

Promoting human development by doing philosophy at the heart of the family

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Abstract

Human development requires the education of autonomous citizens, capable of critically approaching their opportunities. However, if this is left to the school alone, the children's most important educational environment—the family—is neglected. The Community of Inquiry (COI), developed by Matthew Lipman into an educational methodology, aims at educating students to be critical citizens by developing habits of mind through collaborative philosophical inquiry. The research reported here was targeted at introducing the COI into the family, particularly addressing the intersubjective relationships among participants. In Uruguay, 'Community Teachers' visit disadvantaged homes to follow children's progress and to increase the retention rates. Two Participatory Action Research activities were implemented in 2012 and 2016, in which sixty Community Teachers were trained in the COI methodology and applied it to their work with families. The observations made suggest the COI can support the promotion of human development from the very heart of the family.

Key words

capability approach, Community of Inquiry, family, human development, moral literacy

Introduction

As in most Latin American countries, social polarisation in Uruguay has been steadily growing since the end of the 1990s, although it seems to have recently slightly decreased (CEPAL 2017). One of the consequences of such polarisation is social exclusion. If the education system is expected to cope with this problem, it should focus on human development, which implies a kind of education that cannot consist of only passing on information, but should be as comprehensive as possible, covering human aspects that normally fall outside its traditional remit (Dewey 1916; Freire 1970). In this comprehensive conception of education, expecting the school to take exclusive

responsibility means neglecting an important educational sphere: the family, in which the key adults (whether a parent, grandparent or guardian) are the first and primary moral educators of the child. A child's school teacher may change regularly during the course of their education but, in most cases, at least one of the key adults in the family is maintained throughout childhood and adolescence. In addition, this type of relationship involves a very important emotional aspect that can make the child, while developing, learn to feel worthy or unworthy of love and respect (Honneth 1995; Nussbaum 2005), a perception that may stay with the child as they become adults. Moreover, the way in which the key adults teach children to respect their authority seems to be the foundation for moral future growth (Damon 1990; Herman 2007; Kochanska et al. 2005). Hence, paying attention to the intersubjective relationships within families is an issue of extreme importance in the promotion of human development.

Intimate intersubjective relationships (Honneth 1995) can be problematic at all levels of society. However, the breakdown of family ties and violence more often emerge from anger or frustration with a certain social or economic situation. According to McAra and McVie (2016), youth violence is strongly associated with poverty at the household and neighbourhood levels, and risk factors typically include poor parental supervision and family conflict (Burrington 2015; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber 1986), poor school attachment (Dornbusch & Erickson 2001; Laufer & Harel 2003) and early violence and victimization (Resnick, Ireland & Borowsky 2004). That is why it is urgent that these populations should be targeted¹. Additionally, the aforementioned risk factors are most likely to be connected with the lack of some of the skills required for the exercising of citizenship, among which education in connection with the development of thought, practical reason and reflection is highlighted (Nussbaum 2000, 2011). Therefore, the development of critical thinking, along with healthy intersubjective relationships, should be addressed.

But how can the family be accessed by State institutions such as public education if it is considered the citizens' most private, sacred sphere? In Uruguay, the Community Teachers Program (hereinafter CTP) has been operational since 2005. These teachers visit socio-economically deprived homes in order to follow the progress of children

¹ As aforementioned, this is not linked exclusively to lower socioeconomic status, but vulnerability to such problems increases at high-risk neighbourhoods mainly characterised by lower levels of education, employment and healthcare. For example, the economic factor is one of the three main elements mentioned by Garbarino and Sherman (1980) when describing 'high-risk families' in connection with child maltreatment, whereas Harris (2010) refers to 'challenging contexts' as regards areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Particularly in Uruguay, lower socioeconomic status is a very important factor related to child neglect (Retamoso & Vernazza 2017), high school failure and dropout rates (Aristimuño & De Armas 2012). As economic resources are not sufficient to address all socioeconomic status groups, the State emphasises attention on these high-risk populations.

closely and discourage them from dropping out of school. Despite the positive results of the program in relation to the prevention of school dropout rates (CEIP Uruguay 2013b), there is potential for working with moral and emotional literacy in the family, which has not yet been explored, probably due to the lack of pedagogical tools to involve parents in the educational relationship.

