Some factors influencing the success of philosophical discussion in the classroom

The following notes are partly speculative and partly based on about eighteen months experience of giving modeling sessions in the programs of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC). These took place in many different schools, in connection with training workshops given by the Institute. (The sometimes strong opinions expressed are not necessarily shared by other members of the IAPC.)

I start with the assumption that to encourage philosophical discussion among children is a desirable aim. Arguments for this have been given elsewhere; in particular, see Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, 2nd. Ed., 1980, (PC). The points I want to concentrate on here are concerned with what might be called the "mechanics" of a classroom discussion, with where and how it takes place, and not with the pedagogical approach as such — though this is of course probably the most important factor of all. (For a discussion of it, see PC.)

It is possible to imagine many different settings for doing philosophy with children; but the most common one so far has been the public school classroom. This immediately suggests a problem: children *have* to go to school, and with a few exceptions, (see *Thinking*, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 34) a schedule of activities is mapped out for them in advance. At a certain period the teacher will say, "Now we are going to do philosophy," and do it they will, whether they want to or not. But a philosophical discussion is worthless unless the participants themselves have a desire to pursue it. Since few people like doing what they are ordered to do, we thus have at the outset a built-in paradox working against the success of classroom dialogue. The only way out ultimately is to insist that philosophy always be an optional subject. At present, this would have the disadvantage that many children, not knowing what philosophy is or can be, would not opt for it. So the least we can do is try to make sure that mandatory philosophy sessions are exciting and interesting.

The physical environment in which discussions are held is important in several ways. First, let us consider noise. Surely a minimal requirement is that participants should be able to hear each other's voices, without anyone needing to shout. Yet I have sometimes observed teachers attempting to run a discussion with the classroom door wide open and a deafening uproar coming from the corridor. Even with the door shut, it appears that most school buildings have been designed on the assumption that one should avoid silence at all costs. Walls, ceilings, floors, and furniture have apparently been constructed so as to amplify as much as possible the everyday sounds of talking, moving desks, and travelling from room to room.

The problem of noise leads to that of interruption in general. Discussions are continually sabotaged by a person entering the classroom with some trivial message. If this happens at a crucial and absorbing stage in the dialogue, the thread is broken and the continuity destroyed. I have known only one teacher who forbade interruptions of this kind during a philosophy session — but wouldn't it be simple to pin a notice on the door, such as "Discussion in progress. Please don't interrupt"? (Younger children who carry messages could be made aware of the meaning of such notices, and encouraged to respect them.) Worst of all is the blatant calling to attention by loudspeaker. Merely picture to yourself a child who has been following eagerly an exchange of views by other members of the class, perhaps a shy child who does not say very much, but who has now been moved by sheer interest to add a comment, when suddenly "MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION . . ." booms that monstrous contraption on the wall (a superfluous request, as a child might with equal success try not to attend to an earthquake).

There is also the possibility of unintended interruption that occurs when a classroom used for discussion contains children engaged in other activities as well. A situation of this kind is never satisfactory. If the other children are doing something that involves talking or making noise, the disadvantage is obvious; if they are working silently, they themselves may be distracted by the discussion.

One way to avoid all the above-mentioned problems of noise and interruption, when the weather is suitable, is to take the philosophy class outdoors. This is the ideal setting. For schools in city centers it is rarely possible — but why not devise rooftop discussion areas?

Given that a suitable environment has been found, what of the arrangement of the group itself? In philosophical discussion, the views of all participants (including those of the teacher or discussion leader) are equally valuable in the sense of being worthy of consideration. This equality should be reflected in the physical distribution of the group, and therefore the best seating arrangement is roughly circular. How circular is an interesting question. In most cases, a randomly distributed group where everyone is able to face everyone else seems preferable to a rigidly defined circle with a large empty space in the middle around which the children sit as though waiting for the clowns to appear and the performance to begin. But I am

here treading on unknown ground. Classes vary widely in character, and it may well be that for some of them the formal circle imparts a more serious atmosphere and prevents the discussion from becoming too rowdy. Conversely, children who have been cowed by a militaristic seating plan may find their ideas flowing more freely if they are allowed to sit in an untidy group on the floor.

So many factors affect the success of a discussion that it is very difficult in any one case to know whether the seating makes a difference. I have taken part in, and observed, very good sessions in which the children have retained their normal seating arrangement, often in rows all facing the front. Perhaps in some classes this gives the children a feeling of security. But it should be noted that with the conventional seating plan there are two possible disadvantages: (1) However well the discussion is handled, the teacher remains physically apart from the group, and this makes it harder to break away from the normal pattern of teacher/pupil interaction and encourage dialogue between the children. (2) Even if the children wish to address each other, those at the front cannot easily talk to those at the back, and the latter are forced to address their remarks to the back of people's heads. (The only person they face is the teacher, who thus inevitably becomes the recipient of their remarks.) On the other hand, one should not be too eager to foist upon children the conventions that apply to conversations between adults. Many of them may not be perturbed by talking to the backs of heads, or speaking to someone who is almost out of sight.

