

HISTORY AND SENSE OF A PROJECT

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Abstract:

The following lines will tell you a little about the Philosophy in Schools Project. Telling hi/stories is a way of making something be known. So I would like to share some history of the past, some history of the present of the Philosophy in Schools Project, as well as some of the ideas that give sense to its activities. Sharing facts and ideas can also be a way of starting new movements of thought, of inviting people to think about what is not told, about what is only implicitly assumed, about directions it insinuates, about points of proximity and distance in relation to other histories, in relation to the histories that you, the reader, also live and produce. The Philosophy in Schools Project was approved in December 1997 as a community outreach project of the University of Brasília. This project is happening in different educational contexts throughout Brazil's Federal District. There are many ways of understanding and practicing philosophy. In the Philosophy in Schools Project we try to live philosophy as a thinking experience. Its objective was and still is the integration of university scholars, students from Philosophy, Education and Psychology courses (the so called "mediators"), and teachers and students from public schools, all through the exercise of philosophy. The Philosophy in Schools Project sees education and philosophy as everyone's practices and no one's properties. Transforming education into a product may submit it to private interests and to the market laws. A philosophical education is a common space that receives everyone without charging for their presence. Only by doing so can we meet, not only with different age groups, but also with distinctive realities in order to think together about the world, about what we have become, what we can become.

Keywords: Philosophy; Education; Thinking experiences; School; Communitarian project.

História e Sentido de um Projeto

Resumo:

As linhas que se seguem vão lhe contar um pouco sobre o *Projeto Filosofia nas Escolas*. Contar histórias é uma maneira de tornar alguma coisa conhecida. Então eu gostaria de compartilhar algumas histórias do passado, algumas histórias do presente do *Projeto Filosofia nas Escolas*, bem como algumas idéias que dão sentido às suas atividades. Compartilhar fatos e idéias pode também ser uma maneira de dar início a novos movimentos de pensamento, de convidar pessoas a pensar sobre o que não foi dito, sobre o que está assumido apenas implicitamente, sobre direções que são insinuadas, sobre pontos de proximidade e distância em relação a outras histórias, em relação a histórias que você, leitor, também vive e produz. O convite está feito. O *Projeto Filosofia nas Escolas* foi aprovado em Dezembro de 1997 na Universidade de Brasília como um projeto de pesquisa para a comunidade. Este projeto acontece em diferentes contextos

educacionais em todo Distrito Federal (Brasil). Há muitas maneiras de entender e praticar a filosofia. No *Projeto Filosofia nas Escolas* tentamos viver a filosofia como uma experiência de pensamento. O objetivo do projeto era, e ainda é, a integração de acadêmicos da universidade, estudantes dos cursos de Filosofia, Educação e Psicologia (chamados "mediadores"), professores e alunos de escolas públicas, através do exercício da filosofia. O *Projeto Filosofia nas Escolas* entende a educação e a filosofia como práticas de todos sem ser propriedade de ninguém. Transformar a educação em um produto pode submetê-lo a interesses privados e às leis do mercado. Uma educação filosófica é um espaço comum que recebe a todos sem cobrar por sua presença. Só assim podemos atender não só a diferentes faixas etárias, mas também a realidades distintas para *pensar juntos* sobre o mundo, sobre o que nos tornamos, sobre o que podemos vir a ser.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia; Educação; Experiências de pensamento; Escola; Projeto comunitário.

Historia y Sentido de un Proyecto

Resumen:

