Analytical Thinking with the Gifted and Others

For the past two years, I have trained teachers in Dr. Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children program. During 1979-80, I worked with a group of ten suburban elementary school teachers, half of whom were teaching the gifted and talented; this year my class is composed of twenty elementary school teachers working in the regular classroom in an urban setting. A very brief comparison, based upon my observations, of how the program works with the suburban gifted and with inner-city students who are frequently weak in basic skills reveals both predictable differences and surprising similarities.

As might be expected, the gifted students were more adept at expressing themselves in verbally sophisticated terms and presenting elaborate arguments. Discussion was nothing new to them, while the urban students seemed to have had less opportunity to present their ideas in class. Once they adapted to this new freedom, however, they showed considerable verbal skills and often made the same arguments as their gifted counterparts, although in a more anecdotal fashion. Generally speaking, both groups rather quickly came to enjoy participating in the discussions.

Children in both settings also had good immediate recall of events in the story and competed to suggest what they thought were the important ideas in each chapter. The urban students sometimes had difficulty reading the story, but once this had been done with help from the teacher, they also remembered the events quite clearly. Some of the gifted fifth graders found the story a bit too easy for their reading level, but the emphasis on discussion prevented this

from becoming a problem.

Teachers in some classes from both groups noted a carry-over effect from the philosophy discussions to material covered in language arts and mathematics. Students sometimes recognized on their own that logical and linguistical concepts discovered in Harry Stottlemeier applied in other areas that they were studying. Also interesting to note, the logic sections presented no particular difficulties for the urban students, and some individuals who otherwise rarely participated in class on any subject were the most capable at solving the logic problems and enjoyed doing so.

Finally, children in all classes occasionally found that the absence of final answers on many topics was frustrating and that leaving an issue after having discovered a number of plausible alternatives was both a promising and disquieting experience. Gradually, however, they came to accept this situation with good humor as part of the inquiry process.

There is a special pleasure that comes from seeing children with precocious skills being challenged to expand their horizons even further, but there is an equal, perhaps even deeper, pleasure in seeing the child who may be disenchanted with school, a discipline problem, and low in basic skills suddenly become alive to what the wondering mind can offer. Both ends of the spectrum deserve our attention, and both have for too long received only our neglect. Philosophy for Children is one way of beginning to rectify this omission.

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