Concerning these missing pedagogical tools, the study described in this article seeks to consider the Community of Inquiry (hereinafter COI), a concept borrowed by John Dewey from Charles Peirce and applied in the educational setting. More recently, Matthew Lipman developed the COI as a classroom educational methodology to engage students in philosophical discussions, which I will equate to 'doing philosophy'. The COI methodology, a proven effective way to develop critical thinking and educate citizens competent in respectful dialogue (McCall 2007; Gregory 2008; Splitter 2011, 2015), has recently been introduced and welcomed in Uruguay, particularly in private schools. The primary objective of this study is to test whether the methodology could serve as a tool to develop moral literacy at the very heart of the family, by creating the habit of reflective dialogue, thus developing balanced relationships. The existence of the CTP enabled this research.

Between October-December 2012 and May-September 2016, Participatory Action Research activities were carried out in order to train two groups of Community Teachers in the use of the COI methodology, and to test its impact on their work with the families. The results of these observations support the feasibility of promoting human development in the very heart of the family.

This article is divided in the following sections. Firstly, the Theoretical Context section examines the literature about moral literacy in connection with philosophical inquiry, taking as its starting point Amartya Sen's and Martha Nussbaum's capability approach, of which literacy in general, and moral literacy in particular, are interpreted as constituting elements. From definitions of moral literacy that relate it to philosophical activity (Clifford 2011) and judgement translated into action (Herman 1998), I establish the link between moral literacy and philosophical inquiry (*doing philosophy*) understood as the development of reflection as a habit. Thus, I make the connection between doing philosophy for the development of moral literacy and the COI methodology as a suitable way to cultivate the capabilities involved in moral literacy. The Research Context section describes the Uruguayan CTP, which has enabled this study to look into the possibilities of the COI as a tool to help families develop moral literacy together by cultivating reflection as a habit. I outline the research methodology

and explain the experimental work carried out. The Research Outcomes section describes the benefits and drawbacks of the methodology as perceived by the parents and the children on the one hand, and the teachers on the other. Next, the Discussion section debates the outcomes, by pointing out what still needs to be done to continue in this path. Finally, the main conclusions and possible future lines are introduced.

Theoretical context

Moral literacy and doing philosophy

The research is partly based upon Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach and his conviction that the concept of capability enables more clearly focused institutional interventions when reducing poverty is concerned. Such an approach proposes that social arrangements should be primarily evaluated according to the extent of people's freedom, understood as capabilities development, to promote or achieve what Sen terms 'functionings' (beings and doings such as being healthy, participating in the decisions of one's own community, or enjoying recreational activities, among many others) they have reasons to value. Sen's capability approach serves as a normative framework for welfare assessment². From this framework, it is possible to determine: (i) when a person is in a better or worse social position, (ii) what poverty is, (iii) what the best strategies for development are, and (iv) what measures should be taken to realise justice. The growing importance of this perspective has brought into focus issues that have usually been excluded from traditional approaches to the economics of welfare, because it emphasises what individuals *can do*, instead of the economic resources they have access to. Consequently, in evaluating how well a person is or what should be done to support someone in the pursuit of their life plan, the focus must change from resources such as income, to the meaning these resources bear for the individual. Resources are crucial for anyone to realise their life-plan, but the capability approach weighs their impact on individual freedom. From this viewpoint, poverty becomes less dependent on the resources someone has, and more on other elements such as the education that they have received, their proclivity to disease or how the standards of their community affect their judgements and choices.

The concept of poverty evidently changes from this perspective. Even though material resources are indispensable, they are also defined within the exercise of one's capabilities; in other words, the conceptualisation of poverty—to understand why

² In this account of the capability approach I follow Pereira (2013).

someone is poor, what aspects of their life should be changed for them to combat their own poverty—may entail the exercise of political freedoms and civil rights, enabling discussion and exchange. For example, a basic income, without any kind of cultural reference or reflection, can be spent in a totally ineffective way:

Political and civil rights, especially those related to the guaranteeing of open discussion, debate, criticism, and dissent, are central to the processes of generating informed and reflected choices. These processes are crucial to the formation of values and priorities, and we cannot, in general, take preferences as given independently of public discussion, that is, irrespective of whether open debates and interchanges are permitted or not. (Sen 1999, p. 153)

As Katherine Simon (2001) points out, to be a citizen is not just to hold a legal status in relation to a particular State; rather it is to possess the capacities and have access to the opportunities to participate with others in the determination of one's society. It can, thus, be concluded that although it is important to focus on social policies, only providing recipients with things such as income, health and civil rights -and simply hoping that they make use of them—is not enough. Something else must take place, an education in the autonomous use of these elements that empowers them. Miranda Fricker (2010, 2012) states that when someone speaks but is not heard, for example, because of their accent, or their sex, or the colour of their skin, or their social status, they are undermined as a knower. What Fricker calls epistemic injustice is not only an ethical problem but also a political one because citizens are not free unless they get a fair hearing, insofar as their epistemic framework is considered alongside others, especially those of the dominant culture. This, once again, refers to capabilities and education. And this is where moral literacy comes into focus.

