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Ethical Inquiry: In and Out of the Curriculum

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Ethical inquiry: In and out of the curriculum

Lisa Novemsky

Presented at NERA 2010 and dedicated to Matthew Lipman (Aug 1923 - Dec 2010)

"The ethical requirements are becoming more and more critical in a world that is becoming less and less ethical" (Freire, 1997p. 313).

In its pure form, "doing philosophy" which includes "doing ethics, inquiry and critical or rigorous thinking."

The late Matthew Lipman recognized that doing philosophy entailed the cultivation of excellent thinking. His ideas have been explored and expanded within the context of Philosophy for Children, a movement that makes reasoning and judgment available to children through the discipline of philosophy. It is rare to see philosophy and/or other methods of teaching reasonable, ethical and caring thinking in institutions of learning in this country.

Is it possible that with the emphasis on our national *Race to the top* we are leaving the development of ethical thinking at the bottom? We are still exploring the teach-ability of ethics, in particular, ethical decision making. How is ethical thinking fostered? In early childhood classrooms, particularly before the reign of standardized testing trickled down to this level, there is/was a socio-emotional model of early childhood education that emphasized taking care of others. This is still practiced at places like Bank Street College of Education Head Start (2010).

The component that was/is not always present in such models was a venue to foster the caring, creative, and critical thinking that underlies the making of ethical judgments. This was noticed by Dr. Lipman when observing such an early childhood setting. The wonderful caring atmosphere was there. What could be added was practice in deliberation about the big ideas that children have. Philosophy for Children, a movement, based on guided communal inquiry around a series of narrative texts designed for children to learn to think for themselves and with others was born.

Making ethical judgments can be very difficult. Philosophical inquiry, when conducted in a community, can stir the ethical imagination and lead to a profound awakening of ethical awareness. Through dialogue and inquiry students become active agents of their learning. Students and instructors engage in what Martin Buber (1970) called "I-Thou relationships" as the instructor guides students through the woof and warp of a particular discipline.

In science, my chosen discipline, I did see such an approach in the sixties, seventies, and eighties in the context of the Science, technology and society (STS) movement. Science was taught as inquiry and in the context of how science lives in our contemporary world. In the race to meet the standards and to get high grades on standardized testing we have tossed such ideas aside. How can we bring the spirit of those discussions back with consideration for the changes in the world and new understandings of how we learn? In these models the ethical goal of instruction is empowerment of students rather than a number in the race to who knows where?

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