

PLAYING WITH PHILOSOPHY IN THE PRE-SCHOOL

When I was offered an administrative position in a YWCA child care center in Philadelphia, one of the attractions of the job was the opportunity it provided to try to do some philosophy with pre-school-aged children. Over the course of about a year, I spent some time regularly with the oldest group of children in the center. Also, for some months, I met regularly with a small group of kindergarten children who came to an after-school program at the Y. This paper is an account of those experiences: of the nature of the groups, the course of the meetings, the materials used, the activities attempted, the reactions and responses of the children--and an attempt to sum up what this limited experience may suggest about prospects for philosophy in the preschool.

The after-school program of the MidCity YWCA in Philadelphia provides care for children who attend the near-by elementary school, and who cannot return home immediately after school. Children are picked up at the school and spend the rest of the afternoon--from 2:30 to as late as 6 p.m.--at the Y. They are led through a fairly organized program of games, homework, arts and crafts.

When the children returned from Christmas vacation, in January 1987, I had plans to effect some reorganization of the program. I asked them to fill out a questionnaire which included some questions about preferred activities. Two of the activities listed were listening to stories and talking about stories. Children were asked: "Tell how much you like each of the following--whether a lot, o.k., a little, or not at all." There was a scattering of positive answers among the grades--one here, two there. But among the kindergarteners, there were half a dozen children who had checked "a lot" or "o.k." to one or both of those activities. Since I felt I would have time to work with only one group, the kindergarten was clearly the appropriate one. (It should be noted, perhaps, that the kindergarten children--most of them--could not yet read on their own. They depended on counselors for help in doing the questionnaire. They received some, but probably not enough, in what was a very hectic situation of too many kids and not enough counselors.)

Kindergarten children in the program met daily in their own room, with their own counselor. I planned to pick up the self-selected group of six, twice weekly, take them to a separate room, and read to them and talk with them for half an hour or so. That was my plan. In the working out, various changes occurred. From mid-February, when we started, to early June, I met with a group of children perhaps twenty times. We spent half to three quarters of an hour together each time we met. Spring vacation, the pressures of my work, outdoor excursions in the good weather, were among things that prevented our meeting more often.

Identification of a suitable meeting place was a problem, never solved to my complete satisfaction. Meeting in classrooms empty at the time offered too many distractions to children who had worked all day and were tempted by the toys and games around them. Meeting in my office was quite satisfactory in some ways: seated in a circle of chairs or around a table we could attend to each other and to the common subject. However, the phone rang frequently. If the other occupant of the office was in, people came and went to see her. If she went elsewhere, I was interrupted to deal with calls and visitors. It felt like a major problem. The wonder to me, thinking of it afterwards, is that we did anything at all. I mention these problems because they seem to me the kind of thing likely to occur in informal, out-of-school situations. An appropriate place, uninterrupted time, regular meetings, are, I think, really important--necessary conditions, in fact, if a worthwhile community is to be established.

So schedule and meeting place were problems. But the most significant problem was keeping the group together. For some of the children in the initial group, it was just too difficult on many days (and for all of the children on at least some days) to sit and to

listen, to take turns, to carry school day habits on into the afternoon. On the other hand, some kindergarten children not in the original group began asking for a chance to come. When I added those, I found that though six might be possible (under the circumstances) a group of nine or ten was not. I decided that the best thing would be to make joining the group a matter of choice each day. Those who wanted to come were welcome (up to a maximum of six or seven), while those who didn't could stay away--and would be welcome if they wanted to join us another day. I also made the meeting time later in the afternoon, giving the children more time for active play after school, even though this might limit the time some of them could remain with us. Those changes improved things considerably. There was still a fair amount of restlessness even then. And sometimes a child who had chosen to come would nevertheless turn out to be unable to attend to the group activity. But we didn't have to deal with anyone who didn't want to be there at all, and who demonstrated that feeling by continual complaint or disruption.

Of the original group (self-selected through their answers on the questionnaire) four of the six continued to come to almost every meeting, and one came now and then. Of those who later asked to be included, a couple became regular members of the group, and eager interested participants. A few others visited now and then.