According to UNESCO (2004, p. 6)

Over the past few decades, the conception of literacy has moved beyond its simple notion as the set of technical skills of reading, writing and calculating [...] to a plural notion encompassing the manifold meanings and dimensions of these undeniably vital competencies.

The view of literacy as the command of a set of technical skills was the predominant one until the mid-1960s, when the promotion of literacy basically consisted in enabling individuals to acquire these skills, regardless of the contents and methods used for their provision. As from the 1990s, however, 'a more analytical perspective came to distinguish literacy as a technical skill from literacy as a set of practices defined by

social relations and cultural processes', and such a view came to embrace various uses of literacy applied in daily life 'from the exercise of civil and political rights through matters of work, commerce and childcare to self-instruction, spiritual enlightenment and even recreation' (UNESCO 2004, p. 10).

In this sense, literacy seems intimately related to the capability approach, particularly Martha Nussbaum's version that integrates a list of capabilities³ that defines a threshold level of individual dignity that every political order should secure in order to be considered as minimally decent (Nussbaum 2000). According to her list, the most recent definition of literacy by UNESCO seems to include the most important elements, from childcare and work to spiritual development.

Moral literacy could be considered one of such elements. As Barbara Herman defines it, moral literacy 'is a basic, learned capacity to acquire and use moral knowledge in judgment and action' (Herman 1998, p. 314). However, such capacity is not so simple to acquire. Herman offers a view of moral literacy as a complex competency, guided by rational norms but dependent on social conditions, so merely knowing the norms is not enough to become morally competent: 'the accurate representation of judgment and deliberation in the normal rational adult requires a model that exhibits the enmeshed development of the system of desires and the capacity for effective practical rationality' (Herman 2007, p. 15). The transformation of mere desires into safe or available desires, moral desires so to speak, 'takes place in an environment regulated by a wide range of evaluative concepts. [...] The desire itself becomes socialized' (Herman 2007, p. 15).

Michael Clifford (2011) suggests that moral literacy deals with employing knowledge and understanding of morality 'in such a way that [subjects] are able to go beyond uncritical appeals to custom, feelings, dogma, and prejudice, to recognize what counts as justifiable moral reasons, and to thereby come to considered decisions of their own, decisions which can be taken seriously in that they are based on sound moral principle' (Clifford 2011, p. 138)⁴. Thus, moral literacy allows subjects to become competent and respected participants in public deliberation on practical issues that concern them, and

³ Nussbaum proposed a list of ten central capabilities, which can be summarized as follows: life (able to live to the end of a normal length human life), bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought (able to use one's senses to imagine, think and reason in a 'truly human way'), emotions (able to have attachments to things outside of ourselves), practical reason (able to form a conception of the good and critically reflect on it), affiliation (able to live with and show concern for others and able to have self-respect and not be humiliated by others), other species (able to have concern for and live with other animals, plants and the environment at large), play (able to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities) and control over one's environment (politically and materially speaking) (Nussbaum 2000, 2011).

⁴ This definition of moral literacy is closely linked to Nussbaum's capability of practical reason, which implies 'being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life' (Nussbaum 2011, p. 33).

it consequently can be interpreted as one of the essential capacities of the autonomous citizen.

Clifford defines ethics as 'a philosophical activity (i.e., one which appeals to reason) to identify the moral good and the kind of conduct necessary to promote that good' (Clifford 2011, p. 132). He bases this definition on that of Powers and Vogel (1980), which states that ethics is concerned with clarifying what constitutes human welfare and the kind of conduct necessary to promote it. Clifford thus makes it clear that moral literacy is more connected to decision making for attaining a good life than with custom or religious dicta. Therefore, he reinforces Herman's concept of moral literacy as related to reason and argumentation, in which case it can be clearly linked to a capability that can be developed through education. However, education for such an aim cannot be interpreted as mere transmission of knowledge, but, as can be inferred from his definition of ethics, as the development of an activity, which recalls the progressive education philosophy that embraces the idea of learning by doing. As Herman espouses: 'We do not think a person is literate in a domain if all she has possession of is a set of facts. There are things you must be able to *do* with or because of the facts you have access to as a literate person' (Herman 1998, p. 314).

