

Teaching Philosophy to Children: A New Experience in Iran

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Abstract

The program of *philosophy for children* has been recently introduced in Iran and soon attracted the attention of academic and scientific associations. To investigate the effect of *community of inquiry* method on developing reasoning skills in children, based on Lipman's research, an experiment was conducted in Ahwaz Nemooneh Dulaty School. Sixty boy students were randomly selected and assigned to experimental and control group. The experimental group was taught based on community of inquiry method for eleven seventy-minute sessions. The results of this semi-experimental study have shown that implementing community of inquiry method has positively affected the reasoning skills of the experimental group.]

Keywords: philosophy for children, community of inquiry

1. Introduction

A long with the changes in the theoretical foundations and nature of science, new approaches for recognize the educational process and objectives have been offered. One of these most important approaches focuses on thinking. Ennis, Lipman, and Paul (1989) argued that cultivating thoughtful people should be the major purpose of education (see, Shabani.2005). Fisher (2001) also states that we are kinds of creatures that are able to think as well as control and think about our thoughts. Our understanding of thinking is in debt to the efforts that have been done over centuries by scientists studying the nature of mind, its abilities, and the methods of developing these abilities. Ongoing studies in this area might help us to find the answer of what thinking is and how we can develop thinking ability in children.

To put it in another way, since old time regarding the question what philosophy is, various answers have been proposed which can be summed up in two groups. The first group defines philosophy as a collection of philosophers' ideas and opinions about philosophical subjects. The second group, however, envisions philosophy as philosophical activity that could be done by anybody who thinks philosophically (Beheshti, 1999). A bulk of research since 40 years ago has concluded that adulthood period including university years is too late to develop reasoning skills in people. The result of these studies along with the idea that philosophy is not is not exclusive to philosophers has promoted educational scholars to think about teaching philosophy in childhood. Thus, new program entitled *philosophy for children* has been proposed with which philosophy entered the schools.

2. Teaching philosophy to children

About forty years ago in Columbia University, Professor Mathew Lipman argued that by engaging children in philosophical discussions, it could be possible to develop their thinking abilities. He believes that if children's natural curiosity and their desire to discover the world are integrated with philosophy, they can be more flexible and effective thoughtful individuals (Safaeimoghdam, 1999). However, this dose not mean that children must be taught the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, or Kant directly in class sessions, though these philosopher might have interesting ideas for both children and adults. Concepts such as truth, freedom, beauty, justice, rights and rules have combined with many problems that are still vague to children. Children are likely to ask some ques-

tions such as whether human's thought and knowledge are real. Should we always follow the majority? How can we demonstrate our friendship? What does a good society look like? What can our body do for us? Do we have to think all the time? How can we understand the way others think? These questions and the issue of developing cognitive skills in children which can strengthen children's thinking abilities, and reasoning skills, could be told as short stories or novels during class sessions. Being full of philosophical concepts and ideas, such stories draw children into span of philosophy.

Fisher (1995) believes that philosophy for children is a successful method to teach thinking. Findings in more than fifty countries have indicated that philosophy for children improve thinking skills, including critical thinking (Fisher, 1998). According to Lipman, the program of teaching philosophy to children is adopted from Dewey and Vygotsky's theories that focus on teaching thinking and reject the idea of rote learning. Children ought to be taught how to try out, analyze and experience the subject matter rather than teach them how to memorize and recall the content. By providing children with variety of drills, such programs train them how to judge based on evidence and reason. By so doing, it broadens the children's horizons and teaches them how to think.

Special storybooks have been developed to implement the program of philosophy for children. Splitter and Sharp (1995) point out that since children enjoy stories, it could be used to motivate them to ask question, participate, and think, especially if the story includes competitive topics and events.

3. Goals of Philosophy for Children

One of main purposes of this program is improving the conditions of teaching thinking in educational systems (Lipman, 1991). Lipman believes that the goal of the program is helping children learn how to think by themselves (see Ghaedi, 2005). He pigeonholes the goals of this program as follow: improving reasoning ability, developing creativity, bracing ethical values, enhancing self-awareness and raising critical thinking.

Lipman (1988) in "*Critical Thinking What Can It Be?*" proposed a model for critical thinking. He claimed that the goal of teaching critical thinking is cultivating reasonable individuals by the process of inquiry. Lipman believes that philosophy for children is the only program that uses philosophical discussions to provide the implications of ethical development in children by engaging them in ethical inquiry, which itself requires critical and creative thinking. It is possible to achieve these goals and most of stated skills and initiating desire to apply them by using language and building a "*community of inquiry*". The term community of inquiry was used by Peirce for the first time in "*Fixation of Belief*". In a community of inquiry, students in association with their teacher read a story then discuss it collectively as a collaborative work.

