

Recognition, Tolerance, Respect and Empathy

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After working for the last nine years with children at a private primary school in Mexico City in order to build communities of inquiry, an essential methodology of the 'Philosophy for Children' (P4C) Program of Dr. Matthew Lipman and Dr. Ann Margaret Sharp, I have perceived the difficulty that pupils have in respecting ideas from their own schoolmates and friends. Since respect is an integral component of successful communities of inquiry, lack of respect in the classroom is a serious problem. To incorporate the methodology of the Philosophy for Children Program is not an easy task. It requires that students are conscious of themselves and others as worthy of respect, unique and irreplaceable as individuals.

I believe that implementing an educational proposal like the one expressed by Lipman makes sense and is deeply significant; however, this approach must be supplemented by work from complementary disciplines, especially psychology and its tradition of Humanistic Psychology, with thinkers like Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Rollo May.

According to Client-centered therapy, as developed, for example, by Carl Rogers (1961), we have summarized the following six characteristics:

1. People are worthy, unique and irreplaceable beings, holding a special capacity to be self-conscious and to take decisions toward self-development.
2. People are considered as biological-psychological-social-spiritual beings, recognizing their structure as a unit composed of body and spirit. People are beings who, on the one hand, are subject to physical and biological laws of nature, but on the other hand, are in need of other beings so they can transform themselves. This is to say that human beings are connected to each other and have a natural tendency to seek their self-fulfillment in material, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual needs.
3. People are self-conscious beings capable of self-directed behavior. They recognize in themselves the capacity to perceive their own existence through their perception of the environment, know their capacity for introspection and self-consciousness, and have the possibility to modify the idea they have of themselves and their attitudes, and to direct their own actions toward what they find pleasing, which entails the possibility of controlling their emotions. People respond to reality depending on the way they perceive it. And when they are conscious of this reality, people need not automatically react to it, but instead handle it in relation to their own judgments.
4. Each person recognizes him or herself as someone who has the possibility of positive behavior and who can act toward self-development.
5. People are beings who develop better in a favorable environment.
6. Finally, the human being is a social being. This is to say that the human being could not recognize and be conscious of herself without the presence of other human beings, so it can be said that she is a being in connection with others, and that is why interpersonal relationships are so important for her. This goes along with the proposal to build communities of dialogue, as the human being gets to discover herself and develops herself through other human beings.

As we have observed in the implementation of the P4C Program at the primary educational level of my school,

especially in regard to the building of Communities of Inquiry, there are a number of previous conditions that need to be in play in order to generate this style of educational community. Children who have no experience recognizing the importance of thinking about, and feeling for, themselves as persons, or perceiving others as persons similar to themselves, will be unable to build a community within the classroom that can create critical, creative and caring thinking.

From our work in different groups, we realized that it is very important that young students perceive others as persons. However, in order to recognize the dignity and importance of other persons, students must first recognize their own dignity, which brings us to the concept of 'Recognition.' Only when someone has an experience in which she recognizes her own dignity, can she then move to the next level of recognizing the importance of others. Consequently, when attempts are made to form communities of inquiry, it is important that teachers do not assume that students have discovered their own sense of dignity; if this previous work of self-discovery has not been undertaken, students can hardly be expected to perceive the other's importance.

I suggest as an initial step toward building communities of inquiry, that teachers perform exercises that enable students to discover, and so recognize, their own significance as unique persons of value. Once I discover myself as someone important, I can come to see the need to silence my own expectations and assumption in order to listen better to others who are equally as important.

As a second step toward building communities of dialogue, we have to understand the concept of 'Tolerance.' The values dictionary of Hector Rogel defines tolerance as follows: "The attitude of someone, who is willing not to repress the conviction of others, especially those of a religious or moral kind, even though they seem to him false or deserving to be rejected, neither prevents their expression." However, taking an attitude of tolerance does not mean that one needs to either approve of such convictions or be indifferent toward what is right or wrong.

