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A Seminar on Philosophy for/with Children as a Dialogical Space between Jews and Arabs at the University of Haifa

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In recent years, the educational-system development specialization of the MA program in the University of Haifa's Faculty of Education has held an annual seminar on Philosophy for/with Children (P4wC). Under my guidance, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Circassian students have formed a group embodying a living and breathing dialogical space.

Despite the global spread of P4wC principles following the emergence of the P4C movement promoted by the International Council of Philosophical Inquiry and its practice in dozens of national and regional centers, neither approach is formally taught in Israeli universities and colleges. Both thus remain outside the pedagogical mainstream, the University of Haifa—where I teach—being the only institution at which they can be studied at an MA level. I have also established the Israeli Academic Forum for Philosophy with Children, which conducts seminars and offers professional development, etc.

Located in northern Israel, the University of Haifa is a multicultural academic melting pot, the Education Faculty in particular—and thus also the seminar—being

home to students from varied ethnic backgrounds representing most if not all the sectors of Israeli society.

The seminar meets 14 times for four-hour sessions each semester. The syllabus opens with a critical review of the State educational system and its traditional curriculum of preparation for matriculation as the launching pad for tertiary education. It then zooms in on innovative philosophies that center on the student and the development of diverse forms of thinking. The core of the work deals with P4wC, first outlining Matthew Lipman and Ann-Margaret Sharp's vision of P4C and then examining its development across the globe. At the same time, a broad discussion is conducted of the role played by the community and inquiry—all these activities taking place while exploring the students' attitudes towards the material in the context of the educational environment from which they come. The MA pedagogical-development students have diverse academic backgrounds, some being kindergarten teachers, others teaching in elementary and high schools, or serving as counselors, heads of educational frameworks (kindergartens and schools), or forming part of non-mainstream alternative educational systems. Some are urbanites, some live on the periphery in settlements and villages. The seminar is in Hebrew, the academic texts in English. Over the course of the semester, the students write assignments, at the end conducting an in-depth field study—philosophical communities of inquiry with small groups of 5-year-olds relating to diverse subjects, such as P4wC, etc.

As a meta-approach and field practice, P4wC exists both within and without educational institutions, thus not being confined to a specific time or place such as a school. As a way of life and educational method, it differs from philosophy as taught in schools and academia alike. While the teaching of philosophy is becoming increasingly common in schools (especially high schools), within the history of philosophy and philosophical thought P4wC has established itself as a model for cultivating human beings who ask existential questions about themselves, their world, and their surroundings from an early age in atmosphere of peace.¹ In contrast to the academic study of philosophy, in which students are passively exposed to philosophical ideas, P4wC seeks to create a place and space for active engagement in philosophical thought that promotes broad, critical thinking skills in its young practitioners. Rather than focusing on philosophy as a field of knowledge to be

¹ W.O. Kohan, *Philosophy and Childhood: Critical Perspectives and Affirmative Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

mastered, it revolves around questions relating to the pupils' existence in the world.² It thus develops young people's philosophical sensitivity, presenting questions to them as a living, breathing, vigorous space that fosters creativity, caring, and concern.³

As Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan observe, P4wC is based on the idea that students ask questions that can be extraordinarily sweeping in scope and grandeur: "What happens to people when they die?"; "Am I really 'me' on the Internet?" They thus raise "issues of enormous metaphysical importance."⁴ This ability indicates that children begin with a thirst for holistic explanations, it thus being patronizing not to try to help them develop concepts equal in generality to the questions they ask. Building on Charles Peirce's ideas regarding the scientific community of inquiry, Lipman proposed the concept of a philosophic community of inquiry:

We can now speak of "converting the classroom into a community of inquiry" in which students listen to one another with respect, build on one another's ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another's assumptions.⁵

Philosophic communities of inquiry are sometimes run by the children or adolescents themselves, without adult intervention or necessary ties to an educational institution. Taking place in a school environment, as part of a youth movement, or private initiatives, they provide a framework within which students can think and talk about problematic issues with support from adults and their peers. In this way, as Lipman argued, classes may be transformed into communities of inquiry whose members listen respectfully to one another, construct ideas together, challenge one another, and above all look for and discover their fundamental values and tenets.