Las líneas que se siguen le dirán un poco sobre el *Proyecto de Filosofía en las Escuelas*. Contar historias es una manera de dar a conocer algo. Así que me gustaría compartir algunas historias del pasado, algunas historias del presente del *Proyecto de Filosofía en las Escuelas*, así como algunas ideas que dan sentido a sus actividades. Compartir hechos e ideas también puede ser una manera de iniciar nuevos movimientos de pensamiento, invitar a la gente a pensar sobre lo que no se ha dicho, sobre lo que es asumido sólo de manera implícita, sobre direcciones que son insinuadas, sobre los puntos de proximidad y distancia en relación con otras historias, historias que usted, lector, también vive y produce. La invitación está hecha. El *Proyecto de Filosofía en las Escuelas* fue aprobado en diciembre de 1997 en la Universidad de Brasilia como un proyecto de investigación para la comunidad. Este proyecto se lleva a cabo en diferentes contextos educativos en el Distrito Federal (Brasil). Hay muchas maneras de entender y practicar la filosofía. En el *Proyecto de Filosofía en las Escuelas* intentamos vivir la filosofía como una experiencia de pensamiento. El objetivo del proyecto era, y sigue siendo, la integración de profesores de la Universidad, estudiantes de los cursos de Filosofía, Psicología y Educación (llamados "mediadores"), profesores y estudiantes de las escuelas públicas a través del ejercicio de la filosofía. El proyecto comprende la educación y la filosofía como prácticas de todos, sin ser propiedad de nadie. Transformar la educación en un producto puede someterla a los intereses privados y a las leyes del mercado. Una educación filosófica es un espacio común que da la bienvenida a todos sin cobro por su presencia. Sólo de esta manera podremos atender no sólo a personas de diferentes edades sino también a las distintas realidades para *pensar juntos* sobre el mundo, sobre lo que nos hemos convertido, y sobre lo que podremos llegar a ser.

Palabras clave: Filosofía; Educación; Experiencias de pensamiento; Escuela; Proyecto comunitario.



HISTORY AND SENSE OF A PROJECT

Juliana Merçon

The words that follow will narrate some of the history of an encounter between philosophy, teachers and students. It is only one history among many others that tell us about similar encounters from around the world. It is also only one history among others that would be differently narrated by other participants of this same encounter. And it is also one history among others that I could tell you about this encounter. All this makes me think that it may not be the same encounter which is narrated in different ways. Maybe it is a series of different encounters which are experienced by different people. Maybe it is a new encounter that we experience each time we narrate it. Or still, within the encounter between philosophy and school, there may be something common and old at the same time as something not shared and new within each history that is told.

The following lines will tell you a little about the *Philosophy in Schools Project*. This project happens in different educational contexts throughout Brazil's Federal District. Telling hi/stories is a way of making something be known. So I would like to share some history of the past, some history of the present of the *Philosophy in Schools Project*, as well as some of the ideas that give sense to its activities. Sharing facts and ideas can also be a way of starting new movements of thought, of inviting people to think about what is not told, about what is only implicitly assumed, about directions it insinuates, about points of proximity and distance in relation to other histories, in relation to the histories that you, the reader, also live and produce. The invitation is made.

Some of our history

Our brain is like a robot
full of wires linked to a motor.

Our memory is like a wire linked to the brain.
Diego, 8 years old

In 1996, Ann M. Sharp, professor from the IAPC (Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for children), Montclair State University, and Walter O. Kohan, professor of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires, offered a short course on philosophy for children at the University of Brasília. More than 100 university students and school teachers enrolled.

In June 1997, Walter Kohan, now as a professor of the Faculty of Education at the University of Brasilia, and Ana Miriam Wüensch, from the Department of Philosophy, conducted workshops, lectures and video sessions on philosophy for children to groups that combined reached over 200 people. In July of that same year, more than 120 people participated in seminars on philosophy in the education of children. These events once again received the presence of Ann Sharp. Other smaller events were organised and helped create a favourable context for the emergence of a pilot experience: the *Philosophy in Schools Project*.

The *Philosophy in Schools Project* was approved in December 1997 as a community reach project of the University of Brasilia. Its objective was and still is the integration of university scholars, students from Philosophy, Education and Psychology courses (the so-called 'mediators'), teachers and students from public schools through the exercise of philosophy. In February 1998, the *Philosophy in Schools Project* offered its first 'Teacher Education Course'. This course was an initial step in the work that would last for a whole year in the schools. More than 30 schools and about 140 teachers were candidates for the course, but only 4 public schools and 30 teachers were selected. Distinct geographic positions and social-economic characteristics were considered, as well as the number of interested teachers per school and time made available for the project by each institution. The activities of the *Philosophy in Schools Project* occurred at the



university and schools through the entire year. In October the project offered a course entitled "Freedom and friendship in the reading experience", which was given by Jorge Larrosa from the University of Barcelona.

