Green Elephants? - Wonder in a First Grade

"I have an elephant.
It is green and eats my sunflowers."[1]

Wonder, disbelief, excitement, and humor showed in the faces of my twenty-five first grade students as some replied:

"Incredible."

"Who ever heard of a green elephant?"

This launched a discussion about whether the story was whimsical or realistic. As each child responded, he/she was asked to give a reason for his/her claim.

The story initiating this discussion was from Dr. Ronald Reed's *Rebecca,* an unpublished manuscript written for analytic teaching to be used in kindergarten and grade one.

Analytic Teaching is a teacher training program designed to introduce students to a method of teaching which was developed by Dr. Matthew Lipman of the Institute for Advancement of Philosophy for Children. The teaching method is designed to use the tools of philosophy and logic in order to improve the thinking skills of children.

Through the teacher training program, I gained a surprising new understanding of the significance of dialogue to thinking. The assumption that reflection generates dialogue was challenged. Instead, it was asserted that dialogue generates reflection.

> Very often, when people engage in dialogue with one another, they are compelled to reflect, to concentrate, to consider the alternatives, to listen closely, to give careful attention to definitions and meanings, to recognize previously unthought of options, and in general to perform a vast number of mental activities that they might not have engaged in had the conversation never occurred.[2]

Introspection verified this concept. Experience in the college training program reinforced its meaning. Believing that the analytic teaching program with its emphasis on dialogue would promote more effective thinking in my first grade students prompted me to want to include it in the curriculum.

Another exciting characteristic of the analytic teaching training program was the emphasis placed on the fostering of cooperative activities rather than competitive ones. In discussion sessions as well as in creative activities, such as writing poetry, we as students aided each other by offering helpful suggestions and encouragement. The product was improved by the interaction of the community. Even students who felt themselves limited in creative ability discovered that they did possess talents; that they did have something worth while to say or write. The nuturing emotional climate of the college class was conducive to a feeling of freedom to let imaginations soar. Self esteem was heightened. An increased appreciation of the unique worth of each member of the community emerged. As we neared the end of the class term, I was convinced that I wanted to try this program with my first grade class. After writing a practicum proposal and securing the permission of my principal, I was ready to initiate the program.

In the beginning of the school year, a pretest was administered which proved to be very difficult. Some of the children reversed b's and d's; some were frustrated by the unfamiliar kinds of questions. The lines were too close together and it was hard for the children to keep the place.

Organizing the physical arrangement of the classroom so that it was conducive to philosophical discussion was the next task. The need to see each child's face and body posture was essential to interpreting non-verbal communication. Raised eyebrows, a frown or a puzzled expression were often ways of silently asking "why." With good visibility as a priority, the children were seated on the floor in a circle, but they could not sit still long before they became uncomfortable. Squirming and bothering other students interfered with the discussion. Next we tried moving all the desks into a circle. This was very hard to do and took too much time. The most advantageous arrangement was a modified square, using part of the desks for three sides and filling in the corners and remaining side of the square with chairs to provide seating for all students. Although difficult to accomplish initially, the children soon learned the routine and were able to get the desks and chairs in place for thinking class in about five minutes.

Once the physical structure of the classroom was arranged, we agreed upon some guidelines:

(1) Everyone will have an opportunity to speak.
(2) One person speaks at a time while the rest of us listen.
(3) Our hands should be down while someone is speaking.
(4) Respect other people's thoughts.
(5) Respect other people's feelings.

The story, *Rebecca,* held the interest of my children from the first chapter. Each session one chapter was read. Occasionally the previous chapter or chapters were read to refresh the memory of some children or to introduce the story to new children. For each chapter there were suggested activities and exercises. Through involvement in dialogue, the children became acquainted with the concepts being presented.

Many of the activities and exercises were also skills that were used in developing reading: recognizing similarities and differences, differentiating between reality and whimsey, predicting outcomes, and making decisions. These reading skills served as supplementary practice for the analytic thinking class. Reinforcement of these analytic thinking skills also came through related activities in science, social studies, language, art, and creative writing. This carry-over into other areas of the curriculum was fun for the children to discover.

One of the exercises that was particularly successful was justification for preferences or aversions. The children were shown a large beautifully wrapped package tied with a colorful ribbon. They shook the package and tried to guess what might be in it. Asked whether they thought they would like or dislike the object, the children excitedly agreed that it looked like a present and must be something good. When they were pressed to justify their opinions, they had to admit that they did not have good reasons. Inside the wrap-

ped box there was a tissue paper wrapping over a black plastic garbage bag that contained the mysterious object. When discussing the tissue paper wrapped object, some children speculated that a stuffed animal might be in the container because it felt soft. The children's suspense and excitement continued to mount as the tissue paper was removed and the black plastic bag was revealed. Then there was a change in the mood of the class. Two of the children expressed doubts about liking the object inside. "It might be something scary!" Through manipulation, discussion and a hint or two the children decided that there was a koala bear in the bag. Seeing the koala bear at last, the children voiced their approval. At that point the group had enough information to justify their reasons for preference or aversion. They had learned a lesson about snap judgments that they will not soon forget.

