Nomination Letter for Dr. Claire Katz (Texas A&M University) for the APA Prize for Excellence in Philosophy Teaching*

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey wrote that "education is not preparation for life but is life itself." Few, if any, educators, of course, would disagree with Dewey's dictum, but I know no one whose career as a teacher embodies it more than my colleague Dr. Claire Katz. Since first encountering Dewey's philosophy of education as an MAT student in the Philosophy for Children program thirty years ago, she has dedicated herself to the development and implementation of unique, transformative educational programs in philosophy for children, teens, undergraduates, graduate students, and professional teachers (about which much more below). It is difficult to imagine a more deserving candidate for the APA Prize for Excellence in Philosophy Teaching.

A word, first, about her research and service. Dr. Katz was already well-known among her colleagues and scholarly peers for her work on education from feminist and Levinasian perspectives. However, she is also leading the way for the discipline of philosophy as a whole to recognize the broad and deep philosophical potential of research in philosophy for and about children, youth, and communities. Further evidence of this will be found in a forthcoming volume from Roman & Littlefield that she is editing, entitled *Growing up with Philosophy Camp*. She is also actively involved in several professional groups devoted to philosophy pedagogy; notably, she occupies a seat on the Board of Directors of PLATO (Philosophy, Teaching, and Learning Organization) and is a member of the APA Committee on Pre-College Instruction in Philosophy.

Dr. Katz’s teaching philosophy is built around a pedagogical model she calls *collaborative inquiry* (CI). CI binds together the Socratic method, service, leadership, and a lifelong commitment to serious intellectual inquiry, practiced through high-impact active learning projects. Not content simply to build her own teaching around this pedagogical model, Dr. Katz conceived and established a robust Program in Philosophy for Children (P4C) at Texas A&M with the purpose of implementing the model in pre-College instruction, undergraduate education, and training for primary and secondary school teachers. The Program supervises training in P4C pedagogy for Texas A&M students and offers in-service training to local teachers and administrators, all based on the CI model. But the model is most dramatically

*Note: I have borrowed liberally (indeed sometimes word for word) from a past nomination letter for Dr. Katz that was written by Dr. Jill Graper Hernandez, formerly professor of philosophy at UT San Antonio and now Dean of Arts and Humanities at Central Washington University. As Dr. Graper Hernandez has been entirely preoccupied with changing jobs and cities, she was understandably unavailable to nominate Dr. Katz this year; I am of course drawing upon her letter with her full knowledge and permission.
represented in the annual pre-college philosophy Summer Camp — *The Aggie School of Athens* — that Dr. Katz conceived, programmed, and has implemented for the past four summers at Texas A&M. Initially, the Summer Camp served as an outreach program to bridge the gap between P20 initiatives in the Brazos Valley (where Texas A&M is located) and Dr. Katz’s mission to engage teenage students in philosophical dialogue, while also improving the pedagogical skills of A&M graduate students in Philosophy. The Summer Camp has since blossomed into a field-leader for Philosophy for Children initiatives, drawing students from both within and without the local community — mostly from cities in Texas but also from as far away as Paris, France. In 2017 and 2018, the program revolved around a cluster of “big questions”: in 2017, the topic was “Philosophical Worlds,” which focused on how different societies and communities produce different philosophical traditions; in 2018, it was “Democracy, Literacy, and Education.” In 2019 the Camp staff followed a recent trend in philosophy by building the program around a popular culture phenomenon, in this case, the *Harry Potter* novels. Dr. Katz and her team employed themes and episodes drawn from the novels to explore such issues as the relationship between literacy and democracy, the purpose of education, and political partisanship.

The inaugural Summer Camp in 2016 was budgeted for 25 middle-and-high school campers, but 45 enrolled (with 10 more on a waitlist). Dr. Katz raised grant money to expand the project in three subsequent years (2017-2020), and the 2017 camp had 59 enrollees with an additional 15 on a waitlist. The 2018 camp had 50 enrollees and a waitlist of 50, and the 2019 camp had 42 enrollees and a waitlist of 30. It should be noted that the drop in overall numbers from 2018 to 2019 reflects Dr. Katz’s commitment to critical reflection and self-assessment: in 2018 a Camper Advisory Board was formed, and the Board suggested that the camp in 2018 was too large, especially the younger cohort. So in 2019 the number of high-school-aged campers peaked while the number of junior-high-school-aged campers was deliberately restricted to 15.

The Summer Camps draw faculty volunteers from across the state who have been inspired by its success and impact, as well as philosophy faculty (including myself, in 2018) and graduate students at Texas A&M. The faculty/graduate student instructors help the campers learn to question, ask for evidence, listen to others’ perspectives, and make use of counter-examples in argumentation. One important result is that the campers experience the joy of belonging to an intellectual community, which, for most of them, is a new experience. But an unexpected consequence of the program is that the campers actually become teachers in their own right, by drawing parents, siblings, and friends, into the conversations they encountered at Philosophy Camp. Exit surveys reveal that many parents have noted an immediate change in their children: campers who were typically quiet in the car would talk non-stop about what they had discussed that day. Dinner conversations became philosophy discussions involving the entire family.