In 1999 the 'II Teacher Education Course' was held and three more schools took part in the project. Philosophy was then practised in 7 public schools, through the activities of 15 mediators (university students), 50 teachers, and about 1500 children. The participants of the project helped organise the *IX ICPIC* (International Council of Philosophical Inquiry with Children) *Conference*, which was held in Brasilia from the 4 to 9 July. People from 30 countries and from most parts of Brazil met to share experiences and discuss ideas concerning philosophy with children. There were over 1300 attendants. Visits to the schools that participate in the project were made during the conference. The adult participants had then the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the children from the project.

The 'III Teacher Education Course' was also offered during 1999. Twenty new participants integrated the project. In July and November we received a visit from David Kennedy of the University of Montclair/IAPC. He offered seminars on 'philosophy and childhood' and attended some of the project's general meetings.

In the beginning of 2000 the project offered its 'IV Teacher Education Course'. This time the course was held at the schools that were taking part in the project as an attempt to broaden the number of teachers involved in each school and intensify our activities. About thirty new mediators and teachers started their activities in the project. At the university, two new subjects started being offered by the Faculty of Education: 1. Philosophical inquiry in education, and 2. Philosophy with children. In April we launched the book *Philosophy in public schools*. This book presents the principles of the philosophical practice within the *Philosophy in Schools Project*, the history of its first two years of existence and reports on the experiences that occurred in the different schools. David Kennedy

was a visiting professor at the post graduate course in Education during the first semester. In July, Jorge Larrosa (University of Barcelona) was again with us, this time conducting a seminar on 'philosophical and literary images of childhood'.

The 'V Teacher Education Course' was held in the beginning of 2001 at the university. Forty new mediators and teachers started their practice in the schools. During the month of June three major events were organized by the project: 1. The *First Students' Meeting*, which gathered around 200 children who discussed many topics of philosophy and education among themselves and with adults (a senator, philosophers, teachers, etc); 2. An *International Meeting on Philosophy and Education*, hosting different philosophers/educators mainly from South America and France; and 3. The *I Regional Forum on Philosophy Teaching*, which was the first of a series of such events. The International Meeting and the Regional Forum happened on the same days. Over 700 people attended these events.

At the end of June 2001, the *Philosophy in Schools Area*, through the Department of Theory and Fundamentals (Faculty of Education), and together with the Department of Philosophy, offered the first post-graduate course in Philosophy Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools. Like all the other short courses given by the project, this course was free of costs. Fifty people were selected from over 100 candidates. 40% of the enrolled students had a degree in philosophy, another 40% in education, and the 20% had studied sociology, history, literature, mathematics, etc. Twenty-four professors (from Brasilia, from other cities in Brazil, and 9 from other countries) presented their ideas on philosophy and education. The course ended in April 2002 with the formal defence of the students' written work.

In August 2002 the *II Regional Forum on Philosophy Teaching* was held in the neighbouring city of Goiania. Many participants of the *Philosophy in Schools Project* presented their papers. Due to the focused attention on the post-graduate course and to strike within the public education system, the 'VI Teacher Education Course' was held in October 2002. Thirty new students and teachers



were introduced to our reflections and practices. Soon the year would be over so we took the opportunity to restructure the activities for the year to come.

In March 2003 we started our 'VII Teacher Education Course'. On the first enrolment day, a week prior to the course, 60 people signed up. Many students and teachers insisted that we created more spots, so we started the course with 87 enrolments. Each night, from the 17th to the 21st of March, the group would meet with university professors (coordinators and collaborators) to discuss the following topics: 1. What it means to teach and to learn; 2. Childhood and adulthood; 3. Thinking as an experience; 4. Philosophy and education; 5. Methodological reflections on philosophising with children and adolescents. This was the initial stage of a course that had 120 hours distributed among activities at the university and schools throughout 4 months.

