Teaching Ethics in the Secondary School*

The attempt to generate adequate courses in Ethics at the secondary school level preceded Philosophy for Children as it is generally thought of today. But despite this early momentum, problems inherent to secondary school applications have shifted interest toward the early school years. Curricula furnished by, for example, the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children has, in recent years, been increasingly geared to the elementary school. Programs rarely go beyond the intermediate school years. However desirable or necessary that state of affairs, it does not respond to the apparent need of educators to address themselves to the crucial period of adolescence through some organized program of values education.

It seems to me that success at the secondary school level requires special attention to the dynamics underlying secondary schools as institutions and to the problems of secondary school staff and students. The following paper is an attempt to organize my experience in a secondary school Ethics program so as to exhibit some of the crucial variables that determine success in an analytical program geared towards adolescents.

The Meadows** is a school with a long history of involvement in values education. Through its association with the Society it has been a leader in the development of programs in social action for high school students. At present Meadows is a well known "prep" school with a moderately large population of, mainly, college bound students. Meadows is part of a multi-school system administered by a Director appointed by the Society. It has its own administration and a Department of Ethics. The Ethics Department serves all schools in the system and so ethics begins at the earliest grades. Traditionally, the Ethics program has been under the aegis of Notables of the Society. A few years ago a professionally trained Philosopher was hired by the Director to professionalize the department, to develop curriculum and to tie the Meadows' program more closely to existing movements in moral education. I was hired by the Chairman to teach at grades seven through ten and to help in the development and implementation of Ethics curricula.

In many respects Meadows is an ideal place to investigate as an index of academic problems associated with secondary school Ethics programs—for so much is already in place. Meadows frees one from having to contend with external problems that hamper new attempts. At Meadows, parents, teachers and administrators are already committed to an Ethics program and institutional support and structure already exist. More substantive issues can thus be seen without interference. A ready division of problems arises from the varying perspectives of the major groups involved. Administrators, teachers and students each have differing needs, and perceptions of the program. And these, of course, involve other crucial variables including goals of the program, styles of implementation, materials to be used, conflicts with other academic demands and policies of grading.

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**Both the "Meadows" and the "Society" are fictitious names.

Qualifying all of these issues is a deep theoretical position. Recent movements in psychological theory, and especially in the theory of moral development have been applied to education in a fashion that reinforces the educator’s intuition that curricula must be suited to the students’ age and development. So for the educator confronting innovation in the high school the most immediate questions are: to what extent are materials and practices appropriate to adolescent students; and is the program in question compatible with the emotional sensitivity and intellectual maturity of my pupils?

II

It is not surprising, given the locus of administrative responsibility, that the Administration at Meadows sees the role of ethics in terms of student issues of institutional concern. Administrators see the ethics classroom as a forum for discussions of problems ranging from graffiti in the bathrooms to racial epitaphs on the school bus. So, for example, the Principal's assembly address on a recent spurt of student thefts ends with the injunction that the issue be discussed in Ethics. Administration maintains that the Ethics Department should play a "pastoral" role; organizing group activities, concerned student clubs and overnight hikes. Meadows has a long standing work studies program, housed within the Ethics Department, that requires students to work sixty hours with community oriented organizations.

The Meadows Ethics program is conditioned by a sense of the practical needs of the school, its long history of social
on school or contemporary issues. Meadows has thus come from being a leader in innovative curriculum development in the field of moral education to an institution where it is commonly felt that the Ethics program is of minimal educational importance and where there is no concordance as to which direction to follow.

The common administration and faculty view that thinking skills programs are age inappropriate and that necessary cognitive skills are developed within the more standard aspects of the college bound curriculum is reinforced by the attitude held in respect of pre-college philosophical offerings. It is commonly maintained at Meadows that philosophical materials do not meet the standards of style, relevance and availability implicit in the materials chosen for the other curricula at Meadows. This applies to classic philosophical texts, which are considered too abstruse, IAPC materials, which are considered too unsophisticated and Kohlberg curricula, which are considered to be of minimal relevance and appeal. The view of thinking skills as improper at the secondary school level and the harsh judgment of available curriculum models, thus, results in the position that pre-college philosophical materials are too sophisticated in intent, and, where available to secondary school students, too unsophisticated in content.

Attempts at strengthening the Ethics curriculum are drawn to other than philosophical approaches. So, for example, an attempt to develop an academic basis for the community service program has centered on a new course called the "Culture of Aging." This course, housed within Ethics, takes a Social Science approach to developing a cognitive basis for the students' work with the elderly. Another projected curriculum focuses around peer counseling. Students will, presumably, be taught to interact in quasi-therapeutic settings; discussing the psychological basis for the problems that they face. It seems hardly an exaggeration to say that the very soul of Ethics at Meadows is a point at issue. But most importantly, from the point of view of philosophically oriented educators who think of working within secondary school settings, the problems of Meadows seem to reflect issues inherent to secondary school programs. Diversity of faculty and divergence of attitude would seem to be the rule rather than the exceptions when trying to introduce attitudes and programs that are alien to the experience and training of the secondary school educator.

