

A Third Grade Experiment With Pixie

I like to talk and I like to listen. I like to interact with people. My favorite teaching memories are conversations with children. My worst are of bored little faces looking up at me while I discussed "important information." Feeling this way, Analytic Teaching was an attractive choice for my graduate studies.

Matthew Lipman, author of many of the materials used in Analytic Teaching, made a statement in his book *Philosophy in the Classroom* which intrigued me:

The common assumption is that reflection generates dialogue, when in fact, it is dialogue that generates reflection. Very often, when people engage in dialogue with one another, they are compelled to reflect, to concentrate, to consider 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.'

I wondered if it might be possible to take my love for conversation and turn it into a valuable teaching tool.

Last summer I enrolled in the six hour Analytic Teaching class. I found it very exciting. Through directed conversations we were allowed the "luxury" of pondering and questioning all sorts of ideas. We used Matthew Lipman's fourth grade materials for *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*.

I found the class very challenging. There was a sense of having both direction and freedom. Some people were very verbal while others seemed content to listen. The instructor would give focus, clarify, or introduce certain principles of logic as they were needed. He always seemed to be able to help us just when we needed him. I tried to absorb his method.

September came and my class of third graders became my focus. As usual, I was overwhelmed at the prospect of turning these individuals into a cooperative "family." This year, though, the task seemed especially difficult. One child stood out immediately. He had the most severe speech problem I'd ever encountered. He wanted to talk all the time, but with every word, he had to hit his body in an effort to get the word out. He seemed burdened with emotional problems and could become wildly disruptive with almost no provocation.

Another child in my class had a history of sexual and physical abuse. His behavior reminded me of the story of the boy who was raised by wolves. The class found his actions sickening and would have nothing to do with him.

The rest of the class was composed of children who seemed very alert and children with very short attention spans. Four of the latter were assigned to special classes for a part of the day.

When it was time to decide how to conduct my Analytic Teaching class, I thought about these children. My immediate reaction was that with this particular group I could spend all my time handling "problem" children. A perfect solution seemed to be to hold the class during that period

in the day when all the children with special problems were gone to special classes. My practicum proposal stated that there would be sixteen children participating once a week in a forty-five minute session. The only thing that bothered me about this arrangement was Dr. Reed's comment that he believed in heterogeneous groupings of children. He felt that the program could help all types of children. I took his comment seriously but wasn't ready to face the added burdens this presented.

My first class was held on October 15. My diary entry reveals that the class was not quite what I had expected. It states, "There is quite a difference between an analytic teaching class for teachers and the same class for children!" Surprising as it seems upon reflection, I really had imagined that we would deal with some complex question. I think that I was ready to tackle some Socratic question like "What is justice?", and instead my children just wanted to figure out if the heroine of our story was a boy, girl or animal.

Later, I decided that we had really accomplished some good things that day. First of all, the children made a real attempt to give reasons for what they said. Second, after starting out by awkwardly raising their hands to speak, they worked out a fairly good system of entering into the conversation without this device. If they did step on someone's words, they apologized.

The following is a transcription of our first Discovery class:

Pixie

- Child 1: Pixie is a boy, because he says, "Sometimes I'm not patient."
- Class: Girls can be not patient!
- Child 2: She's a girl. Pixie is a girl's name.
- Child 3: Yes, I've read stories about a person named Pixie and they were always girls.
- Child 4: Girls' names are lighter.
- Teacher: Can a name be used for either a boy or a girl?
- Child 5: Yes, my name is Billy and it can also be used for a girl by spelling it Billie.
- Child 6: No girl would ever want my name, LaMonte!
- Teacher: Does the story help us to know whether it is a boy or girl?
- Class: No.
- Child 7: How do we know Pixie is a person? Maybe she's an animal.
- Child 8: I think that she is a person because she has a father and mother.
- Child 3: I'm not sure I ever had a father or mother - I never saw them. (Korean orphan)
- Child 5: I think you can have just one parent.
- Child 9: One of them could have left. I only live with one.
- Child 4: You could have just a mother but not just a father - you never see pregnant men. (Lots of laughter)

The children were visibly puzzled over this.

