

Reflections

House Bill 72. Teacher Competency Test. No pass - No play. Formal and informal observations. Career ladder. In September as school was starting and these phrases were popping into my thoughts, I began to wonder why I had committed myself to introducing a new program into an already crammed curriculum and schedule. What was I letting myself in for? Could I make time for Analytic Teaching and still cover all the concepts and materials on which the children are tested? It was going to be a challenge for me and a decision that, initially, I would question time and time again.

My school is in a high socio-economic area and has a very involved parent community. After sending home a parent permission letter, I got such positive feedback on the value of a thinking-skills program, I was anxious to begin.

My principal was very supportive, and was also delighted to see a program that focuses on thinking skills and logic. She purchased the novel, *Harry Stottlemeir's Discovery*, for us to use as a text. I used the instructional manual, *Philosophical Inquiry*, as a guide to accompany the text. She was also pleased that the sixth grade teacher, who will have many of the same children next year, would be able to provide a continuum for the program.

Our school facility is open-concept and this presented the first of several obstacles we had to overcome. It was difficult to find an area large enough and private enough to accommodate a group of 34 students. Our classroom is squeezed between a section of fourth graders and another section of fifth graders, and with 34 desks and chairs in the area, there was simply no way to face each other or break into small groups without disrupting other classes. Therefore, the first priority was to find an unoccupied area with a less structured setting. The only available space was the science room, which has to be reserved in advance because all grade levels share it. I reserved the area on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m., and our "A.T." class, as the children later referred to it, was ready to begin.

My fifth grade class was very excited about Philosophy for Children. Our school has often piloted programs, such as the *Odyssey* literature series, but I could tell by the excitement on their faces, that after hearing about Analytic Teaching, the children thought that this one was going to be special. A class where they received no grade that focused on discussions and thinking was their kind of class!

I teach the high-ability group in language arts. Many of the children in my class have been in the CASE program since second grade and they are now involved in the Pyramid project. The class consists of 34 fifth graders. I chose to teach Analytic Thinking to all of the students rather than single out a small group.

After the first session, another problem surfaced. A class of this size was much too large to conduct the sessions with all the students at one time. Consequently, I divided them into the two groups of seventeen each. They decided they would choose group names so I wouldn't stick them with the generic group A and B. Thus emerged the "Jams" and the "Beach Bums". While the "Jams" were having A.T., the "Beach Bums" were working independently back in the

area, and vice-versa. This highlighted an advantage of the open-concept school. My team members cooperated by checking on the children left in the classroom to make sure they were on task. Surprisingly, they usually were!

Once these problems were solved, we were all anxious to begin. The first session consisted of simply talking with the children about the program itself. I let them decide on the rules to facilitate discussion, and they chose to use the same procedures used in the classroom. These rules were simple. One must raise his or her hand to be recognized and one should show respect for others by not interrupting. These rules were comfortable for everyone at that time. Later, I encouraged them to respond to each other in discussions without raising their hands and looking to me for recognition. During this session, they also decided to keep a log of their discussions and thoughts.

Language arts class in fifth grade is a time block of two hours and forty-five minutes. At this time, I teach the same group spelling, reading, current events, and English. As A.T. progressed, one of my goals was to integrate thinking skills into these academic areas. The curriculum in fifth grade provided many opportunities to adapt what we were discussing in A.T. to subject matter.

As the semester progressed, there were several times that lessons we were studying in our regular curriculum lent themselves to topics suggested in the teacher's manual. When this occurred, I would initiate the discussion at that moment and involve the entire class instead of breaking into two groups.

One such opportunity arose when reading a selection about Benjamin Franklin in literature. We had just read chapter one in the novel and discussed Harry's discovery of a rule about reversibility. It was a perfect time to discuss discovery and invention. At the same time, the weekly newspaper used in our curriculum contained an invention newspaper used in our curriculum contained an invention contest, and several of the children made or described inventions and submitted them to the paper. Later in the year, the winners were published and even though our entries were not among them, the children were personally involved and interested in discussing the results.