Dialogue within the seminar space

² J. Mohr Lone. "Teaching Pre-College Philosophy: The Cultivation of Philosophical Sensitivity," in J. Mohr Lone and R. Israrloff (Eds.), *Philosophy and Education: Introducing Philosophy to Young People* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 12–22.

³ J. Mohr Lone, *The Philosophical Child* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); A. Kizel, "Philosophy with Children, the Poverty Line, and Socio-philosophic Sensitivity," *Childhood and Philosophy* 11.21 (2015), pp. 139–162; T.E. Wartenberg, *Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy through Children's Literature* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

⁴ M. Lipman, A.M. Sharp, & F.S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), p. 29.

⁵ M. Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), p. 20.

Embracing openness and dialogue, the seminar places conversation and thought at its center promoting a peace atmosphere as an antithesis to the conflict atmosphere in the Middle East region. The students are thus exposed to the philosophical and educational literature of Rousseau, Dewey, Lipman, Sharp, and Matthews, alongside critical theoreticians such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Gur-Ze'ev and critical pedagogists such as Freiere. They are also introduced to many of the figures of P4wC—Maughan Gregory, Karin Murriss, Walter Omar Kohan, Arie Kizel, etc. These varied texts, clips of the practical implementation of P4wC, and websites bring them into contact—if only briefly—not only with the methods but also and most importantly the philosophy that lies at the foundation of the P4C/PwC approach and its manifestations and evolution across the world.

The seminar covers the six pillars of P4wC:

- a) Learning from a place of questions rather than a corpus of answers;
- b) Forming a community that facilitates a mode of learning vs. an educational hierarchy that boasts of omniscience;
- c) The coordinator is a participant in the learning process rather than “judge”;
- d) Learning in the (real) present vs. learning for the (unknown) future;
- e) Improvisation vs. predetermined content;
- f) Learning as liberating the learner from disciplinary boundaries.⁶

These dimensions embody P4wC as a pedagogy of searching centered around a pursuit of meaning that promotes personal development—and thus self-direction and capability. This stands in stark contrast to the “pedagogy of fear”⁷ that makes perpetual demands on the learner, induces apprehension about taking risks, reduces student competence, and creates a need for an omniscient “guide.”

At the same time, the seminar encourages the search for answers to questions related to the conflict, although this is not easy for students because most of them are not interested in participating in political discussions as part of the concern of students, especially the Arab minority. This is despite the fact that the atmosphere at the seminar over the years is an atmosphere of openness, dialogue and acquaintance that allows for a good personal connection between the students.

⁶ A. Kizel, “Philosophy with Children as an Educational Platform for Self-Determined Learning,” *Cogent Education* 3.1 (2016): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1244026>

⁷ A. Kizel, “Pedagogy out of Fear of Philosophy as a Way of Pathologizing Children,” *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* 10.20 (2016), pp. 28–47.

Exposure to different views

Broad exposure to views that directly conflict with the educational theories in which the students are trained poses a series of internal and external challenges alike. These confrontations find expression in arguments and debates within the dialogical learning community. At the start of the seminar, I make a point of telling the students that it will introduce them to ideas that may shake their personal, national, education, pedagogical, and community positions by placing questions at the heart of an open form of dialogue.

Over the years, we have found that the Haifa seminar poses a series of educational challenges to the most active participants in the philosophical community of inquiry revolving around a number of axes:

- a) *Educational disparities between dialogical ideas centering around P4wC and the more conservative theories the students have been trained in and work according to.* The Jewish and Arab participants are all graduates of Israeli teacher-training colleges or universities. Although the educational discourse in Israel engages with such issues as dialogue, student openness, asking questions and making room for emotional and social skills in learning-teaching processes, the teacher-training program remains very conservative and governed by hierarchical paradigms in the framework of which the teacher essentially conveys information. As the person with knowledge, he or she awards marks, prepares the (students for their) exams, and runs the classroom. The basic class structure in Israel gives pride of place to the teacher, both physically and in lesson style—the teacher speaking much more than the students—and through the curriculum, which privileges the transfer of knowledge (to be regurgitated in exams) over personal development. While the students who are teachers—some with 7–10 years experience in the education system—speak the language that lies at the core of P4wC, their conservatism reveals itself when the discussion reaches the heart of the topic (the belief that the student can engage in critical and creative thought, the philosophical community of inquiry, the student interactions)—first and foremost in their lack of trust in their charges and the students’ ability to think independently, especially in the field of philosophy.
- b) *The child at the center and student thinking as natural and important vs. the child as “not-knower” and “incapable.”* Both Jewish and Arab students imbibe the

view that education is hierarchical, the teacher occupying a higher place than the pupil with respect to life experience, knowledge, and skills alike. The pedagogic view that has come to dominate the educational discourse relates to two vertices—that influence and reinforce one another:

- 1) The child as “not-knower”: This philosophy contends that children are essentially “not-knowing” young people whom the education system can better by raising their level of knowledge and inculcate with values so that they become “knowing”—i.e., possess intellectual knowledge and know how to behave. It thus views young children as “candidates for”/“not yet fit” who lack the ability to act autonomously and guide and direct their lives in any properly independent fashion. Some educational systems thus contain a double discourse—an external one that discusses the belief in the child’s capabilities (some of which fit the educational structuralism) and an internal one within the school based on the belief that children are “still not ready,” school being the place in which they mature.
- 2) The model of demand as the pedagogical basis for the operation of the educational system. Here, the school is perceived as the ideal place for learning—a *beit midrash* (study hall) for learning, as it were. This sacred hall of learning—which possesses an objective prestigious status—affords optimal teaching-learning processes conducted in a professional educational language that is socially legitimate. The school thus possesses the right to demand at any and all times that the young student meet the standards set by adults and gain measurable achievements as a way of preparing to enter adult life as a fit and mature person. In many respects, the students must therefore swim through a sea of demands and commands.

The seminar introduces the participants to the “pedagogy of fear”⁸—an approach that stunts the active and vital educational growth of young people, making them passive and dependent upon external disciplinary sources. According to Martin Seligman, the founder of the positive psychology school, modern psychology has been co-opted by the disease model.⁹ In its over-enthusiastic adoption of the model of “repairing damage,” the pedagogy of fear thus views students as in constant need of “mending.”

⁸ A. Kizel, “Pedagogy out of Fear of Philosophy as a Way of Pathologizing Children,” *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* 10.20 (2016), pp. 28–47.

⁹ M. Seligman, “The Effectiveness of Psychotherapy: The Consumer Reports Study,” *American*

Rather than seeking to repair damage, P4wC advocates building strength and resilience in children. The philosophical community of inquiry should provide a space for addressing existential questions, some of which deal with urgent social issues. These philosophical questions threatening some social and educational structures, some claim that philosophy is irrelevant, ineffective, “pompous,” and “badgering” and has nothing to do with success—certainly not financial or real-life success.

This definition of philosophy stands in stark contrast to that propounded by Gareth Matthews, one of the proponents of P4C. Wondering whether children as young as three are capable of undertaking such tasks as reasoning, he notes that “Piaget has taught us to suppose that children of that age and even those who are much older are highly egocentric.”¹⁰

During the seminar, the students engage in in-depth discussions that reveal the difficulties and cognitive dissonance they experience in accepting new views. While they strongly identify with the principles of P4wC, they are also wedded to the notion that the “child does not know and is incapable.” The seminar thus encourages an open discourse regarding the pedagogical theories that lie at the heart of P4wC, upheld by four pillars: doubt, questioning, dialogue, and discovery. As facilitator, I expose the participants to the principles of P4wC, in particular with respect to the view that children are natural philosophers. They thus learn not only about the history of the P4wC movement but also its global development, reading the numerous studies relating to it that have demonstrated the importance of critical, creative, and caring thinking.

P4wC do not regard children as a “space of lack” (experience, knowledge, values, etc.), Gareth Matthews arguing that the psychological model of children’s stagal maturation that has been accepted without question or reservation by scholars of childhood is biased and erroneous from its very foundation upwards.¹¹ Although it is compatible with biological or psychological development, it is not consistent with philosophy. As he asserts, however, no reason exists to assume that children are incapable of discussing and debating. Any person, whatever their age, who listens to the philosophical questions children ask and the answers they give understands that

Psychologist 50 (1995), pp. 965–974.

¹⁰ G. Matthews, *Dialogues with Children* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 114.