So much for the mechanics--the who and when and where of it. As for the content of our sessions: I started with Frank Tashlin's The Bear That Wasn't.^{*} It seemed likely to engage the kids, and enable me to get acquainted with them, and them with me. And it offered a couple of topics--good and bad reasons, personal identity--worth talking about. After I'd read it to the children, in several sections, and we'd talked about it and done a few other things to follow up the discussion, we went on to Ron Reed's Rebecca. I had expected that that would be our main reading material, the core from which we'd take off. Reed had generously sent me a copy of the manuscript, at my request, and a copy of the manual, and had indicated that I might use it in any way that seemed appropriate. I had tried it with the pre-school children, with notable lack of success (of which more later) but the kindergarteners were interested and immediately responsive. I gave them xeroxed copies of the pages we were using. One or two could read them. The others, I discovered, quickly memorized the pages as we used them.

The first questions raised were about Rebecca's living in a tree. We explored the problems and the possibilities involved in that, and went on to consider such issues as: What if everything was trees--no houses? What if trees got littler instead of bigger? What if you got littler instead of bigger? ("Your would be bigger than your mom and she'd be littler" one child offered, and another, "She'd be a little lady but she'd know how to talk to her big girl or boy." One suggested, "Babies might have beards," but "When you're a baby, you'll be dead," someone else concluded.) With those and other issues suggested by Rebecca we had several lively meetings. I anticipated an interesting time with Rebecca.

When, however, I decided to make participation in the group a matter of choice each day, I felt it advisable to turn to stories that could be read in their entirety in a fairly short time. In that way, I would be able to read a story to the children and talk about it with them at one meeting. We could go on for as many meetings as seemed appropriate to the interest exhibited and the activities suggested by the initial discussion--each time rereading all or at least part of the story if there were new children in the group.

From then on, I improvised. One thing suggested another. Rebecca's elephant suggested the poem "Oliphant" by J.R.R. Tolkien. Read without its title, it was a riddle--which the children had no trouble in figuring out. Then they made up animal riddles for each other, offering only one clue at a time, considering whether each additional clue ruled out any of the previous guesses. Animals suggested Lobel's Frog and Toad, which I'd been reading to the younger children. At times I thought it best to pick up on things with which the children were preoccupied. One day they came in full of talk about witches and wizards. The reason for their interest I never found out, but as it clearly

wasn't going to be dropped I thought it better to join than to fight them. I recorded their answers to "What would you do if you were a witch?" I read Bunya the Witch, and poems about weird and witchly creatures, and asked, "What if we were all turned to toads?" ("We would be green and little but we would still have eyes," someone opined. Another added, "Ruth would be a toad with glasses.") They learned to play Leap Frog, and frog-hopped down the hall to their room every afternoon thereafter.

I used books I knew and had at home, or books I found in the library. I always had some questions prepared in advance, and some idea of related activities. Rebecca, Pixie, and Kio and Gus were sources of suggestions of things to talk about. There was picture making, individually and in pairs, and there were lots of groups writing--duplicated afterwards for rereading and illustration. There was certainly not an organized program for development of thinking skills. I believe, however, that it was a happy and stimulating time for the children. As I've said, they were choosing to come. I regret not having been able to work consistently with them, for a longer time.

The other group of children with whom I worked attended the YWCA child care center. They were dropped off in the morning by a parent on his/her way to work, and picked up in the late afternoon. There were six children in the group when we started, all 4 years old or nearly that. All but one had been attending the center for quite a while and knew each other well. As time went on, some other children entered the class, some left. The maximum number was 10 or 12. These children were most fortunate in their teacher, a firm, loving and stimulating master of her craft.

The original plan was for me to spend about twenty minutes with the children, in their classroom, twice a week. I would read and lead the talk. The teacher, and any helpers she might have, would be there as well. We started in the fall of 1986, but after about a month the pressures of other work forced an interruption. In February of 1987, we started again, and continued regularly through May. I met with the children about thirty times in all, during that school year. We started again in the fall of 1987, and made attempts through the year, but things did not go well. There were new children entering the group, unfamiliar with its patterns and routines, in this and in all other activities. The range of maturity levels was greater, the children who'd been coming to the center for a long while being more accustomed to playing cooperatively and to communicating verbally with each other. I decided to try making participation in the group voluntary, as I'd done with the kindergarten children. But there was no place for us to go, away from the others. Finally, for lack of interest on their part, and from discouragement on mine, the philosophy class just petered out.

