

# Pixie: Looking for Meaning and the Third Grade

In reviewing my year of Analytic Teaching, several recurring thoughts come to mind. In this paper, I will attempt to share some beneficial ideas for teachers to use that I feel have been tested sufficiently in a practical setting. Initially, I felt unsure and clumsy with my group. By the year's end, the sessions have become very comfortable and therefore probably more productive for all concerned. Important points that I will explain are: 1. My ground rules, 2. Teacher planning and forethought, 3. Expectations and goals, 4. Topics that interest my children, 5. Rules for the teacher, 6. Use of the manual, 7. My rewards.

Although my goal this first year in Analytic Teaching has been to create a community of inquiry in my practicum class, I have expanded my horizons greatly as I have progressed. A helpful sentence for me in the *Harry* instructional manual is: "One of the purposes of engaging each other in dialogue about matters of importance is that it helps us to discover each others' perspectives, learn about different frames of reference and move towards being more objective." This seems to me to be a most worthy goal and one that cannot be practiced too early. What I did not realize at the onset of this adventure was that building the community would be only a part of the total picture. So much more has been involved in my analytical thinking class including the benefits afforded to me personally. What a refreshing experience to think with children. So often the teacher just doles out the "knowledge" or information to be "learned" without ever having the luxury of sharing a child's thought in conversation. Seldom would I otherwise take time to sit down and listen to children's thoughts on a particular subject. Discussing with the children and seeing through their eyes the different angles and slants, opinions and the "why" of these opinions, examples from their vantage point . . . these have been the rewarding, fulfilling aspects of my class this third grade year.

A prime goal throughout the year has been to listen to one another. At the very beginning of the year, we adopted a slogan that I had heard one of my instructors use, "Silence might mean we're thinking." We displayed the slogan enclosed in a bubble coming from a gorilla's lips in cartoon fashion. This helped establish the idea that we had a right to be silent, to think before speaking. Silence is not a void to be filled with talk.

To be really productive, I felt some procedures would have to be gone over with the group. The first day, we laid down several ground rules and have refreshed our memory throughout the year. Rules we hold important are: Everyone has a chance to speak on each discussion subject; we never put anyone down for an opinion; we listen to the speaker, agreeing or disagreeing as we choose; we have the right to "pass" and speak later; we try to speak to each other and not filter everything through the teacher; we try to sit by

someone different often; we try to communicate clearly, not monopolizing the conversation with too many personal stories. These ground rules work very well for us as we are a small group, (11 members), and they must be enforced by the teacher as unobtrusively as possible. This leads me to the fact that the responsibility of the teacher is really overwhelming at times! The conversations go in many different directions, sometimes following different but meaningful paths from those which might be planned by the teacher. This very fact is what makes analytic teaching so exciting and enjoyably unpredictable!

Our "Pixie" group has a format far removed from the usual classroom setting. We sit on the floor in an oval, usually boy/girl. We meet for 25 minutes twice a week. The group is composed of varied nationalities, academic abilities, economic backgrounds, interests and dispositions. We are more accepting in this setting than in our classroom as a whole and speak more freely. I like to think each child feels quite worthy to air his thoughts and that each is a contributing member. There is no embarrassment for being quiet and thinking before offering opinions. Sometimes a child does not contribute orally at all. I do discourage "passing" frequently or repeatedly. I use the term "agree with" and many of the children do also. This helps the children speak to each other instead of to me. The children have come naturally to giving explanations of "why" when expressing their thoughts. In the *Harry* instructional manual, I particularly review for myself the second leading idea in Chapter 10, "Offering good reasons for our opinions." It helps me convey to the children that persons who have, and can give, good reasons for their beliefs will be more persuasive both to others and to themselves in showing their opinions to be worthy. Otherwise, we can feel insecure about our beliefs. Leading children to realize that good reasons are factual, relevant, familiar, and explanatory is vital and comes so naturally in the discussion group. Excellent examples are given by the children; ideas I would never think of!

I have used *Pixie, Looking for Meaning*, by Lipman and Sharp, in my third grade class. I purchased seven copies to use with eleven students. Sharing has not been a problem; to cut expense, I would suggest one copy for every two children. We read the novel, not on a regular schedule, but as we are ready for another episode. Each child reads a short passage. I sometimes feel it necessary to refresh memories by reading short passages as they apply to our discussion of the day. The children enjoy reading and have complained that we do not read enough.