The demand for tolerance is based on the person's liberty to, under his own judgment, decide what is true or false, what is good or bad; it is also based on the indisputable fact that people can be mistaken. Therefore, tolerance is demanded by the principle of justice, which implies the recognition of someone's right to their own beliefs. In being tolerant we respect the person's capacity to formulate judgments. However, tolerance has its limits, specifically when tolerance itself becomes an issue, or in other words, the extent to which a person has a right to act according to his thoughts.

A person's rights are not unlimited, since they are limited by other person's rights; neither individuals nor communities are obliged to accept actions carried out in the name of freedom of conscience that clearly impact the rights of others. Additionally, we believe an important corollary of this view is the principle that no one can be legally forced to do something against his own conscience, taking liberty of conscience as a fundamental human right.

Looked at from a more positive point of view, tolerance deals with "the frank acceptance of other human beings as equally respectable, allowing this other person to be as he is."

Virgilio Ruiz declares that "recognition and respect for others as persons belong to tolerance, not only because their human dignity but it is assumed that they put all their effort to pursue truth and welfare." (Ruiz, 2005 p.41)

Ruiz provides an expanded concept of tolerance that makes clear its importance in the building of communities of dialogue, since a spirit of tolerance is needed within such communities that allow people to express themselves while building and consolidating their own thoughts.

Additionally, Ruiz mentions that the idea and practice of tolerance is directly related not only to the personal

development of the individual, but also to two of the most important principles of modern democratic States: the principle of equality and principle of liberty. These principles are deeply integrated into the Philosophy for Children Program and how it is structured.

For most authors, tolerance is a positive concept that refers to that attitude through which ideas, beliefs and behaviors different from one's own, are allowed. Thus, it is understood that toleration also implies respecting other persons and their ideas. The theorist Todorov explains this point as follows:

Evidently, I can only be tolerant toward other humans if I postulate from the beginning, that all of us share the same human essence and therefore I suggest that others deserve the same respect. We must recognize that men are equal in order to admit that at the same time they are different. Tolerance based on equality should not face any limit and in a reciprocal way, any unequal discrimination is condemnable. Ruiz, 2005, p. 42)

Ruiz explains that he who is tolerant does not expect self-confirmation, either through a violent conversion or bettering of others; rather, his main concern would be a coexistence based on equality and mutual understanding. In order to achieve this, we require: "the capacity to listen...and to seriously take others into account, besides acquiring the attitude to learn through new situations and new information." (Ruiz, 2005, p.172)

As mentioned in international documents like UNESCO's Letter of Tolerance, (UNESCO, 1995) the struggle against intolerance requires education and it is precisely the process of building communities of dialogue that we will enable us to build such privileged spaces and transform individuals.

Another complex concept that is related to notion of tolerance is that of 'Respect.' Although this is a very familiar term, it seems that its full meaning has been lost on many people. We consider it important to unpack the full meaning of respect as we build our communities of dialogue.

Everybody uses the word respect, yet if we compare the scholarship dedicated to this moral value as opposed to others like love or justice, it does not appear sufficiently studied. Josep M. Esquirol mentions that respect comes from how we look at the world. Respect is an ethical attitude that directly links us to things, and the world itself, in which we find a close relationship between the world and ourselves; it is an attitude of the subject toward someone or something deserving of respect. In thinking about what the word "respect" means, we also need to consider what kind of entities deserve respect, and the many things in the world worthy of respect.

We have perceived in the communities of dialogue that respect is an essential attitude that enables one to participate and get in touch with other members of the group.

I think that respect is a very common term, one that may even be part of many people's daily vocabulary. Everybody uses it, knows its meaning, and understands that respect for other people and for certain things, is a good example of moral behavior (Esquirol, 2006, p. 11). It is also helpful to see respect as a virtue; instead of the 'courageous' or 'wise' person, we could consider the person as 'respectful.'

It is often the case that moral terms are not as clear as they could be. Quoting Josep M. Esquirol, he tells us about the well-known sentence of Marx: "The worker is more in the need of respect rather than bread," where we find that the meaning of the word "respect" is close to "recognition." The worker wants to be recognized as a subject, but as Esquirol emphasizes respect is something more than just recognition. Even though respect presupposes recognition, recognition does not necessarily presuppose respect. Consequently, Marx's sentence may have been better expressed as "The worker is more in...need of recognition rather than bread" (Esquirol, 2006, p.12).