Teacher: If this helps, animals and people have a father and mother - even if they never know them.
(Still some disbelieving looks)

My last entry for that day shows that I was unsure about how our discussion really turned out. It had been an interesting discussion, but had it been Analytic Teaching? I sensed that I had not known where we were going. I had the uneasy feeling that the conversation moved along much more quickly than I could move as an effective guide.

Each session that followed was full of surprises. Sometimes I felt like an actor who knows his lines but finds himself in the wrong play. None of his lines fit and he isn't quick enough on his feet to "play it by ear." Matthew Lipman seemed to recognize this problem. He wrote regarding new teachers:

They will be successful in eliciting children's views of their own experience, asking for alternative views, and giving illustrations. But they may not yet be proficient in moving to more philosophical levels of dialogue, such as are involved in drawing out inferences, generalizing, pointing out contradictions, asking for underlying assumptions, and stressing the need for intellectual coherence.²

I felt that I was a long way from my goal and appreciated knowing I wasn't alone.

A touching incident occurred after our second session. One of the "special" girls confided to me that she was very disappointed at missing out on our Discovery class and getting to meet my professors. I felt terrible. I immediately agreed that it was not something I could allow them to miss. I treated it as a mistake. I was being forced to undertake heterogeneous grouping!

With the increased number of children some things changed. We had been sitting in a circle on the floor. By adding five more children, we began to feel crowded. We discussed the problem and decided to bring chairs over to form a circle. I liked the suggestion and thought it might add a bit of formality to the discussion — reinforce the idea that this was not playtime. Instead, it created too much disturbance (carrying over 22 chairs, arranging them, putting them back before going to lunch, etc.). Before long we were back on the floor.

Dr. Reed attended a session in mid-October. I read from the text. In this episode Pixie wonders if her teacher Mr. Mulligan might have known Abraham Lincoln. A number of children believed that this was possible. Even after explaining that President Lincoln lived over 100 years ago, many children didn't grasp the idea of the time problem.

When the children became restless, I should have ended the session. Instead, I plunged into an exercise on ambiguity. I used an example from the Teacher's Manual and didn't get much of a response. Then I decided to try one of my own. It was a last-ditch attempt and I knew it would appeal to their bawdy sense of humor. (I was ready to stoop to anything!) I said, "I have a bare baby." Of course they loved the idea of a naked baby. Then I was able to write the words bear and bare on the board and discuss ambiguity.

We continued to work on ambiguity in other sessions. A visitor came in during one session and caught me standing

on my chair telling lies. I was illustrating the sentence, "I am lying on a chair."

The game Teakettle reinforced the concept that many words can have several meanings depending on how they are used in a sentence. I made up a set of cards with words that can have more than one meaning. Some of the words from the Teacher's Guide seemed very hard, so I made up some of my own. The children loved this and didn't want to stop. The person who was "it" would leave the room. When he returned, different children would use the mystery word in a sentence, replacing the mystery word with the word "teakettle." The children became increasingly skilled at forming well-stated clue sentences.

Associations was another game that went over well. The children were divided into two groups. A team member was required to tell what the preceding person's comment made him or her think of. On the second time around, they had to give a reason.

These were the kinds of activities in which I felt most comfortable. The reason for this is that they offered me a chance to use teaching skills that come most easily. I could explain, illustrate, and give examples. Keeping on top of what was happening was not difficult. They did not offer much practice at questioning strategies.

One time we spent a session discussing secrets and friends. I used several questions from the manual. These initiated a discussion that was enjoyable. We talked about the difference between friends and family. We concluded that some friends never fight, some friends fight a lot. Sometimes family members can be friends, but not always. You have no choice about family but you do about friends.

Dr. Rembert sat in on an interesting discussion involving part/whole relationships. I read the section from Pixie where her arm falls asleep. She poses the question, "How could a part of you not belong to you?" LaMonte immediately began an excited story of how he often does things that he has no intention of doing. He said that sometimes when he comes into the classroom his arm just reaches out and closes the door. He doesn't tell it to do it or think about it.

Before long, everyone had a story about being controlled by outside forces. One of the biggest forces seemed to be parents. The consensus seemed to be that they had very little control over their lives.