III

Due in part to my introducing the program into my seventh grade class, Lisa has been added to the Meadows seventh grade curriculum. Although many members of the Ethics Department have had some experience with IAPC programs and have even had training, IAPC materials, when used, are used in non-standard ways. The programs are not run sequentially, but rather, are used in a segmented fashion by the teacher or as a resource in discussing issues that arise from other contexts. Lisa is used, in seventh grade, in addition to a program on animal rights and a time consuming sex education component. Given the discussion above, it is not surprising that there is resistance on the part of staff to the addition of the Lisa program to the curriculum. And given the melange of materials that have to be taught during one forty-five min-
ute session per week, it will not be surprising if the proven effectiveness of the IAPC material is not manifest to the teachers and students using the program.

I attempted to use *Mark* in my eighth and ninth grade classes, but stopped after several weeks. I discontinued the program for reasons that appear to support the contentions of members of the Meadows staff who were unhappy with philosophical materials. My students would not take the texts seriously, found the characters and situations unrealistic, and, most important, found careful and analytical discussions unwelcome. Class room discussions were, therefore, either superficial or forced and resentment towards *Mark* quickly built up.

It is not clear to me that the problems I found using IAPC material at Meadows are inherent to the programs themselves. The wide range of expectations for Ethics makes any unified philosophical program difficult to sustain. And, of course, I had my own problems. My background is in college teaching and in teaching through IAPC sponsored workshops. Teaching adolescents, especially as a new teacher in the school, strained my abilities as an educator. I confronted problems that I had never even thought about. I had to find appropriate limits for my own tendencies toward openness in the classroom. I had to discover how to discipline without turning the class off to open discussion. I discovered the enormous sensitivity to social pressure that governed my students’ attitudes, both to what they said, and to how they were willing to say it. Building the basic framework of trust and rapport, developing the necessary commitment for significant philosophical thought, took longer than the period I attempted to use *Mark*. As an attempt to show my students my willingness to build a class together, we jointly developed curriculum for their classes. None of the classes were willing to continue with *Mark*. Instead we chose a variety of materials from literature and contemporary non-fiction. The end result was far less productive of philosophical growth than would have been the case had we followed a carefully structured program of the sort that *Mark* would have provided.

But there is a deeper underlying problem: a problem that testifies to the insight of the professional secondary school educators at Meadows. Students resented the intrusion of thinking skills, as a source of objective standards, into their Ethics curriculum. They found it difficult to accept the fact that there are objective standards applicable to a subject matter that they perceived as "personal opinion." This occurred despite the fact that my students could reason well, and, if anything, had exceptional verbal abilities. Students resented the attempt to add rigour to the "one subject where teachers listen to what you say"; where "listen"

was code for caring and respecting the adolescents' attempt at autonomy and forthrightness in the student-adult relationship. Ethics is, for the Meadows student, not only a place where academic pressures are eased, but where students are free to challenge accepted views. Attempts to impose curricula or to establish academic standards are, thus, viewed by students as an attempt at "brainwashing" students to do the "right thing."

This, in part, is the result of the Administration's view of Ethics as a kind of philosophical health education. Ethics classes are mandated to deal with the crucial problems of sex, substance abuse and anti-social behavior. Students, therefore, see Ethics as one more, not overly subtle, attempt on the part of adults to enforce compliance with approved modes of behavior. So, to the students, structured curricula in Ethics are seen to require that students come up with appropriate pieties at the appropriate time. The problem is exacerbated by the recent innovation of grading Ethics classes. Since grades are crucial at Meadows—and determine the rank of the student in the "prep" school olympics, grading Ethics is quite effective in generating overt student participation in class. To what extent grading generates an increase in sincere involvement in the philosophical enterprise, of course, remains to be seen.

As anyone familiar with IAPC material in general and the *Mark* program in particular, knows *Mark* does in no way fall in the category of brainwashing. In fact the *Mark* program offers a range of options, attitudes and opinions that is far broader than the attitudes expressed by my students at Meadows. Moreover the process that IAPC training requires certainly does not demand or support the use of grades as a tool for enforcing student participation. But naturally, the IAPC envisions a much greater time expenditure on Ethics than Meadows allows. And further, presupposes a unanimity of attitude towards philosophical programs that Meadows does not provide. The question for philosophically oriented educators attempting to develop programs at the secondary level is: to what extent does Meadows present problems common to the field. And to what extent can philosophical programs be altered to meet the demands placed on them by the exigencies of the secondary school milieu.