In general therefore teachers should decide what seating arrangement is best for their own class, remembering all these factors and perhaps experimenting with different methods. The method adopted should be that which leads in practice to a greater frequency of dialogue between the children. Attention to small points of physical behaviour may also make a difference. One teacher achieved great success with a fourth grade class by simply insisting that when commenting upon another child's remarks you should look at that child and not at the teacher.

This leads to the question of rules for discussion. Why should there be any such rules? If good philosophical dialogue can take place only in an atmosphere of freedom, why restrict that freedom at the outset? In the first place, because freedom is desirable only as long as it does not interfere with the freedom of others. A person who is free to talk at any time, and under no obligation to listen, thereby denies others the right to be heard. Very few of us are capable of listening to more than one person at once, so it ought to be a basic rule that only one person speaks at a time. (Other factors will affect this as well: for instance, the larger the group, the more difficult it is to prevent the occurrence of conversations aside.)

But that is only one side of the coin. There is no point in speaking at all unless you are listened to. Listening implies not merely hearing, but paying attention to the meaning of what is said. And by some children this is not automatically seen as a natural thing to do. Perhaps they lack practice. School is traditionally a place where they must always listen to the teacher, but rarely to each other. It follows that in most classes listening needs to be stressed, and one or two practical rules may help to do this. In the ideal discussion (which is rare among adults as well as children) everyone listens to the person speaking, and then, by a kind of mutual consent, someone is allowed to reply, each giving way when appropriate, so that a balance is maintained and all have a chance to speak. An approximation to this sometimes takes place in the classroom for a short time — a few children arguing back and forth (always with excitement) while the rest spontaneously adopt the role of tense spectators. But in general (until we know how to do things better) it has to be the teacher (or leader) who selects the person to speak from those with hands raised. The trouble with this is that it emphasizes the pattern that has been drilled into children from kindergarten upwards: the teacher asks the questions, and the class answers. So what often happens is this:
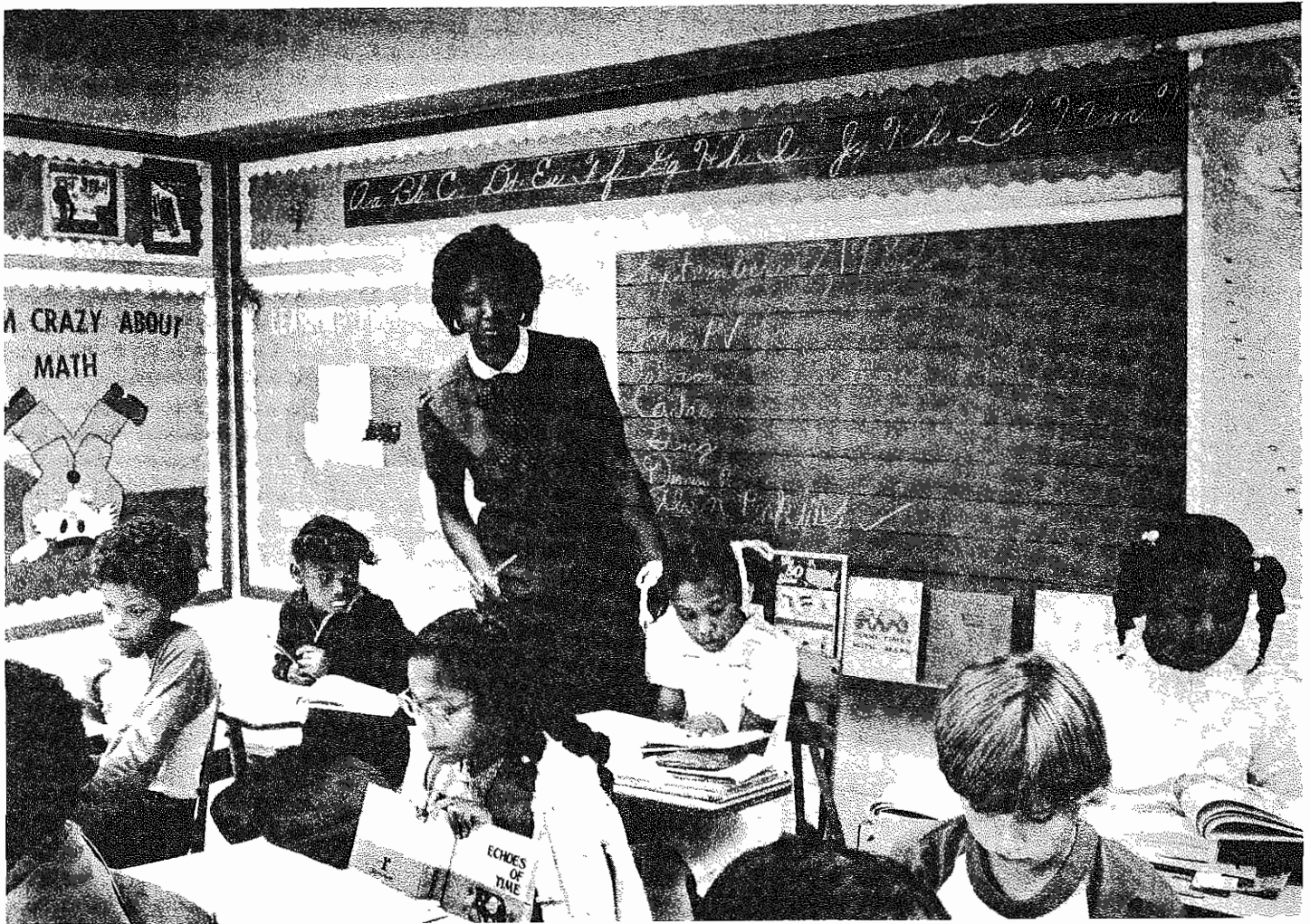1) Teacher asks question,
2) Several hands go up,
3) Teacher selects child to answer, but while the child is speaking,
4) The others keep their hands up, waiting to give their own answer to the original question.

