gender identity (Ruíz, 2024).

According to Ruíz (2024), the self-healing capacity of structural violence is what explains that structural violence is not an accident, but a living design with an intrinsic capacity for survival. It uses its roots to nourish itself, channel its nutrients, grow continuously, and maintain its persistence in the face of external

tensions. Therefore, structural violence operates — by design — to produce, distribute, and maintain power unequally, regardless of individual attitudes or intentions. Even if individuals "have a change of heart" and implement reforms to "improve" the system, structural violence protects and preserves itself, so that changes and improvements do not affect the perpetuation of inequalities in the economic, political, and legal dimensions.

In this sense, ZONA-FILO maintains that the liberation of the most oppressed and the construction of a more just and inclusive present must go hand in hand with the pedagogical act of questioning and critically analyzing the epistemological tools created and used in communities of philosophical inquiry. Certainly, neutrality and critical thinking are compatible — but not within a political understanding of reality. Hence, as Giroux (2010) affirms,

> It is always directive in its attempt to teach students to inhabit a particular mode of agency, enable them to understand the larger world and one's role in it in a specific way, define their relationship, if not responsibility, to diverse others, and experience in the classroom some sort of understanding of a more just, imaginative, and democratic life. (p. 718)

Education, therefore, cannot be neutral, but political, and its educators must embrace the politicization of education in order to build a better society.

### *procedural neutrality and neutrality in p4c*

Returning to the notion of neutrality, it is worth noting that some theorists have proposed the practice of "procedural neutrality." According to this idea, neutrality in teaching does not prevent an educator from expressing and arguing their own personal position on the topics under discussion (Elliott, 1973). From this perspective, it is recognized that the educator must identify when it is appropriate to be neutral and when it is not. This does not mean that educators should use their position of authority to give their arguments an unfair advantage. Rather, the goal is for educators to move beyond the classical notion of neutrality and recognize that they should have the freedom to discern when it is appropriate to adopt a neutral stance and when it is not.

Procedural neutrality, then, is understood as an instructional stance that educators can adopt to reveal or make explicit their point of view on controversial topics without compromising balance and impartiality in the treatment of

opposing views (Bomstad, 1995). In this way, it avoids the situation — common in classical neutrality — where educators hide their true positions, which prevents the discussion from being enriched.

Bomstad (1995) points out that procedural neutrality prevents educators from abusing their neutrality or non-intervention. This is because classical neutrality, with its strong emphasis on avoiding the indoctrination of students, prevents educators from sharing their true opinions. Thus, by using procedural neutrality — for example, in philosophical discussions on applied ethics — educators can intervene and present their questions or counter-questions, premises, and reflections without undermining the impartiality that neutrality aspires to.

As I mentioned earlier, in the work of Lipman and the co-founders of P4C, neutrality receives special attention, as it is taken as a synonym for impartiality. Based on this notion of neutrality, which resembles procedural neutrality, it is possible to practice the methodology, ontology, and epistemology of P4C. In this approach, priority is given to the development of critical thinking within a community of philosophical inquiry, where educators are not protagonists but facilitators.

Furthermore, communities of philosophical inquiry have an epistemology that informs the nature of the relationship between children and reality. The epistemology of the community of philosophical inquiry is based on reflective equilibrium — that is, the co-creation of reflections. The goal is not to find finished, absolute, or complete knowledge. Rather, the aim is the constant reconstruction, improvement, and revision of the flawed parts of philosophical arguments in order to maintain balance (Lipman, 2003). Thus, the relationship between children and knowledge is continuously reviewed and self-corrected through a dialogical and dialectical process of inquiry. The objective, therefore, is to maintain the balance of philosophical discussion, which allows for the cultivation of creativity by seeking new solutions and ways to sustain this epistemological equilibrium.

In addition to the methodology and epistemology of the community of inquiry, P4C also has an ontology. By ontology, I refer to the study of the nature of the "knowable" or of "reality" (Guba, 1990, cited in Morrow & Torres, 2002). As

Lipman (2003) points out, reality is participatory — that is, it is co-created through reflection on the world. This does not mean that objectivity in "reality" does not exist, but rather that there is a subjective-objective relationship that seeks to understand the ambiguous, equivocal, and mysterious nature of reality.