Rebecca was the book with which we started. I expected to read a page or so at one time, and to talk with them about it. Their reaction, however, was vastly different from the response of the kindergarten children. They were resistant. They seemed bored, or bewildered, and they did a lot of complaining. Now and then when I arrived someone tried to send me away: "Oh no, not that again" was the greeting one day, and "Go back to your office" another. When I suggested that they explain to a visitor--an older child who was spending the day--what we did together when I came, one child said immediately, "Don't yell and don't jump around," And then added gloomily, "Talk--just talk." In fact, however, they did far more of the jumping around and yelling.

Our experience with Rebecca, the first month, persuaded me to put it aside and try something else. In subsequent visits to their class, I read a variety of things--books by Leo Lionni and Arnold Lobel, poems from several sources. I tried to tie some of the reading to the weekly theme to which other activities were related. I found that most things I read absorbed them in the reading--that books with pictures kept them close and involved but had the disadvantage of being hard to read and to hold up at the same time. They especially liked to hear read things that they had made up; their own comments, stories, group poems, delighted them most. The teacher said at times that she felt the

children were thinking about what was going on, and that they mentioned at other times of the day things that came up in our discussions. I felt rather less positive, however, There was rarely any really satisfactory talk about what I read to them.

Disappointed by my lack of success with the four-year-olds, I reflected much about what the reasons may have been. I have no conclusions, but some observations to offer. One thing that astonished me (and sometimes made me wonder to what extent we really communicate with children at all) was the way in which they would sometimes understand a story in a completely different way from what I would expect. They would listen intently, with evident interest and involvement and appreciation. They might laugh or smile. But, when we came to talk of it, it would turn out that they had no idea at all, or a completely different one, of what an adult would make of the story. They just didn't "get it" at all. But it didn't matter to their enjoyment.

For example, I read a little book of stories by Arnold Lobel, called Mouse Tales. One of them tells of a girl who threw pennies into a wishing well. The only response was "ouch" until she threw in her pillow, whereupon the well said "that's better," and then began granting wishes. The children seemed to like the story. But they could offer no reason why the well said "Ouch," ("Pinched herself," someone suggested) and no reason why it would be better after the pillow went down. After the story "The Journey", (from the same book) the kids seemed to think it was quite as reasonable and sensible--and possible--to get new feet as to get new shoes, when the old ones wore out. I sometimes wondered whether we were really in touch at all--whether it might be only luck that adults and children connect sometimes.

Another thing that struck me was that these children had almost no idea of the difference between real and imaginary, between fact and fancy. If we can get new shoes, why not new feet? I may not have an elephant, they seemed to think, (green or otherwise) but then I haven't a dog either. The people down the street have a dog, and Rebecca may have an elephant. And why not green? Whatever princes may be (and I don't believe the children had a clue), they might perfectly well turn into frogs. Tadpoles do. We had some in the Center which were doing just that.

In Lobel's story, "Christman" (in Frog and Toad All Year) Frog arrives later than expected for the holiday celebration. While he is waiting, Toad's imagination has conjured up a host of dreadful possibilities. I asked the children whether those things really happened to Frog. All the children but one seemed to think that what I read was what happened. Just one--one of the oldest and most mature of the children--said, "Toad dreamed it." Of course what is going on there is pretty complex: in reading the story, one accepts Toad and Frog as being with homes, clothes, speech, real in the context of the story. And then one is supposed to be able to laugh fondly at Toad, whose impatience and affection for Frog make him worry and imagine all the dreadful things that might happen. It is of course a convention to accept animal characters that speak. But I think perhaps it is an inability to deal with such conventions that the nursery school children still lack. I certainly don't mean to suggest that it is not reasonable or legitimate to wonder about what is real, what imaginary. But I think it may be that we can only wonder about such things from--so to speak--inside the conventions that govern our stories. So we can only join Rebecca in worrying that a frog of whom one is fond may turn into a prince, if we already know the convention of what kisses can do to frogs. These children didn't.

Another reflection about the four-year-olds: it must be noted that one attraction that philosophy must lack for these children is the opportunity to talk. When elementary school children are asked what they like about their philosophy classes, it has been my experience that one thing they invariably mention is that they get to talk. But in the nursery the children talk all day. They talk in the block corner and in the housekeeping corner, at the easel and at the chalkboard, doing puzzles and looking at books. They chat

over snacks, they argue over lunch, they are sociable in the bathroom. Indoors and out, from morning to evening, they are talking all day long. Philosophy offers them no novelty in that quarter.