Another preferred activity was the assignment to begin with a strange, crazy idea, like "An orange elephant eating a hot dog at Coney Island."[3] Each student's task was to take that idea, and make it a little crazier by adding to it. When nothing crazier could be thought of, another unusual idea was introduced and the activity continued. Participation during this exercise was at an all time high! At another time) attention was captured when the teacher entered the schoolroom wearing heavy glasses with an enormous nose attached to them, a sun hat and heavy wool scarf. The objective of this session, and the following session, was to compare the intensity of feelings when one experiences an event with the intensity of feelings when one recalls the event. Initially the reaction was explosive laughter when the children observed the incompatability of the sun hat and the wool scarf along with other ridiculous things. Remembering was less humorous, but the smiles and animated coversation of the children indicated the lingering pleasure of the activity.

An exciting episode was playing detective and trying to guess the ending of another child's story. The students chose another classmate to guess the ending of their stories. Curiosity was aroused at each attempt to solve the mystery.

During another session, the children were asked to close their eyes, think of one sentence for the beginning of a story and one sentence for the middle of a story, then signal that they were prepared by putting up their thumbs. After the author told his/her beginning and middle story sentence, he/she chose a member to contribute the ending. The response was so good that the young author often had a choice of three or four interesting possiblities for concluding the story.

There were many enjoyable experiences; however, I did encounter problems in the practical application of the program. Too much teacher direction was a major one. A helpful technique for decreasing the amount of teacher direction was to ask the last speaker to choose the next respondent, giving the children more responsibility for facilitating the discussion. Later in the year as the children became more proficient readers, some of the exercises were written on the board or on a chart before the session began to further minimize teacher participation. Another device that reduced channeling the discussion through the teacher was the use of cards with part of an exercise on each one. The students then drew a card and without further direction followed the instruction on the card. If reading difficulty occurred, the participant chose a friend to help.

Another concern was the amount of time required to complete a chapter lesson, since sessions of approximately twenty to twenty-five minutes were the most productive. Concentration lagged, momentum slowed, and discipline became a problem with sessions longer than twenty-five minutes. Many times one chapter lesson required two or three sessions to conclude. Divided lessons often produced diminished interest for the incompleted lesson or parts. Review was necessary to rekindle enthusiasm before the related activities or exercises could effectively be done.

Scheduling was also a problem. Experimentation indicated that the choice time to conduct the analytic thinking class was the first period in the day, before the pressure of the crowded curriculum was felt. A necessity for a successful session was an unhurried atmosphere free from interruptions. Two sessions on a weekly basis seemed to be most appropriate for the curriculum. Furthermore, rescheduling to another day proved advisable when a special event, such as a school program or a class party, occurred on the same day as the analytic thinking class.

One of the problems that caused concern was the lack of participation of some children, especially when the whole group was in session together. For one very shy child, the fear of ridicule appeared to block expression. The child's face revealed interest, but she did not speak. Breaking up into small groups promoted involvement, as evidenced by the increased contributions of the less verbal students. Sometimes children were encouraged to participate by being asked to repeat or clarify what a previous speaker had said. Giving an inattentive child the responsibility to choose the next speaker often proved helpful in redirecting the child's interest to the group's task.

Some lessons were frustrating. The distinction between the prescriptive and descriptive use of words was very hard for the children to understand. Another difficult task was to define thinking. The responses of nearly all of the children demonstrated their inability to distinguish between describing something and defining it.

Developing a community of inquiry was an important objective of our program. The text *Rebecca* was used as a springboard for philosophical discussions. Dialogue was stimulated through discussion of Rebecca's questions and through other related activities. Initially each student was interested in speaking his/her own ideas, and did little listening to others. Questions were asked to involve them in dialogue. It took a while for children to know that "yes" or "no" was not an acceptable response. The children were required to give reasons to support their opinions or statements. Concurrently, the other students' responsibilities were to listen carefully so that they could either concur or logically disagree with the opinions expressed. Gradually, respect for one another's opinion developed. The children became really involved in one another's thinking. They helped each other express ideas through questions and suggestions that helped to clarify the meaning of some of each other's thoughts. Finally, after months of dialogue, a com-

munity of inquiry had evolved!

The New Jersey State Teacher's College motto, "He whc dares to teach must never cease to learn," has had renewed significance for me. After sifting through information gained from other analytic thinking teachers, college courses, philosophy for children's literature and then combining that knowledge with my own experience, I compiled some suggestions:

1. Keep in mind that seeing a teacher who is curious, intellectually open, and respectful encourages those qualities in children — modeling is important!
2. Use the concepts and experiences the children can relate to as a springboard to more advanced understanding.
3. Discover ways to apply concepts in other curriculum areas.
4. Encourage children to build cooperatively on the ideas of others; to "add to" the thoughts of others.
5. Require children to give reasons for their opinions.
6. Promote good listening skills by listening attentively to children.

Analytic thinking class has been a challenging, worthwhile experience. Based on my observation and teaching experience, some rewarding outcomes were the development of more effective thinking skills, increased proficiency in communication skills, and an improvement in creative activities. Beyond academic progress, dialogue also enabled the children to realize that there was more than one way to respond to a life situation; that there were options that could lead to greater fulfillment. I believe that the introduction to philosophy and logic that my class received in analytic thinking class provided them with some useful skills and insights that will be helpful in their lives.

Irene Wyatt

Footnotes

1. Ronald Reed, *Rebecca,* Unpublished manuscript, p. 2.
2. Matthew Lipman, et al, *Philosophy in the Classroom.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), p. 22.
3. Reed, p. 20.

Bibliography

Lipman, Matthew, Ann Margaret Sharp and Frederick S. Oscanyan, *Philosphy in the Classroom.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980.

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