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Moral Philosophy in Middle School: Indifference, Resistance and Bystanders

Introduction

I first learned about P4C when I was a philosophy graduate student at the University of Washington. I was a part-time student and a full-time lawyer for some time, and I did a lot of work on legal issues related to children. Eventually I became interested in education as a means of empowering young people. I was really attracted to P4C because it drew together my passion for philosophy and my interest in working to prevent child abuse and neglect and the syndrome of "giving up on life" at age 12 that I was seeing in my legal work. I believe that for children to take control over their own lives, it is essential that they are able to recognize the power of their own voices and ideas and learn to think critically and independently. Philosophy is a powerful means of inspiring this transformation.

In 1996 I founded the Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children, an organization dedicated to introducing philosophy to K-12 students. The center became part of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Washington in 1999. Our "Philosophers in the Schools" program, begun in 1999, educates graduate and undergraduate students about ways to introduce philosophy to pre-college students, and then sends these University of Washington students into public schools around Seattle to conduct philosophy sessions with K-12 students.

Our program includes three Philosophy for Children seminars, one each quarter. All of our Philosophy for Children classes introduce UW students to methods of doing philosophy with young people (as contrasted with teaching philosophy to young people) by stressing the development of a philosophical community of inquiry, in which students are encouraged to ask their own relevant questions, develop views and articulate reasons for them, and to listen and learn from one another. The emphasis is on learning by doing, and we spend time discussing the students' experiences in K-12 classrooms and helping the students to conduct philosophy sessions with pre-college students.

Since its founding, the Center has introduced philosophy to over 1,500 students in more than 30 schools around Washington State. Students in philosophy classes taught through the Center range from preschool through high school. Over the past decade, the Center has run over 25 workshops for teachers and parents

about ways to facilitate philosophy discussions with young people. As part of my work with the Center, I have worked in public school classrooms at a variety of levels, from preschool to college.

Philosophy in Middle School

Abraham Heschel, the Jewish philosopher, said that philosophy is the art of asking the right questions. I love that. Questions are the core of what philosophy is all about, and at the core of what I want young people to learn through doing philosophy.

We live in a culture where asking questions is not valued. Kids learn this early. In the early elementary school grades, when I ask children what questions they have, the children eagerly and unselfconsciously offer all kinds of questions. By fifth and sixth grade, I start to see hesitation, worry about how they sound to their peers. By eighth grade, students have learned that having a question means that there is something you don't know that you should, and you don't want to exhibit that lack of knowledge publicly. Engaging in discussion about the unsettled questions of philosophy helps the students to see that questions are really fundamental to learning, and that having a question means there is something puzzling or interesting to think about.

What I want to do this morning is talk about a particular philosophy unit that I designed and have been doing with middle school students, and then to engage you all in one of the sessions of this unit. For the past five years, I've been teaching a unit about genocide and moral philosophy to 8th graders. I start with a general philosophy unit, to give the students some background about the general questions of philosophy and an introduction into how to do philosophy. The first classes focus on epistemology, or what can we know about the world? I then do some classes on moral philosophy, using Plato's *Ring of Gyges* and some other materials, so that the students understand how to recognize a moral question.

This unit is part of an interdisciplinary unit that the middle school English and history teachers and I have developed. Some years ago I became aware that students were reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Night* by Elie Wiesel, but were not really engaging in any kind of inquiry about what they were reading. I approached the English teacher about coming in to do some moral philosophy around the issues raised by these novels. Eventually the history teacher also became involved. The unit now involves the moral philosophy and genocide sessions that I teach, a literature and genocide unit, and a history project with a theme entitled "In Honor of the Human Spirit," in which the students create a thematic essay using video. In addition, for the past couple of years the art teacher has joined us, developing a unit on expressionist art to have the students create pen and ink drawings on the theme of genocide and resistance.

