# Effective Strategies for Teaching Philosophy For Children

*Pixie* (Lipman, 1981), one of the novels from the *Philosophy for Children* series, was chosen for an exploratory trial in which we documented the teaching strategies that were used. We identified those which seemed to contribute to the success of the trial. The purpose of this paper is to describe these strategies in detail.

The trial was conducted at the laboratory school of the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP). This is an educational research center that serves a random selection of multi-ethnic children, all of whom have some Hawaiian ancestry. The center has been successful in designing language arts programs that have improved the academic performance of the target population (Crowell, 1983). *Pixie* was used as one part of an effort to raise teachers' awareness of thinking strategies and increase the amount of instructional time devoted to these strategies. For a more complete description of the experimental trial, see Crowell, Carroll, and Nu'uhiwa (1984).

In planning our trial, we considered how children learn and how the role of the teacher affects their learning. According to Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan (1980), students learn by talking with people in their environment and thinking things out. The role of the teacher is to prepare the environment, guide the discussion to focus on important themes sugested in the novel, and help the children relate these new ideas to their own experience. Lipman et al. caution against indoctrinating children with the teacher's preconceived values; rather, they encourage a process of open inquiry. Many of these qualities seemed compatible with the responsive teaching (Au, 1982) that we at KEEP already practiced. Since one of our research questions was whether *Pixie* could be substituted for a more traditional reading text, we decided to test *Pixie* with the teaching strategies that we already use in our comprehension - oriented reading program.

An experienced teacher who had been well trained in the use of these strategies taught *Pixie* to a group of six, third-grade children who were functioning above the class average. They completed the novel in 47 lessons over a three month period. Many of these lessons were videotaped unobtrusively from an observation room but with complete awareness by both teacher and children. Transcripts of these tapes supplied the examples cited in the remainder of this paper.

To clarify our discussion we will consider these teaching strategies under three categories. First, we will describe those techniques that were used for classroom management purposes, for example, keeping the children highly involved, maintaining a rapid pace, and fostering cooperative rather than competitive discussion. Second, we will discuss those strategies that were used to present the content of the novel. Third, we will describe those attempts by the teacher to give the children a metacognitive awareness of the thinking strategies they were learning in the context of *Pixie*.

**Classroom Management Techniques**

In teaching *Pixie,* the teacher employed a variety of specific techniques designed to keep the discussion animated, rapidly paced, and with a high level of involvement on the part of each of the six children. In the early lessons, the teacher was explicit in establishing the ground rules that governed daily discussions. For example, during the first lesson, the concept of character was discussed. As the children named characters they had seen in a play, a child raised his hand for permission to speak. The teacher responded, "You don't have to raise your hand." This statement early in the trial increased the pace of the lessons, added to the children's spontaneity, and generally gave a more conversational quality to the discussion. She introduced informal signals that the group could use to indicate consensus. For example, to confirm the fact that every child understood a point she made, she suggested, "Nod your head if you understand what I'm talking about when I say character."

The teacher used opportunities to shape the attentive behavior of the group. In the following example, she praised the child who was paying attention rather than criticizing one who wasn't.

**Teacher:** When you read page 1, this is your purpose. Notice that when I said, "This is your purpose," Kent looked right up here. His purpose is not going to be here (pointing at the book). His purpose is here (pointing to herself). The purpose you want to read page 1 for is to find out anything you can about the character Pixie. That's all you're going to be reading for.

The teacher's aim was to give the students a specific goal for reading, but at the same time she effectively let them know the behaviour she expected.

The teacher encouraged mutual helpfulness and support, emphasizing cooperative rather than competitive discussion. When one girl gave a particularly useful answer to a question posed by the teacher, two other children expressed pleasure at her response. The teacher reinforced their attitude.

**Teacher:** Donna hit the jackpot. Do you see how good Charles and Leroy feel about Donna's answer? What if it was a letter that we couldn't use?

**Leroy:** Just go.

**Teacher:** Just go on. That would still be good information that Donna gave you, that letter isn't there.

**Nancy:** And you won't call it again.

**Teacher:** You won't call it again. That's a good feeling about other people's answers, right?

The teacher was accepting of all contributions but demanded that each child be responsible for his or her own ideas. She made the children feel accountable by recording their initials next to their contributions.

**Teacher:** Kent, I'm going to put your initials here. Donna, I'm going to put yours here. Because,

this book is a little more advanced. If we say, "Now, I wonder who said this hypothesis?" we can look back and say, "Oh, Kent, can you help us?"

