GIVING GRADES IN PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN CLASSES

In the teaching of philosophy for children, we are - in the matter of grading - generally in the position of saying one thing and doing another. We commonly discourage teachers from instituting a marking system and giving students grades regularly for their work in philosophy classes. For our part, however, we do not do as we say. Teachers are generally graded for their work in Philosophy for Children courses. They may question this practice, though in my experience, that has rarely been the case. The teachers, in fact, take their grading more for granted than do I.

I would like here to take a closer look at both of these aspects of the grading question. In the matter of grades for children, we may question whether they truly are not being graded. And with regard to teachers, perhaps we should consider whether grading in their workshops can and ought to be taken for granted, to the extent it has been, and whether it may not have some serious drawbacks.

Reasons for discouraging the giving of grades to children in philosophy classes are numerous, and easily cited. For one thing, we want to discourage the notion that there is a single right answer, already determined, to every question. When a topic is brought up for consideration in the class, we want to encourage the fullest possible expression of various points of view. We hope for inquiry into the meaning of the issue, into the possible ways in which it may be viewed, the reasons that may be given for different positions, the consequences of holding one view or another, the consistency of a specific view on this topic with other convictions a person might have. When some topic is thus fully explored, it may well be that more than one position is reasonable, consistent, coherent. Or it may be that more questions are raised than answered - that the group is not truly satisfied with any of the positions tentatively suggested, but tends to feel that no further progress is possible at present. In either case - whether there seems to be more than one acceptable view, or whether there is none that satisfies - it would make little sense to ask whose conclusion is best - who got an A, who failed.

Further, even if some kind of general agreement does develop, even if some positions are discarded as generally unsatisfactory and others - one or more - meet with considerable acceptance in the group, it is the group's conclusion that we want and not the teacher's. If the teacher is to give the grades, it will not be easy to convince the children that one may safely disagree with him/her.

Another consideration that speaks against the giving of grades arises not from the children's attitudes toward the teacher, but from their relationships with each other. We hope to see, in the classroom, the growth of a community of inquiry, in which students work together to develop their understanding. Everyone is welcome to join as an equal into the community. The views of each participant are to be treated with respect (though, of course, not necessarily with agreement), to be listened to and considered seriously. Every question raised or objection voiced is to be seen as a possible new and valuable insight. The aim is discussion by all members of the group, and for all - a cooperative venture.

It is a basic assumption of the Philosophy for Children program that children thinking together, talking together, can develop ideas and reach understandings that go well beyond what each of them privately and individually could do. Introducing the usual grading system fosters quite the opposite attitude: that the classroom (in this case and others) is a field of competition among individuals.

It might be suggested that grades are to be given not for specific ideas proposed, but for participation in the process. The "best" student is not necessarily the one who gives the teacher's right answer, nor the propounder of an answer approved by the group. Someone who speaks well - clearly, cogently, reasonably - for a position later rejected by the others, may be more deserving of praise - and A's - than intemperate members of the majority who blurt and bully. Taking a position like this, one might suggest some criteria for grading: frequent participation, listening to others, willingness to revise ideas, ability to give reasons. Such criteria look not to the matter of specific statements but to the speaker's manner.

But even this approach, though it seems closer to the values of the Philosophy for Children program, fosters a competitive rather than a cooperative spirit. And further, though dealing with the behavior of individuals, it does not sufficiently take into account individual differences. Some children are more ready to speak out than others. Some take great delight in the process of argument and plunge with glee into controversy, whereas others are far more inclined to listen for a long while, to take everything into account, to mull over what's been said - to think it all over, in short - and to speak very little. Some children take a long while to come up with their own thoughts about an issue. Next week, or next month's comment (or even private thought) is not likely to count for much in the system that calls for giving grades for appropriate participation.

Finally, we want children to join freely and enthusiastically into their discussions. We hope that the play with ideas, the thought-provoking encounter in argument, will give them enjoyment and satisfaction that they will continue to welcome, even to seek out, through their lives. We should then avoid the suggestion that there is an end beyond the discussion - a reward, the grade, for philosophical discussion well done.