These impromptu discussions which arose during regular classes were some of the most meaningful and enjoyable for the students as well as for me. The statement in our English text, "You can't judge a book by its cover," led to a productive discussion of stereotyping. A lesson in grammar on concrete and abstract nouns prompted a discussion of mental images and the reality of thoughts.

With an increasing emphasis on composition in the elementary school, I was pleased to find many topics in Analytic Teaching which could be used for writing exercises. These papers were not graded, but the children did read them aloud, which provided an opportunity for children less vocal in class to express their thoughts and feelings. Some of the best compositions came from an assignment in which they were to make a new law, tell why it would be an important law to have, and tell if the law would be good for all people.

In our regularly scheduled Analytic Teaching classes, I gradually began to see thought-provoking responses which reflected many of the topics being covered in academic areas.

During a discussion of "What Makes You You?", we were having a drug unit in health. The children brought up such questions as: Would you still be the same person if you had amnesia? Were on drugs? Were on life-support systems? During animated discussions such as this, the biggest problem for me was keeping personal stories and anecdotes to a minimum and gently guiding the discussion back to what the issue was, or what the issue was becoming.

Of course, the children were especially enthusiastic when games were used to introduce a topic. The game "Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral?" proved to be a successful introduction for classification. In this game, one person is chosen to think of a word and the other children get 20 questions to guess what it is. I videotaped both classes while they were playing the game. Then we viewed the tape, and appraised the value of their questions, decided whether another way of asking the question might have proven more helpful, or decided whether asking a different question altogether might have been better. The feedback from the community on this exercise was well-received by all the students and, generally, they seemed to accept the constructive suggestions without feeling uncomfortable or threatened. This activity was a favority with everyone.

Gradually, I began to see topics which were introduced in Analytic Teaching crop up in our daily discussions of current events. Just after we had spent two days defining fairness, the crisis in Libya erupted. When I asked if anyone had a news story to share, every hand in the class shot up. Almost immediately, the question of whether the United States bombing of Libya was fair arose. During this discussion, the children were listening intently to each speaker, and were responding to each other instead of addressing their remarks to me. Even though many felt the action was fair according to our definition of fairness, those who didn't were able to express their opinions and state reasons for them. At this point, I could tell the children were thinking for themselves and I had a good feeling about our progress as a whole.

In summary, I feel that Philosophy for Children has been a successful and worthwhile course for me as well as for the children, and was well-worth the time and effort given. Not only have I seen tremendous growth in the analytic and thinking skills of the members of the class, I have seen growth in my ability to listen, question, and guide meaningful discussions.

Finally, I would like to share the comments of some of my students when asked what they thought were the benefits of Analytic Teaching. These statements alone indicate that my time and theirs has been well-spent.

- Jake: It has helped me to make better choices.
- Amy: A. T. gives me a good feeling inside because I know I have shared my thoughts with others.
- Joey: I enjoy the discussions because mainly it makes me feel more grownup.
- Sandi: I've had a lot to say to my mother and father.

- Hedy: I like discussions when we give our opinions because it's like your opinion is never wrong.
- Julie: I like putting what we've learned to use.
- Jennifer: I learned a lot about figuring things out.
- Betsy: A.T. lets my mind wander and think of creative ideas and possibilities.
- Ryall: It helps to organize my thoughts and stuff.
- Jessica: A.T. makes me feel good because people listen to what you have to say and they respect you for what you have to say or what you think.
- Ryall: It helps you think about things in a way you wouldn't ordinarily think about it.
- Carol: It helps me to reason things out and do better on tests.
- Betsy: It helps me to think of the possible reasons a character or person acts a certain way.
- Ryall: It makes you stop and think about what you're going to say thoroughly before speaking out.
- Heather: It makes you not afraid to raise your hand and ask questions.
- Courtney: I like A.T. because I can use my brain while I have fun.

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Bibliography

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