

On Reed and Discussing Philosophy With Children

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In his article "Discussing Philosophy With Children: Aims and Methods,"¹ Reed maintains that "conversation is crucial to philosophy for children" (p. 229). The article outlines some of the criteria for a worthwhile philosophical discussion with children, ways of achieving these, and discusses some related problems. While I agree with Reed's contention with regard to the importance of discussion, and while I am not denying the possibility of doing philosophy with children, as well as the desirable educational outcomes that arise from this, I propose to comment, clarify and elaborate on some of the criteria and some aspects of the teacher's role as outlined by Reed. In doing this I hope to contribute to the delicate and ongoing task of identifying and plausibly defending what is to count as educationally worthwhile in this area.

A. In the first criterion Reed contends that a necessary condition for a philosophy for children discussion is that the *answer* to the issue being discussed is "up for grabs" (p. 229). The teacher must not yet know the answer. The questions that arise here are: *i*) Are there any issues in philosophy that are not "up for grabs"? *ii*) What *kind* of answer the teacher has and how he or she arrived at this answer? *iii*) Does the teacher want the students to adhere to his or her answer?

The reply to the first question depends on one's views about the nature of a philosophical issue. In one sense there are many questions entertained by philosophers that are not yet fully or decisively answered although philosophers have come

up with replies to these questions. I have in mind, for example, questions dealing with the justification of moral principles or the nature of reality. But what about issues dealing with basic logical principles, fallacies or the nature of the theoretical syllogism?² It seems to me that answers to the latter questions are of a different nature than the ones offered to the former ones. Is Reed then referring to all kinds of philosophical issues? Let us assume that he is. Then with regard to the latter issues, according to Reed, the teacher ought to simply and directly provide the answers to the students. A treatment of these issues, following Reed's proposal, does not lead to a philosophical discussion. But it seems to me that even in such cases one can have a discussion where a position is critically and rationally examined. Moreover, even in the latter cases, investigating an issue, considering possible replies and coming up with correct reasons for the proper answer, the children will be acquiring certain skills that are needed in doing philosophy.

But Reed might have only been referring to the former kind of questions. In these cases the teacher might, after a careful, serious and thorough examination of the philosophical issue in question, come up with an answer supported by reasons and/or evidence. And as far as he or she is concerned this answer is the appropriate one unless shown otherwise. Should a teacher, then, not encourage discussion on this issue? Should she or he simply "tell the

children the answer" (p. 229)?

In answering these questions, the point that needs to be emphasized is whether or not the teacher wants to draw out what he or she desires. (In other words, the intention of the teacher plays an important role). If the teacher wants the students to move only in one direction—the one she or he has in mind—then, as Dewey remarks, there is not point in using “‘suggestive questioning’ or some other pedagogical device.”³ But it is possible for a teacher to have an answer *and* at the same time not intend to “draw out” the answers from the students. (Of course, some student might come up an answer or a position which is similar or the same as that of the teacher.) From the fact that a teacher might have come up with a resolution to a philosophical problem, it does not necessarily follow that the teacher cannot engage in a philosophy for children discussion which deals with that problem. (Here I am making a general point which applies to all philosophical discussions whether or not with children: the fact that one has come up with an answer to a philosophical problem—an answer which one thinks is correct—does not necessarily preclude that person from entering into a philosophical discussion. A group of philosophers might all think that they have resolved a philosophical problem in a different manner. This does not necessarily mean that they cannot have a philosophical discussion about that problem.) One’s attitude towards that resolution, or one’s intention with regard to that answer may however prohibit someone from engaging in a philosophical discussion. If, for example, a teacher does not allow an examination of other views, or criticisms of his or her view (although the teacher may not explicitly state that this is his or her view), or a teacher lures the students to hold a certain view through questions and answers, then of course one would not have engaged in a philosophical discussion though one might have pretended to have had one.⁴