Teachers from many different schools took part in that course. The group decided that the activities of the project would occur at seven of the represented schools. This choice considered the geographic diversity and the number of teachers willing to extend this experience for at least a whole year. One of the selected schools stands out for the novelty it presented to us. It is an educational centre for the literacy of adults in a very poor region of the Federal District. All the teachers that work there are members of the local community.

In November 2003 the project organized the *III Regional Forum on Philosophy Teaching*, which was held at the University of Brasilia and had about 300 participants. The *South American Philosophy and Education Electronic Journal* (www.resafe.rg3.net) was launched during the Forum.

The 8th version of the "Teacher Education Course" took place in March 2004. Twenty new teachers joined our activities. Meetings at the schools and the university happened throughout the year, which was highlighted with two main events in November: the *II Students' Meeting* (that counted with the participation of about 150 children, who produced posters and engaged in philosophical discussions) and the *I Federal District Forum on Philosophy Teaching* (that gathered

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over 100 teachers from Brasilia and neighbouring towns).

The project today

The *Philosophy in Schools Project* is a construction of each school, of each group of teachers and mediators, of each teacher.

There are no recepies.

Together and alone we have to invent and adapt everything to each class.

Claudia, teacher

We are today 3 university coordinators, about 30 university students or mediators (from different areas: education, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, arts), 50 public school teachers (primary and secondary education), and approximately 1500 students (children, adolescents and adults) participating in the *Philosophy in Schools Project*.

The project does not follow a rigid model of organisation and functioning. Each week, month, semester and year we evaluate the different aspects of our practice: in the classroom, at each school, regarding the articulation between the schools and the university. The evaluations generate new proposals, attempts and experimentations concerning how our activities happen and how we organize ourselves as a group. During 2004 our activities were organized as follow:

Activity	Participants	Place	Frequency	Duration
Evaluation and planning of the philosophy class	Teachers and mediators	School	Weekly	2 hours
Philosophy class	Teachers, mediators and school students	School	Weekly	1 - 2 hours
Study group	Teachers,	University	Weekly	4 hours



	Mediators, Coordinators			
Report writing	Teachers, Mediators, Coordinators		Weekly	1 - 2 hours
General meeting (reports are handed in)	Teachers, Mediators, Coordinators	University	Monthly	4 hours
General evaluation	Teachers, Mediators, Coordinators	University	Every six months	4 hours

Describing our activities

- Evaluation and planning of the philosophy class:

For two hours every week the group of teachers and mediators meet at the school to talk about the previous philosophy class that happened with the students. They talk about their impressions, what was interesting and what they think could change. Such evaluation may create a context for reflecting upon the next meeting: what text (philosophical extract, literary text, music, drama, video, pictures, etc) to use, how, why... Planning a philosophical class is a way of experiencing inquiry among adults. The 'plan' that emerges from such an inquiry and that will be taken to class concerns only the (pre)text that was collectively thought about and the questioning attitude shared by that group.

- Philosophy class:

Pairs of mediators and teachers are formed in each planning group. They will be together during the school year, planning, evaluating the activities and participating in the discussions with the students. Once a week each pair goes

into a class to engage in dialogue with the children, adolescents or adults. The mediator is not a model for the teacher. They are both thinking about their practice, trying to find ways of providing a context in which students can really think and feel at ease to express their thoughts. They are both experimenting forms of interaction and trying to respond to questions such as: what does it mean to teach? What does it mean to think? Can thinking be taught?

□ Study group:

Every Thursday evening a group of about 20 teachers and mediators meet with the coordinators to discuss readings concerning philosophy, philosophy with children, education, etc. The group decides what texts will be read and discussed. The practice in the schools is constantly linked with the ideas discussed, what seems to provide one more context for sharing experiences, frustration and challenges.

□ Report writing:

Every coordinator, teacher and mediator writes reports on their philosophical activities. The reports have two dimensions: one descriptive and the other reflective. Each person chooses what activities to describe and the topics they want to investigate. The groups of mediators and teachers that meet at each school are also motivated to write collective texts about their experiences and reflections concerning the philosophical practice. The reports are read by the coordinators and other participants, talked over during our general meetings and kept in files in the Project Room.