According to what has been outlined so far, moral literacy can be described as an activity in which some things are 'done'. This leads to the issue of 'doing philosophy'. Rudisill (2011, p. 242) establishes the 'difference between merely studying a particular domain of knowledge called "philosophy" and fully engaging in a sort of intellectual activity, also called "philosophy"'. Among the intellectual skills required for this activity, Rudisill includes the understanding of certain concepts and the logical relationships between them, the pursuit of answers to questions regarding the nature of value, mind and justified belief, and the application of such skills to practical concerns such as what norms to endorse and the reasons for doing so. Such skills, as is evident enough, cannot be attained by merely studying the history of philosophy. Some other kind of activity must be involved in order to develop them. It is not only the data related to the study of the philosophers' lives and ideas but the adoption of the characteristics of their work that shall contribute to someone's *doing* philosophy.

By doing philosophy, it can be said that someone would be closer to acquiring moral literacy than by merely becoming acquainted with the different philosophical arguments sustaining the different moral theories—as happens when studying philosophy—or by experiencing moral problems and trying to solve them by the elements one has close at hand, usually custom, feelings or dogma (what we usually do

in life; in other words, 'life experience' is not enough). In order to recognise justifiable moral reasons, it is necessary to go deep into reflection, and to develop reflection as a habit.

The COI methodology seems a very suitable alternative to become acquainted with, get proficient at, and develop the capabilities connected with moral literacy. In addition, the COI takes place, as will be explained, in an intersubjective environment, by working in a group. This matches what Herman defines as an essential characteristic of morality:

The social nature of moral concepts is not merely an external fact about them: that they are taught or acquired in social contexts. The moral concepts that agents use to describe a moral world are ones they reason with, by themselves and in colloquy with others. The terms of reasoning must be ones that can be shared. (Herman 2007, p. 144)

Such reasoning can only be developed by reasoning; by putting into practice the capability under development, in this case, reasoning and reflecting. This is what the COI is all about, as Lipman has pointed out: 'not the traditional, academic philosophy of the universities, but the narrative-and-discussion based *doing* of philosophy such as is to be found in the approach known as Philosophy for Children' (Lipman 1995, p. 61). I will develop the connections between doing philosophy and the COI methodology in the following section.

The COI methodology and 'doing' philosophy

The COI represents a way to implement what in education is called a 'learning community'⁵. The term 'community of inquiry' originated in the late nineteenth century in Charles Peirce's (1955) reflections on science and the work of the scientific community. Basically, it consists of a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in a rigorous research process that can be empirical or conceptual, in order to solve problems of different kinds. The process highlights the social and fallible nature of knowledge formation, which necessarily arises from a social context and requires intersubjective agreements for its legitimacy. Later, John Dewey (1916) joined this line of work from an educational context, and subsequently Matthew Lipman designed a specific methodology for use in the classroom that led to the well-known program called Philosophy for Children (see Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980). Lipman's

⁵ This notion is built on the concept of socio-cultural constructivism of the Vygotskian line (Wertsch 1993) and the processes of co-and self-regulated learning and the structuring of the feeling of empowerment (Gunstone & Northfield 1994).

developments are the strong point from which to conceive of the COI as applied to the experience I will describe in this article.

The goals Lipman's program intends to achieve include, among others, improving the ability to reason, the development of critical, creative and caring thinking, and the development of ethical understanding. The basic educational means for group inquiry on which the methodology focuses is collaborative dialogue. Dialogue is what promotes these objectives through the participation of others in one's own processes. While critical thinking as a basic ingredient of Lipman's proposal has a strong component in the development of reasoning and reasonableness, it is noteworthy that it cannot be separated from the ethical willingness to modify one's own thought if the others put their own thought forward consistently and supported by good reasons.

Following Rudisill (2011), I have stated above that in order to *do* philosophy, the subject must develop some skills that recall the practices of some professional philosophers. I have mentioned some of these skills above, but I shall now probe into the ones that are particularly useful for the aims of my research, and how such practices find their correlation in the features of the work developed in the heart of a COI.

Firstly, Rudisill (2011, p. 243) points out that 'when philosophers do philosophy they do so dialogically'. Their interlocutors may be imagined while writing for them, but later they materialise into the actual readers. Consequently, to do philosophy, the subject must be able or at least be open to understand their interlocutors' claims and arguments accompanying such claims. They must also be respectful of the principle of charity in interpretation and be able to identify the interlocutor's strategy and main assumptions. This is exactly what is promoted in a COI. In his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey (1920) emphasises the attractiveness of applying the scientific method to philosophical work on morality: the biologist's free-minded spirit, searching for all possible alternatives before giving a definitive answer, is the same spirit that the moral philosopher must have, considering the particular and always problematic moral situation. This attitude has the following aspects in common with science: (a) willingness to explore, to experiment, to doubt about the certainties already achieved, and (b) readiness to submit one's own methods and results to the scrutiny of others. It is thus inferred that to reach moral decisions, the subject must be involved in the intellectual work of a group or community.

