

REFLECTIONS ON TEACHER PREPARATION: GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAMS AND REGULAR CLASSROOMS

What I want to propose in this paper is based upon my limited experience as a teacher-trainer. I am, therefore, aware of the tentative nature of the judgments I have arrived at and I hope to learn more about these matters in my conversation with you at the close of these remarks. Up to now, I have worked with two quite different groups of teachers, the classroom teacher and the teacher of the gifted and talented students. The first two parts of my paper will be an account of my experiences with these groups of teachers. The final part will consider puzzles that I confront as I consider the possible consequences of my own activity as a teacher-trainer.

Let me begin with an extended example from my experience with regular classroom teachers. Over two years ago, I met with the eighth grade teachers in a middle school in the central New York area. Their school day was in the process of being reorganized into six major segments. These included the four major subject areas (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies), the segment devoted to music, art, and physical education, and an additional component to be shared by all teachers in the major subject areas. The eighth grade team had decided upon critical thinking as its shared component. I was invited to conduct an awareness session. The materials I used were from the first chapter of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. The eighth grade teachers reviewed a variety of approaches to critical thinking and settled upon the IAPC approach. Two major factors influencing their decision were (1) the presence of an organized curriculum which made sense and provided a structured, but flexible framework and (2) the presence of a trainer who could take them, step by step, through the materials. Over the period of approximately a year, these teachers became trained in the use of two programs, *Harry* and *Lisa*.

As these teachers reached the end of their second year of using the two programs, I met with them to gather their reflections about this experience. During the period of training, I had pointed out that, although *Harry* was aimed at fifth and sixth graders, it was necessary for their students to start with *Harry* in order to develop their reasoning abilities. There was some resistance to this among the teachers, but they eventually agreed to trust my judgment on this point. It was not surprising that many of the weaknesses the

teachers found with the program originated from their use of *Harry*. For example, their students found that the novel was somewhat contrived and not sufficiently up-to-date. What is appealing to fifth and sixth graders may not be appealing to eighth graders. (This could possibly be remedied by the use of *Harry Prime*.)

Other comments were related either to the effectiveness of my training or their sense of familiarity with the materials or both. For example, the teachers stressed the need for supplementary activities which would build upon the concepts and skills developed through reflection upon the novel and the exercises in the teacher's manual. What lies behind this criticism is the desire on the part of the teachers to have a program that provides everything and therefore requires an absolute minimum of creativity. This desire stems, at least in part, from the fact that secondary school teachers feel at home in their subject matter. Critical thinking is perceived as a different sort of subject matter. This is why the teacher-trainer must attend to the development of the teacher's confidence in the use of the materials. A fully confident teacher will recognize that the flexibility which is an essential ingredient in all IAPC programs is purposeful in that it allows room for the creative expansion of concepts and skills in a variety of directions.

After listening to a number of variations on the preceding themes, I began to wonder whether I was a complete failure as a trainer. In order to bolster my own confidence, I asked two questions: were there any strengths teachers found in the program and was there any valuable carry-over of learning into their own subject areas? In response to the first question, teachers pointed to a number of positive consequences arising from their use of both *Harry* and *Lisa*. First, both students and teachers found *Lisa* to be a stimulating basis for the discussion of important issues. Secondly, students have come to realize the importance of giving reasons for what they say. The comment, 'that's not really a reason', comes up frequently in discussions. Thirdly, students have become more open to learning different things as a result of their discussions. Prior to the introduction of this program, students would often say: "Why do we have to learn this?" That question is asked much less frequently. Finally, students have gained greater respect for the opinions of others. This has been an important step in the building of a community of inquiry.

The following points were made in response to the question about transfer of learning. Teachers in different disciplines indicated that students quickly became sensitive to the implications of language as a medium of communication. What formerly was

accepted without question was now subject to critical scrutiny. The English teachers were particularly aware of changes in the quality of the discussion of works of literature in their classes. Students had generally become much more patient with the process of discussion and were much more objective in their evaluation of literature. It was no longer enough to simply state one's personal opinion. One had to give reasons which would render one's views acceptable to others. The fact that students were more accustomed to looking for reasons made the task of the science teacher easier. Students were more open to an inquiry method of doing science. Finally, the program improved the abilities of eighth grade students who are all required to take the Preliminary New York State Regents Competency Test in Writing. One part of this test is the preparation of a persuasive essay. Since students understand what the giving of reasons is about, they are better equipped to respond effectively to that part of the test.