□ General meeting:

Once a month, usually on Saturdays, there is a meeting for all the teachers, mediators and coordinators. Each month a different school is in charge of preparing the meeting. The schools in charge usually conduct a philosophical



workshop that is based on activities they had previously shared with the children. The workshop provides a common ground for thinking about our practices, sharing other experiences and questions, and linking the schools. The general meeting makes us see how we are one big net formed by very diverse threads.

□ General evaluation:

At the end of each school/university semester, teachers, mediators and coordinators evaluate different aspects of the practice in schools and of the form through which the project is organised. Suggestions are presented for the following semester.

Some senses of our practice

Each thing has a reason
for being understood the way it is understood
Bianca, 10 years old

There isn't such a thing as a neutral philosophy or practice. As human constructions they are always situated at a certain point in history and space. They provide elements for either maintaining the world around us as it is or for changing it. When philosophy is practised with such large groups of people (and specially children) the need for making its principles and functions explicit is even greater. I will now present a few elements that may contribute to the understanding of some of the reasons and functions of philosophy as we practice it. I know that a much more extensive presentation would be necessary. Please consider the following lines as a brief introduction to some of the ideas on which we base our experiences.

The public space as the place of philosophy

Poor children think that what they say is always wrong.

They are not as confident as rich kids.
Philosophy may help them value their own voice.
Márcia, mediator

The industry of knowledge is growing rapidly and globally. Education is today one of the five major export products of many so-called developed nations, it is a very profitable business indeed. Since at least the early 90's, the field of education in poor countries like Brazil has been targeted by international economic organisations that are willing to expand their markets. In 1994, a publication of the World Bank defended that universities in Latin America should abandon the research institute model (considered expensive and not efficient) and function as "non-university" public and private colleges (technical institutes, short duration courses, etc). We know that such measure would only contribute to the expansion of private institutions and to the disintegration of the knowledge produced for the service of common interest and well being. Within this context of political struggle, the *Philosophy in Schools Project* resists the global tendency for turning education into a product. We question the determinations of the common by the capital and affirm the importance of public education as free of costs and full of quality for all its levels (primary, secondary and tertiary).

The *Philosophy in Schools Project* sees education and philosophy as everyone's practices and no one's properties. Transforming education into a product may submit it to private interests and to the market laws. A philosophical education is a common space that receives everyone without charging for their presence. Only by doing so we can be with hundreds of children, adolescents and adults that live today on the margins of our excluding society of consumption. Only by doing so we can create room to listen to the voices that are constantly silenced by the world of adults with diplomas. Only by doing so we can meet not only with different age groups but also with distinct realities to *think together* about the world, about what we have become, what we



can become.

I highlighted the words *think together* so that our practice is not understood as some 'critical or progressive' pedagogy that consider the 'intellectual-teacher' responsible for raising the 'conscience' of the students in order to 'emancipate' them from their 'oppressed class' through a non-ideological truth. Although we acknowledge the classist, excluding and oppressive character of our societies, it is important to clarify that we do not practice philosophy to impose any truth, but to explore, problematise and think collectively about the truths that are presented to us. The *Philosophy in Schools Project's* objective is not to define the transformations that should take place, but to generate the critic of the acquired and non-reflected ways of thinking and acting. Our objective is to provide a context in which we can think for ourselves and discuss with others what the possible and desirable transformations are (Kohan, 2000).