¹¹ Matthews, *Dialogues with Children*, p. 114.

they are marked by a freshness and inventiveness that adults sometimes find difficult to grasp. Maturation and maturity frequently bring with them a staleness and loss of inventiveness that coalesce into conformist or normative education—or at the very least a commitment to obedience and mediocrity. The new and fresh philosophical perspective of children demands a willingness to engage in dialogue and rejection of the fear of the innocent and deep questions of philosophy.

Community/religious/family conservatism/patriarchy vs. egalitarian dialogical education

Over the years, the seminar has developed a dialogical view that recognizes and embraces the participants' identities, cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, and community norms, etc. This creates an open space in which the students can become members of a learning community and establish a discourse that includes asking nationalistic questions, the tensions within Israeli society, gender status, and personal/collective narratives. In the main, the latter are hybrid rather than dichotomous. While the seminar is devoted to asking questions as a space of inquiry rather than identity-formation, it also serves as a forum for addressing real-life issues. The Jewish students thus define themselves, for example, as “Jewish Israelis” (their parents being Ashkenazi or Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews), “Israeli Ashkenazi Jews” (if their parents are European), or “Israeli Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews” (if their parents are from North Africa or other Arab countries). Those who are not Jewish define themselves as “Israeli Arabs,” “Israeli Palestinian Arabs,” “Israeli Druze,” or “Israeli Circassians.” All these delineations carry a weighty political charge that reflects the different ways in which civil-national identity is interpreted. They also bear emotional loads in light of the long-standing conflict that has claimed so many victims. Students frequently coming from homes in which a close relative has been killed, the sensitivity around the issues invites either closeness or distance.

The seminar as a space that legitimizes the asking of questions

The university framework in which the seminar is conducted is an enabling space due to its pluralistic approach—which reflects the multiculturalism of Haifa itself, a city known for its Jewish-Arab coexistence. This environment promotes a dialogical discourse in the seminar that accords with the educational discourse for peace—one that, rather than imposing views on others or presenting predetermined knowledge,

adopts the P4wC principle that a space of questions is a place where questions can begin.

From many perspectives, the seminar forms a type of laboratory for peace and dialogue in a friendly, caring environment. Firstly, it models mutual existence in the midst of questions posed to oneself and others. Secondly, it serves as an inspiration of sorts for the possibility of the existence of philosophical communities of inquiry in an atmosphere of dialogue and mutual respect in the school as a whole and the participants' specific classroom in particular.

During their studies at the University of Haifa, the participating groups exhibit numerous affinities with existential thought—in particular meaning, authenticity, and responsibility. Rather than addressing experience solely as a way of searching for and finding meaning in the Deweyan sense, however, this regards the search for meaning as a process that leads children to take responsibility for themselves within the world. In this sense, it closely corresponds to Viktor Frankl's thesis that human beings are spiritual entities whose primary drive is the fierce need to find meaning in life.¹² Imprinted upon human nature, this impetus is perpetual, dynamic, and universal. Frankl's thought is particularly relevant to the contemporary search for meaning because he argues that human beings strive to know the goal they are dedicated to achieving—an aim that gives them a feeling of self-expression and unique self-realization.¹³ Meaningful lives are purpose-driven, people discovering rather than inventing meaning. This theory corresponds to the search for and finding of meaning the philosophical community of inquiry in Haifa's seminar affords, enabling each participant to find his or her role and goals in life.¹⁴

Applying Viktor Frankl's view to the seminar and the participants' dialogue, the meaning of life is the taking of responsibility for fulfilling one's unique potential. The ability to reach high and live a life imbued with meaning depends on experiencing things that lie beyond ordinary everyday life. The seminar focuses on the search for and finding of meaning that allows the students to discover their full humanity by enabling them to recognize their distinctiveness (i.e., their otherness

¹² V.E. Frankl, *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy* (New York, NY: World Pub. Co., 1969); idem, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy and Humanism* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

¹³ V.E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (New York, NY: MJF, 2000).

¹⁴ V.E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1984).

from those around them and, by the same token, the otherness of others)—and their responsibility towards others.

Throughout the years, the participants of the seminar at the University of Haifa report that the meeting between them allows them to experience and practice a respectful dialogue that allows them to demonstrate ways to live together in an atmosphere of peace and while striving for mutual recognition.