Are there arguments we should consider in *favor* of grading - reasons why we should approve and encourage it, or at least tolerate it? Since we have all witnessed numerous enthusiastic philosophy classes, and read of others, it can hardly be claimed that grades are *necessary* to ensure children's attention and effort. Whatever the case may be in other classes, that surely cannot be claimed for Philosophy for Children.

One view of grading - or of the process of evaluation that underlies it - is that (though competition with other students may not be essential, or valuable) students may be seen, and should see themselves, as competing with themselves. The standard against which each is measured is past performance, and the grade indicates the level of improvement achieved. I think there may be several reasons why this interpretation of the grading process is not satisfactory, for philosophy classes. What constitutes progress would be a very complex question. The aim of group achievement as against that of the individual is subverted by this kind of grading as well as the more usual system. If grading is done by the teacher, those who think long and talk little will be difficult to assess and to deal with fairly.

But the greatest problem I find with this view of grading applies to its uses in all fields, and not just philosophy. It seems an eminently worthwhile approach to take with children who have some difficulty learning, who have many obstacles to overcome,

who struggle to overcome them. For them, the regular recognition of their accomplishment may be a most helpful and valuable encouragement. But what of the brilliant indolent ones, the students of quick comprehension and ready expression? Do their grades reflect their progress or their status, their work or their wit? I find it hard to believe that, for example, the third grade child who is reading at 7th grade level in November will receive a failing grade if he/she is reading at 7th grade level in June. And what is true of reading is, I think, likely to be true for all the subjects listed on the report card. Grading which reflects competition with self seems no more attractive than grading which calls for competition with others.

One persuasive argument for grading was made to me by a teacher in an inner-city school where few children in the whole class could be claimed to be working at grade level. And the half of the class who were relatively higher achievers went to a computer class during that period. Philosophy was for those who were left behind. The class was enormously successful. The children (sixth graders) were fully involved with Kio and Gus. They were attentive, enthusiastic, respectful of the opinions of others, eager to try to clarify and justify their ideas - all the things one hopes for in a class. The teacher explained to me that she was giving philosophy grades on her students' report cards because most of them had never had a grade of A or B in their lives. Their high (and well-deserved) grades in philosophy would have great significance to them. That was an argument I could appreciate, but one applicable only in those special circumstances.

If, for some reason, grades *must* be given, it has been suggested that everyone should get the same grade. This seems sensible, since a philosophy discussion is a group enterprise. If the discussion has been lively, has addressed the interests of those present, has moved toward clarification and justification of ideas, has offered opportunities to all who want to participate, the group - speakers and listeners - has been successful. If, on the other hand, it has been dull and lifeless, or scarred with unkind comment and bickering, or given over to anecdote and idle chatter, the group hasn't done its best.

Further, as well as a grade *of* the group, I would suggest that it be a grade by the group. Becoming self-aware and self-critical are certainly worthy aims for a group. We - children, teachers, and professors - are, I think, likely to become better at whatever we're doing if we take a little time to consider what works, what doesn't, when things went well and when the process faltered. A little time could be set aside regularly, at the end of class, to consider just such questions. Such group self-evaluation doesn't necessarily involve the assigning of a grade. And it may be a good idea in any case. But if grading should be necessary, let it be grading for the group as a whole, and taking account of the assessment by that group.

The general argument against grading is not news. It is surely familiar to everyone who has been working in this field for a while. But is that all there is to be said? I think not. Though we may agree on its desirability, I question whether we *can* really put aside grading entirely - whether the lack of a place for philosophy on the report card truly does eliminate the grading specter.

In the typical Philosophy for Children class, the teacher is the very same one who gives grades in spelling, and in math. The elementary school child is most often in a self-contained class or is taught by, at most, a couple of teachers. (This has been the case in my experience. I believe it's generally true, though I may be mistaken.) It seems to me likely that the fact that the teacher makes evaluations, passes judgment, gives grades, in all other areas of the curriculum influences the way the students view the teacher and respond to him/her at philosophy times as well. The

teacher will give ratings for "behavior" in general, or for such specific items as "gets along well with others; is courteous; shows appropriate behavior; outs forth effort." (I have chosen a few items from the report card forms of the Philadelphia public schools. I doubt that they differ much from those found in other systems.) Neither student nor teacher will be entirely unaware of or uninfluenced by that fact. It's just part of what it means to be in school.

