

Sensitive Topics in Democratic and Philosophical Discussions: Analysis of Teaching Practices in the Implementation of PhiloJeunes

Sivane HIRSCH, Professeure à l'Université de Laval

Annie-Claude PICHE, Professionnelle de recherche

PhiloJeunes provides training to prepare teaching staff to facilitate democratic and philosophical discussions in the classroom. We interviewed teachers, educational counselors, and spiritual and community life facilitators who underwent this training to understand their experience in implementing the approach in class. They emphasized the use of this approach to address various sensitive topics in different teaching contexts. They also expressed concerns about potential pitfalls during these discussions.

In this article, we will introduce PhiloJeunes, the approaches advocated by the organization, the concept of sensitive topics, and the challenges faced by teachers. We will then examine the participants' observations regarding their classroom experience. Finally, we will analyze the contribution of the PhiloJeunes approach to addressing sensitive topics in the classroom.

Introduction

While practicing philosophy with students has several benefits, the approaches used to implement it pose challenges for both students and the teaching staff facilitating these discussions. For this reason, several organizations offer training to individuals interested in implementing philosophy for children and philosophy for adolescents in the classroom. PhiloJeunes is one such organization. Since 2015, it has been collaborating with various School Service Centers by providing ongoing training to educational counselors, spiritual and community life facilitators, and teaching staff to implement this approach. The organization sees the implementation of the approach in secondary schools as a way to prevent radicalization leading to violence, encouraging young people to engage in group discussions, develop critical and nuanced judgment, and thus counter social polarization.

Social polarization, which fragments modern societies, is increasingly present in schools. It is observed in the classroom mainly when addressing what we call sensitive topics. We define these as difficult-to-know objects that confront uncomfortable knowledge, engage complex and varied social values and representations related to plural ways of living in society, and manifest unexpectedly in the classroom (Hirsch and Moisan, 2022). These topics are becoming more numerous in classrooms, especially in the humanities and social sciences (Moisan et al, 2022) - for example, through the study of racism, genocides, or sexuality education - but also introduced into teaching through current events - such as vaccination, the #MeToo movement, etc.

If the training aims to prepare educators to use this approach in the classroom, it seems that they remain concerned about the possibility of encroaching on sensitive topics during the discussion or even addressing them themselves. Indeed, during the survey we conducted with ten educators, regarding their perception of the training they received and how it prepared them for the exercise, this concern was clearly named.

After a brief presentation of the democratic and philosophical discussion (DPD), which is at the heart of the approach proposed by PhiloJeunes, and the concept of sensitive topics, we will present the challenges that educators face when attempting to address them in the classroom within the context of DPD. This will lead us to consider the strengths, but also the weaknesses of DPD in such a context.

1. An Educational Approach Facilitating the Treatment of Sensitive Topics

According to Lipman, a philosophy professor, philosophy allows children to develop their capacity to think for themselves, to reason, and to become more active in acquiring knowledge (Lipman, 2005). He proposes a method for doing philosophy with children: the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI), during which young people reflect on and discuss questions raised by novels. Others have suggested different approaches to this collaborative reflection - songs, arts, sciences, etc. The role of the teacher then becomes facilitating the discussion to allow students to express their thoughts (Lajoie, 2018).

The approach highlighted by PhiloJeunes' training, developed by philosophy didacticist Michel Tozzi, draws inspiration from CPI but offers a more complex structure. Within the framework of DPD, students are given responsibilities such as synthesis, reformulation, etc. Additionally, the discussion starts with a trigger element (e.g., a song, a reading, etc.) presented by the session facilitator, whose main role is to advance reflections through questions and reformulation to structure the thoughts of the students discussing.

However, developing students' reasoning and critical thinking takes time. Therefore, this kind of activity cannot be offered on a one-off basis. Instead, it should be done regularly so that students become accustomed to its mode of operation, which differs from usual teaching, and practice and develop their various skills. By mastering the approach, they can then fully benefit from the chosen philosophical approach to reinvest it in their daily lives, for example, by resolving conflicts or organizing their thoughts (Gagnon and Sasseville, 2008).

As for sensitive topics, their exploration in class promotes self-awareness, understanding of the world, and critical thinking for students (Jess and McAvoy, 2015). It also contributes to fulfilling the social role of the Quebec school system by promoting democratic values and forming responsible and engaged citizens through the development of attitudes favoring coexistence. Whether this treatment is planned - by addressing sensitive topics as part of the curriculum - or in response to social or school environment news - it provides an opportunity to accompany students in their

speaking, understanding of multiple perspectives, and management of their emotions, engaging them in their learning. Thus, philosophy for children or adolescents in general and, in the case we are interested in here, DPD, seems to meet the challenges of this teaching.

