Philosophy for Children Kenyan Style

By Rebecca Odierna

"For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Paulo Freire, 2000, p. 72).

It was the last day of Philosophy 492, my college course dedicated to teaching the principles and strategies of p4c Hawai'i. I stood up in front of the class and presented part one of my final project—a philosophy for children travel kit. The green, suitcase-looking container was packed tight with yarn, popsicle sticks, paper, glue, fabric tubes, Good Thinkers' Tool Kit, and other pertinent p4c materials. At the time of my presentation, I had no idea what lay ahead in my future, nor was I even remotely aware of the great significance my final project would have in the course of the next three months of my life. What I did know was that I was heading to Kenya for the entire summer as a volunteer for an organization dedicated to educational projects throughout the rural areas of the country, and I was nothing but giddy at the prospect of introducing philosophy for children to impoverished African children.

Months before I joined the Philosophy 492 class, I was asked to join Emerging Humanity—a non-profit organization based in Honolulu, Hawai'i—as a volunteer in a project that focused on enhancing the classroom environments at the organization's partner schools throughout the Nyanza Province of Kenya. My role during my Kenyan adventure would be to work with teachers and students to strive to improve the quality of learning and the internal relations within the classroom. Combining the knowledge I learned from scholarly texts and from my initial classroom observations in Kenya, I soon realized that the majority of the Kenyan school systems are still entrenched in the old, British-colonial style of learning: The teacher stands up in front of the class and dictates the content that is presented. The desks are lined up in perfect rows facing the front of the classroom. Students are not encouraged to interact, participate in activities, or ask questions. Their duty is to sit politely, listen, and strive to keep up with the teacher while also attempting to take quality notes. Discussions are rare, and the learning style is based on nothing even remotely resembling dialogical, hands-on and/or experiential learning. The whole system promotes rote memorization.

p4c Travels to Kenya

Upon learning about the Kenyan approach to education, it came as no surprise to me that there were non-profit organizations dedicated to improving the quality of education for these Kenyan children. It was also not shocking to hear that many of Kenya's rural students are failing school. To offer some insight into the problem, the class's grade average when I arrived at the girls' high school that I spent most of my time at was 37 percent. I was astonished. However, my initial dismay soon turned to motivation. I was determined to help improve the test scores of the students and to make learning more fun and meaningful for these children, who, as a result of their education experience, were bored and stressed in equal measure. Luckily for me, I had spent the entire spring semester before my trip learning a different approach that, I felt, offered an antidote to the students boredom and stress: p4c Hawai'i. Words cannot give full justice to the impact that my p4c experience had on my life and on my educational outlook. As an aspiring teacher I was intrigued by the educational philosophy of p4c that focused on student dialogue in communities of inquiry. Throughout the semester, I participated in p4c communities in college level classes and joined in p4c discussions at a local high school. The experience provided clear evidence to me that this kind of instruction worked in practice.

As a result, I saw no better way to approach my summer project in Kenya than to bring what I had learned from my college philosophy class and apply it to my efforts with Kenyan students. After all, it seemed clear to me that the problems disrupting their education could

be overcome, as they were problems that arose from the reliance on outdated educational methodologies that stressed memorization and the authority of the teacher. p4c Hawai'i, on the other hand, regards teachers and students as co-investigators in inquiry. It promotes the idea that they should be mutually responsible for mindful exploration and individual and collective growth. In this sense, education can and should connect the kind of student-teacher opposition that existed in the Kenyan schools.

An education that promotes memorization above all else fails to challenge students to practice such worthy activities as critical thinking and problem solving. According to the ideals and aims of p4c, students shouldn't be docile listeners; they should be investigators who consider and reconsider, question and re-question, assess and reassess. Dialogue and inquiry are the means to achieving these goals. Paulo Freire has written that, "the fundamental goal of dialogical teaching is to create a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorizing about the experiences shared in the dialogue process" (2000, p. 17). This concept of dialogical learning is embedded in p4c. Another approach of p4c is that reality isn't a finished story with only one version—it is open-ended and makes allowance for many avenues of interpretation. In this sense, teachers shouldn't be the know-it-all, end-all authority figure. They shouldn't be imposing their opinions on students. Instead, they should encourage the students to think through and discover their own view based on all the information available.

Confident and determined to inspire change, I grabbed my philosophy for children travel kit and began making the rounds at Emerging Humanity's partner schools—the very schools where I had done my first observations. My initial endeavors were exhausting, and I found myself losing hope in my goals. I went from school to school and sat down with every principle, trying to convince him or her of the promise in adopting the learning methodologies that are embedded in p4c. I explained the concepts until I was blue in the face, but no one was biting my bait. "Sit in a circle?!?" one headmaster gasped. "Have every student participate?" another principal stuttered, with a shocked look. "Encourage the teacher to consider herself another student?" a second principal said in disgust.