As a result, most of those with hands up are not listening to their classmate who is speaking. Even the few who may be able to listen and keep their own point in mind are still mostly concerned with the latter. What occurs therefore is a succession of more or less unrelated answers, and little chance of dialogue. As one teacher put it to her class, "If your hand is up while someone is talking, it shows you're not listening." For a rule to be useful, it should be clear at any time whether or not it is being followed; so the rule "No hands up while someone is speaking" is much to be preferred to something like "Everyone must listen." The latter has no observable consequence; but in the act of adhering to the former, a child may be reminded that he or she should be listening.

Any means of breaking away from the pattern of question and answer just described is worth trying. Perhaps it would sometimes be better to address the first question to one particular child, and then ask who would like to comment on the answer. If the class finds it hard to obey the "no hands" rule, it might be suggested that they play the following game: after someone makes a comment, the next person to speak may only agree or disagree with that comment, giving reasons; and so on. (The point of calling this a game rather than another rule is to make clear that it would be too artificial as a permanent rule for all discussions.)

Listening is difficult because it requires self-discipline. The urge to think about one's own point has to be resisted, and the attention directed to someone else. Children are naturally impatient and dislike having to wait for their turn to speak; it may be worth pointing out to them that they do not have to wait to listen!

Another rule may be useful in connection with what is heard. It may seem obvious that the content of the children's remarks should be relevant to the question being discussed. But relevance itself is not enough. Suppose the question takes the form "What is the difference between A and B?" A child may respond by giving examples of A and B — which, although relevant, does not answer the question. In this case the questioner may persist and ask what the difference is between those examples; but if the child's comment is completely irrelevant (for instance, it may pertain to some previous question), this should be pointed out. Of course, flexibility is important: it would be counter to the interests of inquiry if some very perceptive and illuminating comment were to be rejected for the sake of rigidly adhering to a rule. Here we are verg-

ing on the subject of questioning technique, which is outside the present scope. The point is that relevance and answering the question are important enough that children should be made aware of the need for them, and one way of doing so would be to build them into the rules for discussion.

A further area where rules may be necessary is what could be called the etiquette of discussion. Such etiquette should be based upon the notion of equality of all the participants with respect to their right to contribute. For example, if someone always comments in great detail and at tedious length, the others will soon come to resent this — rightly, because that person is taking an unfair share of the time. On the other hand, it does not seem easy to formulate a rule to prevent this occurring, partly because of the vagueness of the phrase 'too long'. Perhaps it is better left to the discussion leader to drop a tactful hint when necessary, though this may call for unusual judgement ability and sensitivity.

Finally, if the class is particularly rowdy, it might even be necessary to adopt some rule concerning discipline in the general sense. I suggested at the beginning that a minimal condition for success is that the class members want to take part. A child who continually sabotages the discussion by disrupting behavior presumably does not want to take part. So would it not be better if he or she were asked to sit outside the group temporarily and do other work, or simply listen? Such exiled members should for the time being actually be banned from contributing to the discus-

sion — partly to emphasize that they have not been behaving in a way that allows the discussion to continue, and partly in the hope that (as often happens) what is forbidden will become desirable. These are suggestions only; but clearly something has to be done in the face of persistent disruption.

Whatever rules are adopted, the chances of them being adhered to are much greater if the children themselves can see the need for them and have had a hand in their construction. This suggests that it may be better to start out with no formal rules and then, when and if the need for them becomes apparent, put aside a discussion period solely for the making of such rules.

In considering all of the above points, one thing especially should be borne in mind: the wide range of variability among groups of children. Each class seems to have its own character, and its own way of reacting in different situations. Any attempt to engage in philosophy with children by strictly adhering to some preconceived plan of operation would be both dangerous and useless. In dealing with classes, as with individuals, the key directives should be flexibility and toleration.

Michael Whalley