I was feeling like the actor in the wrong play again. Dr. Rembert sensed my problem. It wasn't hard as I was using the international palms up, shoulder shrugging, help signal. He stepped in and opened up the discussion with the question, "Well, are we just like robots?"

Off they went again. Some felt that they were just like robots. It was fascinating. They really weren't sure that the robots in science fiction movies weren't self-controlling. Some recognized that the controls were behind the scenes. Others were pretty sure that the robots had wills or minds of their own. Initially, this discussion had been about part/whole relationships. We ended up somewhere else.

A nice creative writing and art activity emerged quite naturally out of the discussion. I asked the children to write a story about a robot and to bring in boxes and other materials to build this robot. Many creative stories emerged as well as some wonderful robot friends. I took pictures of

the children with their robots and displayed the stories for all to read and reread.

Most recently we have been talking about body language. Sometimes this language conflicts with what we say. After the discussion, one of the children pointed out that sometimes when I fuss at someone for their behavior, I turn away and giggle.

So much has changed since the beginning of the year. At Christmas the boy with the speech and emotional disorder transferred out. He had only contributed a few times to the group, and his contributions were more for attention than anything else. He did like being part of the group, so I'm glad I changed the arrangement.

About February our little Robert moved away. He was our "wolf boy" and we had grown very attached to him. After the initial rejection by the children, I told them that they were going to have to help me raise Robert. He just had not received the care that they had received. They rose to the occasion and took him under their wings. Robert liked Pixie.

In all honesty, I was not happy with working with a larger class. We lost children and gained others all year long and the class averaged about 24 students.

I would have to list two things that have probably hindered my progress this year. This year I have felt an increased pressure to cover so much material in the nine subject areas I teach. I truly have not had the time to really prepare for Pixie properly. Twenty minutes before class has not been enough time for me to really digest the issues. I think that this has shown up in a lack of depth of examples and counter-examples, etc. This summer I plan to sit under a nice shady tree and "chew" on Pixie.

The second problem for me has been my highly self-critical attitude. I have wanted to teach like Ron Reed. During many sessions I have been so conscious of my every move and wrong move that it has, at times paralyzed me. In an effort to not control the discussions, I have gone to the opposite extreme, giving too little direction.

I have decided to give myself permission to take several years to become good at analytic teaching. In the meantime, I'd like to enjoy it more.

Next year I am going to shorten the discussion period. Forty minutes proved to be too long. Once a week was not often enough. Twenty minutes two or three times a week will work better.

In rereading my evaluations from both Dr. Reed and Dr. Rembert, the word "focus" popped out again and again. Some of their suggestions for accomplishing this were:

- Ask or try to state where you are at a given point in the conversation.
- You don't have to achieve consensus. Just attempt to get as clear as possible for as many children as possible.
- Introduce games and exercises to make abstract concepts more concrete.
- Consider opening the conversation with a more pointed question.
- When other issues arise that you are not ready to discuss, write them on the board as Leading

Ideas and come back to them at a later time.

- Conversations are made of certain strands. Listen for them and you have a ready-made tool for dealing with the adverse.
- In preparing for an exercise, try to focus your attention on one issue and one thinking skill you will pursue during the discussion. Such decisions will help you decide which comments to extend by question during the discussion and which to accept without further discussion.
- The conversation needs a focus and a structure. You have to insert your active personality into things a good deal more.
- Give clear examples, repeat them, stress the questions to be answered.

There were several things that I felt went well this first time through. The children took to the ground rules easily. They loved to say that they agreed or disagreed with other participants. They were not upset when others disagreed with them. We all liked not having to raise hands to talk and for the most part, people entered the conversation without this device. At other times we did use it.

I was really impressed with the materials for third grade. Through the use of *Pixie* I gained a greater understanding of where eight and nine-year-olds are intellectually. Time and again I overestimated what the children would understand. It was the fundamental things, like the concept of time, or the concept that we all have a mother and father that surprised me the most.

Recently I was asked if Analytic Teaching was just another fad, exciting sounding but without much substance. I was so happy to be able to say that it is truly a remarkable program. I am looking forward to implementing it into my teaching from now on - I'm hooked!

Carol Stephens

Footnotes

1. Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, and Frederick S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980, p. 22.
2. Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, and Frederick S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980, p. 125.

Bibliography

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