

Who Is Harry Stottlemeier Anyway?

"They can reason things out — it surprises me." (1)

Needed: More elementary school teachers who can make that statement and have the evidence to support it. *Wanted:* Elementary school teachers who are committed to teaching, critical reasoning skills. *Must have:* certification, genuine interest and the following skills: highly verbal, open to the new ideas even when they may be in conflict with your own, accepting of children's ideas, encouraging children to explore their own ideas, competent in open discussion, and humble. If you are interested in bringing fun back into your teaching, apply to: Southview Elementary School, Anytown, U.S.A. We are an equal opportunity employer.

"Like if you thought something was true. Now you have second thoughts about it. You {sic} have to really think about it." (2)

Harry

The comment was made by a fifth grade child who had just completed a year's work in a unique program called *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. The program is published and distributed by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children and is written about and for elementary school children. The program content includes a variety of issues from philosophy and at the same time, using those issues, it also concentrates on teaching children how to think more critically by utilizing a variety of philosophical issues as its course content.

*Harry** is designed to supplement the existing curriculum, not replace it. It is in the form of a novel that presents a series of vignettes, each of which is related to some philosophical issue(s), e.g., is the mind also the brain? These stories take place in and out of the school setting and are designed to encourage children and teachers to discuss their ideas honestly and openly without the absolutism of finding "the" correct answer.

The authors of the program, Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp, recommend about 90 minutes a week be spent working with *Harry*. It could be all at one time, but experience has shown that two 45-minute sessions are better. Language Arts may be the appropriate area in which to use *Harry*. This is true because Language Arts tends to be more flexible and wide reaching in its content, and the skills learned in Language Arts have the widest applicability across the curriculum.

Harry can pump new life into an entire curriculum by providing the challenge of studying something new in a different and creative way.

As a result of a three year study using children in grades four through six in rural Minnesota, reported in a recent edition of *Thinking* (1), I have concluded that the

most important aspect of this program is not that which deals with the philosophical issues, but that which is directed at developing critical reasoning (understanding and refining those skills we bring to bear on solving problems). The issues from philosophy are used as a vehicle to concentrate on the ability to 1) define a problem, 2) gather information, 3) test the veracity of that information, and 4) draw logical conclusions.

The value of *Harry* is that it takes a close look at critical reasoning skills independent of any particular discipline. It emphasizes, but does not limit the teacher to, the Socratic method of open discussion where reasoning logically becomes very important. Both children and teachers are beneficiaries of that process.

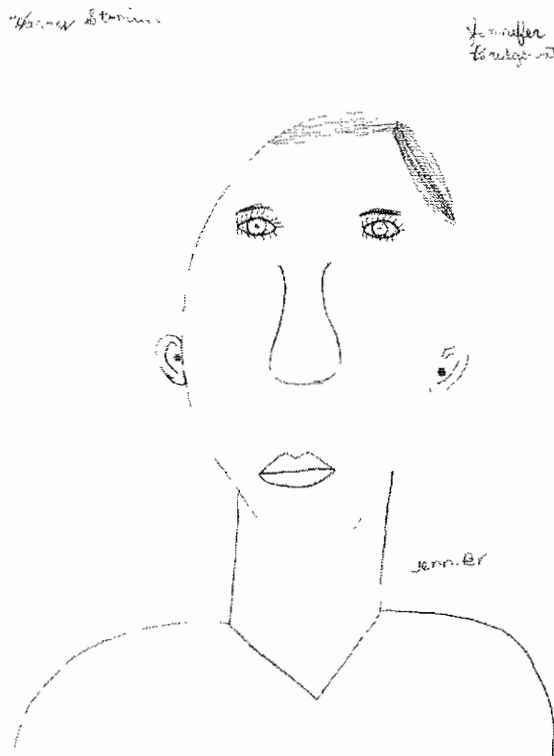
The results from my research show that *Harry* has helped children to improve reading and vocabulary performance, but the important thing to keep in mind is that the program concentrates on skills necessary for survival in our complex world. It is *not* designed for gifted children and to use it exclusively for that purpose would be a tragic mistake.

