Philosophically Counseling Children

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When I do philosophy with children in elementary school discussions are in the form of a «community of inquiry» and are based primarily on topics discovered in the material developed by Matthew Lipman for his Philosophy for Children program.[1] Philosophical discussions with children, although typically carried out within a much more limited vocabulary, can be every bit as insightful, and offer insights equally as profound as those within the capabilities of a trained philosopher. Simple language should not be confused with simplistic thought.

But discussion with children is often not of the same theoretical orientation as that found in most undergraduate university philosophy courses. This is especially true of those classes whose children have elected to choose their own topics of discussion based either on issues of the day or actual personal concerns. Discussions I have had with elementary school children have dealt with issues such as whether there is a difference between boys and girls (beyond the biological), whether it's ever OK to he or steal, what causes someone to want to commit suicide, whether or not God exists, what constitutes a good friend, and what you should do if a friend says he wants to kill himself. It is when sensitive topics such as these are discussed that philosophy in the classroom departs from a mere academic exercise and transforms into philosophical group counseling.

PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING

What is philosophical counseling? Simply put, philosophical counseling consists of a trained philosopher helping an individual deal with a problem or an issue that is of concern to that individual. It can also be done in a group situation. Philosophical counselors know that the majority of people are quite capable of resolving most of their own daily problems either by themselves or with the help of significant others. It is when problems become too complex - as, for example, when values seem to conflict, when facts appear to contradict each other, when reasoning about a problem becomes trapped within a circle, or when life seems unexpectedly meaningless - that a philosopher trained in philosophical counseling can be of greater help than the average friend or family member.[2] While teaching philo-

sophical reasoning skills is often carried out at one of the later stages in philosophical counseling, most counseling sessions focus primarily on the resolution of the clientis immediate problems or concerns and the alleviation of any distress that may have been precipitated by them. But there is a very fine line between a philosophical discussion that simply satisfies the intellectual curiosity of participants and a similar discussion that becomes, in a sense, therapeutic for them. In my classroom it was not uncommon for discussion to cross that line often.

THE SECRET OF DEATH

I was discussing with the 11 year olds of a grade 5 class the part in Pixie[3] (pages 4 and 5) where the teacher suggests a game which involves students thinking of an animal and keeping it a secret from each other. I asked the students what they thought a secret was, and why anyone would keep something a secret from everyone else. At first there was talk about keeping family financial problems a secret so that the neighbours won't find out. If the neighbours don't find out, they said, then the parents won't be embarrassed. The students said when parents keep this kind of thing secret they don't only want to protect themselves they also want to avoid causing their children unnecessary worry. At this point in the discussion the general feeling in the room was that the parents were doing the right thing when they kept this kind of secret.

But discussion soon moved to another kind of secret parents keep from their children: the knowledge of a terminal illness or even the death of a close relative. The students agreed with each other that it seemed their parents often did this also to prevent their kids from worrying. But students expressed concern because, while their parents attempted to spare them from worry by not telling them what was wrong, the children could clearly see that something was upsetting their parents. They agreed that knowing that something is wrong but not knowing what is wrong makes a situation even more worrisome for them than knowing what everyone else is worrying about. Not only did they feel more worried; they felt left out of what was known by everyone else around them. They said this might be OK for younger children, but that they were at an age where they felt it was better to know the truth. The worst thing was, they said, when they only heard of a relative's illness after the relative had already died of it. Some of the students said this made them very sad and very angry. They said keeping this kind of a secret isn't fair because it doesn't give the child the opportunity to say good bye. What was implied was that by not having been part of the relative's dying process the child does not have the sense of closure felt by those who had known about it all along.

One girl said her grandfather had died at a ski resort in a gondola accident while he was with the family on a skiing holiday but she wasn't told about it until several days later. She had been left wondering where her grandfather had disappeared to in the middle of their holiday. She sensed that something had gone wrong but was unable to get a straight answer from anyone. To her this made the situation «very scary.» A boy said his «nanna» (grandmother) was presently ill with lung cancer and that he had been told she is dying. I asked him how he felt about this not being kept secret from him. He said he wished it had been kept from him since he felt very badly about knowing. Other kids agreed that it made them feel very bad when they heard that a loved one was dying, but they said despite the fact that

knowing made them feel bad they wanted to know. I asked why, and they said because that way they could still go and visit the dying relative, or write a card to them, or pray for them, or even think about them more. If they were only told after the loved one was dead it was like being cheated out of the last chance to do any of these things.

One student said the worst experience she had had was when she had been told about the death of a loved one not by her parents but by friends of the family. Others said what was even worse was to find out second-hand by unintentionally overhearing the adults discussing it with relatives or the neighbours.

There seemed to be a consensus expressed in the classroom that the children understood the fact that their parents were only trying to protect them when they kept information about a terminal illness or death a secret. They also said, «Yes, it makes you feel bad to hear that a loved one is very ill or dying, and it may make you worry, but it's better to know than to find out later that your parents have kept it a secret from you, or they have lied to you to keep you from feeling bad.» They said having a parent lie to you, even about something terrible like a terminal illness or a death in the family, is very worrisome. They unanimously agreed that death is a part of life children need, and have a right, to know about, and don't want to hear lies about, even when they are only «little white lies.» They want to learn the truth about it.

At this point the boy who had talked about his nanna dying said that in listening to the discussion, and in thinking some more about it, he agreed that he is now glad he had been told of his nanna's illness - when he can still visit her in hospital - rather than when it is too late, after she has already passed away. But he said he still felt badly about knowing his nanna is ill. The other children said it was OK for him to feel bad, that anyone would feel bad if their grandmother was gravely ill, and that he was very lucky he could still talk with her for a while.

CONCLUSION

This discussion was cathartic. It helped these 11-year-old children come to grips with why their parents sometimes keep secrets – especially about bad news - or even lie to them, in an effort to protect them from the sad and bad things in life. It also helped the students to think about their own feelings about death, and the importance of knowing and learning about death from those they trust the most - their parents. The conclusion was that they didn't want to know about their parent's financial troubles, but that they would rather know the truth about loved ones - their illnesses or death - and feel the bad feelings, be part of the family in collectively experiencing the loved one's passing, gain a sense of closeness to other grieving family members, and be allowed a sense of closure, rather than be left out (and left guessing) in order to have their feelings spared.

This classroom investigation into the secrecy that often surrounds dying and death in which the students considered their own feelings about the matter was clearly a diversion from the kind

of intellectual, theoretical disputation that generally occurs in an academic discussion. This discussion did not deal with what some imaginary person ideally ought to have done in a hypothetical situation, and it was not merely an abstract verbal engagement in the quest for some lofty «Truth» of the matter. It dealt with a real-life issue that was truly perplexing - and often distressing - to a number of the children in the class. What made this philosophical discussion a group counseling session was that the children had a vested, and not merely an academic, interest in the outcome of their inquiry. And, just like discussion in any other group counseling session helps participants to better understand themselves and the life they are living, the outcome of this classroom session was that the students came to a better understanding of what they believed constituted living a good life.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of this program, see Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988. Or see Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, and Frank Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980.

2. For a detailed account of philosophical counseling see my book *Philosophical counseling: Theory and Practice.* Westport, CT.: Greenwood Publishers Group, 2000.

3. Lipman, Matthew and Theresa L. Smith. *Pixie*. Upper Montclair, NJ: The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1981. 4-5.

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