Reflections on Theory and Pedagogy of Challenges in Facilitating Children's Dialogues in the Community of Inquiry

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Abstract

The value of developing philosophical thinking among young children and its pedagogical possibilities has been discussed in the Philippines in the recent years. One such possibility is the pedagogy of Philosophy for Children (P4C) which allows children to participate in a dialogue in the context of a community of inquiry. The community of inquiry is a specific kind of classroom environment where children would feel welcome, motivated and secure to express their wonderment, to share their opinions and intuitions and to appraise one another's reasons and propositions (Haynes, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Jackson, 2004; Nicoll, 1993). Considering the necessity to maintain the organic nature of the community of inquiry and of the process of the dialogue itself, it is a major concern as to how teachers will become effective facilitators of such a classroom environment. This paper aims to better understand the craft of facilitating the community of inquiry and the role of the facilitator by attempting to answer the following questions: a) How must a facilitator regard the pedagogy of philosophical dialogue? b) How must a facilitator see young children? c) How should a facilitator approach and acknowledge children's questions and ideas? d) What thinking skills and behaviors should a facilitator be able to model to them? The answers provided are derived from my familiarity with the pedagogy of philosophical dialogue and from my personal experiences as a facilitator of the community of inquiry. Some implications to the field of teacher training are also discussed.

Key Words: *Facilitation, Philosophy for Children, Community of Inquiry, Philosophical Dialogue*

Introduction

The value of developing philosophical thinking among young children and its pedagogical possibilities has been discussed in the Philippines in the recent years (Lee, 2009; UNESCO, 2009). As educators were becoming more interested in 'higher-order thinking skills' in the 1990's, philosophy professors from the University of the Philippines who believe in the inalienable connection between democracy and the pedagogy of philosophical dialogue initiated workshops and trainings on Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children (P4C) in a number of Manila public schools. These mainly involved familiarizing the school teachers with the practical uses of philosophy in the classroom and abating the bias against it as an obsolete, possibly even pointless discipline. They also aimed at exposing these school teachers to literature that serve as springboard for children's philosophical dialogues and letting them experience being a participant in a community of inquiry[1]. However, there were numerous challenges in assessing whether the teachers had become able in the task of facilitating the communities of inquiry in their respective classrooms or even whether they had in fact implemented the P4C pedagogy. Specifically, there were no criteria set so that measurement of the impact of P4C on the students would be possible nor was there documentation and measurable assessment of the training program and of its probable impact on the students (Lee, 2009).

Over and above these challenges is the question of how exactly a teacher would become a facilitator of the community and of what it *means* to be one. How must a facilitator regard the pedagogy of philosophical dialogue? How must he or she see young children? How should he or she approach and acknowledge children's questions and ideas? What thinking skills and behaviors should he or she be able to model to them? If we are able to provide categorical answers to these questions, perhaps we could then better appreciate the craft of facilitating the community of inquiry and thus explore possibilities in teacher training and in formulating criteria for assessing P4C's impact on students.

The Role of the Facilitator

Creating a Community of Inquirers

The foremost task of the facilitator is to develop a physical and social classroom environment where children would feel welcome, motivated and secure to express their wonderment, to share their opinions and intuitions and to appraise one another's reasons and propositions (Haynes, 2007; Jackson, 2004; Johnson, 2007; Nicoll, 1993). Indeed, the "community" aspect of such a classroom is not to be undervalued as it is what makes thinking and learning possible for every participant. Particularly, the facilitator is expected to not only consider the age and background experiences of his or her students but also to develop sensitivity towards their 'particular sensibilities and imaginations' (UNESCO, 2007, p. 18). This helps in closely monitoring the direction where the dialogue is likely going and in rephrasing or interpreting some statements that the children had made. With regard to those who prefer to

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[1]This term was first coined by Charles Peirce but the whole notion of how it is applied in Philosophy for Children was influenced by other theories such as those of Mead, Royce, Buehler and Dewey (Planas, 2004) as well as Vygotsky (Juuso, 2007).

listen than talk, the facilitator would also be able to make them feel that they are included in the thinking process by developing such sensitivity. He or she may do this in various ways such as by making eye contact, by closely observing non-verbal thinking behaviors and of course, by encouraging them to also verbalize their thoughts.

