

Philosophy For Children and The Special Education Child*

The Philosophy For Children curriculum is offered and used in many school systems. During the 1983 - 1984 school year, I was given the opportunity to be trained to use Philosophy For Children in my classroom. I am a special education teacher, working in District 24 Queens, for the New York City Board of Education. My students are classified as educable mentally retarded and range from the ages of nine to twelve years old. I chose to use the text of "Kio and Gus", because with modifications, it is appropriate for my students understanding and academic ability.

Philosophy For Children is designed to promote creative thinking and has been found to be successful with children who are intellectually gifted and within the regular school population. There was doubt by the trainers that Philosophy For Children could be used by my students. This presented a challenge to me, for I believed it would enhance the students' learning and my own pedagogical needs.

Philosophy For Children leads children into conceptual and reflective thinking through a story and its related exercises. The program develops the teacher's skill for questioning and, even more important, listening to the children's responses. It elicits opinions, ideas and beliefs from the students in a non-threatening manner. The teacher guides the class to reach various conclusions without allowing his/her own beliefs to overpower those of the students.

As all educators know, instruction for the "special" child is based on the child's specific learning disability. Most lessons are taught by rote memorization. By promoting creative thought processes using Philosophy For Children with modifications, the special education child becomes challenged to reason. It provides an outlet for their experiences, acceptance of differences of opinions, and broadens their own conception of their environment and its effect upon them.

My students have difficulty in abstract reasoning, decision making, coping with environmental experiences and are frustrated because of past academic failure. The classroom atmosphere, created through the use of Philosophy For Children, provides positive reinforcement for the children's need to succeed.

It is important that the students comprehend the story. The teacher may choose to read the text aloud while students follow in their books, to keep the continuity of the story, to be able to stop when necessary, and to explain word meanings. If there are advanced readers in the class, the teacher may desire full student participation, but still insure full comprehension by all the students. The teacher should review the story line, while it is being read, so students remember past events that may be related to present ones. This helps improve the students' attention span. Before each lesson begins, the teacher should review characters and

events for students' complete understanding and focusing, keeping the continuity with the new reading.

Once an important statement or event is reached in the text, the teacher should begin the discussion. If the students start questioning or responding, their remarks become important and it is the students who draw their own conclusions. The teacher becomes a mediator, repeating the children's responses for the class and prevents ill feelings from occurring when there are differences of opinions. The teacher should know to end discussions when they have reached their full potential or the students become disinterested. The discussions encourage the children to volunteer information and opinions related to the text and their experiences. Teachers will notice increased vocabulary usage and improvement in the children's self esteem because they are being given positive attention and encouragement.

Some students may have difficulty expressing themselves. Art work is incorporated in the Philosophy For Children program on given pages in the text. The teacher can use picture drawing anytime, if it will help stimulate the children's conception of the material or discussion. I have found it helps the child focus on his imagination and promotes creative thought by the follow-up discussions based on his art work. Students may not have an outlet.

Tactile materials, such as clay, help the children visualize the differences in viewpoints, the perceiving and accomplishment of tasks that students have, one from the other, in the making of the same item.

Involving the senses of touch, smell, as well as seeing and hearing, when using Philosophy For Children in the special education classroom should be encouraged. One exercise I use to emphasize blindness (a part of "Kio and Gus" text) is to blindfold the students and give them simple commands that they ordinarily have no problems doing visually. They are exposed to the problems of the visually handicapped by experiencing them themselves. They also comprehend that other senses are not affected by the loss of one sense. A creative educator can create his/her own exercises to highlight the text.

Some of the given exercises, written by Lipman and his colleagues, are too difficult for use by the special education population. The educator should select those exercises that the students can easily complete. The vocabulary is advanced, and the teacher can do the activity by simplifying the language yet achieving the same results. For others, the teacher may choose not to use them at all. Again, the educator could create their own exercises that will be more meaningful for the class. It is important to remember to read directions slowly and to give examples and explanations so students can easily accomplish an exercise. The Philosophy For Children program is meant to be enjoyable, not a frustrating experience.

It is the teacher's flexibility in the making of exercises, and implementing the program which will lead to success in understanding, and the development of creative and cognitive thought processes, or its complete failure in the special education classroom. The educator must be sensitive to the needs of his/her students, even knowing when the

students have had enough for a given day. Some days, the students may be too restless for the program to be presented; other days, the students regret that the day's lesson is over.

When implementing Philosophy For Children in the classroom, the educator must respect student's ideas, opinions and beliefs. The child needs to trust and feel secure before he feels free to speak. Often what may seem an unimportant response, when encouraged, could be the key to opening the door for greater comprehension and conceptualizing. The main goal is to promote students' logic and reasoning.

The classroom's atmosphere of acceptance created when students become involved in Philosophy For Children will carry over and help the children in all academic areas. The children become more interested and inquisitive in areas of Social Studies, Science, and Mathematics. They show improvement in Language Arts and Reading skills. There will be better interaction between classmates, increased attention span, greater self esteem and pride in work, Philosophy For Children broadens students' horizons and outlook toward their education. It is of great value to special education and should be incorporated in all classrooms.

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