Orange Elephants and Sweet Tears

Orange elephants! Snow in August! Tears that taste sweet! *Rebecca*! This delightful little girl and her unending questions involved each of my first graders this year in beginning philosophical inquiry. I taught the course in my classroom in a low socio-economic area of the city. "Thinking Time" was a period of about twenty minutes two or three times weekly.

Analytic Thinking was taught as a separate subject in the curriculum. The boys and girls learned to be aware of the skills they were using to think and reason. The skills were reinforced as they occurred elsewhere in the curriculum. The children, therefore, were able to make those skills more a part of their behavior in all areas of their lives. One unexpected discovery in teaching Analytical Thinking has been the demonstration of thinking skills in certain children who did not previously exhibit those skills in other areas. One child, who is emotionally disturbed and would lead us to believe that he is incapable of logical thinking, has shown surprisingly responsive behavior. Another, a very quiet child who rarely volunteered an opinion or a reply, now answers readily; her comments have revealed a contemplative personality rather than a shy one. A third child, very bright and knowledgeable in academic work but unpracticed in thinking analytically, has shown greater depth of understanding as he acquired these new skills.

A community of inquiry was an important goal of the program. It was difficult to achieve, but extremely exciting when it did develop. This community was developed by sharing a book, *Rebecca*, and considering many questions that the main character poses. The following pages describe some of the activities which I used with the class and some comments from the children during those activities.

In October I asked the group, "What is thinking?" Some of the responses were:

Eddie: You think about something.
Christopher: Helping learn.
Rodrick: Think about going over to your auntie's.
Tammy: If you want to read, you're thinking.
Erica: Thinking means anything you're thinking about.
Stacy: Loving people.
Yashica: You have to think what to get someone for their birthday.
LaKeith: You need to think.
Stacy: Listen.
Dontay: Think about somebody.
Tammy: See things.
Eddie: Think about listening to something.

I rephrased, "What do you think with? How do you think?"

Stacy: In your head — things go around in your head.
LaKeith: When you think about something, you think about something else.
Christopher: You can think a thought now and can't think that another time.
Bwerani: If we think while we run, we get tired and stop running.
LaKeith: When we're writing and somebody interrupts us, we forget.
Yashica: When somebody runs across the street they might be thinking of what lights mean and they won't get hit.
Stacy: When you have a lot of things on your mind you get nervous.
Tammy: Planning what you're going to do.
Erica: When it's raining you'll be thinking about going to school.
Michael: Use your brain.

Many of the children had a very difficult time verbalizing their thoughts and distinguishing definitions from descriptions.

One of the activities my children seemed to enjoy was one dealing with appearance and reality. I used several optical illusions to demonstrate the appearance of size difference, movement, and depth. A few children could only be convinced of the reality by being allowed "hands-on" experience with the materials. Only then did they believe that I was not performing magic.

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Hooray! A community of inquiry was happening on December fourteenth as we sat on the floor and read about Rebecca's wondering. She wondered if a prince (who had changed from a frog after she kissed it) would turn back into a frog if she kissed him. The children thought of other examples of reverse cause and effect. For example, they decided that if ice cubes are heated in a pan they turn into water; if that water is heated again it doesn't turn back into ice cubes. Almost everybody was "tuned in" and they were actually helping each other to verbalize ideas or clarify statements!

Philosophical discussions are not everyone's idea of a great time, as one child let me know in a later discussion. We were reviewing *Rebecca* and I asked them if there was anything they wondered about in the story so far. Tammy wondered why the elephant was green. Bob wondered why it ate sunflowers. Calvin wondered why Rebecca's tears tasted sweet. Yashica wondered why Rebecca was trying to teach her elephant to fly. Sedrick said, "I don't wonder about any of that stuff!" Sedrick was not ready to use his energy in the field of philosophical inquiry. He continued to let his feeling of frustration restrict his growth. He often used attention-getting behavior to try to sabotage the discussion.

During a lesson concerning the use of "If—, Then—" exercises, another child became frustrated beyond his level of maturity. Eddie was so concerned with "giving right answers" and contributing that he became very upset. This offered me an excellent opportunity to help the children put the logical issue to practical use. They comforted Eddie by suggesting alternate behavior patterns and encouraging him in his efforts.

The presence of voting machines in the building presented the perfect introduction to a discussion on reasons for voting. The children had seen political ads on television and watched adults coming to school to vote. They saw the

machines being moved into the building and were curious about all the commotion. Their curiosity motivated them right into the discussion on reasons for voting for a particular candidate, and on deciding when voting is the appropriate method of making a decision.

On page sixteen of *Rebecca*, the children were asked to make lists of the personal characteristics of Rebecca and Robert and to decide which character profile more accurately resembled their own. They were enthusiastic in recalling the characters' personality traits and helping me list them on the chalkboard. When our lesson continued the next day, we thought of friends and family and their personal characteristics; this proved to be interesting to the children. They talked to each other independently. As a group they decided that people they liked best were "nice," "friendly," and "love us."