Philosophy as a thinking experience

This project makes us think about our life,
our ideas, concepts, provoking doubts
and questions about ourselves,
about our attitude, about our practice in education.
And what remains...
is the impossibility to continue being what one was.
Luisa, teacher

There are many ways of understanding and practising philosophy. In the *Philosophy in Schools Project* we try to live philosophy as a *thinking experience*. To affirm that philosophy is an experience is to say that it cannot be transmitted or transferred from one person to another. An experience is non-transferrable and unrepeatable. It always depends on the configuration of a subjectivity at the moment it occurs. An experience is also something unpredictable. It is not possible to foresee when or how it will happen. The relationship we establish

with our thoughts is more important than its content, if we consider thinking as an experience. Such a relationship is not one of appropriation or mastery, but it is characterised by the possibility of forming and transforming what we are. Philosophy as an experience crosses the life of those who practice it causing transformations, opening thinking to itself and to novelty. Thus a thinking experience always has a dimension of uncertainty: besides the fact that there are no certain paths that guarantee its occurrence, when it happens it provokes an overture to the unknown. A philosophical experience is not a means or an end to anything that can be anticipated.

As we affirm philosophy as a thinking experience we try to practice it in a more intimate way. The questions we pose and investigate are directly connected to the way we live, to the way and relate to the world, to the others and to ourselves. These questions cannot be external to our living. And their collective investigation may change not only what we think but also who we are.

When we think of philosophy as non-transferrable and unrepeatable we are stating that our practice does not envisage reproduction, but the novelty that emerges from the encounter between different ways of thinking. As the novelty we want to foster is always unpredictable, we are aware that there are no methods that lead to it. All these ideas seem to change how we think about what it means to teach and to learn philosophy. We will explore below some possible connections between philosophy as an experience and the meaning of teaching and learning.

Teaching and learning philosophy

Teachers seem to find it more difficult to think
and deconstruct their practices
than the children
who are always happy to discuss and don't find it strange
that now they are not doing what they were used to do in class.
Leonardo, mediator



In schools what is taught is expected to be learnt. To teach means to make available to students that what has to be mastered: contents and skills. Learning how to teach has to do with learning the methods that will make students master what is taught. Nevertheless, teaching and learning philosophy are quite different. Teaching philosophy does not mean transmitting something from one place to the other, but the creation with the other of a new something and place. One cannot learn philosophy from the other but with the other. To learn philosophy is to meet with the other within oneself through a thinking experience that is not repetition, but the start of a new path for the other and for oneself.

Philosophy is not taught by carefully hiding something known in order to make the students construct or discover it on their own. What is taught is not known. The teacher that teaches some knowledge, skills or a model that should be imitated can only prevent one from really learning. To teach philosophy is to generate spaces for the emergence of novelty, plurality, difference. What is taught is not knowledge, a way of thinking or a path, but an *inquietude*. Those who teach philosophy transmit their questioning attitude, their non-conformity with what is presented as natural or necessary in our social world. Those who teach philosophy transmit their openness to the unknown, helping each student find and follow what intrigues them.

By saying that there is no method that leads to thinking, we are not saying that there is nothing to do or prepare, that anything goes or that everything we do leads to the same results. On the contrary: not having a method means that the challenges and the effort are much greater. Not having a method means that the teacher will have to search for the most adequate way of teaching philosophy each time s/he does it. At each moment, the teachers will have to choose or create the material, raise their own questions, read about them, discuss with other teachers and mediators, ask themselves and others about each class, how to proceed, when, why, what for. At each moment, they will have to ask and search

for new answers. Again and again. Again and again, situating themselves inside the philosophical questions, questioning themselves, changing how they act and who they are, helping others find their own thinking path.

Final interrogations

Thinking and rethinking about our practice...
This is the start of our philosophical journey,
a journey that never ends.
Delia, teacher

What tensions does a practice that is not oriented towards a close end generate in a context like the school where what is taught is supposed to be mastered by those who learn it? What other new possibilities of collective work (planning, evaluating and teaching) can we explore? Is the philosophy class (previously prepared) the best moment for philosophising? Do our expectations subtly induce students' thinking? What are the conditions we need to foster in order to create an atmosphere in which children, adolescents and adults can think together and for themselves? What new relationships can we establish with knowledge, others and ourselves through philosophical practice? What prevents us from living philosophy as a transformative experience? What limits do we and others impose on such experience?... Asking and answering these and many other questions is just a start, an eternal start, on our "philosophical journey, a journey that never ends".

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