However, our survey also identified pedagogical challenges faced by teaching staff when these sensitive topics arise in discussion, particularly regarding classroom management, consideration of students' emotions - without avoiding them -, and the unpredictability of these topics depending on the context. These challenges are similar to those defining philosophy with young people in the classroom.

2. Some Methodological Clarifications

The 10 participants in this survey work in the Montreal area in a wide variety of educational contexts. Among them, three are teachers - two in primary school (1st and 3rd cycles) and one in 4th secondary school in ethics and religious culture (ERC) -; three are spiritual and community life facilitators - two in primary school and one in secondary school -; and four are educational counselors with various backgrounds - two had been working as educational counselors for over 15 years, while the other two had been educational counselors for only a year; three were former teachers and the fourth was a spiritual and community life facilitator. All of these individuals have undergone training with PhiloJeunes.

In collaboration with PhiloJeunes, our survey took place in two stages. First, we participated in training sessions (two online conferences and two in-person meetings held in small groups) in the fall of 2019 to better understand its progress and principles. Then, we conducted interviews with 10 people in the spring of 2020. Considering the pandemic context, the interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and lasted about an hour. Our analysis, aimed at identifying the challenges encountered during the implementation of the approach in the classroom, highlighted two specific challenges: managing emotions during sessions (Bordeleau-Payer, 2023), and the more specific treatment of sensitive topics (Hirsch et al. submitted) and preparation of training for these issues. Therefore, it is the educators' perception of training in relation to these aspects that will be presented here.

3. PhiloJeunes Through the Eyes of Educators

Overall, educators who participated in this survey find the PhiloJeunes approach motivating, relevant, enriching, both for those who implement it and for the students who experience it in the classroom. However, this enthusiasm needs to be nuanced due to the challenges, or even obstacles, that educators identify, especially regarding the teaching of sensitive topics.

3.1. PhiloJeunes Training and Support

PhiloJeunes training, along with the range of tools it provides, is highly appreciated for its adaptability to different school contexts. As one participant puts it: "I don't feel constrained,

obligated to work in a particular way." (Paul) The fact that the training does not limit itself to Tozzi's DPD approach but exposes them to other approaches is mentioned more than once. Furthermore, educators explain that the training is essential not only for theoretical knowledge about philosophy and the provided materials but also for the experience it allows them to have themselves: "we experience it as adults, we are trained, it's fantastic to have philosophical communities among adults, it's really great." (Camille) However, educators regret that the training does not adapt more specifically to the Quebec school context, both in terms of the training program - in Quebec, there are no philosophy courses, but rather ethics teaching - and teaching practice, which enjoys greater academic freedom in Quebec than in France.

Educators also emphasize the importance of support in their practice afterward, especially when implementing the approach in the classroom. "We prepared together beforehand, discussed our viewpoints, how the students would react. Then we discussed [how] we should have facilitated that. [...] I really learned more through the support mode." (Catherine) Support is even more appreciated because educators often find themselves isolated in their environment when practicing philosophy with students, with no real opportunity to exchange with experienced colleagues in the approach. It thus becomes a key element in ensuring the sustainability of the approach in their schools. It helps dissipate initial concerns that often prevent educators from getting started even after completing the training. Clara, who provides such support, testifies: "What I see, what always bothers the practical implementation is the fear of if I make a mistake [...] As I tell them! No one is going to die." But she also notes that "It is completely opposite to what they are used to doing." Indeed, teaching staff are more often in a position of transmitting knowledge than of engaging in a discussion that invites young people to question it. DPD then takes them out of their comfort zone. The fact that the training is more based on the French context seems to accentuate this challenge.

Nevertheless, the various resources of the DPD approach, easily accessible online, are often mentioned as among the advantages of this training, allowing educators to "create my presentation based on the group, the topic introduced" (Marion). They say this also contributes to increasing students' engagement in the discussion. However, this flexibility also requires significant work from educators, demanding time and expertise to adapt content, which then becomes a major obstacle to the wider incorporation of this approach into schools. Thus, training is essential, as well as support afterward, which "requires a real investment of time that they don't have so much in the school" (Camille).

3.2. Implementation of DPD in the Classroom

It is primarily Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) teachers who integrate this approach most into their work. This program, under review since January 2020, will be replaced in the fall of 2024 by a new program called Quebec Culture and Citizenship. Both versions of the program only benefits from one hour of class per week with their students. Thus, even though it probably offers the best framework through its content, it does not provide the best practical context for implementing the approach.