This process reflected the teacher's highly sensitive responsiveness to each student's contribution. In addition to providing a visual display to help the children follow the content, she supported risk taking by considering all comments and she helped children to clarify their own ideas.

By using the strategies that we have just described, the teacher encouraged free exchange among the children regarding the issues suggested in *Pixie*. She permitted a conversational approach in the discussion even though it sometimes resulted in overlapping speech or co-narration of ideas by two or more children, which may be disturbing to some teachers. She was firm, however, in not permitting any deviation from the topic. She lost no time in negotiating procedures for turn-taking and in return had the complete attention of all of the children all of the time. She maintained a high level of interest and suspense to the very end of the novel. It is extremely important to foster this kind of interchange, involvement, and enthusiasm to make *Pixie* a success. None of the techniques used were an end in themselves, rather they were a means of conveying the meaning of the novel and facilitating the cognitive growth of the children.

**Content Instuction**

Since the trial of *Pixie* was done in the context of language arts instruction, the teacher emphasized the format of the novel and elements such as plot, characters, and setting. She prepared the children for the length of the novel and helped them work out a time line within which they would complete it. She also used a variation of a suggestion made by Lipman and Sharp (1982) to construct a visual record on chart paper of the contributions of each child. This helped the children to keep in mind the story line and delay their sense of closure regarding the outcome of the plot. They observed the continuous character development and made predictions about the behavior of Pixie and her friends on the basis of their accumulated information. They became aware of the multiple settings used in most novels.

The teacher's goal was to encourage the students to use a variety of thinking strategies whenever possible. To do this, she posed problems based on philosophical concerns suggested by *Pixie*. Several examples follow that illustrate these concerns.

One example is from a discussion of analogies. The teacher posed a question of text interpretation: "Did the author give you a definition?" The students' responses illustrate how they evaluated evidence from the text and rejected their initial hypothesis based on this evidence.

**Leroy:** It was on . . . it's on page 41, line 23. It says, "I suppose that would be an analogy." He gave the definition right there.

**Teacher:** Okay. Do you agree or disagree?

**Donna:** Agree.

**Teacher:** Agree? So what is an analogy?

**Leroy:** It's like um . . . an . . . Oh. They just give an example.

Another illustration of the student's use of thinking strategies comes from a discussion about models. The teacher asked for examples of models within the classroom. The children hypothesized that a globe was a model and talked about evidence to support this hypothesis.

**Donna:** The globe!

**Teacher:** Yes, the globe is an excellent example of a model, because?

**Leroy:** Because . . .

**Teacher:** . . . it even has a . . .

**Donna:** It has big um . . . like papier maché . . .

**Leroy:** . . . a scale.

**Teacher:** What do you think the scale might be on the globe?

**Leroy:** Five thousand miles an inch.

**Teacher:** One inch a thousand miles. So every time you measured an inch of ocean, it would mean there was a thousand miles in there. That's an excellent example of a model. It's the same relationship.

**Kent:** Because it has bumps like . . . like the mountains.

**Teacher:** Um hum. You can show a whole mountain range that you know is enormous but a model would be smaller.

**Leroy:** Cause you can't fit the whole world in our classroom. If the whole world went in our classroom, we wouldn't be able to see it, because we would be on the world.

**Teacher:** Then it wouldn't be a model, then it would be the real thing, huh?

These examples demonstrate the value of an open, accepting, responsive approach on the part of the teacher, as well as her knowledge of each student. She gave tasks or asked questions that were matched to the abilities of the children. Some of these were questions at which the most limited student could succeed occasionally, and at the other extreme were questions that would challenge the most capable student. Tasks that are always easy provide no opportunity for new learning (Au, 1982).

These questions cannot be scripted ahead of time. They are dependent on a teacher listening to every word and every meaning the child intends, even if it is not very clearly stated. She must know the text material very thoroughly, but she must also know what background experiences the children bring to the task. The teacher must respond on a moment-to-moment basis. She can plan a list of topics, she can even plan the first or second question of the discussion, but after that she must listen to the children's contributions. On the basis of these she must determine what areas need clarification, which topics present opportunities for stimulating

higher level thinking and problem-solving, or in the case of P for C, which topics provide opportunities for philosophical inquiry.