Without recognition we can hardly expect to be respected. This relates to the point we made previously that

the person should first recognize himself if respect is to be possible.

To treat someone or something with respect means primarily to treat them with attention. If we look in many dictionaries we find that the word “respect” is equivalent or is a close synonym to terms like “consideration,” “deference,” “attention,” and “regard.”

The Castilian word “regard” (“miramiento”) can perfectly function as a synonym of respect: to treat someone with regard means having respect or attention for them. In German, the word “Achtung” means respect as well as attention. For Esquirol, this equivalence shows the medullar meaning of the term, namely, attention: the essence of respect is the attentive look as a condition for the possibility of respect. Esquirol explains that respect comes from the attentive look: “Not everything that we look [at] attentively ends up deserving our respect, but it can be said that some things that we look [at] attentively...can also end up being respected by us.” (Esquirol, 2006, p. 13)

One place where looking attentively is very important is in the building and maintaining of communities of dialogue. Without the attentiveness of participants it is impossible to establish the minimal conditions needed to initiate dialogue. Therefore, as Esquirol makes evident, the concept of respect is an essential attitude to develop in students who participate in the community of inquiry, which is an attitude grounded in how we look and pay attention. As facilitators of communities of dialogue, we will have to discover exercises and practices that can help achieve a way of looking at others that shows our attentiveness, our desire to generate dialogue.

We can think of respect as a type of movement, but not in the sense of a mechanical or local movement. The type of movement expressed by respect is perhaps best understood with reference to Aristotle and his conception of movement as “dynamis.” This notion includes what could be called “life movement” or “eros;” for example, the encounter between two lovers is a kind of movement that surpasses both. Similarly, respect is akin to a movement but one whose approach also keeps some distance, generating an approximate proximity while keeping distance between subjects. How we approach someone or something is a condition for appreciation; if the distance is considerable and the object we seek to appreciate cannot be perceived clearly, so neither can it be rightfully appreciated. Esquirol says: “I realize the existence of persons, situations and things by first approaching them; it is only through approximation [that] I can perceive their singularity, their value.” (Esquirol, 2006, p.58)

Given our consideration of respect outlined above, it seems that one can work towards creating respect in the community of dialogue by stressing its importance in the building of a respectful dialogue community, where everyone could participate in this dialogue without fear of exclusion. At the level of dialogue, respect exists in terms of whether we give due consideration to others as valuable, which is something we can convey in the very way we look at others.

It is in classroom work where this look of consideration can be practiced and exercised. The differences between members of the classroom, is something teachers are confronted with every day. However, these differences can be understood in different ways. We can learn to recognize these differences and tolerate them, which enables participants to look attentively at their relationships with one another, making respect come much more easily. Such an atmosphere of mutual respect allows dialogue to come to life. And so the true meaning of respect comes to the fore as we recognize not only the differences between other members of the community, but also our own.

Through engaging in dialogue respectfully, we learn to live well, to pay attention to the world and others around us, to respect ourselves and see how this self-respect is inseparable from respect for others. Thus, in the end, engaging in respectful dialogue allows us to see that it is other human beings who, through their distance and differences, help widen our own perceptions of ourselves and the world.

Finally, I would like to explore one more concept, that of 'Empathy.' I believe this notion not only helps facilitate acceptance and respect, for ourselves and others, but can also help deepen our discovery of ourselves and others as persons. Although the concept of empathy has received some attention from the perspective of philosophy, I approach the term largely from the perspective of therapy and the creation of therapeutic environments.

According to the psychology dictionary of Carlos Gisbert, "empathy" is defined as: "the emotional approach or instinctive knowledge of another person caused by his behavior or state, provoking a comprehension and acceptance attitude up to the point of sharing or even experiencing his/her feelings. This is where different individuals tend to regularly show reactions of empathy in various degrees." (Gisbert, 1999).

Going deeper into this concept and analyzing it through the lens of humanistic psychology, such as the work of American psychotherapist Carl Rogers, we can easily see the value of empathy.

