

## Pixie: A New Experience

Being a dedicated teacher had been a way of life for me for twenty years. The state then stressed the importance of including graduate study in order to be considered a "career" professional. The desire to keep myself at a respected level in my chosen field led me to Texas Wesleyan College.

It was quite by accident that I became interested in Analytic Teaching. Enrolling in a children's literature class proved to be a turning point in my attitude toward teaching. The course was very frustrating to me for the first four or five weeks. The study was not what I thought that it would be or what it should be.

Then came the realization that I was in the class for a semester and that I might as well make the most of it. It became apparent to me that I had not thought deeply with other adults for a lengthy period of time, if ever. The discussion method opened up my almost closed mind. Analytic Teaching soon gained a new supporter.

Finding myself to be a teacher who lectured and gave facts to children, I began to explore the possibility of a way to be a more challenging, innovative educator through the art of conversation. This new approach frightened me. It would mean changing the framework of my teaching in which I felt comfortable. However, by the completion of the summer session of the Analytic Teaching course, I felt this program was worth the change. In this course, we learned how to develop a community of inquiry in our group. Every person's comments and opinions were valued and each was encouraged to explore ideas. This pursuit was done without having to find a "right" or "wrong" answer.

It was with enthusiasm that I decided to try to implement these new ideas into my classroom. This new approach could fill a gap in the students' ability to analyze ideas in depth and better prepare them to be able to express themselves verbally and in written work. Thus, *Pixie* is now a part of my teaching experience.

Analytic Teaching has been used in many schools in Arlington by several very respected teachers. It is also now being used as a part of the Pyramid Program for gifted children. Therefore, I found no difficulty receiving the consent and cooperation of my principal, Al Miller.

The third grade at J. B. Little Elementary School is divided into three ability levels. My class is the middle of these groups. The performance level of this class is a mixture of high-average, average, and low-average students. Most of the students come from middle income homes that require both parents to work. Many attend day care facilities in the afternoon, but most go home alone. It is my consensus that most of their financial needs are met, but that their emotional needs are left lacking.

Being a novice in the teaching of *Pixie*, I sought ways to reduce my class from twenty-nine to twelve students for thirty minutes twice a week. I enlisted the help of Dr. Mona Kerby, our librarian, and Barbara Peterson and Gaye Starnes, our music and physical education teachers. These teachers are very cooperative and interested in the development of new ideas. By taking over half of my class, they enabled me to work with twelve students. I decided to meet

with the group on Monday and Tuesday of each week. I felt that two consecutive days would be beneficial for carrying over ideas.

Next came the task of deciding which twelve students would be in the class. I purposely did not look at their standardized test scores as I might let these influence my decision. I was careful not to choose the most disciplined students. After deciding to have six boys and six girls, I chose three leaders, three behavior problems, two shy personalities, and four congenial students.

At our first meeting I explained that I needed their help with my college class. The children love the idea of their teacher being a student. They ask questions that are hard to answer. "Do you always like your teacher? Do you have to do projects that you don't want to do? Do you get into trouble for talking too much? What happens if you forget your book?" Of course, the most embarrassing question was "Why are you older than your teachers?"

The regular sessions began on October 2, 1986. The group took the logic test provided by Texas Wesleyan which is given at the beginning of Analytic Teaching and will be given again at the end of the school year to measure progress, and as a means to evaluate the program. I stressed that this was not a test for a grade, but rather an activity to help us understand how they think. I explained that we would do the same activity again at the end of the year to see if their way of thinking has changed. Due to the fact that I wanted a chance to compare the students in the Analytical Teaching program with the remainder of my class, I tested my entire group. We completed the test and I found it to be too long for one session. Next year I plan to divide the testing into two sessions.

Little Elementary is an open-area school. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to find a quiet place for a class to meet. I have the class in the afternoon when most of our first grade neighbors are having a break. We push tables together and sit in a circle, making sure we can all see and hear each other.

Because I am an open, curious person who combines humor and deep feeling, I feel our class has had a comfortable environment from the beginning. The children never felt that they had to say what I wanted to hear. The different personalities soon meshed into a group of courteous participants and listeners who respected each other's views. They really enjoyed getting to say what they think. The sessions soon became known as "The Thinking Class."

