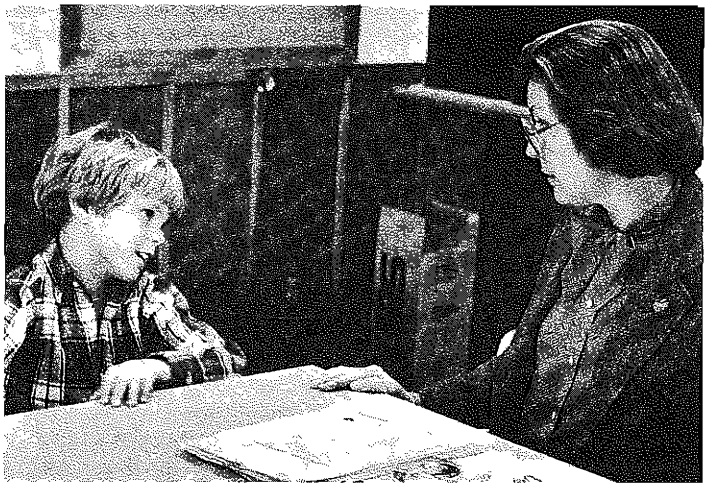
Training Teachers: Some Problems



Harry is wonderful. Surely we all agree that to read, to talk about, to think about, to teach *Harry* is wonderful. But some experiences with *Harry* are more wonderful than others: some workshops are more lively, some groups more responsive, some discussions more frultful. Descriptions of wonderful experiences may readily be found — for example in *Thinking* or in previous issues of this journal. Descriptions of the less than wonderful are not so easily come by.

It seems to me that differences between more and less wonderful experiences, more and less successful workshops, are worth considering. There may be significant factors in common among the less wonderful; perhaps they are factors that we can control, to move in a more appealing direction. Of course there may be no such factors; or they may be unavoidable. It still may be helpful to try to discover the circumstances that warn of trouble. My purpose here is to compare two workshops, in the attempt to open a discussion of more and less wonderful times with *Harry* and his gang.

During the 1980-81 academic year, I directed two workshops and helped the teachers in their initial year of teaching philosophy classes for elementary and middle school children. The two school districts were quite close geographically, in central New Jersey. They were of comparable size and had the same number of schools. (Herein, workshops, school districts, and communities can all be identified as *A* and *Z*.) *Z* is an old distinguished town. *A* is a group of recent housing developments bound together chiefly by their school system. These differences are merely noted; it seems to me unlikely that the difference is significant for the Philosophy for Children program.

Workshop *A* had 14 regularly enrolled members. Twelve of them taught sixth grade in the same school, a branch of the district middle school. This school consisted solely of sixth grade classes, and all children and all teachers were involved in the Philosophy of Children program. Their principal was also a member of the workshop and implemented the philosophy program with *Harry.* The fourteenth member of the class taught in a school for learning disabled and emotionally disturbed children. Besides the 14 enrolled students, there were two people who visited as auditors on a regular basis for much of the year.

All 13 members of the *Z* group worked in the same school district but not the same school. There were teachers from three elementary schools and from the middle school. Ten of the 13 — nine classroom teachers and a librarian — implemented the program. Children in grades four through eight were involved in philosophy classes — most of them quite small classes. In addition to those teachers, a principal, a music teacher, and a counselor attended the workshop regularly but did not do *Harry* with children.

Harry was considerably more wonderful on *A* day. With this group, the workshop was generally a stimulating, even thrilling, experience. Though they had had a long school day, the group arrived at the meeting room ready to spend the full two-and-a-half hours in work. Most members of the group participated frequently. The two auditors were accepted, and participated, as members of the group. There was little gossip, few private conversations. They were attentive, interested, ready to engage every issue seriously. From an early extensive debate on "what makes you you?" (which lasted, as I was told, on through the week) through analysis of meanings of the word "mind," to lengthy consideration of the concept of a victim (in working with *Mark*), almost every topic suggested became a subject for genuine discussion. Members of the group were prepared to put forward convictions of their own, to defend them or to revise them in response to comments of others. They questioned each other, clarified, amplified, compared. They *thought,* and with good will and seriousness they thought together.

With the *Z* workshop, everything was difficult. Rarely was everyone on hand at starting time, but complaint was general if we did not finish on the moment, and a few people just walked out then. No matter how carefully I tried to make a circle of seats, conducive to communication, some people managed to sit away and outside. Discussion was rarely general. If pushed, people answered questions, as briefly as possible. No one cared to pursue them. One or two people spoke only to make light, to make fun, to scoff. Two people whispered together for much of the time, week after week, for the entire year.

Logic lessons sometimes went reasonably well: the questions were clear, and the teachers' need for help in answering them equally so. They worried, but they worked. In the latter part of the year, too, when we worked on *Suki,* classes tended to go better: to read and write and talk about poetry was perhaps a pleasant relief from philosophical inquiry. More philosophical discussions, however, engaged only a very few people who were willing to take up an idea and talk about it. More often it was treated as too obvious, too foolish, or too difficult to merit their genuine attention.

