Philosophy For Children: A Surprising Success Story

The Challenges:

This school year I have been assigned to teach two grade four classes with twenty-eight children in each class. In addition to Philosophy for Children, I am responsible for Math and Language Arts (Reading, Spelling, Composition, Grammar and Literature). As ours is a French Immersion school, I have only five half-days each week with each class since the children spend the other half of each day learning in French. With so little time, the big question becomes how to cover so much material.

This year's grade fours contain a disproportionate number of very active, aggressive and disruptive students who show little self control. Although it was my second year teaching the program, these students had never been exposed to Philosophy for Children before. After meeting each group, it seemed impossible to imagine how they would ever be able to sit still and participate in a large-group discussion. Everyone wanted to talk all the time. In addition, they seemed to have very short attention spans and I had visions of most of them becoming bored five minutes after a discussion was initiated.

Behavioural Observations:

For the Philosophy program, I arranged the desks in a circle and included a desk for myself. With low expectations, I began the *Pixie* program with two one-hour periods a week. An hour at a time seemed very long, but I thought I would give it a try.

Much to my surprise, both classes immediately took to Philosophy. The children couldn't get enough of it. They would ask, "Are we doing P4C today?" and would cheer when I said yes. The hour period flew by and we never finished the topic under discussion.

I was intrigued as to why this group of rather rambunctious children was able to follow the rules of large-group discussion and participate in a meaningful way when, in other subjects, they would simply give up when frustrated by having to wait their turn. The following are six possible reasons.

1) Because I sit in the circle, it is as if I am one with them and not a person of authority who knows all the answers. We are all expected to be equal, mature individuals.
2) Because each child's contribution is listened to by all, the children tend to think through their thoughts rather than to blurt out the first things that come to their minds.
3) Since they are held accountable for their ideas, the children take the time to phrase what they want to say as clearly as possible.
4) Because the subject matter is different from anything the children have ever encountered before, it arouses their interest and they never seem to get bored.
5) The variety of possible activities is endless. There are small-group activities, written activities, large group discussions and word and idea collections. It appears that the children think of the activities as games; they often ask if they can do them again.
6) Because P4C is fun, the children think that they are getting out of doing work. Little do they realize that in their "fun" Philosophy classes, they are covering the four main aspects of Language Arts: reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Language Arts Observations:

When I began the program, I wondered about the advisability of devoting so much precious time to Philosophy at the expense of Language Arts. I worried about how we would ever have enough time to cover the Reading program or do a sufficient amount of writing to improve their written skills. Since the children had been in a totally French program until the end of Grade Two and had only had half a year of an academic English program in Grade Three, their language and spelling skills in English needed a lot of work. The *Pixie* program is, however, impressively rich in language as the following observations indicate.

1) In a relatively short time there has been noticeable improvement in the children's spoken and written vocabulary. A new level of curiosity for words is evolving because of a word game we play as a warm-up to our Philosophy sessions such that when the children encounter new words, they begin to use them in their discussions and in their written compositions.
2) There has been a carry-over from Philosophy to other areas of the curriculum. In Reading and Literature the children analyze the material as though they are doing Philosophy. They find similarities in ideas or issues and can be heard to say, "like in *Pixie*".
3) Ideas from Philosophy also go home with the children. Often they are eager to add to our class collections a number of "mental acts" or "expressions" encountered in their free reading or on television.
4) The children have become enthusiastic writers. As part of P4C, each child has a Thought Book in which to answer questions in written form before orally sharing their ideas. This procedure enables even the very shy students to "voice" their thoughts.
5) Since the program contributes to the Language Arts program, the children are expected to correct the grammar and punctuation of their written work and, for many, this carries over into their regular composition writing.
6) Some extremely shy children have begun to participate orally. Through small-group

discussions, they have gained confidence and, after a few months of P4C, they now enter the large-group discussions.

Most surprising of all, however, is that some low-achieving children are turning out to be thoughtful participants who contribute novel and relevant ideas to the large-group discussions. It may well be their first experience of success and of public praise for their valuable contributions. This has the multiplier effect of improving their self-concepts which, in turn, leads to greater participation on their part and overall improvement in their performance in other areas of the curriculum.

Apparently there are many sides to children that a teacher may not see and it is all too easy to underestimate students of low academic performance. If not for Philosophy, the whole class would lose out on the interesting ideas that these children have to offer.

The direct and indirect benefits of Philosophy for Children both in behavioral and in academic terms have been significant. Certainly doing Philosophy for Children with these children was well worth a try.

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