The ontological goal of the P4C paradigm is not the acquisition of information about reality, but the possibility of understanding the relationships within and between the topics explored communally (Lipman, 2003). Thus, relationship takes precedence in the co-construction of reality. Moreover, since children have their own thoughts about reality, imposing external versions of reality — a reality independent of them, distant in time and space — ultimately hinders the study of the nature of the "knowable" or of "reality" that the children themselves could create. For this reason, Lipman (2003) emphasizes the importance of cultivating and respecting children's own thinking about reality, which holds more value than imposing a reality with which they do not identify — a reality that is neither ambiguous nor mysterious. Therefore, by allowing children to analyze, explore, and even recreate reality in communities of philosophical inquiry, an ontology is produced that is not created for children, but by them.

Perhaps this is the main issue that accompanies the notion of neutrality. The P4C paradigm, although it makes room for children's critical thinking, does not fully recognize the reality of structural violence — a reality that, for children who benefit from racism, colonialism, and other forms of violence, is most likely not an apparent one. As Allison Bailey (2021) explains, critical thinking is sometimes confused with epistemic resistance, which in turn preserves white privilege. For Bailey (2021), epistemic resistance resembles critical thinking in that it disguises itself as the careful consideration of the truth of a given claim. Thus, even when racism or implicit bias is being pointed out, because the exercise appears to carefully analyze premises and demonstrate the truth of arguments, it is not recognized as racism or implicit bias.

Epistemic resistance also occurs when philosophical concepts are used to reinforce that resistance (Bailey, 2021). Thus, even though what is being discussed and practiced appears to be "pure philosophy" and students seem to be engaged in self-corrective processes of logical thinking, what is actually happening is

resistance to change. If epistemic resistance occurs, how can it be addressed if P4C facilitators are not supposed to intervene in communities of philosophical inquiry? Furthermore, how can structural violence be identified if it sometimes disguises itself as morality?

*morality vs. ethics*

Certainly, in P4C we face a paradigmatic challenge. The challenge lies in recognizing the need to remain alert to the illusion of neutrality, even when it appears in moral proposals. When Freire (2004) speaks of moving away from impartiality and neutrality to take a political stance in favor of the most oppressed, he states: "The real mistake is not having a certain point of view, but making it absolute and failing to recognize that even from the correctness of one's point of view, the ethical reason may not always be on one's side" (p. 8). By ethics, Freire (2004) refers to the "universal ethics of the human being," in which being human and being ethical are synonymous. This type of ethics resembles the definition proposed by Dussel (2016). For Dussel, ethics consists of the "future order of liberation," of "the demands of justice with respect to the poor, the oppressed, and their project of salvation" (p. 34). This ethical demand is not always present in moral exercises. Morality, external to the human being, can be built upon the logic and epistemic resistance of the prevailing order, which does not necessarily recognize the embodied demands of the poorest. Morality seeks to create universal norms that protect and perpetuate the status quo. For this reason, both Dussel (2016) and Freire (2004) argue that something can be moral but not ethical, and vice versa. The educator has the responsibility to prioritize ethics as synonymous with being human and to understand it as a fundamental part of human relationships that attend to and respect the freedom of others.

The definitions of ethics by Dussel (2016) and Freire (2004) show that political education has a responsibility toward the other, as an ethical being. A philosophical exercise without a political context, no matter how moral it may seem, hinders the ethical growth of students and educators. An example of this occurs in P4C and in ethical exercises built on the non-cultural, as presented by Reed-Sandoval (2014). In her case, when attempting to discuss Rawls' "veil of ignorance" with children in Oaxaca, she realized that the exercise was useless

without questioning the Western philosophical frameworks not grounded in culture. The children, by introducing the wisdom of family members and community leaders, demonstrated that an ethical exercise that does not begin with the culture and politics of the place where it is discussed does not help either the children or the educators to uncover some of the important philosophical issues in their environment.

Therefore, at ZONA-FILO we believe that neither the practice of P4C nor the facilitators of communities of philosophical inquiry can remain neutral in the philosophical exercise. A philosophy that focuses solely on critical or moral thinking loses sight of the importance of respecting students as ethical beings who require the cultivation of a critical pedagogy. Freire (2004) himself points out that both morality and ethics can be used to disrespect the "universal ethics" — the one that recognizes every human being as an ethical being. Morality has been used to justify not helping people in the "Third World," under the idea that they are destined for misery and suffering (Freire, 2004). Structural violence hides behind moralities in order to survive, self-repair, and reproduce violence in a justified way, under the appearance of critical thinking and morality. For this reason, educators must intervene, abandon neutrality, and embrace the political nature of education if they truly wish to respect their students. In the end, education is not neutral — and it never can be.