Reed might not be totally unaware of the problem I am trying to point out. In another section of his article where he

points out how children typically view their teachers he writes: “if the teacher is to take part in a philosophy for children discussion she must get across to her students that there are times when, indeed, she does not have all the answers” (p. 231). By implication, then, the teacher does have some answers to philosophical problems. And he adds: “She must convince students that *there are times* when she will *actively seek* to discover the truth, to uncover meaning, to, in fact, figure things out” (p. 231). By implication, again, then, there are times when she or he will *not* actively seek to discover the truth. In the latter case, by definition, she or he cannot be engaging in a philosophical discussion. In the former case, however, the teacher might, for having an answer does not prohibit him or her from actively seeking to discover the truth. (In doing so the teacher might enrich, strengthen, review or clarify her or his stance position.) But, once more Reed seems to confuse the issue when he writes about the special role of the teacher: “She is there as discussant, as someone who does not know the answer but is actively trying to figure it out” (p. 231). Contrary to Reed’s view I have attempted to show that the teacher can be a discussant although he or she might have an answer. In other words, it is not necessarily the case that a participant (teacher or student) in a philosophical discussion (one about a philosophical question rather than a purely empirical one) should not have an answer in mind. What needs to be emphasized in this criterion, I suggest, is the *way* one has arrived to answer and the *attitude* one takes toward it.

B. In the second criterion for a philosophy for children discussion Reed proposes that the discussion should not only deal with the interests of the students; their interests ought to play a more central role as interests ought to determine the starting-point of the conversation. There are two questions that come to mind with regard to this criterion: Is Reed identifying ‘what interests students’ with ‘what is in their interest’? To what extent should the nature of the children’s interests determine the

topic for discussion?

It is not very clear whether or not Reed is taking into account the distinction between subjective and objective interests. He believes, however, that if a "significant number" of children do not find a topic interesting, then that topic should not be discussed. It follows, then, that the topics for discussion have to be chosen from among those that interest the students. I believe that the notion of subjective interests has to be taken into account in justifying the inclusion or exclusion of a certain topic for discussion. But this does *not* mean that this notion ought *always* to be the primary and/or sole criterion for such decisions. The matter is not as facile as Reed's second criterion pictures it. Is it really the case that the interests of the students always lead to educationally worthwhile activities? What about those cases where the topics that need to be discussed (and the need is partially called for by the nature of the subject in question and by logic as Reed himself suggests on p. 232) conflict with the interests of the students? May it not be the case that some things that initially seemed uninteresting to us turn out to be very worthwhile and even interesting once we get engaged in them?

Given such queries it might be plausibly argued that it is *not always* the case (though it *might* frequently be the case) that what interests us is identical to what is educationally worthwhile.¹⁵ Moreover, given that our focus is on *philosophical* discussions, then it is important to keep in mind that the topics of interest have to be of a philosophical nature. Not any interest will do. In this respect, then, the participants in a philosophical discussion have to bear in mind the distinction between what has a philosophical import or what is philosophically relevant from that which is not.¹⁶ This does not mean that the philosophical procedure cannot be applied to almost any topic. But one has to insist that in a philosophy discussion it is the philosophical procedure that has to be pursued if what is claimed to be carried out *is* a philosophical discussion. As Reed rightly puts it, "A philosophy for children discussion should "impose" a set

of obligations on the members." (Criterion 7, p. 230) And these obligations, although they may conflict with the interests of the participants, have to take precedence. (It is important to note here that this "imposition" is of a logical kind rather than psychological, and it is thus different from coercion.) In this respect cases might arise in which a decision by majority or by a significant number of participants *may* be irrelevant.

I am not arguing that in deciding about the topic for discussion the interests of the students should not be taken into account. Given that our focus is on philosophical discussions, however, the children have to understand what these kinds of discussions entail. With regard to Reed's second criterion, I suggest, that we ought to keep in mind a notion of interests that is neither entirely subjective nor entirely paternalistic. Doing philosophy with children, as Judy Kyle puts it, "shifts the emphasis from both a) the rather *laissez-faire* concept of existing interests of children and b) the somewhat paternalistic concept of the interests children *should* have, to c) a concept of interests and experiences children would have if they could."¹⁷ In other words, once the students get initiated into and understand the nature of doing philosophy, they will raise points or topics that are both philosophically relevant and that interest them.

C. Reed warns us that it is not easy for the teacher to "gain full membership in the 'group'" (p. 231)—a role which the teacher ought to try to achieve. In order to achieve this, Reed suggests that the "teacher will have to work against . . . the students' view of her as the dispenser of academic praise and blame. Teachers are in the business of grading students, of passing some and of failing others" (p. 231). Reed's suggestion might be taken to imply at least two things: a) no formal grades should be given for the philosophy for children sessions; b) the teacher must not evaluate every utterance a student makes.