Encouraging children who are already thinking to think well gives them the opportunity to become inquirers and not merely passive receivers of information, which is highly useful in this age of technology and globalization. As they gain the ability to acknowledge and evaluate various perspectives, they will also familiarize themselves with considering and reconsidering conventions, with being open to changing their initial views in light of stronger arguments, and with thinking globally (Camhy, 2005; Parirokh, Fattahi, Parirokh, & Majdi, 2006). Most significantly, the children's learning will be supported as they become skilled at assessing the accuracy and usefulness of information (Lee, 2009).

Moreover, when children gain a sense of security that they are respected, they are prompted to treat others in the same manner and they enhance the ability of caring, apart from critical and creative thinking (Accorinti, 2000). Ultimately, when the classroom has successfully evolved into a community of inquiry, it will henceforth provide preparation for democratic life as children at an early age experience the intersubjective process of taking turns in speaking and genuinely listening to others, of respectfully evaluating one another's ideas and communally arriving at the best (or a number of best) working solution(s). As they acquire the habits of the community of inquiry, they would then be better equipped to make sense of their lives and to appreciate the importance of taking an active part in public deliberations and to identify and defy deceptive propaganda (UNESCO, 2007).

Maintaining the Community of Inquiry

Participating in philosophical dialogue can be a highly engaging and productive experience for children if the facilitator is able to maintain an intellectually and emotionally safe environment. Not only do children enjoy having the opportunity to be heard, but they also grow to be more self-aware, more responsive to others and more able to deal with and solve cognitive conflict. Hence, the children develop social skills that are democratic in nature and are characterized by reflective reasoning, free expression of ideas and mutual respect (Fisher, 2000; 2001; 2006; Haynes, 2007; Biesta, 2009).

Such safety and appropriateness is not limited only to child-child but also to child-teacher interaction. According to Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan (1980, p. 88), respect for children's opinions necessitate a 'mutual relationship of trust and empathy that might get them to admit that they do not know all the answers'. Evidently, it is the facilitator who must continuously model these characteristics so that the children will be able to rely on the atmosphere of the classroom and to sustain their confidence in honestly expressing what they really think as well as in self-correcting when stronger resolutions are made (Sharp & Splitter, 1995). Building and maintaining this environment of trust and confidence entails a certain disposition on the part of the facilitator. Primarily, he or she must be genuinely curious, open-minded, and respectful of children as legitimate sources of ideas and constructors of knowledge. Furthermore, the facilitator must recognize that the process of developing this atmosphere takes a considerable amount of time and that it is essential to constantly ensure that the community of inquiry is as organic as possible since 'most children are extremely sensitive to the whole spectrum of

techniques that enable an adult to condescend to children and humiliate them' (Lipman, et al., 1980, p. 88).

Hence, taking part in reflective, collaborative inquiry is not only cognitive but social and emotional as well. Participants in the community of inquiry become eager and willing to think deeply and to speak what is genuinely in their minds when they are certain that they are practicing something truly meaningful and purposeful, something that is not merely an exercise in educational practice but a way of life. Certainly, there is no need for the facilitator to state this explicitly for those who effectively internalize the cognitive and social habits of the community of inquiry would naturally develop a reciprocated, rational relationship between themselves and their co-inquirers, which would then guide them in their later encounters with other people outside of the classroom.

As the facilitator of the dialogical inquiry who must strive to maintain this organic nature of the community of inquiry, he or she must understand these two things: 1) that thinking is 'an *activity* and not a *thing'* (Murris, 2008, p. 673); and 2) that such an activity is the 'essence and nature of the human being – an idea which is often accompanied by the assumption that it is possible to use this knowledge as the foundation for subsequent action in such domains as education, politics or ethics' (Biesta, 2009, p. 5).

Facilitating the Dialogue

The facilitator of the community of inquiry allows children to freely ask their questions and express their ideas while ensuring that the dialogue does not become a mere sharing of anecdotes or sessions of therapeutic talk. It is imperative that the dialogue is a healthy, reflective, and productive endeavor which is why guiding the discourse towards a coherent line of thought amidst a multitude of ideas is very important. As such, the facilitator must be skilled at identifying how these ideas may be built on one another so that improved and not merely new conceptions are produced. He or she must also be able to anticipate where the dialogue may be heading so that spontaneity and relevance are both maintained and the children themselves are able to follow the flow of ideas.