Secondly, Rudisill (2011, p. 244) states that 'doing philosophy involves formulating and critiquing arguments, ideas and presuppositions effectively'. In fact, the objectives of the COI imply the development of a more autonomous way of thinking, one exercised

in taking and articulating new elements, capable of being more and more reflective thanks to the exercise of revision, change and adaptation of the postures in view of the group discussion. The history of COI work has an important stronghold in Lipman's Philosophy for Children program. In this program the sessions are essentially structured around a narrative, which is problematised and discussed in a group, with a space for explicit metacognition at the end which aims at the development of self-reflection. The objective of the program is to develop reasoning and reasonableness, along with the effective expression of arguments, plus creativity and understanding of the ethical dimension of the connection with the other members of the community.

Thirdly, someone who does philosophy should 'develop, organize, express and defend her own ideas—both assertive claims and critical appraisals of others' claims—in a precise, clear, effective and systematic manner' (Rudisill 2011, p. 244). In line with this, Lipman (2003) presents the development of higher-order thinking as the purpose of his program. Higher-order thinking, as conceived of by Lipman and in tune with Rudisill's conception of doing philosophy, is aware of its own assumptions and implications, as well as the reasons and evidence on which its conclusions are based. It examines its own procedures and perspective and is ready to identify the factors that lead to bias. In other words, it thinks about procedures as well as about the subject matter (Lipman 2003).

In the experience described in this article the use of the COI follows Lipman's proposal insofar as it is structured around narratives that serve as the basis for discussion, and it aims to develop thinking that is critical in terms of reasonableness, and in turn creative, complemented by Ann M Sharp's (2007) emphasis on a *caring* dimension.

Finally, it is important to note that although this research uses the main elements of a methodology that was intended primarily for children and teens, it is applied here to educational work that includes adults, pursuing the same goals.

Research context

The Community Teachers Program

The Community Teachers Program (CTP) is an original educational experience, carried out in State schools of Uruguay since 2005. Given the problems identified in schools and neighborhoods in vulnerable socio-economic contexts (with low-income households and low educational profiles) where there are significant proportions of grade repetition and school dropout, a joint effort was agreed between the Uruguayan Primary

Education Council and the Ministry of Social Development. The basic idea was to extend the usual four-hour school day through 'Community Teachers' who spent further time with the students, their families and the community. They would work in networks, with the aim of improving the relations between the school and the community, in order to reduce the dropout rate and so-called 'school failure'. The assumption behind this initiative was that both the dropout rate and failure are strongly linked to the socio-economic conditions of the families and the school characteristics.

According to the latest official report, in 2015 the program reached 318 schools and 16,711 students (Ramos et al. 2015), which is a considerable number taking into account Uruguay's population of approximately 3 million people. Within schools, children or families, or both, are selected; generally, the selected children are the ones with the poorest school performance, attendance problems, previous grade repetition or social integration difficulties. The selection of children is a joint effort between the school authorities, the classroom teacher and the Community Teacher.

The task of the Community Teacher is to promote the development of the family social capital, understood as the variable that measures the collaboration between members of a community and the opportunities arising from this collaboration. The aim of this is to improve the chances of the family supporting the child. In working with children, the aim is more specifically to address the different needs and different types and rates of learning.

The activities through which this task is performed can be classified into two groups (CEIP Uruguay 2013a)⁶:

(a) 'Community Literacy Strategies'—working in families experiencing educational exclusion—which focus on 'literacy in homes'. The aim is to provide tools to empower the family as the child's educator mainly via weekly parent groups between parents, teachers and other members of the community, where concerns—mainly but not exclusively about the education of children—are shared and discussed.

(b) Group devices at school to promote educational performance, including a 'learning space for integration' designed for children with specific learning and integration needs, and 'learning acceleration' which focuses on the promotion of pupils older than average due to grade repetition or late enrollment, in order to help them catch up with their peers.

⁶ All Spanish-into-English translations are mine.

The activities detailed in group (a) refer to activities at home, whereas the ones detailed in (b) are activities in the classroom, although outside the curriculum schedule. The children selected can be referred to one or more of these activities and the duration of the activities varies according to their needs. This article is mainly concerned with the Community Literacy Strategies.