In order to conduct an effective discussion using a flexible inquiry technique such as this, the teachers at KEEP rely on a strategy known as experience-text-relationship (Au, 1979). The initial step in this method is to help the child recall relevant experiences he or she already has for the topic of discussion. The students must become aware of whatever prior knowledge they already have that relates to the new learning situation. Attention is then directed to the text as the children become familiar with the new information it presents. The third and most critical element is to build the relationship to help the child integrate the new ideas just acquired with the prior knowledge he or she already had. Until this integration occurs the child is unable to apply these new ideas and put them into service. The use of this paradigm by the teacher is important in order to insure that the children have internalized the new ideas and can generalize them to a variety of other situations. It is especially important in helping the children extend the thinking strategies stimulated by the discussions of *Pixie* to other situations.

**Metacognitive Awareness**

One of the major, long-range goals of KEEP is to give the children a metacognitive awareness of the thinking strategies that they will need to solve problems both in and out of school. We want them to learn how to learn, to be aware of a whole tool kit of problem-solving strategies, and to be able to select an effective one for any given task. During the teaching of *Pixie,* the teacher provided an heuristic to help the children identify the sources of information they would need to answer her questions (Raphael, 1984). She wrote three phrases on the board to identify these categories: *right there, think and search,* and *on my own.* The following example illustrates the teacher's use of this strategy.

**Teacher:** I put down three of these, these are three labels we will be using throughout *Pixie* for the kinds of questions that I ask you, or that you will ask yourselves . . . or that you ask each other. The definition of analogy is as I told you, um . . . comparisons that use 'like' or 'as,' right? That's what an analogy is. If you can find the answer right there in your book, it would be a good example of a *right there* question. If they gave you the definition, but it's hidden someplace, if you have to think about it, put pieces of information . . .

**Leroy:** *Think and search.*

**Teacher:** It would be *think and search.* If you had to read a little bit, close your book . . . and infer, it would be an *on my own* because there aren't any words that tell you.

The teacher also took frequent opportunities to articulate the thinking processes she observed in the children to give them a metacognitive awareness of the strategies they were already using. In the following example taken from the first lesson, the students were guessing the title of the novel letter by letter from the teacher's clue, "The name of the book is also the name of a character." One of the students called out the letter 'e.'

**Teacher:** There is an 'e' in this character's name and it's at the end.

**Leroy:** Now I know what it isn't — Leroy.

**Teacher:** It isn't Leroy. Can I shake your hand for that? That was good. Maybe in his head he thought the hypothesis might be, "The name of the book is Leroy." Then he got a clue and he said, "Oh, my hypothesis is wrong. It's not Leroy."

It would be easy to overlook this as an egocentric comment, but the teacher used the opportunity to model informal hypothesis testing.

In another example, the teacher encouraged the children to use evidence from the text to make generalizations about characters in the novel.

**Teacher:** Now that you know a little bit about Pixie, do you think Pixie would just hand over definitions for you or just hand over answers to you?

**Nancy:** No.

**Charles:** No.

**Donna:** No, because this book is not like a baby's book! She wouldn't just tell us everything. We would have to look for it.

**Nancy:** Yeah, because you have to search for (inaudible) to do the work.

**Teacher:** Uh huh. Because of what you know about Pixie, and the kind of character she is, she's probably not going to make things easy for you. But you can handle this. You've been handling analogies and ambiguities, and all kinds of higher level things.

**Summary**

*Pixie* is a very creative novel and provides an excellent vehicle for stimulating discussion and analyzing text and character. We found that the crucial difference between *Pixie* and the basal reader stories our children have used is that the characters in the novel model the thinking processes we want to help our children develop. Pixie and her friends actually articulate the thought sequences they engage in. The dialogue of the story shows the characters reviewing and weighing the evidence they have, verbally trying one alternative and then another, and giving reasons for their decisions. This quality rarely occurs even in the most challenging of the basal stories (Kawakami, 1983).

This quality combined with the teaching strategies we have described made our trial of *Pixie* an effective demonstration of the teaching of logical thinking and problem-solving. The teaching strategies related to classroom management

that seemed to contribute most were: to establish clearly the procedures used to monitor discussion; to be open and accepting of children's ideas while permitting them to make modifications; to be responsive in adapting the course of the lessons to their needs, and to maintain interest and enthusiasm that would encourage student involvement, commitment, and accountability. Those teaching strategies that gave students opportunities to practice logical thinking and problem solving in the context of the story were also important. Finally, the most important teaching strategies were those that helped students become aware of their own thinking, analyze questions and identify sources of information to answer those questions, and be able to select the appropriate thinking strategy needed to solve each new problem.

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