A commitment to philosophical inquiry is thus indispensable in making an effective facilitation possible (Sharp & Splitter, 1995). When the facilitator appreciates the philosophical pedagogy as a setting for children to explore concepts and formulate questions, he or she would be able to uphold the aim of developing the thinking skills and social dynamics of the community of inquiry. Likewise, there will be little to no chance of indoctrination because the facilitator plays the role of a co-inquirer among the children; someone who is authentic in his or her curiosity and focuses on the task of supervising the development of the community and of reducing or eliminating alienation among the participants even in instances of disagreement in their ideas or conclusions (Sharp & Splitter, 1995; Swanson & Hornsby, 2000). All these must be done while still retaining to be a figure of authority especially with regard to reminding the children to treat others with respect and fairness, to introducing materials and activities appropriate and worthy for classroom dialogue and to directing the procedures for classroom management (Sharp & Splitter, 1995).

Evidently, facilitating children's dialogues is not an easy task. It can be said that most teachers, even including those who do have some experience doing philosophy have a lot to learn about the thinking skills to develop among the participants and the social dynamics in the

community of inquiry. Further, there is also a lot to unlearn about how children are usually regarded by teachers, such as the dogma that conceptual thinking can be done only by adults or that abstraction is possible merely through maturation. This leads us to the question of how to teach a teacher to be a facilitator of the community of inquiry and whether it can actually be taught at all.

The Facilitator's Learning Process

Trainings in P4C

Formal trainings on facilitating the community of inquiry are offered by some organizations that promote the implementation of the P4C pedagogy. The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) founded by Lipman in Montclair State University, for instance, holds an annual summer residential workshop in a retreat house in Mendham, New Jersey where participants undergo an intensive workshop on P4C. Other affiliations also offer their own training programs and they vary depending on the way the P4C proponents recommend to implement the methodology of the community of inquiry[2]. Nevertheless, they all give emphasis on the development of certain skills and dispositions in individuals interested in becoming a facilitator of the community of inquiry. Typically, trainees are familiarized with the role of the facilitator, are exposed to the community of inquiry and are introduced to various types of stimuli that serve as springboard for philosophical dialogue (Buckley, 2011; Philosophy for Children New Zealand, 2014; SAPERE, 2010).

In the Philippines, opportunities for teacher training in facilitating the community of inquiry were recently offered by the Ayala Foundation, Inc. in 2013. I had been one of the trainers for a number of Manila public school teachers and principals, along with Prof. Lumberto Mendoza and Dr. Zosimo Lee of the UP Department of Philosophy. After conducting lectures on thinking skills, logic and qualitative assessment in P4C, we allowed the participants to experience being part of the community of inquiry where they were able to (re)acquaint themselves with thinking carefully, with listening and genuinely considering the arguments of their peers and with formulating conclusions based on the logical strength of the ideas put forth in the dialogue. Basically, these sessions allowed the participants to better understand the process of thinking together and to see what they can expect when children themselves engage in this practice.

On the other hand, some educators such as Tom Wartenberg do not regard formal training as necessary in becoming an effective P4C facilitator. Wartenberg supposes that what the facilitator needs to understand about the dialogue is its linguistic nature, and that what has to be developed in children is the ability to persuade and 'stipulate appropriate responses for any given stage of the discussion' (Wartenberg, 2009, p. 29, in Gazzard, 2012). Gazzard, a facilitator of P4C, compares Wartenberg's stance with Lipman's, whose insistence on formal training for facilitators is grounded on the argument that a closer and more intensive instruction and guidance is necessary, 'especially in the areas of logic and good reasoning' (Gazzard, 2012, p. 48). She

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[2] Variations in the P4C methodology are usually in the types of stimuli, classroom management strategies, and enrichment activities (Giordmaina, 2005; Pritchard, 2009; UNESCO, 2007; Vansieleghem & Kennedy, 2011).

further explains that truly imbibing the sensitivity to children's interests and ideas, genuine curiosity, respect for the dialogical process are strategically and systematically cultivated in teacher trainings and in Lipman's teacher's manuals. While I agree that what Wartenberg says that his book 'contains everything necessary for teaching an introduction to philosophy class in elementary schools' is quite an alarming sweeping declaration, I wonder if acquiring the right amount of experience and gaining competence in all the aspects of facilitation could only ever be done via enrolling in formal teacher training.