## *final remarks*

From my experience as an educator in philosophical practice with children and youth in Puerto Rico, I believe that the idea of neutrality in philosophical dialogue is, in many cases, an illusory construct. Although in practice we begin with questions — not arguments — every question posed is inevitably loaded with perspectives, values, and contexts. This weight does not invalidate the philosophical process; on the contrary, it enriches it, as it allows those who listen and engage in dialogue to rethink the world from multiple viewpoints.

It is not about imposing a particular vision or promoting a closed ideological stance, but about being transparent about the place from which I speak. Honesty in dialogue means allowing others to know my position — one that can be critiqued, defended, or transformed. In this sense, as an educator, I

strive to model a truly open dialogue, where both educators and learners can pose their questions sincerely and engage in deep, shared inquiry.

The notion of neutrality, understood as the educator's non-intervention to avoid influencing students' positions, is presented as a pedagogical ideal that, in practice, proves unattainable. This stance is based on a utopia that ignores the material and social conditions in which education takes place. In contexts marked by oppression, inequality, and structural violence, neutrality can become a way of perpetuating the status quo.

To speak of justice, for example, as an abstract and decontextualized concept is to construct a false idea of reality. In the case of Puerto Rico, a philosophical dialogue about justice that does not address the colonial situation (Vélez Peña, 2022), gentrification (Vázquez Rodríguez, 2024), the privatization of natural resources (Méndez González, 2025), femicide (Upegui-Hernández, 2025), racism (Godreau et al., 2010), or adultcentrism (Ayala Fontánez, 2021), among other issues, runs the risk of reproducing a superficial and ahistorical view of the concept. What kind of justice would we be talking about if context is not taken into account?

From this perspective, I maintain that philosophical practice with children cannot be separated from its ethical and political dimension. To educate philosophically also means to assume a critical responsibility toward the realities that affect our communities, and to open spaces where questions are not only welcomed but necessary to imagine and build other possible worlds.

The former governor of Puerto Rico, Luis A. Ferré, once told the Puerto Rican people: "Reason does not shout, reason convinces." Hearing this phrase and remaining neutral toward it hides the many instances in which rational argumentation is not enough. What happens when arguments are rational but fail to convince? Does everything rational persuade? And if something doesn't persuade, does it cease to be rational? These questions run through many environmental, social, and political struggles in Puerto Rico, where well-argued positions often go ignored or dismissed by oppressive power structures. In this context, neutrality is not an innocent stance — it is, in many cases, a form of complicity.

To shout, to resist, to fight — even if these do not always conform to the standards of academic rational discourse — are, for many people and communities, the only possible ways to be heard. From this perspective, adopting a stance of neutrality as an educator, especially in situations of disadvantage, under the argument of offering "equal opportunities," strikes me as deeply hypocritical. Those in vulnerable conditions often lack the resources needed to express and defend themselves on equal footing. In such cases, neutrality becomes an ally of power — and therefore, an ally of oppressive power.

Philosophical practice with children and youth cannot be abstracted from these realities. To educate philosophically also means to take an ethical stance against injustice and to create spaces where questions are not only welcomed but urgent. Philosophy, far from being a neutral exercise, is a tool for emancipation — as long as it is practiced with critical awareness and a commitment to social transformation.

This article shows that the presence of neutrality in P4C is justified under the methodological, ontological, and epistemological paradigms proposed by Lipman and the program's co-founders. While neutrality may be useful for practicing critical thinking, it runs counter to the political and ethical nature of the human being. Therefore, to practice a P4C that addresses racism, colonialism, sexism, and other forms of structural violence, a paradigm shift is needed. Critical pedagogy may be a path to achieve this.

According to Yancy (2019), educators should help their students to

> feel the immediacy, as it were, of their possible death, to be haunted by their finitude; to get them to feel just how little time we have (each has) to learn to be better human beings, to change the world for the better, given such a short period between birth and the grave. (p. 3)

Education, therefore, should not waste time trying to be neutral, nor imagining the possibility of neutrality. It is necessary to ensure that students — as well as educators — in a collaborative relationship, question reality rather than conform to it. It is necessary to engage with context, seeking to create, imagine, and dream of more just worlds, where the partialities of many can coexist and give meaning to a true universality. This exercise is, by nature, both political and ethical.

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**erick javier padilla rosas**

PhD candidate in the Educational Policy and Leadership program and Diversity Fellowship recipient at Marquette University, hormiguereño, boricua.

**zorayma z. navarro otero**

Coordinator of ZONA-FILO, bayamonesa, boricua.

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