While the merits of the pre-College Philosophy Summer Camp are extraordinary on their own, Dr. Katz has also drawn on the CI model to transform pedagogy for undergraduate students. In spring 2013, for example, Dr. Katz was selected by her peers to participate in the
Glasscock Undergraduate Scholars Program, which is designed to introduce undergraduate students to the theory and practice of humanities research. She recruited five students to work with her as mentees on individual year-long research projects. During that year, all five students shared an office with Dr. Katz, which enabled her to model directly the benefits of intellectual collaboration. The results speak for themselves: four of the five students entered graduate school (the fifth is teaching), several have continued their mentoring relationship with Dr. Katz, and one even published their project in Explorations, a peer-reviewed undergraduate research journal.

Another excellent example of Dr. Katz's deep commitment to transformative undergraduate pedagogy is from 2017, when she offered a senior-level undergraduate course solely devoted to the theory and practice of teaching philosophy to pre-college students. Topics of the course included the philosophy of childhood (an underserved topic in philosophy), phenomenology and education, educational psychology, as well as more concrete topics, such as classroom management, generating rules for philosophical discussion, strategies for creating a safe intellectual space, and age-appropriate philosophical lesson plans. The course is designed to provide undergraduate philosophy majors who may have never imagined an opportunity to teach philosophy (much less, to teach it to K-12 students!) an opportunity to transform their own lives, as well as those of the K-12 students they teach. (These undergraduate students are typically offered the opportunity to work as facilitators at the Summer Camp, alongside graduate students and faculty members.)

A further example of Dr. Katz's commitment to pedagogical excellence is her enthusiasm for teaching in the First-Year Critical Thinking Program sponsored by the College of Liberal Arts. Instructors in philosophy use these seminars to introduce students to “big questions” — God, freedom, evil, paradox, the nature of rationality, etc. Dr. Katz pursues such questions in her seminars through close readings of narratives found in the Hebrew Bible. It bears noting here that these seminars are taught pro bono over and above the faculty member's standard course load — a supererogatory act that Dr. Katz embraces out of her commitment to undergraduate pedagogy. For this and other efforts, in 2017 Dr. Katz was named the Murray and Celeste Fasken Chair in Distinguished Teaching (a position she will hold until 2022). She was also honored with a 2019 Texas A&M Association of Former Students Distinguished Achievement Award for Teaching.

Dr. Katz's model of collaborative inquiry is also changing the trajectory of how teachers are trained in Texas, as well as the methods they use in the classroom. Dr. Katz has used the platforms she built in philosophy (as well as in Women's and Gender Studies, which she directed from 2010-2014) to expand the University's slate of opportunities for teacher training and preparation. Toward this end, Dr. Katz has created a workshop series which targets K-12 teachers and administrators who are interested in introducing philosophy into their classrooms, as well as graduate and undergraduate students who can be placed directly into those classrooms. The workshops focus on introducing participants to the history, philosophy, and pedagogy of a successful Philosophy for Children program; and modeling for participants what philosophical discussion is and how best to incorporate philosophy into their pedagogy.
K-12 teachers and administrators receive concrete exercises to use immediately in their classrooms, while undergraduate and graduate students receive real-time practicum instruction in teaching philosophy to children. Each workshop enrolls over forty participants (and thus far has drawn from numerous school districts in Texas, locally from Bryan-College Station and as far away as Dallas-Fort Worth, San Antonio, and Houston). The exit surveys completed by the participants indicate that there is tremendous interest in, and need for, Dr. Katz’s training for teachers, as well as a desire to shift pedagogy away from assessment-heavy content and towards an emphasis on philosophical reflection. This shift is made possible—in a state, I might add, that desperately needs it—by Dr. Katz’s selfless efforts to introduce the CI method to those who are teaching our future college students.

A final note. Professional philosophy has recently been beset by a well-documented string of scandals. Not unrelated to this is the equally well-documented under-representation of women and minorities in the field, many of whom attest to feeling unwelcome either in particular departments or in the profession. In light of these unfortunate facts it is important to note that the P4C Program has been a magnet for young women and members of under-represented minorities. This is important in its own right, but it is also important because the Philosophy Camp alums are now college-aged. Several of them requested letters of reference from Dr. Katz and have identified philosophy as a likely major or minor course of study. These early indications suggest that P4C may be a promising corrective to some of the more troubling trends in the profession. As Dr. Katz herself often says, philosophy itself is not the problem; the profession (as presently configured) is the problem. If P4C can have a welcoming effect on thoughtful college-bound students, there may be hope for us yet.

Thank you for the opportunity to recommend Dr. Claire Katz for the APA Prize for Excellence in Philosophy Teaching, and for your service to the field. If you have any questions, I would be delighted to discuss her candidacy with you.

Sincerely yours,

Christopher Menzel
Professor of Philosophy
Texas A&M University
cmenzel@tamu.edu