In other discussions as well — not centering on *Harry* — the groups differed markedly. About a month or five weeks into the school year, I felt — in the same week in both workshops — a marked air of dissatisfaction. Everyone had started the year with some degree of hope and enthusiasm, and everyone was having problems: the novelty was wearing off, the children

were not as excited, the pace seemed slow, classroom discussion was bumpy. I had noted the listless, complaining mood in the *Z* class and was struck with the similarity of mood in the *A* group. So I encouraged a bit of talk about class problems. After one or two questions from me, there was no further need for me to talk. The group took off on an hour-long interchange about problems they had with the kids, their own doubts about the program, things they had tried with children and how they had worked out, proposals for other things to try, and reasons. It was an orderly, thoughtful discussion, with time for everyone, with real communication. After about an hour the discussion zound down; everyone seemed ready to go on with *Harry* and usual class exercises for that day — and ready to return refreshed to doing *Harry* with kids.

Thinking that perhaps the *Z* group needed a session of that kind, I tried to generate such a discussion the following week. Like so many other things, it fell flat. There were many complaints, but no discussion.

Generally, through the rest of the year, I started each workshop session by asking how things were going and welcoming comments on problems or on successes. In the *Z* class, there was rarely much offered — generally complaints about the maturity of child characters in the text, difficulty of the logic, literary quality of the books, relevance of exercises in the manual. For the *A* class, this brief introductory part of the workshop served as a useful exchange of experiences. Teachers reported on lessons that had been especially successful and on those that had been strained, or dull, or disorganized. They asked for and gave suggestions. They questioned, commented, compared: discussion was general and genuine.

Is there any way in which the differences between these workshops may be accounted for? What might be significant factors? It has already been propsed that the differences between the two communities would not provide an answer. Though there are some differences, still both are predominantly middle-class communities in non-urban settings. The schools are of great concern to the communities. Classes are not crowded. Numerous special programs and specialized staff are provided.

When we look more closely at the teacher groups, however, we see some differences which may be significant. The *A* group consisted essentially of teachers — all the teachers — of a single school. All were well acquainted with each other. They were accustomed to function as a faculty. Everyone was required to schedule the same amount of class time weekly for the students' philosophy classes. And everyone was required to attend the weekly workshops after school. No one had been singled out to take on these tasks. The children, their students, were all at the same grade level. Finally, there was a commitment on the part of the administration to implement the program, and nothing ever came along to interfere.

In the *Z* workshop, by contrast, the teachers came from four different schools. They had far less acquaintance with each other and were faced with getting to know one another. Those from different schools had not, I believe, ever had occasion to work together. Furthermore, the two or three of them from a school constituted a small minority of that school's staff. Only they were expected to stay after school for two-and-one-half hours; only they had to find a place for philosophy in their class schedules. Although they were receiving graduate credits for their work, most said they didn't care about that nor did they have any use for it. It was hinted to me more than once that there had been some arm-twisting behind the supposedly voluntary choice to enter the program. In addition to all this, they were not sharing (or having the opportunity to share) as common an experience as the other group: their classes ranged from fourth through eighth grade; the groups had been identified in different ways; the sizes of the groups varied widely, from about six children in the smallest to 24 in the largest. And finally, the Philosophy for Children program seemed to be ignored in various administrative decisions: teachers were told that they might be able to use scheduled released time for some workshop meetings (thus reducing the amount of after-school time), but finally permission was not given; meetings were scheduled during workshop time; changes were made in some children's schedules necessitating complex rearranging between teachers who were sharing a fifth grade class. All of this, of course, suggested administrative lack of concern about the success of the philosophy program.

It happens that philosophy classes taught at the school for learning disabled and emotionally disturbed children provide an interesting parallel to the contrast just discussed. One staff member from that school participated in workshop *A*. She was an interested and enthusiastic participant in that group.

During the course of the school year, she worked on *Harry* with two different groups. At the start, it was felt in the school that the most mature students, those who were brightest among the older students, should have this opportunity. About half a dozen boys were selected from different classes. They were to meet with the philosophy teacher three or four times a week. The boys did not already form a class or group and had not had any regular activities together. Furthermore, they had to meet at a time when their regular classmates had a free period, so they felt much put upon. Whenever the philosophy teacher tried to get them together for the class, both the children and their regular teachers frequently put obstacles in the way of the class.

When the class did meet, the teacher found them highly critical of her, the subject, each other. They complained incessantly and were rarely cooperative. Every class was a great struggle, to little effect.

About halfway through the school year, the teacher finally concluded that the difficulties were too great, for too small accomplishment. She stopped meeting with the original class and instead began working with the children she met regularly. Here she was dealing with a group who worked in the same setting every day. They were well acquainted with each other. They were spending time on philosophy that they were accustomed to spend in that group, in that classroom. Everyone in the class was included and no one was losing any valued privilege or activity.

With this latter group, the teacher had a far more rewarding experience. Though the children were younger, they proved more cooperative. They were able to give some attention to the topics proposed and, in time, to begin to listen to and respond to each other.

Since these children were accustomed, for their academic work, to work individually and separately, any kind of group activity was unusual. Communication about and discussion of a common topic was a significant and valuable achievement.

