A SECOND GRADE CLASS THINKS ABOUT MAKING CHOICES

The second grade class which I was visiting, one morning in spring, had been reading Elfie and having lively discussion through the school year. The teacher knew her large group of bright active children well, and made every effort to stimulate and challenge them. She was thoughtful and inventive in her use of the Philosophy for Children program. I had observed several excellent classes, previously, and anticipated an interesting time. On this morning I was more than interested. I was very much impressed with the varied means the teacher had developed to lead her students to think and talk about what is involved in making choices.

In reading Elfie, we learn early on that the little girl telling us her story has had a difficult year in kindergarten, and is not having a much happier or more successful time in first grade. Her parents ask if she thinks she'd like to go to another school, and tell her she can decide, it's her choice. (The question is first raised in Elfie, Chapter 2 Episode 5, and brought up again in Chapter 4 Episode 3.) Elfie is not really sure what it means to have a choice.

In reading Elfie previously, the second graders I was visiting had mentioned Elfie's problem as an interesting topic that they'd like to talk about. So, on the day I visited, the teacher had planned to return to that topic.

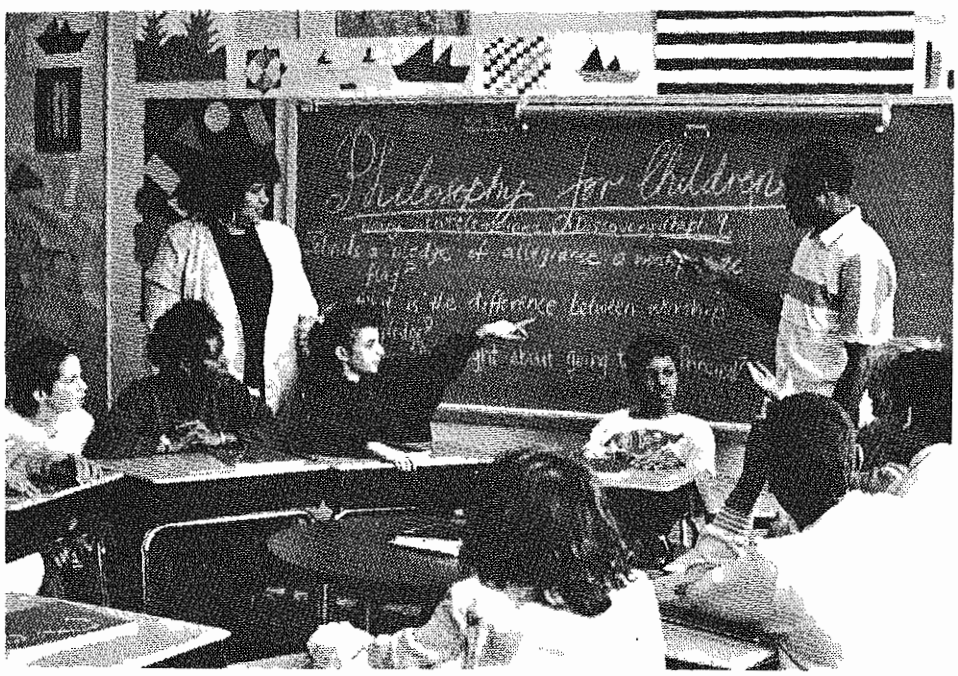

Photo by Mr. Deluca

After the children had gathered in a group for discussion, the teacher passed around two plates, one with chocolate chips and one with raisins, and let the children choose one. Then she asked, "How did you decide which one to choose?" The children's answers were listed on the board, and discussed. Considerations suggested were not merely taste preference, but the fact that raisins stick to the teeth and so promote decay. On the other hand, someone else said, they are healthier than chocolate chips.

The next step taken by the teacher was to tie this activity to what had been done last time. She asked the children whether they remembered what decision Elfie had to make, and whether it would be as easy. The children offered reasons for thinking Elfie's decision would be harder than choosing between raisins and chocolate chips. One child pointed out that the kids in the class had previously had both raisins and chocolate chips, but Elfie knew about only one of the schools, so her decision would be more difficult.

Now the class returned to food choices. The teacher asked what things they might bring to school for a snack during the morning. After an extensive list was on the board, the kids were asked to think about what might be taken into consideration. Calories, cholesterol, and salt content were among criteria suggested. (I was beginning to wonder if I had strayed into a center for small senior citizens.) The class then went over the list of food items, applying the criteria they had suggested.

It should be noted that though the problem--a snack to eat in school--was an everyday kid's issue, there was ample opportunity, well used by the teacher, to consider the serious topic of decision making. During the discussion, the teacher explained such terms as "alternatives," "weighing possibilities," and "considering the consequences." Subsequently, she used them repeatedly so the children could become accustomed to them. The kids were talking about chocolate chips or raisins, potato chips or cookies, but they were expanding their vocabulary and using the new concepts in the discussion.

Two more situations were presented and discussed, each introduced by a picture, with explanation supplied by the teacher. In one situation, a child in a school lunchroom is told by an adult to clean up a mess for which that child wasn't responsible. Questions asked were: What needs to be decided here? What would you do? Why?

Some of the children insisted that they would not do the cleaning up, under those circumstances. They were, I felt, rather bolder in theoretical talk than they would have been if faced by an actual teacher, or even the principal. Perhaps their claims were indications of what they felt fairness required in the situation, rather than a true prediction of their own refusal. The teacher accepted what the children had to say. She did not indulge in preachments about helpfulness and cooperation. But neither did she inquire what might be the consequences of a refusal. It would have been reasonable to raise that question with the children. However, the class went on.

The last topic of discussion was a picture of a child reaching into a desk, which, the teacher explained, showed the child finding his/her own pencil box in someone else's desk. What, the class was asked, were some possible things the child might do? By now there was not much time left for extensive discussion. Alternatives were listed and discussed. The teacher herself supplied one that she thought some children might consider, although no one had mentioned it: it was for the wronged child to take something of the other person's. The teacher was, of course, aware that it may be risky to suggest an answer in case the children should take it to be the right one. Still she was appalled when a number of her students opted for that solution, and she felt it necessary to say that she herself didn't think she would have chosen it.

Obviously there was meat there for another discussion on the consequences of choosing this alternative, or any of the others, and on which would most likely lead to a permanent solution satisfactory to everyone. And for teachers and other adults there is the whole question of how to deal with positions children may uphold which we might consider quite unsatisfactory or even morally wrong. I will leave that question for another time, as the teacher left any further discussion that day of the Lost-and-Found Pencil Box Case.

To avoid giving her suggestion special status, as the <u>teacher's</u> answer, she might have suggested not one but two. A second (for example, waiting until one goes home and then telling a parent, a course of action not suggested by anyone in the class) would make clear that the teacher was just adding to the list and not giving her suggested or approved

resolution.

Another subsequent discussion related to the one described might have dealt with making choices when criteria conflict--when, for example, what's better for the teeth has high salt content, or when wanting to be helpful and cooperative might prevent others' learning responsibility. That would have involved looking critically at the criteria themselves and perhaps looking for higher level criteria to judge among them. But there is always something more that could be discussed. My purpose here has not been to argue that point, but simply to describe what I found to be an inventive and stimulating way of leading students to think about Elfie's problem: What does it mean to make a choice?

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