In fact, the whole school environment has its influence as well. One sits where one is told, on the whole - whether at a desk, in a chair, on the rug, around a table - and one stays there for the appointed amount of time. That, too, is part of what it means to be in school.

Being in school, with one's teacher, has some influence on the children's behavior. In fact, I think we depend on this influence to organize the situation for us. There have been some cases of Philosophy for Children groups which were not school classes, but not, I think, a great many. It would be interesting and worthwhile to discover whether orderly behavior is as readily found in all kinds of groups, whether there is any difference between school classes and informal groupings outside the school, whether it is as easy to work with a group of children outside the school - or more difficulty, or possibly easier. (My own experience of philosophy groups outside the regular classroom has been quite limited, but I have found, on those occasions, reason to be grateful for the constraints felt in the classroom.) I hope that we may look for people to share their experience in this regard.

To say we should be aware of the influences of schoolroom and teacher is, of course, not to espouse the giving of grades. I would just urge that we should be aware of this possibility and that we consider any available evidence that may bear on it. We should urge teachers to be aware of it as well - after, of course, we have completely persuaded them that they shouldn't be grading children in philosophy. If they are committed to the no-grading position, they will the more readily adopt the various procedures that are suggested for philosophy discussions. Such practices as arranging seating differently from the usual pattern, being sure children can see each other, having the teacher sit as one member of the group, letting children have turns at leading parts of the discussion, serve more than one purpose. Among them may be emphasizing the difference of this from other classes and thereby reducing the usual grading expectations. In any case, whether we insist that grading has no part in these classes, or whether we depend on the school atmosphere (of which being graded for everything is a part) to order our discussions, we ought to be honest about what we're doing.

Thus far, we have been dealing with the question of grading *children* in philosophy classes. But what of the *teachers* in programs in Teaching Philosophy to Children? Should they be given grades for the course, as they are in such courses as Curriculum Development, or Sociology of Education? The reasons that speak against giving children grades for philosophy certainly apply as well to the grading of teachers. In the teacher workshop as well as in the school classroom, we want to discourage any attempt to try to figure out what the teacher wants, in order to give it to him/her. We want members of the group to feel comfortable in differing with the trainer as well as with each other. They, too, should come to face with equanimity, the possibility of arriving at more than one answer to the question at issue, or perhaps at none.

We want to foster a community of inquiry in the workshop. Our hope is that the philosophical enterprise will be a cooperative venture, not a competitive one. Some teachers (as well as children) are less ready to speak out, prefer to mull matters over at greater length, would rather listen and reflect than leap into verbal combat. This

reticence in the workshop, by the way, does not, in my experience, necessarily indicate an inability to foster discussion in the classroom. The teacher who tends to be quiet among her/his peers may still be able to stimulate and guide children's classes splendidly.

In addition to the reasons that hold against the giving of grades to children, I believe that there may be additional strong reasons for avoiding the giving of grades to teachers in the Philosophy for Children classes. Our doing so may be detrimental to our very enterprise - to our hopes for the continuation of philosophy classes in the school after the workshop is over. In children's classes, we disapprove giving grades because of what we think will be adverse effects on the process going on in those classrooms. We are concerned with what we want to see happen to those children, to that group. But when considering the grading of teachers, we are concerned not only with those individuals but with the future of the program in the school, after we've gone.

Teachers who feel confident and comfortable with the program, who support each other in their efforts to improve their teaching of the program, who have developed their abilities to converse seriously about ideas with their peers, are better teachers. They are more likely to continue to teach philosophy, to find ways of developing a community of inquiry in the classroom, and further, to find ways of incorporating an open, thoughtful, accepting approach to children's ideas in other areas of the curriculum. But what of the teacher who receives a grade of C, or even D, at the end of the academic year? What is that person's view of his/her teaching? What happens to the community of inquiry? What happens to the hopes of continuing philosophy next year?