So far, the objectives of the CTP have been achieved. The CTP has been set nationwide, and has been mostly accepted by the actors involved: teachers, children, families and communities (cf. CEIP Uruguay 2013b; Ramos et al. 2015).

Methodology

Interaction between the university team and the teachers was essential in order to achieve our main objectives: (a) to provide a group of Community Teachers with basic training in the COI to enable them to implement it and (b) to understand, from feedback sessions with them, the specific difficulties that may arise in their everyday practice with the methodology, as well as its potential. That is why the qualitative methodology used was based on the assumptions of Participatory Action Research (PAR), where research is structured as interaction between the actors living within a particular situation and those outside it in order to collectively improve the situation. The term 'action research', coined by Kurt Lewin (1946), described a form of research that could concurrently focus on research and action in response to specific social problems. Lewin maintained that action research enabled simultaneous advances in theory and social change. Currently, action research is not a compact body of ideas and methods, but a guideline for the generation of new knowledge that is simultaneously put into practice in social changes (Chambers 2008). For this work, guidance was taken from this methodological approach, adapted to the particularities of the case.

The investigative work with PAR guidance was developed between the university group, sixty Community Teachers and some of the families with whom they work. The university group wanted to test their two hypotheses: (a) that the COI could be put forward as a useful tool for the daily work of the Community Teachers, and (b) that the COI could be presented to family members, not only as a methodology to be used by the teacher, but as a reflective way of leading discussions in their everyday life, which could lead to the cultivation of moral literacy. Families interacted with the teachers during sessions of COI in a horizontal and participatory way, thus addressing problems specific to their realities. The teachers also interacted in a similar manner with the

university team, sharing not only aspects related to the situation of the families and their improvements with the COI, but also aspects of their own daily work with the community. So, while the university researchers worked as external actors to the reality of the teachers' work, the teachers were both external actors to the reality of the families, and internal actors involved in the research process with the university team.

Within their dual role, the teachers worked with the families using COI, recorded the sessions, analysed them and reflected together on the possibilities of this methodology for their work. They also did analytical and reflective work dealing with the observation of the changes in family relationships, and between the families and the school. The task of the university team was to train the teachers in the COI methodology, to inform them of their hypotheses and to accompany them in their work with families and parents by creating spaces for group reflection processes, by bringing in theoretical elements and references to other experiences, and by systematising results, as will be described below.

Through this participatory action research process, changes took place both in the lives of the families, and the community life between school, family and Community Teachers. At the same time, knowledge was generated about the possibilities of using COI for the work with families. The working hypotheses were checked through the teachers' knowledge put into action in their work, and enriched by their additional reflection-in-action (Schön 1983). Then this reflection-in-action was transformed into reflection-on-action during meetings between teachers and the university team. The following section describes this process in more detail.

Description of the activities

The activities undertaken were focused on the COI as a tool for Community Teachers. The first activity was funded in 2012 by the Committee of University Extension and Environmental Activities of the Universidad de la República (UdelaR) and it was replicated in 2016, as required by the Primary Education national authorities. The activities consisted of a series of training workshops and joint research with Community Teachers.

The general objectives of the activities were to extend the educational methodology of COI into the area of work of the Community Teachers and to explore its benefits and/or difficulties in their practice.

The specific objectives, in line with the hypotheses already stated earlier, were: (a) to provide a group of Community Teachers with basic training in the educational methodology of COI in order to enable them to implement it; (b) to observe, from feedback sessions with the teachers, the specific difficulties that may arise with the methodology in their everyday work practice; (c) to assess the capacity of the COI for the development of the self-reflection underlying autonomous citizenship in family members of different age groups; (d) to test the possibility of the families using the methodology to generate dialogue within the home; (e) to build bridges between the university team and the participating Community Teachers in view of a future project that aims to extend this methodology to more schools and areas in the country.

Participating Community Teachers attended a series of meetings with intervals of approximately three weeks between each meeting. One cohort of teachers attended four three-hour meetings between October and December 2012. A second cohort of teachers attended five three-hour meetings between June and September 2016. A total of sixty Community Teachers were involved. The teachers had the opportunity to apply the methodology in their daily work and give the university team feedback which was included in the research conclusions, so it was joint research, where teachers actively participated. The participating teachers of both activities were different, as the national authorities wanted the experience to be extended to populations who had not participated before; the families were consequently different too. The teachers had not received any previous training in the COI methodology, as it is not part of the syllabus of the national official teacher training graduate course, so the training sessions were mainly introductory, acquainting the teachers with the main stages of the methodology (lead-in stage, story-telling, question formulation, discussion, reflection).