During the second year of implementation of the program, the school district quite coincidentally hired an outside evaluator from Syracuse University to assess the effectiveness of the middle school reading program. The evaluator examined the IAPC materials being used in the eighth grade, rated their readability at the seventh grade level, and made the following "noteworthy observations":

1. *Extensive instruction is provided on reasoning strategies and processes. This is perhaps one of the best features of the materials at this level.*
2. *No evidence exists to suggest that independent reading habits are developed.*
3. *Limited opportunities exist within the program for students to write and reflect on their reading. Seldom do writing tasks call for more than a word or a sentence.*
4. *While a well stocked library is available, no evidence exists to suggest that it is used in this program.*
5. *Assessment is generally limited to performance evaluations of work sheet tasks. This calls for greater use of informal teacher observation and judgment during assessment. No assessment instruments are available in areas such as fluency, ability to summarize and critically evaluate lengthy selections, and amount of independent reading.*
6. *The stories are relatively easy for eighth grade readers and are somewhat contrived to fit the needs of the philosophical inquiry program. As a result, these materials may not be sufficiently challenging for students.¹*

There are a number of comments to be made about this evaluation. First, the focus of the evaluation is

upon the adequacy of a grade five through eight reading program. The eighth grade teachers recognize that, although the Philosophy for Children program falls under the rubric of reading, their aims are not the same as the aims of a reading teacher. Secondly, the absence of extended writing tasks is more of a reflection upon the teachers (or their trainer) than upon the program. Finally, the issue of assessment is worth noting. It may well be that the evaluation of a student's progress can only rest upon "informal teacher observation and judgment."

Another part of the evaluation summarized the results of a questionnaire filled out by teachers reflecting their level of confidence in the materials. Two items are of particular interest. First, the eighth grade teachers did not think that individualization of instruction was possible in a Philosophy for Children program. In my view, this is indicative of some distortion in our common understanding of individualized learning. Learning does not occur in a vacuum. One can only fully become an individual within the context of a supportive community. Secondly, the eighth grade teachers were much more confident about the adequacy of the program to meet the needs of low and average ability students than they were about the adequacy of the program vis-a-vis high ability students. This view will be considered again in the final portion of my paper.

The situation I have just described is not typical. The eighth grade teachers had an opportunity that other elementary and secondary school teachers rarely have. The structure of this particular middle school was sufficiently flexible to allow teachers a period of time for additions to the standard curriculum. I have given awareness sessions to teachers at other schools and these sessions evoke enthusiastic responses from at least some teachers. But, the question is invariably raised: how can this fit into the existing curriculum? There is the assumption that what is presently part of the curriculum needs no justification. The introduction of something new requires sufficiently strong justification to dislodge a period of time during the week from what is already in place. Although there are individual teachers who are courageous enough to go against the grain, I have found it impossible to convince school districts in my area that the Philosophy for Children program should become a standard part of their curricula. As one assistant superintendent told me, "If you could prove that the average SAT scores of our students would improve by ten points as a result of using this program, we would be happy to adopt it."

Let me turn to my experience as a trainer of teachers in gifted and talented programs. In recent years, New York State has encouraged development in this area by providing financial support to school districts establishing such programs. In Central New York, school districts have focussed upon the identification of academically gifted students while generally ignoring students with special talents. Programs for academically gifted students are typically 'pull-out' programs. Students are removed from their regular classrooms for a specified period of time each week and sent to someone designated as the teacher for the gifted. Teachers of the gifted see their task as one of enrichment. They are generally free to choose whatever materials they wish to use. Since critical thinking has become the current educational fancy, teachers of the gifted are extremely interested in programs which can be utilized to improve thinking skills. There are some real differences which I have observed in my training of gifted, as opposed to regular classroom, teachers. First, once a commitment has been made to undergo training, teachers of the gifted tend to become much more involved in an exploration of the implications of the readings. Discussions of the philosophical dimensions of the text are spirited. Classroom teachers are much more interested in the mechanics of the process. They want to understand what their role is and how best to carry out that role. They also want to see how this program will affect their other classroom activities. This difference is probably a consequence of two factors. First, teachers of the gifted are selected from among those teachers recognized to be creative and self-confident in their approach to education. Secondly, the lack of any definitive curriculum for the gifted gives their teachers a freedom classroom teachers seldom experience.