The state of empathy or emphatic comprehension, is the right perception of the internal reference frame of another person with the meanings and emotional components in it, as if one were the other person, but never excluding the condition of 'as if.' Empathy implies, for example, to feel the pain or pleasure of another person as he/she feels it, and to perceive the causes for them as he/she perceives them, but always being conscious that either the pain or pleasure are his/hers. If this condition of 'as if' is absent, we face ourselves before a case of identification. (Rogers, 1998, p. 45)

This capacity to think and feel the internal life of another person as if it were our own, and yet do so without losing our own identity, appears to be a capacity that is indispensable for getting close to someone else. It is really only when we recognize the feelings, thoughts and experiences of others, that we can feel a personal identification with them.

Learning how to live in another's shoes without forgetting ourselves is an essential aspect of empathy. Empathy is needed when engaging in Philosophy for Children and facilitating communities of inquiry, and it is needed not only by those who facilitate communities of dialogue, but also by those students who participate in them. It is empathy that allows us to get into the other's world and understand it, silencing our own thoughts to listen and perceive the views of others.

The community of inquiry is that place in which we can perceive other persons while still being ourselves; it is precisely through our perceptions of what the other is and thinks that we can enrich our own perception. In the words of Marie-France Daniel (1998), "Once we recognize in [the] other person, similar needs like ours, we may wish to approach him/her to even see our own humanity."

Empathy, then, is the capacity to feel and think as if we were some other person, but without forgetting our own identity in the process. Having an empathetic attitude allows us to understand another's point of view and situation, rather than just judging them from our own perspective. When we really understand someone, it does not matter if that person thinks like us or not. The important thing is that we can begin to comprehend his/her needs and reasons, which gives us the possibility of widening our horizons and our own perspective.

In order to have empathy it is necessary that we learn how to be flexible. Being intolerant and strict will never allow us to listen and understand the other's reasons. And that is why empathy without tolerance, a concept we discussed earlier, would be difficult to acquire or apply.

In México there is a series of programs related to the acquisition and spreading of values, such as, the "The Force of Values" Program (La Fuerza de los Valores). The slogan of the program seems to follow the values we have been exploring: "To see things under others' perspectives, changes ours, and tolerance as well as acceptance

of differences grow.” (Albarrán Noriega, p. 13) Even though I believe that Philosophy for Children is probably the program best suited to cultivate these values, as it encourages the child to not only model these values in their actions, but also to reflect on them and give them a meaning that makes sense within their own experience, it is an encouraging sign to see programs that celebrate values like tolerance.

Our reflections on the meaning and role of the concepts of recognition, tolerance, respect and empathy, should make clear why these concepts are so integral to building a community of inquiry. Moreover, we understand the rich complexity of these concepts and the way they underscore the moral dimension of being human. We also realize the difficulty of trying to consolidate such attitudes in the moral education of students. Moreover, we also need to recognize, as Mary France Daniel explains (1992, p. 247-268), that just as our understanding of human beings needs to be filled out by other disciplines like psychology and educational pedagogy that can understand our motivational and affective nature, so logic and the development of reasoning abilities are also indispensable from the first years of formal education, otherwise no serious work can be achieved in the moral education of our students.

Moral education requires the inclusion of the discipline [of] logic in this formation. Logic will complement imagination just as [well as] the affective and psychological dimension of the person... But just as...logical reasoning can prove useful in some occasions, [technical] knowledge, sensitivity toward others, the opening of spirit and the imagination, may sometimes become more relevant. (Daniel, 1998, p. 61)

I recommend we look at the cultivation of values like recognition, tolerance, respect and empathy in a similar interdisciplinary spirit, as necessary conditions for the moral education of the individual and the building of future communities of dialogue.

As Mary France Daniel explains in the quote above, moral education should not limit itself to instructing children in what society expects of them; rather we also need to cultivate sensitivity toward others, critical reasoning and logic, and the constructive use of imagination. Moreover, any moral education without practice will be incomplete, while the impact of any true moral education should be verifiable at the level of individual moral behavior and reflected at the level of sound moral judgments. The solution pursued by Philosophy for Children is to incorporate the distinctions discussed above, but do so primarily through the creation of communities of dialogue.