Research outcomes

Reception by parents and children

The following paragraphs were written after feedback sessions with the teachers at the end of both activities. The 2012 feedback sessions were recorded, transcribed and published in Modzelewski et al. (2012); excerpts of which are used in this section of the article. The detailed analysis of the 2016 feedback sessions is yet to be published, so the results of the 2016 experience drawn on here are reported in this article for the first time.

The teachers reported that the parents received the new methodology in various ways. Some teachers stated that not all families are at the stage where untraditional activities can be put forward. Other teachers preferred to pose the activity in specific parent meetings at school instead of the family home.

The parents initially showed distrust. One specific teacher in 2012 said that at the beginning of the activity 'they were just sitting there with frightened faces'; a mother said: 'I do not want to say anything, I will not start, another person should start' and covered her mouth and hid, but little by little, as the participants saw that the proposal was friendly, 'they began to relax and that Mum was able to say something interesting too'. During the activity, other parents doubted the value of their participation, but the teachers explained that there was not a single correct answer, which seemed to encourage them to take part.

As for the story reading stage, most teachers said the family listened with great interest, and when the story finished, most members of the family were eager to participate, giving their own interpretations of the story.

In both instances (2012 and 2016) the teachers reported that at the end of the first meeting most parents were happy with the work and eager to continue. One mother stated that 'her head had been opened wide'. Some parents later told the teachers that they had tried to apply the question formulation, discussion and reflection stages of the COI at home on their own in order to address issues they did not know how to approach, such as rules for their children, or respect from members of the family. At a later stage, having had more weeks of practice, a teacher from the 2012 experience reported that a father had told her about changes in the way they argued at home. That is precisely one of the major project objectives: to enable families to use the methodology to generate dialogue within the home.

Many mothers on both occasions (2012 and 2016) pointed out that they considered the COI with the teachers as a kind of therapy, a moment when they could listen to others and share things happening to them. Thus, this methodology gives the parents the opportunity to see themselves from a different point of view. This is a fundamental aspect of its potential.

The Community Teachers' perspective

From the teachers' reflection on their work with families it is possible to present some key aspects of what the methodology enables. The teachers observed that the participants found the opportunity to question, to wonder, to think beyond the text, and express their emotions. Working with narratives, in turn, helps develop the imagination, i.e. the representation of stories without visual support, and also develops language by means of the contributions of the text itself, of the teacher, and of the exchanges among participants.

One aspect that the teachers particularly highlighted is that this work can help attract the parents to school activities and create new and warm ties with the classroom teachers; sometimes parents do not approach the school, which is an aspect of their children's life that is alien to them. The teacher visiting the home and inviting the adults to participate in an activity where there is no specific teaching point but a mere instance of dialogical exchange offers an opportunity to relate the parents and the school, as the Community Teacher is a representative of the school institution. After some instances of COI in the home, one specific student, who was at risk of dropping out, stopped being systematically absent from school for the rest of the academic year, and the majority of the other students started to attend school more frequent and assiduously according to the teachers' oral accounts. It is important to point out that this had been the main achievement of the CTP before our COI intervention (CEIP Uruguay 2013b), but the teachers indicated that never before had the connection between an action and a result been so immediate and evident (Modzelewski et al. 2012). The relationship between the parents and the school is crucial to enabling parents to support their children's attendance to school. The result of these activities meant this relationship was clearly changing.

By addressing the everyday aspects of the life experience of each participant, the methodology enables committed performances from people who do not usually join in. It was thus noted how adults opened themselves to the teacher, the stories being the stimulus. This is crucial in order to improve the relationship between the adult and the teacher, and to give the teacher an opportunity to make a greater impact on the family and for his or her proposals to be accepted. In one particular case in 2012 a teacher told of her experience formulating questions: 'I asked the family about the mysterious plant in the story, could it represent something in their lives? [...] "Is there anything very valuable that you once had and lost, like this plant?" And this mother answered "Yes, my marriage", and this was the first time the woman had told me that her husband had

left her alone with all their kids'.⁷ On an emotional level, this opening represented a step towards self-reflection.

Most teachers agreed that it is important to look for texts that deal with the problems that each family is going through, for them to identify with the story. It is clear that the methodology is intended to stimulate dialogue on any subject without preconception, the community being the one to guide the course of the topics of conversation, with the teacher only as a facilitator. If, however, the teacher knows any of the issues of a particular family context, he or she can anticipate the discussion and propose a text related to the topic of interest. This way of working on problems, by interrogating a story, may be a more suitable alternative than to try to work directly on an interpersonal difficulty. The reason is that the story suggests the problem from a distanced perspective, which does not occur when the discussion takes place directly between the parties involved.