After reading aloud the first chapter of *Pixie*, the students became fascinated with their new friend. They were puzzled as to whether *Pixie* was a boy or a girl. For several sessions they kept exploring new possibilities that might hold the key to their discovering the sex of *Pixie*. The key that I found was that these children did not tend to stereotype this character. *Pixie* was good at gymnastics. Boys *and* girls are good at gymnastics. *Pixie* and Isabel were best friends; but, boys *and* girls can be best friends. They held hands and hugged each other; it is acceptable for boys *and* girls that are just friends to show affection.

Often the children would speak of *Pixie* during the week or come to me on the playground with thoughts about *Pixie*. This excited me because I knew they were not turning off our activities after the sessions were completed. They were

enjoying what we were doing and it was not an assignment that they had to do, but one they wanted to do. They were questioning their thoughts and their imaginations were producing new, exciting ways of thinking.

The group asked me to once again read the first chapter aloud to them so that they could listen carefully for a clue to Pixie's sex. Still they found no answer. However, as we read the second chapter, they were informed that Pixie was the little sister of Miranda. There was a sign of relief that their mystery was solved. My sign of relief came from the fact that Analytical Teaching was bringing about a new concept of discovery far greater than I had anticipated.

Another very engrossing activity was about talking. We discussed talking with grown-ups. Meredith divided grown-ups into three groups: (1) young grown-ups, (2) middle grown-ups, and (3) older grown-ups. When I asked for a clarification of these groups, Jason explained, "Young grown-ups are like teenagers or aunts and uncles before they get married. They are fun to talk to and they don't mind if you ask them embarrassing questions. They understand that kids can have a hard time, too."

"Middle grown-ups," Maria expressed, "are like our parents. They are so busy with their work or problems, that they don't usually listen to ours. I think they care about me; they just don't listen."

The older grown-ups were defined by Jamie. "Older grown-ups are the people who have time for us. Like — my grandmother who was doing her laundry when I asked her a question. She just stopped what she was doing and we talked. It didn't bother her that the clothes were dirty." The group agreed that they enjoy talking to and learn more from the "older grown-ups." Their reasons were that these people have lived longer, know more about life, and have had more time to think things over.

As we continued our discussion about talking on another day, the class agreed that they did think while they talked. However, Mike stated that he thinks about things and then he talks about his thoughts. Kate says that her dad always makes sure that she is looking at him when he speaks to her. But, he doesn't always look at her when she speaks. She thinks that she deserves the same courtesy from her dad except "when he is driving." The group decided that you can tell if someone is listening to you when you speak if they are looking at you. I asked, How? Meredith answered, "You can tell from the look in their eyes, and the way their eyebrows move." Thus, our discussion diverted to body-language.

Our conversations often started with the planned activities and then the children themselves found areas of concern in which they wanted a discussion. We usually followed these discussions if they were beneficial and there was a point in view. However, I often had to squelch their silliness or absurd topics that had little purpose and tended to wander aimlessly.

Of all the activities that we pursued, the favorite was the "Teakettle" game. This game is a practice in working with ambiguities. A volunteer leaves the area, and the group chooses a word that can have several meanings. When the volunteer returns, the members of the group, in turn, offer

sentences in which the mystery word can be used. But instead of using the secret word, they always use the word "teakettle." This game delighted the participants so much that a problem emerged.

The children who were not in "Thinking Class" also wanted to play "our" game. I soon realized that the other children in my class were feeling left-out and cheated. The librarian, Dr. Kerby, relayed to me that she could definitely tell a difference between the group that was a part of "Thinking Class" and those children who were not participating. She noticed more self-confidence, inner motivation, and willingness to participate on the part of the group in Analytical Teaching. These were some of the goals that I was aiming towards. But, were they at the expense of the remaining students?

What to do? At our next session, I explained the problem to "Thinking Class." The thinkers thought. They wanted their classmates to participate, but felt a large group would take away from their discussions and not allow them enough time to say what they thought. At their suggestion, we started including them by playing the "teakettle" game in the large group. We sometimes divided into smaller sections and they led the discussions. Once a week when the Analytic group was in the library, I had activities with those in the remaining group who wanted to participate. They said, "Once a week isn't enough, but it is better than not at all." Of course, these sessions are not as productive as those are with the original group, but at least we are all involved.