It is precisely by seeing these distinctions as conditions that need to be implemented in order to build effective communities of inquiry that we are best able to solve the continuing problems that beset moral education.

For example, Michael Schleifer discusses the importance of communities of inquiry in cultivating empathy. Empathy, as Schleifer mentions, “is the faculty to imagine the experience lived by [another] person... We must help children to develop their capacity to comprehend, feel and share [the] joy as well as sadness of [their] neighbor. When we show empathy before a person’s joy, we also avoid jealousy.” (Schleifer, 2008, p.221)

Although there are some philosophers, educators and psychologists who think we should avoid putting too much emphasis on empathy, I strongly feel that empathy is something essential in the building of a community of dialogue.

Consequently, I fully agree with Schleifer when he writes: “a person really being someone with empathy, either an adult, a child, a psychologist, a professor or a friend, will always consider his/her neighbor’s needs...[as] inclusively [as] his/her own...” And I also agree that empathy is not simply a competence or technique related to verbal and non-verbal expression, but is also related to cognitive and affective factors, and so perhaps is best seen as an attitude and as a moral concept.

Seen along these lines, empathy represents the capacity to “put ourselves in the place of others”, to comprehend

others, to consider the perspectives of others, which, in turn, helps us to interpret and decode their thoughts and feelings. And so, as Schleifer reiterates, empathy does not primarily refer to how we react to other people, like when we start crying because we see someone else cry. Neither is it a simple projection or emotional contagion; instead, it is an attitude that has to do with being able to perfectly comprehend the point of view of the other, his/her thoughts, feelings and opinions, without losing our self-consciousness, our identity, or our own point of view. This is a point that was also mentioned in our earlier discussion of Carl Rogers.

Consequently, we have to help children to understand the multiple facets of empathy and encourage them to consider points of view different from their own if we hope to build viable communities of dialogue. We need to help children to understand empathy as an ability that has been recognized as essential in developing moral judgment and in the acquisition of a moral behavior. As Schleifer emphasizes:

Children can apply the variations of the golden rule more efficiently, if they have acquired the necessary cognitive empathy. They will be more inclined to share and cooperate if they are able to show affective empathy, to read and comprehend other's emotions, which of course means that they have learned to distinguish among their own emotions, to name them and comprehend them. Children will develop a true concern for their neighbor." (Schleifer, 2008, p. 223)

Undoubtedly, it is a real challenge for those who facilitate communities of dialogue to not only consider the development of a child's rational and cognitive abilities, but also participate in the construction of therapeutic experiences. The latter demand seems to require the facilitator have some experience working in the application of therapeutic techniques and exercises, recognizing and defining emotions so as to be able to better detect their own feelings and those of others. Such emotions can be discovered through tales, personal stories, plays, and so, which also enable the educator to make use of his or her own personal experiences, something that Schleifer thinks is important. Through these types of exercises, we can consider another person's feelings in a way that naturally promotes better self-assessment and a greater sensitivity toward others in the community of dialogue.

Finally, I want to conclude my analysis of recognition, tolerance, respect and empathy, with some questions and practical considerations for further thought. For example, how can we include some reflection on these concepts as a regular part of the class? Which texts, exercises, and discussion plans can facilitate the analysis and comprehension of these concepts and attitudes among primary school students? What challenges will we have to face when trying to develop recognition, tolerance, respect and empathy in the classroom? What other philosophical perspectives could aid us in implementing these concepts? What kind of material is best suited for facilitating these concepts and attitudes in the classroom? How can we improve our educational background to better incorporate these concepts philosophically?

At least one key insight that could guide us in our struggle to incorporate recognition, tolerance, respect and empathy into the building blocks of communities of inquiry, is to remember the promise of such communities of inquiry. That continually searching for the conditions to healthy communities of dialogue is part of the very nature of this community, keeping open a space that empowers us to reflect on our own existence and the world around us, and where the ancient search for truth, goodness and beauty, is constantly renewed as sources for the future.

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