Different kinds of lessons have produced differing results as to the success of the day's discussion. Some days are very "flat" but none are actually unproductive. A lively discussion, one which brings forth a burst of initial responses, is a goal worth striving for. I let the children spill out their ideas at first, then we move around the circle in turn, expressing, sometimes changing, ideas and opinions. We have conversations with the group as a whole but speak to others' thought-provoking ideas. I paraphrase when needed to clarify, being careful to repeat accurately. A child may always raise his hand to add ideas, but all get a chance to

address the question. Even when the lesson is less than I hoped, if we make any progress at all, I feel that time is not wasted. When we are late for P. E. class because we have forgotten the time, then I am well satisfied with the lesson! I have become more adept at selecting the productive lessons, but I still get surprised. There are definite areas that provoke more thought from my third graders, and I feel that there would be variance from class to class.

In order to have a smooth discussion, the teacher must take time to reflect on the topic and choose the questions with which she is comfortable. Reading the introduction to each chapter, highlighting important points, anticipating possible responses (which is a near impossibility), becoming familiar with the story as well as the lesson are imperative. Having an idea of the direction in which you want to move will add to your confidence as the discussion leader. I relied heavily on the *Pixie* manual all year. Although I realize that I will eventually move on to other literature, *Pixie* has been very appealing to me and to the children. I have followed the manual very closely, choosing and revising some lessons as they were applicable to my group. The manual is important to me.

One extra activity that has proven to be fun is inviting mothers to sit in on a discussion. Many parents work but at least half have been able to visit us, several during Public School Week. Interestingly, several commented that it was very hard not to participate in the discussion too! A problem that I continue to fight! I thought this was a compliment to the children and their ability to stir thoughts and draw out others.

It has been a shock to me that the longer I work with the activities and with the children, the less I know. Perhaps it is forward progress to realize one's limitations and feel resolved to improve areas of weakness. It is challenging to try to improve each session, using constructive criticism from professors and feedback from past successes. There are so many things to remember, some of which are: talk between children, keep quiet when necessary, explore and go where the child leads as much as possible, keep forward progress foremost, set limits, spread discussion time around equally, keep the climate of inquiry continuing as the year goes on, keep lessons fresh, varied and appealing, have continuity from one lesson to another, one idea to another; actively listen, not just feign listening; paraphrase accurately, not as you would have the child say it but as they *actually* said it. These techniques take time and patience with yourself and can always be improved. The greatest feeling comes to me when a topic discussed in "Pixie group" spills over into another class or subject. The light in the child's eye or wise smile spreading across his face as if to say, "I've thought about that before . . . this is like our Pixie discussion" is the pay-off. When a child sees a relationship to another situation, understands a similarity, catches an ambiguity or vagueness . . . this is what is delightful for me.

Our novel, *Pixie*, has lead us down many enjoyable avenues. An aspect that I had initially not thought of was that the children "see" Pixie, and she is very real to them. We will do a Pixie portrait at the end of the year and will write a story about how it would be to have Pixie in our

third grade. Maybe we will write a letter to her, expressing why we enjoyed her adventures. I anticipate more insight into the acceptance of Pixie as a real personality.

What I will remember most fondly about the year will be the many ideas and delightful comments that the children have expressed. It was an impossibility to get all of them down on paper before they were gone. I have been able to keep some examples of general ideas but not the expressions and antics of the children. I hope that those will not fade for awhile. Thoughts from some of the most productive lessons will follow.

One discussion area most suited to third grade is that of "appropriate and not appropriate." These lessons have led us down some silly paths, but this too seems to have its place at this age. The subject definitely crosses over into our everyday third grade lives.

In discussing "silence might mean we're thinking," we talked about what silence meant to each child. One girl came up with a thought that all noise is sound, but not all sound is noise. She wrote this down for us on a little pad to keep. She added: "noise is sound you hear; noise is loud; everything you hear is sound . . . we hear noise so it must be sound!" She seemed delighted to come to this conclusion. Other children said that noise is loud but sound can be soft. The children made a list of "Silence is: when your sister is gone; when you are called on and you don't know the answer; no company and no tattletales; watching a forest; being by yourself; miserable; your dog not barking; scary (as when you are at home alone), fun, just sitting."

On thinking, one child said it was when your brain was operating; like remote control; a person has a brain and he ought to use it! Another child explained it as thoughts being like a cloud in your mind. They felt that one is working when he thinks; thinking can happen in dreams; one can think while watching TV; imagining is thinking; a person gets smarter all the time even though he can forget. Most children wanted lots of thoughts instead of a few nice thoughts. One child declared: "We are made out of thinking!"

In our discussion of light and dark, one child pointed out that a blind person wouldn't know about light; it wouldn't exist for him. As the class had previously established that dark was the absence of light, one child pointed out that light had to be something for it to be "absent." One pointed that the blind person might feel the heat from a light to which another said: "This room is very light and I'm freezing." We then wondered that if a light "goes out," where does it go? Out to dinner! Out into space! To someone else's house?