To make education system reason-based, the traditional classrooms in which information is transmitted from teacher toward students have to be changed into a new form wherein both students and teacher discuss a subject matter and have reciprocal relations. In this new form of classrooms, students are divided into research groups or community of inquiry where friendly relationships and collaboration in an educational climate are welcome.

4. Hypothesis and Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to study the effect of community of inquiry on developing reasoning skills among students of grade eight in Ahwaz Nemooneh Dulaty School. The general hypothesis addressed is:

Community of inquiry method has a positive effect on development of reasoning skills.

5. Subjects

The present study was carried out in Ahwaz Nemooneh Dulaty School. From three classes of eighth grade, 60 students were randomly selected and assigned to an experimental and control group each of which contains 30 students.

6. Instrument and Design

New Jersey Test of reasoning Skills (NJTRS) was used as an instrument of the study for collecting data. To measure the internal consistency of the test, coefficient alpha of Cronbach (calculated as 0.70) was used while to test the validity, coefficient of correlation and criterion test (calculated as 0.54) were used. The result showed

that the difference was significant at $P < 0.0001$ level.

This research employed a semi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test and control group. To examine the effect of community of method on the reasoning skills among boy students, they were exposed to this method using Lisa storybook¹ for eleven sessions. Each of which took about seventy minutes.

7. Findings

To examine the effect of treatment, the collected data was analyzed by using various descriptive statistical techniques such as mean, standard of deviation. The result of this analysis is presented in Table (1 and 2).

The result of pre-test and post-test of both experimental and control group is presented in table (1). These results indicate that the mean of post-test scores of experimental group in relation to pre-test has increased while the mean of control group has diminished in post-test. Besides, the mean of experimental group in post-test is higher than the mean of control group.

Table1. Descriptive data of pre-test and post-test scores of (NJTRS) in experimental and control group

Group	Variable	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	Standard Deviation
	Per-test	21	41	31.40	4.34
	Post-test	27	45	35.36	3.93
Control	Pre-test	22	41	30.76	5.17
	Post-test	20	38	29.83	5.43

Table2. Results of variance and covariance analysis of pre-test and post-test scores

Variation Source	Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean of Squares	F	Significance Level
Covariance (Pre-test)	700.496	1	700.469	65.814	$P < 0.0001$
Group	425.710	1	425.710	39.998	$P < 0.0001$
Total	606.533	56	10.831	-	-
Error	66100	60	-	-	-
Group without Covariance	504.6	1	504.6	22.39	$P < 0.0001$
Error	1307.133	58	22.537	-	-
Total	66100	60	-	-	-

As it is shown in Table 2, the ratio of F for experimental to control group equals 39.998 which is significant at $P < 0.0001$ level, therefore, it can be said that the hypothesis is correct. In addition, the effect size for experimental group is $R^2 = 0.412$ which indicates that about %40 of reasoning skills variance among students was due to the using of community of inquiry method. Besides, as Table 2 shows, the difference between the groups in post-test scores is significant without using covariance.

8. Conclusion

The interest in developing critical thinking is not a new phenomenon among educationalists; it goes back to Plato's Academy. Malcolm Nalss believes that in order to make incremental social changes, educators must

1 This storybook is one of the books that Lipman has provided for (P4C)

reconsider their roles, and they have to concentrate their activities on skills and methods required by students for their future researches (Meyers, 1986).

The program of philosophy for children introduced by Lipman and his colleagues for the first time states that philosophical thinking does not mean mere reasoning or thinking but it also requires thinking about thinking itself.

Current paper attempts to find whether we are able to improve the critical thinking among boy students of eighth grade using community of inquiry method. The results have shown that this method has a positive impact on developing reasoning skills among boy students in Ahwaz Nemooneh Dulaty School. These results agree with Jeffrey Kane's findings. Supporting Lipman's program, in an article, Kane has pointed out that teaching philosophy to children by means of community of inquiry method results in developing reasoning skills. He has also emphasized collaborative researches, and prioritized social skills development (Kane, 1985).

To support our hypothesis, we can recall the work of Simon (1979), Cummings (1981), Iorio *et al.* (1984), Allen (1988), Sprod (1997), Daniel (1998), Montes and Maria (2001). All these researchers have found that community of inquiry method has a positive effect on development of reasoning skills. Given this, it can be suggested that educational system in Iran should focus on participative methods and group discussion during class sessions. In order to attain the goal of Forth Development Plan of Iran (knowledge), educational system needs essential improvement, including placing *Philosophical Thinking* course in the curriculum of the country.

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