Another difference has to do with the assessment of the student's progress in the Philosophy for Children program. The issue of assessment in gifted programs is fluid. As a result, teachers of the gifted can afford to be patient about results. In addition, grades are not ordinarily assigned in gifted programs. This allows much more room for truly cooperative activities. By way of contrast, the classroom teacher must devise some method of assessment for every component in the curriculum and translate the results into a grade. Typically, the activity of grading distorts the effort to establish a community of inquiry. As classroom teachers go through training, they seek some assurance that they can evaluate the progress of their students. In *Harry*, one can talk about competence in the use of logical skills and one can imagine tests to determine whether a given skill has been mastered by the individual. But, the evaluation of individual learning becomes much more difficult in *Lisa* or any of

the other programs. Initially, classroom teachers think that one need only select an exercise from the teacher's manual for each chapter and grade the students on their response to that exercise. But, it quickly becomes apparent that there is no single correct response to items in an exercise. The exercises are designed to encourage the sharing of diverse responses in order to open the participants to different perspectives. Some responses are clearly better than others, but we must recognize that the better responses grow out of the dynamics of the group as opposed to some self-contained process of individual thought. Although this makes grading in a traditional sense impossible, I suspect that classroom teachers devise their own compromises to deal with the issue of grading.

Having given an account of some of my experiences as a trainer with classroom teachers and teachers of the gifted, I want to turn to the puzzles which cause me to approach training sessions with some fear and trembling. The first puzzle has to do with the issue of direction. I am reminded of John Dewey's description in *The Child and the Curriculum* of the teacher as one who understands what the final outcome of the learning process is to be and who directs through indirection. In my own teaching, I tend to be non-directive. This tendency is based upon what William James describes as the empiricist attitude: ". . . the empiricists think that although we may attain [truth], we cannot infallibly know when. To *know* is one thing, and to know for certain *that* we know is another. One may hold to the first being possible without the second . . ."2

The non-directive approach, as a way of modelling the Philosophy for Children program, is very appropriate since a genuine community of inquiry can only exist among equals. This means that the teacher must struggle to free himself or herself from that social role in order to become a member of the community. But, the activity of training teachers is ambiguous. I find it reasonably easy to be non-directive in my work with teachers of the gifted. Their ability to become absorbed in an examination of the reading provides encouragement for me to become absorbed and together we become participants in the process. There are admittedly moments when questions about methods force me out of my status as participant and so the absorption is not complete. With classroom teachers, questions of method arise more frequently and it becomes very difficult for me to feel part of a group. The demand is for greater direction and it is practically impossible for me to resist that demand. I now understand why some of my fellow teacher-trainers tell me that they continue to work with children on a regular basis. Working with children enables one to shed one's role as trainer and to

recapture the experience of absorption. In addition, philosophical conversations with children often bring their own rewards. It may well be the case that the training of regular classroom teachers over an extended period of time only becomes bearable when accompanied by the activity of working with children.

I hope that I have communicated sufficiently the pleasure I have experienced in my work with teachers of the gifted. However, these experiences notwithstanding, I have serious questions about my work with these teachers. The Philosophy for Children program was not designed with the academically gifted students in mind. This is a program which is capable of engaging all students at all levels. It has been used effectively in a variety of classroom settings, including classes for the so-called learning-disabled and for deaf children. Indeed, teachers in the eighth grade program I described earlier viewed the materials as more appropriate for students of low and average abilities than for gifted students. There is some danger that administrators and teachers in those school districts where the program is used for gifted students will perceive it either as limited to gifted students or as primarily an enrichment activity. What I am suggesting is that, while it is perhaps easiest for a variety of reasons to convince teachers of gifted students to incorporate Philosophy for Children into their classrooms, this can create obstacles in the way of a more widespread adoption. It may well be the case that providing training for teachers of the gifted can become an opening wedge in the drawn-out process of convincing school districts of the value of the program for all students. But, one must be aware that successful implementation among gifted students may paradoxically create attitudes which work against general acceptance of the program.

As we all know, Aristotle situated wonder at the beginnings of philosophy. In that light, it is not surprising that teacher-trainers in the Philosophy for Children program should experience some of the perplexities associated with any genuine philosophical endeavor. In this paper, I have attempted to describe some of my work as a teacher-trainer and some of what puzzles me about that work. It may be that your experiences reinforce what I have said. If so, we can share perspectives on the puzzles I have raised and you may want to suggest further puzzles. It may be that what I have said is best interpreted as a sign that

I need further training in the program. That possibility often hovers at the fringes of my consciousness. In any event, I hope my comments provide a sufficient stimulus for the kind of sharing of experiences and reflections which would make this conference successful.

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Footnotes

1. Professor John Leu, *Middle School Reading Evaluation* (Unpublished), p. 14.
2. William James, "The Will to Believe," *The Writings of William James*, John J. McDermott (ed.) (New York: The Modern Library, 1967), p. 723.