Another problem that I experienced about six weeks after we started the class was with a boy named Richie. Richie has had problems in school since he started. He was not speaking at age three and went to the Early Childhood Development in Spring, Texas. The parents had a hard time hearing that Richie was different. After first grade, they moved to Arlington and he repeated first grade. He was also tested at the Child-Guidance Learning Center in Fort Worth, and attended speech development classes regularly. He has progressed slowly, but is now working adequately in the average group in third grade. It was my hope that this program could help Richie. From the beginning, Richie took part in the conversation and showed skill in recognizing underlying meanings. He was the only child in the group to recognize the comparison that Dad made about Pixie's acrobatics and rubber. In our discussion about names he brought out the fact that girl's names change when they get married. Then he commented, "That's what usually happens, but if the girl doesn't want her name to change, she can use the one she got from her parents."

Even though I felt Richie was participating and gaining from our experience, he still wanted out. I continued to try to influence him to stay, but he persisted. Finally and reluctantly, I told him it was his decision, but our group would miss him and his good ideas. Later, after he was not attending our sessions, I had a talk with him. He said, "Thinking is too hard for me this year. Maybe I'll be ready to think next year." I would be less than honest if I did not admit that I felt very disappointed in my failure with Richie. He really needs what this program has to offer; but, even the best of programs cannot be all things to all people. My

experience with Richie also reminds me that during certain periods in our lives that thinking, and feeling, and expressing those feelings can be very arduous.

The one thing the children found most irresistible about Analytical Teaching was that they could do the activities without pencil and paper. Not having the pressure to make a grade freed them to enjoy the subject on which we were working. When our class came to the story "The Summer House" in our reading book, I decided to fit the techniques on which we had been working into our language arts curriculum. The story is a mystery about a girl nine years of age. Therefore, I used the exercises from Pixie that deal with problems and mysteries, and turning mysteries into problems. After becoming familiar with these exercises, we applied our thoughts to the story. The children divided into groups and rewrote their workbook activities that have correct answer, into activities that have questions with many possible answers. They were delighted to surmise that any answer they chose was correct. To satisfy the requirements of the curriculum, I gave all the children participation grades which were quite good.

During the course of this exercise, several children kept referring to episodes from *The Wizard of Oz* which had recently been rerun on television. They felt that Dorothy's trip was a mystery as well as a problem. When I suggested to them that the book was quite different from the movie, they were shocked to know that a television show or movie could change what an author had written. A couple of days later, I found a copy of the book on my desk with a note. "Please read to us what the author wanted us to hear." Thus, we read the book without red shoes, songs, and Judy Garland. So as the year has progressed, Analytical Teaching has found its way "out of isolation" in a thirty minute class into other facets of the curriculum.

As I was reading a rough draft of this presentation to my students, they continued to amaze me. I felt they had a right to know that I was writing — after all, it is about them. They have made this study possible. When I read the section about choosing leaders, shy personalities, problems, and kids that are easy with which to get along, they stopped me to try to figure out into which category they would fit. Never did they ask me which category I had put them in. They just talked among themselves about the different characteristics of the categories. They placed themselves and their classmates into categories and were completely satisfied that there were no right and no wrong conclusions. They agreed or disagreed with about the same emotion. The fun was in the trying — not in reaching only one conclusion. They each reached a conclusion that satisfied them for the time being, even though that may change. This unplanned exercise showed me that part of what I have been doing this year has been a success. In spite of the fact that the teacher tends to dominate the activities, has trouble keeping her comments to herself, and admits that she tends to find a moral in almost everything, the program is making a difference in the way these children think, converse with others, and respect another's views.

The group has presented me with another problem. How can we continue next year? They don't want the project to stop; my goodness, they have only known Pixie for three

chapters. The thinkers are thinking. "You could move to fourth grade. Maybe third and fourth grades could have recess together and you could take us then. What about meeting before or after school one day a week?"

Honestly, I would like to believe that I have made the difference with these students, that I am what they enjoy and need. But, I know what has made the difference. The difference is Analytical Teaching. The difference is a program designed to break away the chains of old teaching methods with facts and tests. The difference is that these children have been given the opportunity to discover their own thoughts and the thoughts of others. They want to say what they think and have other people listen. Although this has only been a beginning in the study and art of conversation, perhaps, these children will not develop into "middle" grown-ups who don't have time to talk and listen with others. Perhaps, just perhaps, they will be individuals who take the time to think, talk, and really listen to the people with which they live and work and play.

This year I have taken the time to think, talk, and really listen. I have taken the time to smell the roses; or should I say? — the rosebuds.

*Peggy Martin Elrod*