Finally, it is important to note that within the potential of the methodology it is also possible to address issues related to the coexistence of the members of the family, and how to deal with difficult situations. Some of the topics discussed while working with families on the popular fable *The Scorpion and the Frog*⁸ were the possibilities of people changing their attitudes or beliefs, guilt, prejudice, trust, behavior in extreme situations, and the dictates of conscience.

A separate issue is the support that the institution (the school in this particular case) can give to this work that can elicit so many different emotions and expose otherwise invisible problems. Most teachers claimed that the schools should take responsibility for this kind of work (e.g. when situations related to crime come to the surface). 'Sometimes I feel like an orphan of the institution' said a teacher in 2012. But there seems to have been some degree of evolution between both instances of the activity, as in 2016 a teacher recognised that when it was necessary for the school where she works to take over the situation (a specific case of sexual abuse that arose during a COI work), she had

⁷ Although this is a leading question coming from the teacher, rather than, as Lipman postulated, that the questions should come from the participants, during the first stages of the application of the methodology, it was necessary for the teachers to propose their own questions in order to prompt reflection and other questions from the participants. This did not continue when the families became familiar with the methodology.

⁸ Fable of unknown origin, occasionally attributed to Aesop: A scorpion and a frog meet on the bank of a stream and the scorpion asks the frog to carry him across on its back. The frog asks, 'How do I know you won't sting me?' The scorpion says, 'Because if I do, I will die too'. The frog is satisfied, and they set out, but in midstream, the scorpion stings the frog. The frog feels the onset of paralysis and starts to sink, knowing they both will drown, but has just enough time to gasp 'Why?' Replies the scorpion: 'It's my nature ...' (<http://www.aesopfables.com/cgi/aesop1.cgi?4&TheScorpionandtheFrog>)

the support of an interdisciplinary team that worked at all levels (classroom teacher, child and family). However, in general the teachers demand more institutional support to address certain situations that make them often emotionally overwhelmed.

Discussion

In spite of the excitement caused by the positive aspects that this experience revealed and the enthusiasm of the Community Teachers who conducted the COI sessions, it is clear that the experience was still brief and included only sixty teachers. The limited scope of their community work does not allow for making strong claims about the full potential of the methodology. But it is also clear that the first results of the implementation are fully in line with the working hypotheses of the project.

Firstly, the work of the Community Teachers during this experience has evidenced that the COI could work as a useful practice for the CTP, which has very clear objectives but not a very clear methodology of its own. Among the main targets of the CTP are, as stated above, preventing school dropout and involving the family in this process. As mentioned, the objectives of the program have been slowly achieved, especially in connection with preventing school dropout. However, this success seemed to be provoked more by the caring presence of the teacher in the home in relation to the child, than by the involvement of the key adults in the family, who, as the teachers pointed out, were not usually willing to participate in the activities proposed (Modzelewski et al. 2012). The COI provided a straightforward methodology that spontaneously invited, and allowed for, the intervention of the adults in the family, as described in the Research Outcomes section above.

Although at first sight some of the benefits could seem to be therapeutic rather than philosophical (e.g. the mother opening up to the teacher by talking about her divorce, or the explicit mention of the word 'therapy' in a group of parents), it was the opportunity to formulate questions, to discuss and reflect (i.e. the essence of philosophical activity as defined from as early as Socrates) that was experienced by the participants as 'therapeutic'. Thus, the experience was undeniably philosophical. Additionally, the encouragement to have their voices heard, and the discovery that what they could say was of value, links to the capability approach, especially to some of the capabilities put forward by Nussbaum related to imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason and affiliation (see footnote 3).

Consequently, this experience can be considered as an instance in which the potential of the COI working with families has started to find empirical evidence to support it.

Concluding remarks

This article was aimed to sharing a way of coping with social exclusion through philosophy. The education of citizens is inadequate if human development is ignored in one of the areas where the most subtle and long-term learning takes place: the family. Paradoxically, the family being considered the citizens' most private sphere, seems to suggest that there is no access to it from State institutions such as public education. However, the figure of the Community Teacher, introduced in Uruguay in 2005, allows the intervention of a teacher in the family. The question has been, what methodology would allow this new teacher to get the most out of their job? And the question remains. But from this research and its implementation, the COI, which many educators have followed since John Dewey and allows for the participants' doing philosophy, shows once again its invaluable potential for the development of the capacities of an autonomous citizen.

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