I would suggest that that teacher is less likely to share experiences, to engage in joint planning, to give and to ask for support, than colleagues whose grades have been higher. The person who most needs it is probably the one least likely to make greater efforts. More likely would be the neglect of philosophy classes, or even the dropping of philosophy discussions for children altogether. If we hope for effective continuation of philosophy in the schools, grading of teachers would seem to be an unhelpful practice.

Finally, of course, there is the point that we are convicted of inconsistency out of our own mouths, if we argue strenuously against grades for children in philosophy classes, but insist on them - or, at least, accept them without demur - for the children's teachers.

Are there reasons for treating teachers differently - reasons for giving them grades that outweigh the argument against it? Philosophy class, after all, is not the same for teachers as for their students. For children, it is something new, a change from their usual routines. They often contrast it with "work". They are encouraged to talk, and their opinions are treated with respect. (And, furthermore, they aren't being graded.)

For teachers, however, even if they have chosen to take the class (and that is not always the case), teaching philosophy to children adds a new additional subject to their preparation, and attending the workshop adds a couple of hours to their usual work schedule. Are grades necessary if we are to expect cooperation and effort from them? It might be suggested that teachers will not give attention or effort to teaching or to workshop participation where no grades are given.

Without more evidence, I find that hard to credit. Though teachers may need a hint (or even a stronger push) from outside to get them into the course, once in, their professional attitudes are likely to come into play. Their interest in having their

students do well, and in developing their own understandings and skills to make that possible, should provide sufficient stimulus. I have had some - though quite limited - experience with teacher groups where some members took the class for college credit - and so were graded - and others did not. I did not find that the interest, the attention, the effort, of the teachers differed according to whether they were graded or not. In comparing classes where grades were of the usual A through F range, with those in which the only grades were *Pass* and *Fail*, again I have not observed a difference that seemed related to the type of grade. I would be most interested to hear comments from others on this matter, and to compare experiences. From my present perspective, however, I do not see grading as necessary or desirable for teachers.

The fact of the matter, however, is that teachers *are* generally given grades when they receive college credit for the class. I suspect that other teacher trainers feel as I do: we don't like giving grades for Philosophy for Children workshops, but we feel we must. The result, in actual practice as far as I've seen it, is that we give lots of high grades, and we grumble a lot. We grumble about the difficulty of making relevant distinctions. We grumble about determining the most important factors to consider. We grumble about the number of teachers we had who are uncooperative or resistant to our suggestions - who aren't interested in philosophical questions or who can't even see what they are - or who are just lazy. We grumble about having to give grades at all. We grumble. And we give lots of A's.

We feel we must do this, of course, because we are told we must. The school district may require that teachers take graded courses to retain their jobs, or to get tenure, or to advance up the salary scale. Or perhaps it is the college which requires the giving of grades in all courses, or in those that carry credit toward degrees or certifications. Ultimately, the directives of college and school district must be heeded. It seems to me, however, that we should feel called upon to question, and to try to change them.

We are willing to urge forcefully that children should not be graded. I suggest that we should argue as forcefully against the grading of teachers. If college or school district insists that they require some indication of successful work in the class, surely a statement to that effect could be made - in a sentence, or in a grade of *Pass*. (Admittedly there may, also, be those few here and there who will indeed fail.) If, finally, all argument comes to nothing, and we are faced with A, B, C, and so on, let us recall the earlier recommendation: let the grade be the same for everyone, and let the group participate in deciding it.

There is one other aspect of grading that should be touched on here: that is the evaluation of teachers by their supervisors. That this matter should concern us was suggested by a principal in whose school I gave a workshop. "I don't know how to observe a philosophy class," he said. He went on to explain that he felt quite confident, in observing other kinds of classes, that he knew what he was looking for: he could determine whether the lesson was appropriate, had some specific learning in view, with explanation and practice clearly related to that aim, whether the teacher helped students to avoid the irrelevant, whether the purpose of the class had been achieved at the end. He was aware that these were not the right questions to be asking about the philosophy class. But what should he ask? What questions would be relevant and appropriate? Since the support and approval of administrators is necessary if Philosophy for Children is to flourish in the schools, and since the approval of principals is necessary to teachers, the matter of communicating our purposes and

interests to administrators in an important one. Leaving aside any other aspects of this communication, let us consider the question, how should a principal observe a philosophy class?