IV

The most common approach to Ethics at Meadows has been a free discussion, affectively geared approach; requiring a minimum of student preparation and a minimum of academic stress. Although the "rap session" approach to Ethics has the virtue of freeing the students, for at least some period of time, from the rigours of their other courses, students are far from satisfied with it. Students see Ethics courses as "bull" when they are not seeing them as brainwashing. And, in fact, students join in the commonly held view that the Ethics program is ineffective and far from fulfilling its apparent potential. The problem with an affective approach in Ethics is not far beneath the surface. If we mean by affective the development of appropriate motivation, then clearly we risk the charge of brainwashing. If we mean what has been more common to affective approaches, the free and open interchange of attitudes, we face an even more grievous issue. Rap sessions, to be meaningful, demand an emotional openness that seems hard to require of students during a period of
their life when posturing plays the crucial role of enabling the
students to disguise the awkwardness and fear that
results from attempts at new and challenging social roles.
Moreover, Ethics classes, like all other classes at Meadows,
are, more or less, randomly drawn from the school
population. Students, therefore, find themselves in the
exremely awkward position of being required to be open
and sincere in an environment that raises threatening
issues and affords the opportunity of damaging self reve-
lation. And placed in this environment are other students,
many of whom any particular students may dislike or be
dos of — most of whom know each other’s families and
friends. To make matters worse, faculty in general is
required to inform the Administration of any student
behavior that is indicative of anti-social tendencies, emo-
tional turmoil or drug abuse. Clearly such a setting rules out
the Ethics class as an effective surrogate for therapy. And,
equally clearly, the most plausible response of students to
such an environment is to be either pious or uninvolved or
both. Whence the justice of the charge: “Bull.”

This issue is one of substance. Popular models of moral
education as well of attitudes common in secondary edu-
cation, see the locus of concern to be the “person.” Edu-
cators pride themselves in being open to the emotional
needs of their students and programs are developed to
generate emotional openness and expressiveness. But, if
one begins with the students’ life experience, attempting to
draw sustenance from the every day problems facing ado-
lescents, the threat of peer disapproval and embarrassing
or institutionally damaging self revelation qualifies the dis-

cussion thought. Attitudes, therefore, tend to quickly con-
form to group demands; with or without the concommitant
change in actual behavior. Such a situation gives ample
support to the students’ perception of Ethics as being
superficial or coercive, or both.

Both the Kohlberg Dilemma approach and the IAPC
program attempt to address the needs of ensuring psy-
chological and personal privacy by centering class discus-
sions on problems that are surrogate for the moral issues
that grow, immediately, out of the life concerns of young
people. The problem at Meadows is that students take nei-
ther of these approaches seriously. Kohlberg Dilemmas
seemed artificial to my students and they quickly

demanded that the discussion range far afield into the sorts
of background conditions of circumstance and possibility
that overshadows the narrowing approach required by
Kohlberg in the interest of sure diagnosis. Moreover, since
the form of the discussion was of little interest to them —
all “opinions” being held with equal right, there was the

widest admixture of responses, incorporating not only many
different stages, but many different styles and perspec-
tives as well. It might be worth noting that all students could
respond at the highest level of principle and did so, espe-
cially when trying to show the teacher that they knew the
“right” answer. Moreover, with the slightest encoura-
gement, responses could be reinforced to include the sort of
Kantian pieties that, at least to me, seems indistinguish-
able from the highest stages in the Kohlberg hierarchy.

During the second half of my year at Meadows I was
given the rare privilege of being able to work closely with
a self-selected group of some thirty Meadows students. Our
goal was to confront the problems of teaching Ethics at
Meadows and try to find appropriate responses. During this

period we began the task of selecting from the literature that
the students had experienced, material that seemed to best
suit the needs of student involvement and moral rele-
vance. The literature the students selected included mainly
popular and adolescent fiction and contemporary non-
fiction. It seems clear to me that such a selection falls short of
the demands for adequacy as literature, that are the all
too frequent complaint of faculty at Meadows. But it does
seem a start in the development of a resource for second-
ary school Ethics, that reinforced with literature of the high-
est quality could meet many of the objections to philo-
sophical programs. My approach, of course, is not new.
Watered down, Philosophy and Literature courses have
been among the most common options for college edu-
cators moving Philosophy down to the secondary school.

The problem that I now face is to select a wide range of
material that could be stabilized; readings that, I hope, will
have the range and durability of the IAPC novels. Given a
stable basis in materials, the task is then to construct that
sort of support material characteristic of the IAPC manu-
als. To have an appreciable impact on secondary edu-
cation, the material will have to meet the needs of second-
ary school educators, who for the most part have little or
no philosophical training. My model is, as is obvious, the
manuals furnished by the IAPC. My intuition is that to be
acceptable to secondary school educators and students,
reading material will have to be close to the ordinary
required reading for high school English classes. Whether
such a selection can achieve the saliency and breadth of
the carefully fabricated novels that form the basis of the
IAPC program remains to be seen. The Society has fur-
nished me support in this effort during the current aca-
ademic year. My hope is that I will soon be able to report to
interested members of the profession my progress in this
difficult but fascinating enterprise.

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