The "Moral Philosophy and Genocide" unit raises moral questions connected with the Holocaust and other genocides, primarily through the use of film. Two eighth grade classes come together, about 50 students total, in a series of 80-minute periods to watch films (usually less than a half hour each), and then break up into small groups to discuss the issues raised by the films (though the use of lists of questions to answer, activities, and other discussion-generating prompts). For the

last half hour or so of each period, I facilitate a discussion with the entire group based on what has occurred in the small groups.

We have also involved parents in this unit, inviting 5-10 parents to come to each session and participate. Before the unit begins, I do an orientation session with the parents. The parents have loved being involved, as the opportunities for working in middle school classrooms are limited. This also creates opportunities for parents and their children to continue these discussions at home.

The unit is designed to help the students to think for themselves about the difficult questions raised by the history of the Holocaust and other genocides. We talk about indifference and the way that indifference is a central aspect of genocide – the indifference of those who don't get involved. We discuss the nature of indifference and whether it is morally wrong, and our discussions touch on issues relevant in the lives of these students, including class issues, peer pressure, bullying, bystander behavior and the rights of students.

The unit includes discussions of the following questions:

- What is a community? What shapes its identity?
- What prompts groups to turn against other groups?
- Does difference pose a threat?
- Why are some people silent in the face of moral wrongs?
- Is it morally permissible to resist authority in certain situations? Is it ever morally obligatory to resist?
- What is courage?
- What makes someone a hero?
- What is indifference? Is it always wrong?
- What are the moral costs of being a bystander?
- How does knowledge of the Holocaust and other genocides affect our moral responsibilities?
- Who has the power to forgive oppressors? Is forgiveness always possible?
- Are we morally obligated to help others?

In 2008 we made a formal proposal to the local school board to adopt this curriculum in the district. As part of the proposal, we had to show that the unit helps students to meet certain state standards and to explain the academic benefits and the benefits to the school community benefits of the unit. The unit was formally adopted in the district last year.

Session on Indifference and Bystanders

We will now engage in a session that is similar to classes in this unit on the issues of indifference, resistance and the nature of bystander behavior. The reading is called “No Time to Think,” and it is an excerpt from a book by Milton Mayer. An American college professor, Mayer wanted to find out how ordinary people reacted to Hitler’s policies. Seven years after the war, he interviewed German men from a cross-section of society. One of them, a college professor, told Mayer how he reacted in the selection we will read.

Selection read aloud.

After the reading or film, sometimes I’ll ask for questions and we’ll vote on where to start. Sometimes I’ll have prepared questions for discussion. Today we’ll divide up into groups and discuss the following questions. In each group, pick one or two questions that interest you and discuss them, and/or come up with another question the reading raises for you. Choose someone from your group to report back to the larger group.

Questions:

Why did the professor not speak out?

If one person had spoken out, how could that have made a difference?

Was the professor indifferent? Is indifference wrong?

If your life is at risk, do you still have an obligation to help? What about if your livelihood is at risk? Your reputation?

Why do some people step in to act and others don’t?

What small choices do people make that lead to being a resistor or a bystander? Do we have control over these choices? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Discussion ensued.

Tips for Successful Pre-College Philosophy Sessions

Things to Do

Remember that the whole point is to help the students develop their own thinking.

Let the discussion flow from the students' questions and ideas. After reading a story or doing an activity, ask, "What questions did this make you think of?"

Encourage the students to build on each other's ideas.

Show the students that what they say makes you think.

Encourage the students to speak to one another.

Good leading questions to ask in a philosophy session:

"What did you mean when you said . . .?"

"That's an interesting idea. Can you explain what you were thinking when you said that?"

"When you said . . . , did you mean . . . ?"

"How does what you just said relate to what ____ said a moment ago?"

"So if what you just said is true, is ____ also true?"

"When you said ____, were you assuming ____?"

Things Not To Do

Tell the students their answers are right or wrong.

Plan to teach the students some philosophical argument or point.

Insist on your own views.

Be uncomfortable with intervals of silence.

Give a definitive answer to a philosophical question.

Permit lengthy discussions of relatively unimportant issues.

Monopolize the discussion.

Resolve issues for them.

Try to show the students how philosophically sophisticated you are.