The encouragement of "reasonableness" through the practice of philosophy with high school students at risk

Maureen M. McDermott
University of Wollongong
The Encouragement of “Reasonableness” through the Practice of Philosophy with High School Students at Risk

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Maureen M. McDermott
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Abstract

The aim of this research project has been to critically assess the potential of philosophic discussion to elicit reasonableness in a group of high school students at risk of being excluded from their school. The group of students comprised ten boys and two girls from Years Nine and Ten, in a multicultural school situated in a socio-economically deprived area of Sydney. The general behaviour and participation of these twelve students had been judged unacceptable by a panel of staff. The latter, called the Student Support Group, was made up of the school principal, the assistant principal, the school counsellor, the four school house coordinators and other interested teachers. The significance of this study lies in its effort to report on the specific use of philosophic discussion as a means of encouraging behavioural change.

The first concern of this study has sought to move away from the application of Philosophy for Children as a promoter of higher order thinking within a mainstream classroom. Primarily, it has attempted to test the use of philosophy as a promoter of cooperative behaviour among 12 adolescents perceived as being generally uncooperative and at risk from their own behaviour. Given the significance of context in each and every educational setting, that is the context of culture, structure and situation, the second area of study has sought to identify what useful adaptations of Matthew Lipman's paradigm for practising Philosophy for Children were beneficial in the context of the study. It has also been concerned to record educational events and insights that emerged during the time of the research. The study reports on 28 one-hour sessions, held with the 12 students and the researcher each week, over four terms in one school year.

The study is a multiple case study in a single naturalistic context within a Years 7 to 10 high school. Reasonableness within the confines of this study is judged to have five criteria which are located in the intellectual, interpersonal and intrapersonal domains. Data are qualitatively based using a variety of instruments including: pre- and post-study questionnaires issued to the Student Support Group which were based on the set criteria for reasonable behaviour; researcher analysis of the data of the 28 sessions; student participant self analysis and statements issuing from administrators, teachers and auxiliary staff. The students at the centre of this study came from a range of cultural backgrounds.

Throughout the course of the study, the student participants did become more adept at forming logical thoughts and bringing them to articulation, or modifying them as a result of the ideas and contributions of their fellow group members. At the conclusion of the project, nine of the student participants were retained at the school site. Improved reasonable behaviour of the nine remaining participants in the project was attested to via comparison of the results of the pre- and post-study questionnaires and also by administrator, teacher and auxiliary staff statements of demonstrable changes. The student participants through their own evaluation process, progressively articulated higher standards of discursive and ethical behaviour.
DECLARATION

I, Maureen M. McDermott, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Education, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Maureen M. McDermott

24 January 2001
In honour and memory of
Margaret Wilhelmina Vinson
(1908 - 1984)
&
William Jack Patrick Vinson
(1908 – 1976)
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