Learning as You Go

I have not had any formal training in facilitating the community of inquiry prior to the research I conducted in 2013[3]. Relying only on my understanding of what literature attest on facilitation and on observations and reflections on my experience as a participant of the community of inquiry, I was able to truly learn about its dynamics on the data gathering phase itself.

One of the major challenges I encountered in facilitating children's dialogues was to follow their train of thought without getting ahead of what they were truly going to say. I had found that children tend to form their ideas as they speak that some of their sentences are incomplete or unclear.

Facilitator (F) : Why do siblings fight?
Kym　　　　　: Because… they want to protect themselves.
F　　　　　　: Why do they want to protect themselves? From what?
Kym　　　　　: They fight over who's at fault.
F　　　　　　: Do you mean that they blame each other over who's at fault?
Kym　　　　　: Yes.
F　　　　　　: So for instance, I started the fight, I would say that my sibling started it?
Kym　　　　　: *nods*
Ninay　　　　: Yes, but it's really you (who started the fight).

Often, I had to be able to determine if I could rephrase or complete the sentence for them, if I needed to give them more time to think about what they wanted to say and let another child have his or her turn to speak or if I need to wait for them to finish their sentences on their own.

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[3] Canuto, A.T. (2013) *Critical thinking and philosophical progress in dialogues of grade two children in a community of inquiry.* Unpublished master's thesis: University of the Philippines.

F : Why are there people who are boastful? What do you think could be a reason why they are boastful?
Dessa : Some are naturally born boastful.
F : Dessa says that there are people who are born boastful. Do you believe that?
James : No!
F : Why not? James, tell Dessa.
James : Because…
Ninay : I think… That's not true.
F : Why not?
James : It's not true because no one is born boastful.
Ninay : Yes, they only learn it when they grow up.
F : Why isn't anyone born boastful? Isn't that possible?
James : They only see others do it and they learn from those people.
F : How about you, Ninay? What do you think?
Ninay : James had already explained it. I agree with him.

These are some of the instances where it is useful to be familiarized with how the children think, particularly with their background knowledge and inclinations and even with their verbal linguistic abilities, habits and gestures.

It was also a particularly tricky task to gradually shift the role from a director to a facilitator. In the beginning when the children were still unfamiliar with the community of inquiry and were still getting used to sharing their ideas and asking questions, I had to constantly prompt them by asking follow-up questions, playing the devil's advocate, or constantly asking *"What else?"* after having one or two children give an answer to the initial question. That early in the sessions, I needed to consistently model the sorts of questions to ask so that they were encouraged to think further and deeper.

F : How can we tell if a person is beautiful?
Dave : (A girl is beautiful) If she has long hair.
Jedd : Has fair skin.
F : What else?
Keisha : Has beautiful skin and long hair.
F : Does that mean that all girls who have beautiful skin and long hair is beautiful?
Geon : Yes.
Others : No!
F : So how else can we say if a girl is beautiful? What else makes a girl beautiful?

As a result, the first few sessions were characterized by a considerable amount of dead air for it was I who did most of the talking. Though I was unsure if my facilitation was effective enough for the classroom to develop into a community of inquiry, I knew then that I had to trust

in my understanding of how it is done, to be patient and to carefully watch out for changes to occur in the classroom and address them accordingly. Soon after five sessions, I was delightfully surprised to perceive that the children started to feel more comfortable and to manifest more enthusiasm in talking. It then became necessary for me to make adjustments in the role I had been playing and to strike the balance between affirming their growing confidence in speaking and insisting that they give reflective justifications for their ideas.

F   : Would you give up your child for adoption if you are unable to feed him?
Keisha : Yes. Because he will just be hungry.
F   : Who doesn't think that that's a good idea?
Andrei : I wouldn't do that! Poor baby.
James : Me too. You can't feed him so you'll just give him away?
F   : So, James, even if you can no longer feed him, you'll still keep him?
Keisha : (*To James*) What if you really cannot feed him because you are so poor?
Dessa : He should be given up for adoption.
James : (I won't give him up) Because…! (*To Keisha and Dessa*) …Why do you think that way?
F   : We have different opinions, that's good, but we have to be clear why we think like that.