Certainly a philosophy class is an odd kind of class. It is very often (and perhaps most often when best) *not* a class in which the teacher can state clearly just what his aim was for that period, what he intended for the children to learn, and how they went about it. She may have planned, in discussing Pixie, Chapter 1, a stimulating half hour or so on mysteries and problems and secrets. But instead, (to her surprise, and to her satisfaction or horror, depending on how comfortable she is with what she's doing and how concerned she is about the observer in her class) she finds herself mediating a fierce debate on whether Pixie is a girl, or a boy, or a giraffe, and what in the story provides relevant evidence for which answer. Or the teacher may have come prepared for (and even warned the visitor of the possible dullness of) the logic review following Harry, Chapter 6. Must he apologize for the fact that the class is swept away in a storm of argument about whether potholes are holes in the first place? ("They don't go all the way through," the challenger points out.) Though this leads to all the example giving, and dictionary consulting, and attempted clarification, interrogation, and revision of which sixth graders with six months of philosophy behind them are capable, the logic remains unreviewed.

If the topic for the day may not even be certain in advance, if the direction of the class may be found in the interests of the students, if the conclusion may be a new set of questions, or a fundamental disagreement on what conclusion is to be drawn, or simply a general realization that the topic has been exhausted for this time, how is the principal to observe intelligently?

I do not suggest that we persuade the principal not to evaluate the teacher at all, or at least not in philosophy class. We are dealing here with a situation different from those of children in classes or teachers in workshops. In this case, the observer is concerned with a teacher guiding a group of children through a discussion, not a person as one member of a group of peers. Members of a group are not being compared with each other. And the evaluations of a principal are not a matter of a once-and-for-all label, like the report card or the college transcript, but a part of a continuing process of observations and consultations with staff members, over a long period of time. Given the differences of the philosophy class, it is reasonable of the principal to ask how he/she ought to observe a philosophy class, and incumbent upon us to provide some suggestions.

The question was once posed, at a meeting to consider a number of thinking skills programs, "If we were to observe a classroom, what would teachers be doing as a result of your program?" My immediate answer was, "Less." There, I think, is one criterion: children are talking more, far more, than is common, and teachers less.

Another criterion might be the number of children in the group who participate in some way. We recognize (and we hope both the teacher and administrator will, too) that some children will be more eager to talk in the class than others. But the class in which one or a few students are answering all the teacher's questions is not likely to be a worthwhile philosophy class.

One might also note whether the children talk to each other and respond to what other children say. Is the teacher's mediation and interpretation required at every step or is there discussion *among* the students?

And, finally, are children asked to, and do they feel the need to, give reasons for the positions they take?

Those four -

who talks?

how many talk?

to whom do they talk?

and do they give reasons? are suggested tentatively here as questions a principal might keep in mind in observing a philosophy class. Some considerations of this issue, and comments by others, would be welcome.

Finally, I would suggest to administrators the process urged for children's groups and for teacher's workshops. Let the teacher explain what seemed to him/her to have happened during the period, how successful it was as a philosophy class, and why. The receptive principal who listens to teachers will learn from them as he/she evaluates them.

In the course of this paper, I have considered aspects of the grading of children by their teachers, of teachers in workshops by trainers, and of teachers in their classrooms by their supervisors. I have tried to make explicit some things that have tended to be taken for granted. And, I have tried to raise a few questions:

With regard to children, to what extent does the school provide a guiding atmosphere, which is useful, perhaps even necessary, for effective work with a class, even in the absence of grading?

With regard to teachers, does grading make a difference? And, ought we to make a serious effort to try to eliminate, or at least modify, grading in the workshop?

And, finally, what standards ought we to suggest to administrators - what criteria for a successful class might they keep in mind, in observing philosophy classes?

I look forward to hearing the comments of others, on the matter of giving grades in Philosophy for Children classes.

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