The accompanying teacher's manual provides a wide variety of activities covering a broad spectrum of abilities. Careful thought has made this manual an invaluable tool for the teacher.

Why?

"In an already crowded curriculum, how could I possibly take the time to do this? Don't I already teach critical reasoning?" Those are two legitimate questions.

The answer to the first is a matter of priorities. A teacher is constantly making judgments about priorities and decisions made are based on what a teacher values.



*For the purpose of brevity, I will hereafter refer to the program as *Harry*.

The answer to the latter question is both yes and no. Anyone who has taught elementary-age children knows that these skills are taught with little or no effort to coordinate and/or sequence the skills across the curriculum. The results are an unevenness in children's abilities to reason rationally and critically.

There is, however, another reason for looking at *Harry* as a serious and important tool for the teacher. Anyone who has been involved in education in the last decade has heard the frequent indictment that the children can't read, write, or think. That may or may not be true, but the schools need not stand alone in that indictment. Schools are reflections of society at any given moment in time. Schools follow rather than lead.

School personnel should not be, however, immune from criticism. We should be held accountable for teaching basic skills and for transmitting the general culture from one generation to the next in the most human and humane way we know.

At a time when schools are trying to prepare children to live in a rapidly changing, complex world, they are being pressured to "return to the basics." What that phrase means depends upon who is using it, but for many it means returning to a teaching methodology requiring drill and rote learning (excluding learning mathematical number facts and tables). Memorization has returned to prominence. All of these methods require only recall. They do not call for higher processes of thinking. Several recent studies in math (3) indicate that students have learned how to add, subtract, multiply and divide but struggle to know which to use when. Many are incapable of thinking through thought problems.

Other studies (4) indicate that more attention is being paid to those activities that result in convergent thinking, i.e., thinking that starts with the premise that there is one right answer and all effort is made to find the answer.

Researchers could find little evidence of divergent thinking patterns where the premise is that there may not be just one answer, but several. The importance of this approach is obvious — to help the student be free to explore a variety of alternative answers without the fear of making a mistake.

These studies and others point out that efforts to return to nineteenth century pedagogy, which may have served that century, may have harmful effects upon the critical reasoning abilities of students today. The world is far more complex than a century ago, and we need people who can stand on their own feet. We do not need young people who accept uncritically what others say, be they politicians or television advertisers. We need young people who have the confidence to trust in themselves when they have made reasoned judgments.

Harry will not save the world from its trouble but *Harry* might make the trouble more understandable and easier to resolve.

If you are interested in *Harry*, this is how you can get involved. Formal training is a necessity. A philosophy



background is not required but if you have some, it helps. The training usually consists of helping you, using the materials, to identify the important issue in each of the vignettes. In addition, the training will help you select the most appropriate activities to help the children develop and refine their critical reasoning skills, and by the way, it will also improve your own skills.

If *Harry* interests you, contact Dr. Matthew Lipman, author and director of the Institute for the Development of Philosophy with children. His address is Montclair State College, Montclair, New Jersey.

It will be an experience you will not soon forget and will benefit your teaching and those whom you teach.

Bruce Burnes

Endnotes

¹Campbell, Jeanne, *Final Evaluation Report*, "Teaching Philosophy and Critical Reasoning Skills in Grades 4, 5, and 6. A Council on Quality Education Project," Minnesota Center for Social Research, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1980. Pages 16-21.

²Ibid.

Bibliography

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- 2) Campbell, Jeanne, *Final Evaluation Report*, "Teaching Philosophy and Critical Reasoning Skills in Grades 4, 5, and 6. A Council on Quality Education Project," Minnesota Center for Social Research, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1980.
- 3) Carpenter, Thomas, et al, "Results and Implications of the Second NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress): Elementary School Mathematics," *Arithmetic Teacher*, April, 1980, Vol. 27, No. 8.
- 4) Goodlad, John, et al, "Study of Schooling" (forthcoming), *Education U.S.A.*, July 9, 1979.
- 5) Lipman, Matthew, et al, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, Montclair State College, Upper Montclair, New Jersey.