This paper has offered a lot of words about what was really a little bit of experience with young children. At the end, are there any general comments that can be made? Given the limited experience, and the fact that no formal evaluation was attempted, no conclusions can reasonably be drawn. Some comparison and some summary, however, may be made. For both groups, lack of a suitable place and uninterrupted time were problems. When philosophy classes take place as part of the regular school program, they are scheduled, built into the routine of the school day. (And even then, interruptions and postponements occur all too often.) Though there may be changes in the way the group organizes itself physically, being in school carries with it an expectation of general orderliness and quiet and attention to the matter at hand. Lack of quiet, uninterrupted time, in an appropriate place with minimal distractions, was a significant drawback in work with the kindergarten children. In trying to continue work with some of the four-year-olds, it proved impossible to give the children the choice of whether to participate or not, for lack of an appropriate place to go.

For an after-school philosophy program, a free choice for each discussion seems advisable. The children need relaxation after the school day, and they ought to be able to choose what their activities will be. (Even when they have chosen to come, they may sometimes be restless or too tired.) Though some of the children came to every philosophy meeting, still I think the opportunity to choose was desirable for them. Also it made it possible for me to insist on cooperation. Whether there would have been greater success with the nursery children, if they'd been given a choice and I had had a place to take them, I can't tell. It might be worth trying. It is, however, possible that no program of regular discussion aimed at developing reflection would have been very successful with the younger children. I hope that I have made sufficiently clear the great difference in interest, in receptivity, in responsiveness, between the two groups. It seemed to be a difference not just of degree but of kind. It was as if, on the journey that leads from 3 1/2 to 5, there is, not just a path, but a moat or a wall. A child who has crossed it is a different kind of being. In the nursery class, the older children had at least a leg over the wall. They were far more able to deal with the stories and the subsequent questions than the younger ones. They seemed to listen and to respond in a different way. This gap between older and younger is not, it should be noted, necessarily true at all in the elementary school. There may be differences from second grade to third, or third to fourth, but they are clearly differences of degree. Furthermore, they are not invariable: a third grade class may be more involved, more thoughtful, more productive of ideas, than a fourth. Perhaps I am overstating the case here. Nevertheless, I would hesitate long before attempting a similar program with four-year-olds. I would welcome the opportunity to do it again with kindergarteners, and would encourage anyone considering it to do so.

Finally it must be asked, just what was it that I was doing with the kindergarten children, with my scattered readings and my improvised activities at our catch-as-catch-can meetings? Was it Philosophy for Children at all? Obviously there was no organized, systematic curriculum, no consecutive program of skill development. What there was, was an opportunity to listen to stories and an invitation to think and to talk about them. Children were encouraged to make their own comments and what they had to say was listened to with respect. (I become more convinced, over the years, that among reasons why children value their philosophy classes, the most important is just that: that they are listened to.) Though it is not Lipman's program of Philosophy for Children, I think such a series of meetings as I attempted would be valuable in school or out--for making children more reflective, for encouraging them to think about stories from different

perspectives, for helping them to become articulate about their own ideas, and for leading them to be attentive to and respectful of the ideas of others.

*A list of all books used, in one or both of the groups, follows.

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BOOK LIST

Babbit, N. (1970). The something. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Conkling, H. (1921). Poems by a little girl. New York: Frederick A. Stokes.

A first poetry book. (1979). New York: Oxford University. (Compiled by John Foster.)

Flutes and cymbals: Poems selected by Leonard Clark. (1969). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.

Kraus, R., & Richter, M. (1971). Bunya the witch. New York: Windmill Books and E.P. Dutton.

Lionni, L. (1967). Frederick. New York: Pantheon.

Theodore and the talking mushroom. (1971). New York: Pantheon.

Lobel, A. (1980). Fables. New York: Harper & Row.

Frog and toad all year. (1976). New York: Harper & Row.

Frog and toad together. (1972). New York: Harper & Row.

Ming Lo moves the mountain. (1982). New York: Greenwillow.

Mouse tales. (1972). New York: Harper & Row.

Minarik, E. H. (1968). A kiss of little bear. New York: Scholastic.

Reed, R. (1989). Rebecca. Fort Worth, TX: Analytic Teaching.

Stevens, C. (1972). Teaser and the firecat. New York: Four Winds.

Tashlin, F. (1964). The bear that wasn't. New York: Dover.