

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

concern and by recent psychologically oriented curricula; most prominently, Values Clarification. The tradition of student activism and more pragmatic school needs in conjunction with a "psychologically" oriented theoretic posture is manifested in the Administration view that Philosophy in general, and an analytic or "thinking skills" approach in particular, is "age inappropriate." And that an affective Program in Ethics, one focusing on attitudes and motivation, in conjunction with an activity oriented extra curricula policy, is more suited to the secondary school setting than a philosophical approach.

The issue of the function of Ethics at Meadows is complicated by its place in the curriculum. Ethics courses meet, mainly, once a week and were, until recently, ungraded. The Chairman of the Ethics Department has instituted grades for Ethics and is attempting to enforce a policy that requires Ethics to meet twice a week. Further, the Chairman has instituted upper class courses in the History of Philosophy and Ethical Theory. These courses are a source of controversy at Meadows. Although most members of the community at Meadows agree that Ethics is an asset and helpful in the crucial area of college placement, there is concern that an academically oriented Ethics program will interfere with the already strenuous course of studies required of Meadows students. Like most "prep" schools, Meadows offers a wide range of advanced placement courses in an attempt to secure the best possible college placement. Philosophical Ethics, thus, must compete, with a rich and varied academic offering, for the students' already overburdened attentions.

The Ethics Department is composed of faculty members with divergent backgrounds. Excepting myself, only the Chairman has a professional background in Philosophy. The backgrounds and interests of the members of the department include: counseling, theology, history, sociology, anthropology and English. The members of the department see themselves as secondary school educators, whose area of expertise is the teaching of adolescents. Although many of the department members have had graduate courses in Philosophy, the Ethics courses, with upper class offerings expected, bear little relation to either standard college offerings or carefully structured pre-college programs like that of the IAPC.

The members of the department basically concur with the administration view that ethics should be non-analytic, affectively oriented and based on the development of trust and personal relationships between faculty and students. A characteristic view is that class content should be determined by issues of manifest concern; most typically, nuclear disarmament. On this model, the task of the ethics teacher is to inform students while, presumably, reinforcing a "moral perspective." Needless to say, without some attempts to clarify principles governing moral evaluation and including the wide variety of possible perspectives appropriate to moral consideration, students can hardly be expected to learn much more than the "right attitude" towards significant issues. The Chairman, who does not accept this view, has attempted to import curriculum material from the IAPC and from groups working in the Kohlberg model. The faculty tends to be both ill-informed and suspicious of recent developments in pre-college philosophy and there is little interest in developing a thinking skills orientation within the Ethics program. So, Ethics classes tend to remain, as they have been, either didactic or problematical presentations, or extended "home room periods," "rap sessions" focusing

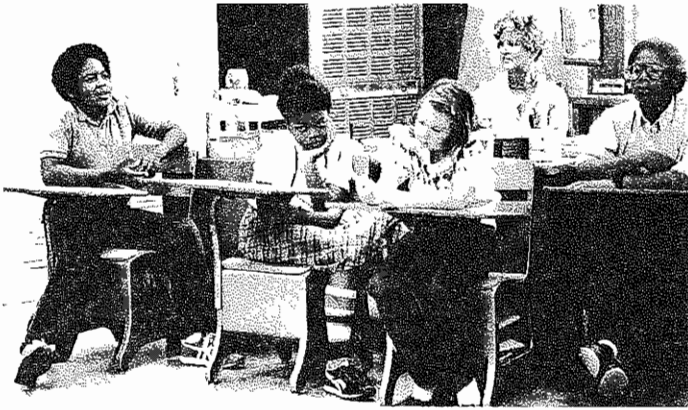
on school or contemporary issues. Meadows has thus come from being a leader in innovative curriculum development in the field of moral education to an institution where it is commonly felt that the Ethics program is of minimal educational importance and where there is no concordance as to which direction 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 minimum 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

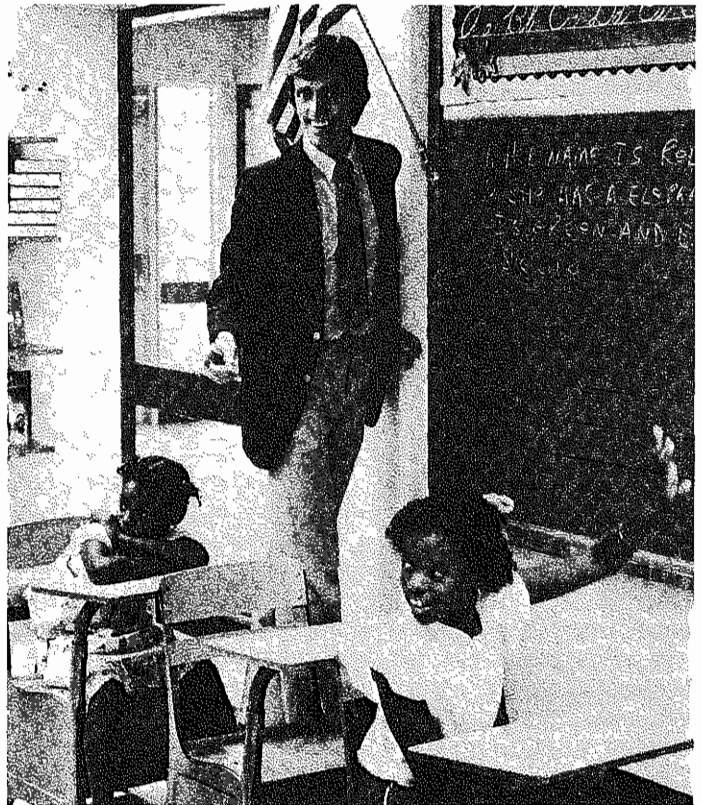
their life when posturing plays the crucial role of enabling the students to disguise the awkwardness and fear that results from attempts at new and challenging social roles. Moreover, Ethics classes, like all other classes at Meadows, are, more or less, randomly drawn from the school population. Students, therefore, find themselves in the extremely awkward position of being required to be open and sincere in an environment that raises threatening issues and affords the opportunity of damaging self-revelation. And placed in this environment are other students, many of whom any particular students may dislike or be fond 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, emotional 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 education, see the locus of concern to be the "person." Educators 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 adolescents, the threat of peer disapproval and embarrassing or institutionally damaging self-revelation qualifies the discussion thought. Attitudes, therefore, tend to quickly conform to group demands; with or without the concomitant 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 psychological and personal privacy by centering class discussions 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 neither 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 perspectives as well. It might be worth noting that all students could respond at the highest level of principle and did so, especially when trying to show the teacher that they knew the "right" answer. Moreover, with the slightest encouragement, responses could be reinforced to include the sort of Kantian pieties that, at least to me, seems indistinguishable from the highest stages in the Kohlberg hierarchy.

V

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 relevance. 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 secondary school Ethics, that reinforced with literature of the highest quality could meet many of the objections to philosophical programs. My approach, of course, is not new. Watered down, Philosophy and Literature courses have been among the most common options for college educators 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 manuals. To have an appreciable impact on secondary education, the material will have to meet the needs of secondary 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 furnished me support in this effort during the current academic 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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