With regard to (a) one can argue that the introduction of formal grades to be given at the end of a semester (or at any other

defined period) for philosophy for children will hinder the children from sincerely investigating a philosophical issue in a philosophical fashion. With the introduction of grades children will simply try to achieve higher grades and this will not necessarily translate into a genuine search or participation that is called for in a philosophical discussion. (They might not express certain views at all, or they might simply express certain views which in their judgment will please the teacher more and therefore secure them a better grade.) Grades will hinder children from developing a love of wisdom and truth. Moreover, one might argue that it is very difficult to formally and appropriately grade students in philosophy for children. But on the other hand, if philosophy for children is the only subject for which no formal grades are given, then the children (as well as parents, other teachers and administrators) might develop the false impression that philosophy for children is less educationally important or beneficial than other subjects. This, however, may be avoided by explaining why no formal grades are offered for philosophy for children at least at the elementary level. From my experiences with teachers implementing the I.A.P.C. philosophy for children program, it seems that this suggestion has worked well. My inclination, then, would be to agree with Reed, if Reed's suggestion is taken to imply (a).

What about (b)? Here one has to note i) that "grading" and "evaluating" are not always identical, for the notion of evaluating does not necessarily imply that of grading (one can evaluate a performance without formally grading it), and ii) that evaluating can be positive or negative. Should the teacher evaluate every student utterance? The teacher, perhaps, should not scrupulously assess every single utterance, but this should not be taken to mean that there should be no evaluation at all. (I am not claiming that Reed disagrees with this. An elaboration of this point, however, might eliminate some misconceptions about evaluation and philosophy for children.) The teacher, and at times the students themselves, ought to evaluate on

philosophical grounds (e.g., consistency, appropriateness, coherency, etc.) their utterances or performances (both the teacher's and the students') in a discussion. As Robin Barrow remarks: "You measure progress in philosophy by *assessing* your ability to state your position or express your argument clearly and coherently"⁸ Without such an evaluation it would be difficult to determine whether or not philosophical progress was made in the discussions. And this means that at times the teacher (as well as any other participants in the discussion) has the responsibility to intervene and point out a fallacious argument, a misinterpretation, or any other inadequacy. For, as Barrow puts it: "traveling by the philosophical road . . . requires that one recognize inadequacies in one's thinking"⁹ If children understand the nature of doing philosophy then this form of evaluation (which is different from giving formal grades) ought not to curtail thinking and should not be understood as an imposition of penalties. On the contrary, it ought to enhance philosophical discussions and help in the formation of "a community of inquiry."¹⁰

Notes

1. Ronald Reed, "Discussing Philosophy With Children: Aims and Methods," in *Teaching Philosophy*, Vol. 8, No.3, July, 1985, pp. 229-34.

2. And some of these issues do occur in the context of philosophy for children, for example, in *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*.

3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. 57.

4. For an elaboration of the nature of discussions and their relationship to open-mindedness, see William Hare, *Open-Mindedness and Education* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 1979), pp. 112-19.

5. Of course one could retort by stipulating that what is educationally worthwhile is identical to what interests us. P. S. Wilson has attempted to defend such a view. (See *Interest and Discipline in Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971)). On this point Robin Barrow remarks: "Nobody can stop

somebody defining education in this way. But you cannot define things into existence. To define education in this way won't change the way things are or remove the need for justification for a policy of following only the child's interests." (*The Philosophy of Schooling* (Brighton, Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books, Ltd., 1981), p. 76.

6. It is worthwhile to note that at the initial stages of doing philosophy for children the use of texts (such as those developed by M. Lipman and his associates at the I.A.P.C., Montclair State College) which raise philosophical issues and which are written in a way that is conducive to philosophical discussions (both in content and procedure) are more appropriate. Once the participants have mastered the nature of a philosophical issue and procedure, then they will be in a better position to apply this through the use of other texts that raise philosophical issues

but not as explicitly as the philosophical novels written purposely for philosophy for children sessions.

7. Judy Kyle, *Philosophy for Children* (Unpublished M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1976), p. 136.

8. Robin Barrow, *The Philosophy of Schooling*, p. 23.

9. *Ibid.*

10. For an elaboration of this concept see Matthew Lipman *et al.*, *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), pp. 45-46, and Tony W. Johnson, *Philosophy for Children: An Approach to Critical Thinking* (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1984), pp. 18-24.

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