I begged them to give it a try, to let me facilitate some classes, to invite the teachers to sit down with me to discuss alternative ways of educating their students. Most of my clients gave me a flat out "no": others' expressed skepticism. No matter what their immediate responses were, I heard over and over again that "that type" of education wasn't possible: "that's not the Kenyan way." I pleaded for them at least to try it out first, and if the teachers and students didn't like it, then they could forget about it, and I'd move along. Nothing I said convinced them it was even worth considering. I soon realized that "the Kenyan way," which seemed more to resemble the entrenched colonial-British way, was neither flexible nor open to new ideas.

Two weeks passed, and I had accomplished nothing. In spite of their students' failing grades and their students' apparent indifference to their own education, I had yet to find one school that was willing to try anything beyond the prescribed traditional methods, far less than show any openness to my "outsider," p4c ideas. Frustrated and sad, I was on the brink of giving up. The following day, I was asked to accompany some of my fellow volunteers to one of Emerging Humanity's two private schools, which was located in the heart of the rural district of Ugenya. Emerging Humanity had established Lifunga Girls' Secondary School (LGSS) as a unique learning institution for underprivileged girls. As a result of LGSS being completely run by Emerge, the projects and ideas of our volunteers were more likely to be welcomed and more easily implemented.

Upon my arrival, I was disappointed (but not surprised) to see that none of the girls spoke a word or cracked a smile in their classes. The energy in the classrooms was intense and rigid—and for the most part deeply uncomfortable. I found it extremely hard to stay engaged. I also failed to keep up with what the teachers were regurgitating, and unlike the girls, I was not required to write down every other word the teacher said and to compose legible study notes. If I had tried to take notes, I know I would have failed miserably. As I sat and listened, I was convinced that LGSS needed to experience something different, even if it refused to embrace p4c. Whatever the change would be, it was clear to me that it was necessary for the sake of the girls and the education provided to them. It was at that point that I decided to do whatever I could to make that happen—to promote change by introducing new and alternative methods of teaching and learning.

Embracing p4c

The reason that I had attended LGSS on that first day was to interview candidates for a new health and language teacher position. After three disappointing prospects had come and gone, I felt a sense of nervous excitement when a woman named Gillian Wafula spoke in her interview. She was a young, progressive teacher who talked of the need to break the British education mold that was so widely embraced by Kenyans, and to reach out to the students in new ways. Her assured demeanor was uplifting and I began to form the opinion that Gillian could very possibly be my project gateway. It was clear from her responses to the interview questions that Gillian would bring a new and fresh perspective, and positive energy to LGSS. We hired her on the spot. Gillian, I hoped, would be a way to bring p4c to Kenya. So, instead of resuming my old routine of trying to persuade an unyielding principal to allow me to talk to the teachers, I went directly to Gillian. I pulled up a chair at her lunch table and made my pitch. "I have some ideas…. I think they could help the girls perform better, and they would certainly make for a more enjoyable classroom experience. What do you say? Want to have some fun?" Gillian looked at me with serious eyes for a short moment before a large grin covered her face. Highly enthusiastic, she blurted out, "Yes, I'm in! What do you have in mind?" It was at that moment that "p4c Kenyan Style" truly began.

For several weeks, Gillian and I worked together to put our plan into effect. It took barely a month, and soon I was proud to see that her language and health courses had become fully functioning p4c communities. The transformation was not easy. The students had never before been encouraged to empower themselves and become active agents in their learning. Getting them to participate in inquiry-based discussions was like pulling teeth. Initially, the girls were confused and timid; they slumped down in their chairs and hid their faces, apparently too embarrassed or bashful to talk or even write in their new journals. But with time, things began to change and our community began to form.

We started off with easy and comfortable discussions, like, "What did you do this weekend?" and "What's your favorite hobby?" or, more searchingly, "As a girl in a patriarchal community, how does it feel to have been given the rare opportunity to attend secondary school?" Slowly each girl began to open up and contribute to the inquiries, and within a month Gillian and I were able to steer the inquiries towards subjects that specifically related to the class and its required course content. The intellectual depth of discussion that we were able to reach was inspiring. By the end of my time in Kenya, the girls had explored topics such as teen pregnancy, female empowerment, literature, colonization, and poverty. They talked about the benefits of waiting until you are financially stable to have kids, the correlation between poverty and teenage mothers with multiple children, and the effects of European imperialism and globalization on the survival of indigenous languages and cultural practices.

By the end of the first month, the students were smiling and eagerly waving their hands in the air, hoping for their turn to speak out or give their opinion on a matter under discussion. During this initial phase the girls were also introduced to the concepts of intellectual safety, collaboration, inquiry, community, and respect. It took hard work, but they soon gained the wisdom to be engaged listeners and respectful but assertive contributors. Their daily evaluations and journal entries conveyed their sentiments of excitement and privilege in acquiring a new sense of agency and responsibility in their learning. One girl reflected, "It feels good to feel like I matter in the classroom. I've never felt this way before, and it actually makes me excited to learn."