Perhaps the greatest challenge was staying true to the process of inquiry itself when I was, like the children, learning as we were going and had my own cognitive and thinking process that contributed to my own beliefs, predispositions and judgments. It indeed required much effort to maintain greater focus on what the children were saying than on the 'thinking voices' inside my own mind; akin to tuning a radio from one station to another while still eager to hear how the song from the first station will go. Needless to say, I always had a throbbing head after every P4C session and it became a habit to spend some quiet time alone afterward just to let everything sink in and to let my mind move closer to equilibrium again. Furthermore, there was also the need to be able to genuinely welcome children's ideas no matter how trivial they may seem especially at the onset. One of the remarkable things that I have observed in facilitating children's dialogues is how deep their ideas can actually go if they are only given the opportunity to entertain and talk about them with each other. Not every utterance made by young children easily made sense to me as an adult but as long as I perceived relationships between and among what they were saying and as long as they could explain what they meant, they all had to be accommodated and put forth for intersubjective scrutiny. Hence, as a facilitator, I had to embrace the fact that I was not the one to dictate on the direction of the inquiry and that my primary job was to maintain relevance and monitor the quality of their reasoning and mediate their conceptual understanding. Whatever the children had to say had to be received with sincere openness and sufficient knowledge of their oral language development.

F   : Now, let's go back to Kiesha and Kym's question: Why are there people who don't abide by the law even when they know it's wrong to do so? Even if they know they could be punished?
Kiesha : Maybe he's just following others who don't want to abide by the law even if he knows himself that it's wrong.
Dessa : Kiesha, what if for instance, he stole some money because he really needs it?
Kiesha : That's not allowed, Dessa. If he knows it's wrong, he won't do it because it's wrong. If it's right, he'll do it because it's the right thing to do. So he won't be caught by the police.

The community of inquiry is, indeed, how Kennedy (2012) describes it: "a complex communicative system" which makes the dialogue highly unpredictable, fluid and malleable. The facilitator is not one to preoccupy himself or herself with the children reaching the conclusions that he or she deems proper or suitable for them, or to achieve a full understanding of this complexity. On the other hand, the main objective of the facilitator is 'to enable as much as possible communicative diversity and clarity, in the intent of acquiring new meanings, and better participation" (p. 14). A careful look at the procedural contributions and decisions made by a facilitator would, I believe, illustrate quite clearly the extent to which he or she has aided in what Glina (2012) describes as 'propel(ing) the inquiry forward… and …recalibrate(ing) the power disequilibrium inherent' in the classroom.

What Makes the Facilitator: The Teacher-Philosopher

The teacher's attitude towards philosophy as pedagogy for the community of inquiry is, I think, the most significant factor for effective facilitation. There is undeniably a need to redefine the role of a teacher and to refocus the objective of education to critical thinking through democratic practice. What the community of inquiry calls for, hence, is a teacher who is ready to relinquish ultimate control of the student's path of discovery and who can put faith into young children's ability to grapple with abstract concepts. Cannon (2012) explicates this and describes

a certain kind of trustful, confident and hopeful attitude towards an endeavor that is certainly filled with doubt, uncertainty and risk. This attitude is called 'methodological faith' which helps especially in the beginning of the children's exposure to the P4C pedagogy when they are often characterized by doubt and self-doubt. This faith allows the facilitator to manage the classroom by first modelling and encouraging respect and reliance on the possible productivity of the dialogue, hence laying the foundation of reasoned inquiry.

While the teacher-philosopher takes into account what is cognitively appropriate to the children's age, he or she welcomes the possibility that they can surpass what stage theories say they can only do at a certain age, thereby avoiding encouraging mediocrity. The teacher-philosopher also ensures that he or she never assumes to know everything or to have all the answers to the children's questions. He or she facilitates the dialogue and maintains unprejudiced authority in the classroom with a readiness and willingness to be enlightened by his or her young students. Ultimately, the teacher-philosopher assumes a 'realist' position with regard to philosophical inquiry and believes that 'philosophy produces something of epistemic value, but not final, definitive conclusions' (Golding, 2011, p. 201). He or she, in turn, does not believe that philosophy is productive only when we arrive at the truth or that philosophy is endlessly dynamic and merely fosters eternal dispute (Golding, 2011).