Early in the year, we went to Scott Theater to see Hansel and Gretel. The children became very involved in the story when they were asked to "be trees." The witch was onstage looking for a fat little boy to cook in her oven. Wesson turned to me and said, "I hope she don't come up here!" Imaginary monsters and threatening situations can seem too real to little children and our discussion about real and imagined dangers gave them a chance to talk about their fears with each other. Someone told us that he had been afraid the first day of school. One boy was afraid of "big, mean kids." Another said that she was afraid of the dark; several voices echoed agreement on that.

In deciding what criteria would be used for making a judgment, we considered orange elephants. Tammy said, "Elephants are supposed to be gray — no other colors." Barribus offered, "Orange, brown, pink, black!" Stacy explained, "If all elephants were orange, an orange elephant wouldn't be funny — just something different than it should be is funny."

At one point, Rebecca decided to share her fig newtons with Robert and the dog, Andrew. Decision making was the issue under consideration here and the readers were asked to decide whether Andrew should get a cookie — and why they thought so. My children were quick to respond. Some even had reasons for their opinions. For example:

"None!"
"One!"
"If you give him too many, he'll get fat!"
"He'll get worms."
"If he's good, I'll give him a cookie."
"If he's bad, he won't get any."

Predicting outcomes is a skill that was developed in this course. By the beginning of the second semester the children had begun to enjoy such an exercise because they knew that their ideas mattered. This was also a skill that was part of the reading program in first grade and the children enjoyed the carryover.

Probability, possibility, and improbability were the topics of our lesson on Valentine's Day. The children felt that the probability of finding an elephant in their valentine sacks was very low. Christopher said that it was possible to find a picture of an elephant on a valentine. They thought it was improbable that they would find hamburgers in their sacks but very probable that valentines would be there. The possibility of finding candy was also very good, they explained to me, because they knew that some children had brought candy to school.

My children copied sentences from the board daily to practice good handwriting. The sentences usually included reading words, language skills, social studies facts, or poems. Always the sentences were to be taken home and read to parents. One day I filled the board with the following sentences and was delighted with the children's expressions as they did their work.

All of my pencils are red.
This pencil is red.
Is it my pencil?

All cookies are sweet.
This is sweet, so it must be a cookie.

Our lively discussion later seemed to make an impression because a parent reported that it reached their dinner table.

Key questions and answers helped us to solve more than one problem in our class. The children were able to see the relationship of key answers to our study of maps. The word "key" on a map reminded them of Rebecca's keys. *Rainbow World*, the current in-adoption first reader in Fort Worth, included skills pages which were easily adapted for use with the whole class in correlation with our thinking lessons.

Robert and Rebecca worked together to try to find a key question. The children in the class talked in small groups to remember ways that they had helped each other figure things out instead of trying to be first and best. They said that they did that kind of thinking when they read to each other, when they helped each other understand math problems, or when they taught a new child a game they already knew. This was a pretty successful session.

Petals Around the Roses is a game of frustration. I drew groups of dots on the chalkboard and asked, "How many petals are around the roses?" They were amazed that I would throw them a curve! Some responses were:

"What to do?"
"I don't know what you mean."
"I don't know how!"

Some just yelled out numbers, hoping to satisfy me. To my great surprise, Barribus was the first to figure out that the petals were only the dots around a center dot. He continued to give correct answers while everybody else was puzzled. Then, one by one, several others discovered the rule and shared it with a friend.

There are some important things I learned this year as I taught this course. Most of them are simply common sense to a strong teacher of any subject, but they are especially necessary to a teacher of Analytic Thinking.

1. Build on concepts and experiences the children can understand very well. Keep referring to *Rebecca*.
2. Be flexible. The *dialogue* is more important than staying on a certain topic that day.
3. Reinforce concepts by putting them into practice.
4. Require the children to give reasons for their opinions.
5. Encourage children to help each other and to "add to" what has been said.
6. Listen to them. Try to develop an atmosphere of respect

among the community in which every contribution is valued.

7. Observe physical signs of restlessness, too much frustration, and excitement.
8. Use "fun" examples to practice logic. (All bugs are yucky things.)
9. Share with parents and encourage them to ask their child about "Thinking Time."
10. Know when to quit! A successful session can be a very short one. It is possible that an unsuccessful session could continue into the summer months and beyond . . . and still not work.

Analytical Thinking was the craziness of orange elephants and the sweet tears of frustration and success. It was challenging, exciting, surprising—just the thing to add a little zest to the school year. I believe that the children in my class have been made conscious of some skills used in thinking and that they will be able to develop these skills further by putting them to use in their lives.

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