The change in the classroom dynamic and the shift in the girls' attitudes during my stay was enough to satisfy me and leave me with the feeling that my time and efforts in Kenya were all worthwhile. When I learned of the incredible improvement of the girls' grades in Gillian's classes, I was overwhelmed with pride. Not only had I introduced p4c to Kenya, but it was also proving to work—and work very well—as an alternative educational method and philosophy. By the time I left Kenya in the middle of August, the girls had increased their scores by an average of 10 percent in the courses in which p4c was implemented. I later learned that after continual application of p4c in three-quarters of the LGSS classrooms, the class' average grade went from a 37 percent in May to a 56 percent in late November.

p4c Kenyan Style

I am sure my educational endeavors in Kenya would not have been successful without Gillian. It was her open

mind and desire to create positive change that enabled p4c to function and grow, first at LGSS and later at other schools. It was Gillian who called her teacher friends and convinced them to invite me to their schools and share p4c with their coworkers and students. Once Gillian embraced the basic philosophies of p4c, she went above and beyond her teaching responsibilities to encourage other schools and teachers to do try p4c. As a result, during the month of July, I successfully introduced p4c to eight classes in six different schools, four of which were elementary schools and two of which were high schools. Whether or not these classes are still operating as p4c communities to this day is unknown, but I am confident in the fact that the mere act of introducing and practicing p4c changed the way several teachers and schools think about education.

My p4c experience in Kenya was first and foremost a learning process. I quickly came to realize that p4c works in different contexts, and that the same approaches I had used in the U.S. were not always viable in Kenya. This is why the term "p4c Kenyan Style" has so much meaning to me. p4c literally had to be molded and adapted to work in the Kenyan context. The fact that p4c was able to adapt to its unique setting conveys the beauty in its remarkable flexibility. It underscores the fact that there is no right or best way to do p4c—its functions and approaches are relevant to the particular community.

For example, in the area of Kenya that I was working, it is not always culturally acceptable to share your feelings in open spaces. As a result, self-reflections and daily evaluations were designated to journals; they were rarely communicated within the group. The one reflection that did stay in the interactive realm of the community was the thumbs-up/thumbs-down evaluation at the end of each discussion. Also, classroom activities such as Plain Vanilla were executed differently. I found in Kenya that students are not as willing to share their questions on the board, and many have no desire to identify themselves with their ideas for that day's inquiry. To adapt to this value, Plain Vanilla became an anonymous game. Questions and thoughts were written on small pieces of paper, folded up, and put in a bucket to keep the author's identity confidential.

Other cultural issues such as the language barrier forced me to think about and facilitate discussions in new ways. While Kenyan teachers teach their classes in English, English is, for many of the students, the second and weaker language. Thus, finding the right words to explain concepts like intellectual safety and the Good Thinker's Tool Kit proved especially challenging. As a result, I was forced to get creative and use pictures, models, and sometimes songs to generate clarity and understanding. I found the best way to provide an explanation, however, was to show the students through praxis. Rather than try to define intellectual safety, I pointed out the moments in which I thought it was achieved or being implemented at various points in our community development and discussions. Overall, what I came to realize as an important truth about p4c is that it has a different face in every classroom. But, while the approaches and methods may be slightly different in each setting, the fundamental principles and philosophies are still the same.

Due to the incredible social and cultural experience of my summer in Kenya, as well as the success of my educational endeavors, I accepted an offer to return in 2011 for an entire year. I had few expectations for my return, but I certainly hoped that I would be able to see p4c communities in schools in the province where I worked. My goal remained the same for 2011: I was going to strive to increase the quality of education that is offered to underprivileged children in rural villages, and I intended to do so through the implementation of p4c philosophies and ideologies. Upon my return to work in Kenya, I was thrilled to see p4c was still active in several of the schools I had introduced it to the summer before. Moreover, the students and teachers in these communities seemed genuinely happy; not only in their classroom interactions, but also with their overall educational path, and the ways in which that form of education was positively generating knowledge, increasing productivity, and enhancing community relations.

With the collaboration of my Emerging Humanity co-workers, p4c program evaluations were conducted within my first few months back. These evaluations were based on interviews with teachers, students, and the students' families, as well as on student productivity and test scores. As expected, the results of these evaluations overwhelmingly showed a positive correlation between p4c and educational outcomes. The program had shown a boost in attitude, enthusiasm, and overall morale among both students and teachers. Students who participated in p4c communities had improved their test scores and

class attendance over the five months in which p4c was being implemented in their classrooms. As a result of these findings, I used these evaluations to make a case for p4c in schools that had not already adopted or tried the program. Again, my efforts were not always fruitful, but by the time I left Kenya in November of 2011, p4c was being employed in fourteen different schools in the Nyanza province. I can only hope that p4c will continue to have a positive impact on education and will gain further momentum in Kenya. I have faith in p4c's ability to enhance education, and I am confident that the people of Kenya will highly benefit from its use, just as any classroom in any part of the world surely would.

REFERENCE

Freire, P. (2000) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000.