The "names" discussion was one of the first to have lots of interaction. All had other names in mind that were used as pet names now or ones that they wanted to be called by. They thought they might be a different person if they had been named differently. Some used their names when talking to themselves, especially when they were telling themselves to do something. It mattered greatly whether or not one had a name.

One of our favorite games was one in which the object of the game was to say what the preceding person's comment made one think of. This was non-threatening and could

be silly with lots of laughing.

When discussing the topic of friends, there were several good examples of how persons can talk together a lot and still not be friends; also how we can seldom ever talk to a person and still be his friend. Some children had old friends who had moved away and were not in touch; they still insisted they were friends. I was taken aback by the acceptance of the idea that one could be afraid of friends! Some thought they could not be friends with Pixie. She might be bossy. Most thought her questions meant that she was smart; some thought she was often a "big mouth" and several thought she would be a fun friend even if they could not always understand her. One child said he thought her "motor" was turned on all the time and she knew what was going on! All were delighted with her elaborate attempts at clear communication. Personally, I felt some children were intimidated by Pixie's questioning nature and boldness.

On daydreams, children thought one could learn from them as inventors might. One child said one should not daydream because it wasted time. A student could also get into trouble if he daydreamed at the wrong time. Most agreed good places to daydream were outdoors, in a swing, in the car traveling, where there is peace and quiet.

In the discussion on stories, the choice between a story of a deer and one about a boy who was cared for by a deer was clear cut. The children preferred the boy who was cared for by a deer. Someone suggested a title of "Tarzan of the Deers." The children liked to make up their own stories because they had control and did not have to be "bored" because some books were too long. The preference as to reading stories about children or animals was about equal.

The exercise on good reasons brought out quality conversation. The children did extremely well in breaking each other's "air tight cases" when trying to decide on the guilt or innocence of a suspect. I just kept very quiet, and the children politely refuted each other's arguments on their own. True, all children participate that day, but the sacrifice for one day was worth the quality conversation. The "crackle" of thoughts flying through the air was most exciting! This is a lesson I read incorrectly and did not foresee as successful.

A pitfall I had to avoid was extending the favorite lessons too long. It is usually better to return to a topic another week rather than continue. When interest is gone, time is wasted trying to coax further discussion. I had to be realistic about third grade wiggling and attention span. I also had to keep in mind that although the children did not always sound like eight year olds, they were, and would act accordingly! The temptation to assemble only the "top" students in an analytic teaching group is strong, but should be avoided in my opinion. Quiet children, those who are not apparent leaders, sensitive children, "average" students, children with different backgrounds, different nationalities, and an even mixing of boys and girls made an ideal group for me. Many pleasant surprises may come your way . . . and the very children you do not expect to shine, will! (This can work in reverse also.) Most all children will have certain topics that draw them out, and given equal chances, most all children will take their share of the discussion time.

In polling my group recently on what they thought were the drawbacks and benefits of our "Pixie group," I was most gratified to hear the very comments that I had initially hoped for. All were pleased to be chosen for the group; they felt that they had "learned" more because they had been doing so much "thinking." Several agreed that they liked to sit and have a conversation for a change and talk about subjects that they would never talk about otherwise. They liked to say things and not be laughed at and not have their feelings hurt. They liked to hear what others had to say and agree and disagree. They thought it was boring when they all agreed or when too many people passed. When asked to criticize the program, they said some subjects were too much alike or too babyish. They disagreed, of course, on which these were . . . showing that they had definite ideas and did not hesitate to continue to state them. As I watched the group interact, I thought back to the beginning of the year. What a change! Probably mostly in me. How different I felt in comparison to the first few sessions. How different the children acted . . . maybe a little too uninhibited at times . . . but completely at ease and feeling free to talk. Some of the shy children have become "stars" in Pixie group. Several children speak much more clearly in the group than in the regular classroom. Consequently, these children have been looked on in a different light than in the past . . . their self-images enhanced. Really delightful senses of humor and personalities have surfaced. The most important thing is, however, the fact that each child can give opinions with reasons to back them up and that each one feels capable of doing this. I hope this is only their beginning of school careers of "looking for meaning."

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#### Footnotes

1. Lipman, Sharp, Oscanyan, *Philosophical Inquiry: An Instructional Manual to Accompany Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, Institute for Advancement of Philosophy for Children, Montclair State College, Upper Montclair, N.J., 1979, p. 436.
2. *Ibid*, p. 253.