

## A Tree In The Desert To Climb

One of the exercises in Harry Stottlemier's *Discovery* asked, "What good is a tree in the middle of the desert?" The children were excited and very expressive about this idea. They felt the tree could be for climbing, for birds to land in, to beautify the desert with green and for its pretty colored leaves in the Fall. I was amazed at their answers. Only the simplicity of a child would see a tree in the desert for climbing. Most adults would probably answer it was there for shade and for a place to rest from the hot sun. The children did not ask how the tree got there, or what kind of birds could live in the desert, or how could you have frost in the desert to change the color of the leaves. Their imaginations were uninhibited by our adult limitations.

They were even more expressive a few days later when asked to describe their thoughts. They came up with the following list of what their thoughts were like:

- popcorn popping up
- taking a picture of a seed
- a light
- a rainbow
- a worm in an apple — it pops in and out
- a rubic cube — very complex
- flowers waiting to bloom
- a gentle breeze in a field
- candy jar always full
- live pictures
- omni theatre — all around you
- little babies — always busy
- an airplane — sometimes flying/sometimes sitting quietly
- an owl — always asking

Children seem to see the world differently from adults. They do not have our frame of reference, therefore, each new experience is seen as puzzling and challenging to them. Children wonder at the world. They look at the problems and mysteries and ask Why? What? How? and Where? Many adults have stopped wondering. It took too much time and was not profitable. The sadness is these adults move from marvelling at everything as children to marvelling at nothing as adults.<sup>1</sup>

Children are naturally curious about their world. They want to know not only the who and what but also the why of things. Jose Ortega Gasset tells us, "to be surprised, to wonder is to begin to understand."

Children are constantly in the process of becoming the adults they will be. What are we doing as teachers to cause the child who asks, "Where does the sun go?" to become the dull thinking gullible adult who accepts things as they are seeing no new or at least few new solutions. Anything that we can do as teachers to stop this dulling process should be done. If we can lead our students on a journey of recapturing the sense of wonder, discovery and imagination then we must. The teaching of Matthew Lipman's *Philosophical Inquiry* program is an excellent beginning in this direction.

I have been teaching this program known hereafter as *Harry* to a group of fifth graders at St. Andrew's School this past year. These children are a good cross section of modern society. In their economic, social and racial make-up

they range from one end of the scale to the other. Their educational abilities also range from the lowest to the highest. I was interested to see how they would respond to *Harry*.

I set the following goals for the year. I hoped the children would 1) listen to one another 2) give reasons for their opinions and 3) begin to think differently or respond differently to some situations in life. I felt with these three I could actually see some progress that was not necessarily measured on a test.

I had presented *Harry* before to a class of inner-city children but not on a regular basis. I wanted to see how these children at St. Andrew's would respond in contrast to the other children. Certainly their life experiences had been very different from those of my previous class. I actually taught approximately 90 fifth graders in three different classrooms. Each classroom had its own way of thinking about the exercise at hand. In each room I was blessed by having 7-10 students that thoroughly enjoyed *Harry*. They talked, discussed, questioned and challenged with every exercise. There was also a group of 7-10 students that moved in and out of the discussion based on the topic. For most of the year there remained in each classroom a small group that simply did not enter into the discussion. Only one day during the year did one of these students talk. I was excited hoping there had been a breakthrough and that it would continue. I was at a loss the entire year as to how to have an open discussion without some children dominating and others not taking part. When I called on an unresponsive child to bring him/her into the discussion I could often see the fear written on their face. I did not ever want to embarrass a child so I would just let them sit quietly and hope they would learn by listening to the others. I had no illusion they were really ever listening but I continued to hope.

In order to determine if the teaching of Lipman's program had any effect on improving the critical thinking skills of the children, I first had to know their critical thinking skills before I began to teach. In September I pretested the children using the experimental version of the test developed by Virginia Shipman of Education Testing Service and Matthew Lipman of the Institute for Advancement of Philosophy for Children.

This test tested for the skills taught in *Harry*. I went over the example question and asked for questions for clarifications. The children were given 30 minutes on each of three days to take the test. In observing their faces and reactions during the test it seemed they were having difficulty with the type of questions being asked. Some children thought long and hard on questions, while others just seemed to have guessed an answer.

The class will be tested again at the end of the year using the same test. The results will be measured as the difference in the number of questions answered correctly. Again it will be given on three days hopefully with the same distractions and outside influences as in the beginnings of the year.

Since this is the experimental test the validity of such a test is questionable. It will merely show if some of the children seemed to have improved their critical thinking and reasoning skills by participating in the *Philosophical Inquiry* program for a year.

My schedule for teaching Harry was arranged with the cooperation of the homeroom teacher. I was to meet the class for thirty minutes a day five days a week. I was to go into her room to teach Harry. My only difficulty with this was I was going into another teacher's classroom and the children tended to follow the rules of the classroom and not our discussion rules which we had developed at the first of the year. This was a constant problem for the entire year. The children had to ask for all permissions in their homerooms so our rule of not having to raise your hand to speak was difficult for them to remember. I was also in constant competition with the piano from the music room next door, the ever present PA announcements, the squeaking door of the boys bathroom and of course the water fountain. The classroom situation was not the best that could be had. I have asked for my own room with carpet and pillows, etc. for next year. I would hope it could be at least three blocks from the rest of the school but I guess that is not practical. I have a feeling the PA system will be permanently out of order.

