Entering, Deepening and Furthering the Dialogue: Relaxation As A Preparation For Doing Philosophy

During the 1984, '85 and '86 school years, I trained a number of teachers in the White Plains School District to work with the Pixie, Harry and Lisa programs. One of the teachers, Nancy Gumbinner, was so impressed with the quality of the discussions she had with her fourth grade students in the district's More Able Student Program during the 1984-85 school year that she decided to use some of the exercises from the Pixie manual to see if she could promote similar discussions the following year with a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, heterogeneously grouped class of fourth graders at the district's Post Road School without using Pixie. To enable the children to enter into a reflective, critical and eventually autonomously dialectical mode of thinking without the help of the models provided by the novel, Nancy decided to train them in some basic relaxation techniques which would enable them to become aware of, reflect upon, criticize and share both their thinking and their thinking about their own and one another's thinking. She did this in three ways: physically, imaginatively, and intellectually.

Physically, she had the children sit in their chairs, with their backs straight, eyes closed and hands on their thighs. They were asked to concentrate on their feet and if they felt any tension to let it go and then gradually to move their awareness up to their legs to their abdomens, chests, arms and heads. If a child was uncomfortable doing this or felt he was going to giggle, he could stop, leave the group and, if he chose, return later.

When the children were relaxed, she asked them to be aware of any sensations, images, emotions or thoughts they might have, to say to themselves, "This is a sensation, thought, etc.", not to become involved with them or think more about them but let them go. Imaginatively, when the children were comfortable with the physical relaxation, Nancy asked them to picture their emotions and thoughts as if they were bubbles emerging from a deep pool or stream and gradually floating away.

Intellectually, Nancy did two things. First, she asked them to think in general about their thinking by asking and trying to answer the following questions:

1. Do your thoughts come from anywhere? Where? How can you tell?
2. Are all the thoughts you are aware of your own thoughts? Do you think them? If you do, how do you think them? If you don't, how do they come about?
3. What happens to your thoughts after they are thought? How do you know?

Secondly, after the children had become comfortable and proficient with the relaxation exercises and struggled with the previous questions, Nancy began to use some of the exercises from the Pixie manual: "Thinking and Having Thoughts," "What Happens When We Think," "Mental

Gerard Vallone

Nancy Gumbinner appears on the cover, holding two children