Indeed, the success of this approach largely depends on the ability to put it into practice regularly and to devote enough time to deepen discussions (Gagnon and Mailhot-Paquette, 2022).

The sharing of roles in DPD represents an additional challenge. The role of facilitation, which teachers assume in the classroom, involves facilitating discussion, accompanying students in their learning, without imposing words or controlling the conversation. In this context, students do not play the "simple" role of learners: DPD confers responsibilities on them such as giving voice and synthesizing discussions. This disrupts the power dynamics in the classroom, which can destabilize many teachers and make their preparation more difficult: how to predict the direction the students' discussion will take? One participant describes her experience assisting a teacher in this process: "She started jumping from one subject to another because she couldn't get the students to delve deeper, it was her first DPD. [...] She started with bullying and ended up on suicide. And then, it got rough, she felt completely overwhelmed." (Lorie)

Chantal describes the challenge of facilitation: "being aware of all the thinking skills, the students' states, being able to ask questions without inducing answers or guiding the student's thinking, but just leading them to open up, to develop a little more, that's a challenge in itself. Managing the group, ensuring respect, listening among all..." Indeed, maintaining a classroom climate can also become difficult, which is a frequent concern among the educators interviewed in the survey. On the one hand, educators have mentioned the risks of derailment and the negative influence of some students whom they see as "negative" leaders. On the other hand, the fact that the approach advocates for a cordial and benevolent discussion can also become a challenge, notably due to the risk of self-censorship of ideas considered more or less acceptable or the impossibility of denouncing ideas that are not, precisely. This challenge is particularly important for some sensitive topics, and we will return to this later.

3.3. Skills Developed by Students

The fact that DPD contributes to the development of transdisciplinary skills, such as students' ability to clarify their thoughts, to nuance their discourse, and to exercise their critical thinking, is frequently mentioned in the interviews. More attentive, "they are more nuanced and concise because at first, they chatted, it ended more, they had trouble organizing their thoughts." (Lorie) This benefits their school work in other disciplines: "Their way of thinking and analyzing situations and open questions. It also showed up elsewhere in their academic paths." (Catherine). Students then adopt a more active posture by participating in discussions and proposing themes that interest them to study. Teachers can thus align discussion topics with students' concerns, making it a discussion even more relevant for them. "We get into groups, and you ask a question, and they all want to talk." (Paul).

4. PhiloJeunes and Sensitive Topics

The dialogue facilitated by the DPD goes beyond simple student participation or friendly conversation; it also emphasizes the importance of actively listening to others' ideas and arguments.

Structured discussion thus invites students to discover the diversity of ideas around them and learn to deal with divergent perspectives.

In this context, the DPD approach seems promising for addressing sensitive topics. However, the challenges related to addressing these topics in class add to the inherent challenges of the approach itself. We have described elsewhere the challenges related to addressing sensitive topics in class, including the teacher's posture, the emotions these topics evoke, and the fear of losing control over exchanges and teaching. Participants in our survey mention these same challenges regarding the DPD and explain that they are sometimes exacerbated when dealing with sensitive topics.

The first challenge lies in the fact that these topics often arise unexpectedly: students choose them or even address them directly in their discussions. In the context of the DPD, it is difficult for the facilitator to (re)direct the discussion given their limited role. For the same reason, participants explained that they wanted to establish certain rules and explain certain concepts with students before starting the discussion. One participant explains her approach:

"Before delving into philosophical discussions about life and death and friendship and all that, we really established basics: what are values, what are norms, what are rules... We talked about prejudices, stereotypes, sexism, racism, all the isms... That's why, from the start [of a session], I felt like we needed to... name things a bit." (Catherine)

However, some students make clumsy jokes, others adopt a "devil's advocate" position that pushes the conversation to extremes, and still others point fingers at their peers. One participant shares the difficulty of managing discussions on racism as a topic, or the micro-aggressions that can arise within the DPD. This is particularly challenging when the topics addressed directly affect communities "that are not part of the majority [and] are... targeted by several prejudices, by several stereotypes [...]. It's not always easy to witness that... it's a somewhat special situation." (Annie)

Another challenge observed by educators is that young people often tend to freely share very personal situations while emphasizing their emotions. A teacher admits that "it can be a bit poignant in terms of emotions [and] become quite disturbing." (Annie) This is even more difficult when a topic is at the heart of current events, such as the attacks in France that initiated the implementation of the PhiloJeunes approach at school. "If we talk about it when it happens, people's reactions are much more raw than afterwards when we've been able to decant a bit, and we have a perspective on things... which is less emotionally charged." (Lorie) She even suggests that it is better to avoid sensitive topics in an overly emotional context, "because it's not pop psychology, it's not sharing emotions, we're not doing group therapy, it's not mediation either." (Lorie)

As Paul explains,

Educators are particularly concerned about the facilitation role they must assume, especially in the face of observed and potential derailments. It is not always easy not to intervene [in reacting to the

ideas expressed by students]. And to take notes, and to come back with them afterwards. Sometimes I think to myself: Oh boy! [...]. At the same time, I have to let them, I have to let them experience that.