After a few sessions we were finally able to deal with the problem of asking permission to speak by establishing our own mode of conduct. One way of handling the problem was to have the children turn their desks in a different direction when I came into the room. This physical movement seemed to signal now we were going to do Harry and our rules of discussion applied for the next thirty minutes. The following is a list of the rules we agreed upon early in the year:

1. we could talk without raising our hand
2. only one at a time would talk
3. we could answer each other without going through the teacher
4. the children would give reasons for their opinions when possible
5. you could say "I agree with someone because" or just "I agree"
6. we must listen to the other students' opinions and ideas
7. everyone is free to give an opinion
8. we would respect one another and not make fun of ideas or opinions

The rules were generally followed. The children occasionally got excited and more than one talked at a time, but they would immediately recognize this and stop. There would then be a long pause out of respect as to who was going to speak first. Since one of my goals for the year had been an improvement in their listening skills I was pleased to see how they began to listen to one another. Children often are thinking of what they are going to say and are not really listening to one another. The discussion process used in Harry was certainly beneficial in improving their ability to listen to others. They simply had to listen in order to question, agree and/or disagree with the opinions of their classmates.

A second goal of mine that was somewhat accomplished was the children's ability to give reasons for what they said or thought. I was surprised at how they began to develop this skill. I often wished they had not developed it so well when the lesson began to drag on and on with each one giving his/her reasons. As soon as I would begin to feel

frustrated with the process a child would make some incredible statement and I would see the benefit of waiting patiently and allowing the discussion to naturally run its course.

One of my concerns was that I finish the book. Ordinarily I do not feel this but somehow I did when I was teaching Harry. I so wanted the children to improve their thinking skills I felt we had to finish the book. It was not until at least February of the second semester that I began to realize that quality discussion was more important than covering pages in the manual. I had placed a tremendous burden on myself trying to teach the program in one year. I was at a new school and I knew that parents and other faculty members were going to evaluate the progress of these students at the end of the year. I would advise others to relax and let the program happen. The program cannot be pushed. The teacher need only to guide the children through the exercises.

I was also concerned many times when the children simply did not pick out the main ideas after reading a chapter. I spoke to the principal about their reading ability. I went over the text a second time. Finally one of the visiting professors reminded me that I should be writing their ideas on the chalkboard. I began to do this and was amazed at the change in their response. They not only had many ideas but it became a game to see how many they could see in each chapter. I was happy to see that they picked out most of the ideas mentioned in the manual and also many little side ideas that they were concerned about. Each time I took up a new exercise I would remind them of their main idea to show that I had used their idea to select an exercise. I am still not comfortable enough with the manual to jump from one lesson to the next using their ideas but I am sure that will come with experience.

One of the real dangers in teaching children to think differently is that they may begin to use this skill. Shortly after we began the program I began receiving telephone calls from parents. It is vitally important the parents understand what you are teaching. I would suggest not only a letter home but maybe a trial lesson in the beginning of the year with the parents. Most of the parents were happy after their questions were answered. In January we had open house at the school. My classes were full of parents and grandparents. At that time we were working on carry-over relationships and syllogisms. I was amazed at the way the children understood and enjoyed these exercises. I could tell by the expressions on the faces of the parents that they were impressed and surprised. Until this time I was somewhat unsure of how the program was being received by the parents. I was more comfortable with the program after this week with the parents and children. I feel that I still need to improve as a teacher of philosophy. Attending the program at TWC was certainly a help in preparing me but the teaching of philosophy is different from any teaching I have done before. I usually think of the questions to ask after the class is over and I am writing up my notes.

Although there were anxious moments, I enjoyed teaching Harry for a number of reasons. It was gratifying to have the homeroom teachers tell me the children used the discussion or thinking skills we worked on in Harry in English or Social Studies. The children would occasionally bring up

their Speller or English book and say, "Look, this is like Harry." They were beginning to think differently outside of Harry.

Most of the time the teacher must be the one in charge — giving information, explaining new concepts, asking the questions for content. It was fun for me as a teacher to just enjoy the lesson with the children. As teacher I could think with them and not for them or about them. Since we didn't give grades I was free from any evaluation of the children's progress except in their discussion and thinking skills.

One of the rewards of the year was the comments of the children about the different topics. I was constantly amazed at the diverse ideas the children had on some topics. The following paragraph is a good example of this experience.

In October we began the exercise on creating your own island. It always surprises me as to how much they are still little children who love to draw and color. Their drawings were crude but to them they were masterpieces. They were very creative in naming their islands and in deciding on an occupation of the islanders. Some islanders were mountain builders, others volcano cleaners, and one was a flower painter. I see this type of activity as one of the important aspects of the Philosophy for Children program. In what other class would a group of fifth graders be permitted to be this imaginative and creative? In what other class would they be free enough with themselves and one another to express such ideas.

They began to use the concepts even when they did not realize it. During the year they would say, "Isn't that one of those words you have to be careful of?" not remembering to call it vague or ambiguous but remembering the concept. Often I would hear, "Don't you have to think about this first?" again not remembering to say "assumptions" but remembering the concept. I had questions like "How tall is tall?" or "What is pretty?" At Christmas I received a Christmas card from one class that simply said, "We never thought about thinking until you came to teach us."

Trees in the desert to climb, thoughts like flowers waiting to bloom, occupations like flower painters, baseball games to settle problems between nations, all ideas from Harry. It is exciting for me to realize that children with these creative ideas will someday be running the world. Maybe the problems we have that seem to us to have no solutions will be solved by a desert climber, a volcano cleaner or a flower painter. This is my thought, my hope waiting to bloom.

*Pam Sanguinet*

#### Bibliography

Fragar, Alan M. & Loren C. Thompson, "Conflict: The Key to Critical Reading Instruction," *Journal of Reading*, 28:8 (May 1985) p. 676.