The teacher-philosopher takes time to reflect, assess and reassess how he or she plays the role of a facilitator of the community of inquiry. He or she is prepared to learn and relearn certain aspects of the methodology depending on what may work best with the children. Most importantly, the teacher-philosopher should find opportunities for dialoguing with other educators in the field to discuss his or her experiences in facilitation and to learn from the wisdom of others.

With or without formal training in facilitation, I therefore confidently say that there is a standard process, dynamic as it may be, by which competence in this craft will be developed and sustained:

From 'teacher' to 'teacher-philosopher'	The teacher-philosopher as facilitator	The teacher-philosopher as lifelong learner

1. Establishing a personal relationship with philosophy
   a) abating any bias against philosophy
   b) familiarization with the practical uses of philosophy
 	
 2. Imbibing genuine appreciation of philosophy
 	
 3. Renewing one's respect for children
 	
 4. Having methodological faith
	1. Building rapport with the children
	   a) familiarization with the children's age and background experiences
	   b) gaining knowledge of children's oral language and social emotional development
	
	 2. Developing sensitivity towards children's sensibilities and imaginations
	
	 consistent modelling of the cognitive and social habits and dispositions of the
		1. Continuous reflection, assessment and reassessment of the facilitator's role and ensuring that there is:
		   a) no indoctrination
		   b) authentic curiosity and respect for children
		   c) upholding of the facilitator's role as figure of authority
		   d) ample and effective modelling of the cognitive and social habits of the community of inquiry
		   e) relevance and appropriateness of materials

community of inquiry	and activities in the classroom

3. Facilitating the dialogical inquiry
  a) applying knowledge of children's age, background experiences, and oral language and social emotional development
  b) identifying relevant ideas
  c) ascertaining possibilities on how children's ideas may be built upon each other
  d) anticipating the direction of the dialogue without getting too far ahead of the children
 	
consistent modelling of the cognitive and social habits and dispositions of the community of inquiry
	2. Lifelong learning and relearning of the community of inquiry methodology
	
	3. Engaging in discussions with other P4C experts and enthusiasts

4. Maintaining the community of inquiry
  a) maintaining safety and appropriateness of the dialogue
  b) maintaining the organic nature of the community of inquiry
  c) maintaining commitment to the philosophical inquiry
 	
consistent modelling of the cognitive and social habits and dispositions of the community of inquiry	

Conclusion

The craft of facilitating the community of inquiry is learned by doing, by living the skills and dispositions of a genuinely open-minded, curious, respectful and reflective teacher. The

facilitator, hence, does not strive to acquire a full grasp of the complexity of the community of inquiry as a social and linguistic system but, at the very least, acknowledges and embraces it. What is essential is that he or she knows how to balance the 'weight, distribution, and good communication "traffic" of all communication moves' (Kennedy, 2012, p. 16).

The P4C pedagogy is largely experiential and while teacher training allows for formal and systematic learning experiences, most of the education happens as the facilitator immerses himself or herself in the community and carefully monitors his or her own progress, along with the progress of the students themselves. This endeavor, in my opinion, can indeed be taught in terms of familiarizing teachers in the theory behind the practice but I personally found that what I heard from experts and what I read from books about facilitating the community of inquiry only ever truly made sense when I had become a facilitator myself. In my reflection, I knew that my love for philosophy and dialogical inquiry contributed greatly to my being able to facilitate the children's dialogues in my research in 2013. As I had, as a student of philosophy, experienced many times the exhilarating and humbling instances of enlightenment, I had constantly valued the process of dialogue and believed that philosophizing is a productive endeavor, relevant and pleasurable to the learning of humans both adult and children alike. Indispensable to effective facilitation, therefore, are both theoretical and practical knowledge of the craft, a sincere appreciation of philosophy and its unique benefits to children, respect and belief in children's ability to do philosophy and finally, humility that adults do not necessarily have all the answers and that children can be the ones to set the agenda of their own learning.

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