Certainly, these behaviors are not out of the ordinary in a secondary classroom, but they may be more difficult to handle in a context where classroom management must be limited. Although the training addresses this issue, it does not specifically prepare educators for these situations. Nevertheless, in such contexts, educators fear "losing control... not knowing what to respond if suddenly we have a student who seems to be losing it." (Marie) This concern remains even among participants with more experience, who recognize that their practice can always be improved, even after successful experiences. For example, Lorie spoke about violence with her students, which led them to see that sometimes their idea "didn't hold water." In this context, Lorie explains that instead of saying nonsense, "that's really it, we put thought into it, we gave permission for that thought to exist, and we put it on the table, but we confronted it with counterexamples, with... but it's done with words, it's done democratically... sometimes [students] go far there, it's extraordinary, and on violence prevention, we see it, I've had experiences with students, it was wow."

5. Discussion

Despite the obvious strengths of practicing the DPD in the classroom, this approach fails to address the challenges posed by sensitive topics specifically. The main challenge encountered, according to participants in our survey, remains the change required in the teaching posture, especially in the context of dealing with sensitive topics. Indeed, this posture represents a significant risk-taking to which, educators say, the DPD does not offer real protection.

The DPD provides ample room for encountering various perspectives, which is an obvious asset, although little room is officially given to disciplinary knowledge, which can be essential for this treatment. Students freely express their views, which promotes the development of transdisciplinary practices that surpass specific disciplinary requirements and adapt to several of them at the same time. In this sense, the DPD contributes to managing emotions around the subject, without necessarily supporting the learning of new knowledge. DPD practice aims to avoid exposing students' intimacy to their peers and thus avoids a therapeutic approach while considering their dignity as valid interlocutors (Bodex, 2022). Philosophical discussion can create what Arao and Clemens call a "space of courage" (2013) in that it gives them the opportunity to express themselves but also demands their respectful listening.

It is important to adopt, when discussing sensitive topics, a posture of withdrawal from these emotional manifestations during the DPD and refrain from imposing the correct answer, and instead attempt to promote tolerance and respect to counteract violence (Bodex, 2022), which makes the approach incompatible with a context where students express racist, homophobic, fatphobic, and other inappropriate comments. Educators then find the role of facilitator, which, according to Tozzi (2008), should only guide reflection through difficult questions, difficult to maintain. This is even

more difficult in an increasingly polarized social climate, to which the PhiloJeunes approach claims to offer appropriate practices.

Finally, we return to the question of training and support, whose role in preparing educators is clearly recognized by the participants in our survey. Despite this, the fact that facilitators are not always teachers may add to their concern about sensitive topics. On the one hand, these individuals may not have a well-established relationship with the students. Knowing the group and its dynamics less well before addressing the various topics with them, they may be less able to prevent delicate situations that may arise. On the other hand, often lacking expertise in the topic being addressed, these educators may be more easily destabilized in the event of a discussion derailment.

In a context where many topics are considered sensitive, this becomes a major obstacle. Even the most experienced educators in our study recognize that, despite their positive experiences and successes, they still feel that philosophical discussions involve inherent risks with sensitive topics, over which they do not have total control.

Conclusion

Engaging in philosophy with students promotes their active participation, freedom of expression, and listening to others. The flexibility of this approach allows for addressing various topics while encouraging critical thinking and open-mindedness. However, our investigation demonstrates that some educators who practice it remain skeptical about their ability to also address sensitive topics within this framework, given the challenges mentioned earlier.

The individuals interviewed in this project express a certain ambivalence towards the PhiloJeunes approach: while they appreciate the approach in general, they also recognize the challenges associated with its implementation, particularly when it comes to sensitive topics. Educators emphasize the importance of training and individual support in the field to break their sense of isolation and better integrate the concepts addressed during the training.

Notably, the tension arises from, on one hand, the educators' responsibility in a school context, including regarding the knowledge shared by students, and, on the other hand, their limited role as facilitators in the DVDP (Development of Democratic and Philosophical Dialogue) is not easy to manage. It is therefore worth considering how to reconcile these challenges to address specific issues related to sensitive topics, especially as they are becoming increasingly prevalent in the classroom.