I was, of course, far less familiar with these classes in a school I visited only a few times during the year than I was with the teacher groups with which I worked every week. The parallels, however, seemed striking to me. Where the groups were constituted just for the purpose of the class, where they were selected out from a larger group, where the system provided little support, the classes were far less successful. The good, the wonderful experiences came in the groups which were well acquainted, which had been a group prior to the start of the workshop, where everyone was required to participate, where the support of the surrounding system was clear.

Having sketched an hypothesis of what variations between the groups may have accounted for the differences between their responses in the workshop, I must add some other kinds of evidence, some suggestions which may in fact argue against my hypothesis.

In talking about the *A* workshop with an administrator, I suggested that the ease with which the teachers took up discussion of philosophical issues was the result of their having worked together as a faculty. The administrator differed: she said that, on the contrary, one of the greatest values of the program from her point of view was precisely the change it brought about in the way they worked together. Previously, although they did in fact meet together, their talk tended to be far more on the surface, to have a joking atmosphere. They did not venture to share serious opinions or speculations, to raise issues and look for clarification or resolution in group discussion. Though the members of *A* workshop undoubtedly were better acquainted than the *Z* group, neither the willingness nor the ability to enter into serious discussion was common before they participated in the workshop.

With regard to the *Z* group, I was told by more than one person in that school system that teachers there were very hard to reach. They were, I was told, so pleased with the kind of scores their students made on standardized tests, with scholarship and college entrance results, and with other such indices that they felt they must already know whatever needed to be known for their classes. The fact was that a great many of their students were sophisticated offspring of highly educated parents, the latter with considerable interest and involvement in their children's intellectual development. But the teachers tended to feel that the credit was theirs. With such conviction of the superiority of their school system and their community, these teachers may have been impervious to any new approach, even had they all shared the same school, grade level, and so on.

One difference between the groups which I have merely mentioned may in fact have played a more important part: the 14 members of *A* group who enrolled for the course were all involved in teaching *Harry* through the entire school year. In the *Z* group, however, two of the 13 members did no philosophy with children. A third person did only two or three classes with children during the whole year. Two others shared a class. Just eight of the 13 were involved in trying to do a full two or two-and-one-fourth hours of philosophy weekly with their students. I do not feel any conviction that this was related to the group's reactions to the workshop, but I offer it as a possibility.

Finally, I may be quite wrong in thinking that differences betweem the two communities for whom these teachers work were not significant.

Thus far, we have looked chiefly at the workshops. But what of the children's classes? As an outsider who visited each class five or six times during the year to demonstrate and to observe, I found that the *A* group classes tended to be quiet and restrained. It was sometimes difficult to get the children to respond at all and often difficult to get them to advance novel ideas, imaginative responses. The teachers worked hard through the year to develop the process of discussion, of interchange among the students in their classes. It may be that their emphasis on the discussion process made the children self-conscious in their response to the material. Or it may be that children in *A* district have been subjected for some years to such a highly planned and organized curriculum that they did not know how to respond more freely when requirements and expectations were not so clear to them. Over the course of the year, they became freer to participate, better at listening, more adept at discussion. Although some classes remained stiff, slow, and sometimes almost silent, many showed a good level of student participation and involvement. But they rarely approached the involvement, the thoughtfulness and depth of response, the freedom to inquire of their teachers.

In the *Z* schools, by contrast, classes of fourth and fifth graders were generally a delight. (The two middle school classes presented difficulties not pertinent, I think, to the topic here.) The teachers handled them, more or less, well, in my view. But to me, as a sometime observer and sometime teacher, they appeared eager, bright, thoughtful, interested, and generally very responsive.

It may be asked, If the children's classes in *Z* schools were good, what does it matter that the workshop was such a struggle? Is not this first of all Philosophy for Children?

The first thing to be said is that, although the children were indeed responsive, it was still possible for them to be directed to *Harry* and guided towards better philosophical inquiry. This can be done better, or less well, by the teacher.

There are, in addition, other reasons for caring whether workshops go well. The year of the workshop is just the beginning. Our hope is that the teachers, once started, will continue to include Harry and his friends in their class programs. Teachers who are involved in and stimulated by the workshop are more likely to want to continue, to find room in their schedules for philosophy, and teach it well.

Further, although the schools are for the sake of the children, the teachers count, too. Their satisfaction is important; their education matters, too. If philosophy is good for the education of the children, it must be good for that of the teachers as well, helping them to become more attentive and responsive to children's thinking in all areas.

And finally a small point, but a point nonetheless: the trainer whose workshops are lively and stimulating is likely to do a better job in response.

In conclusion it may be reiterated that some experiences with *Harry* are more wonderful than others. The purpose of this paper has been to use the particular experiences of one trainer to open a general discussion of problems encountered in teaching Philosophy for Children. If there are trainers or teachers who have had similar experiences, I hope to read of them in the future. If their problems have been considerably different, let us hear of those as well. The problems need to be talked of as well as the successes. They matter because we share, I am sure, a common assumption: *Harry is* wonderful.

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