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, heterogeniously 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 follwing 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 Acts," "Private Feelings," "Daydreaming," "Dreams and Stories" and "Empathy."

Initially, when the children dealt with Nancy's questions, they were amazed at both how effortlessly their sensations, images, emotions and thoughts came into their awareness and how much was "there". They were not sure from where, if from anywhere, their thoughts came nor to where, if anywhere, their thoughts went. But they were convinced that their thoughts originated, and that even if their content was not unique, their thoughts were theirs. Eventually, when the children did some of the exercises from *Pixie,* they began to realize that, if they chose to, they could think for themselves without depending upon what any one else had thought, that they thoughts could be important and that they could form the basis for what would become a mutually supportive, and critically, reflective dialogue.

Encouraged by the success of the relaxation exercises and their ensuing discussions, Nancy decided to try them with a self-contained multi-sensory, learning disabled class at the district's Mamaroneck Avenue School whose students seemed to have a built-in stigma of not being "too bright". While the results of the more philosophical discussions were not as successful with this group, the relaxation exercises and the initial questions Nancy formulated did enable some of the inarticulate children to discover and all of the children to share aspects they became aware of about themselves, to begin to think about their own thinking and to show others, both friends and parents, what they had begun to teach themselves and learn about one another.

The success Nancy had with the discussions that followed the exercises more than compensated for some initial resistance which the physical, though not the imaginative or intellectual, aspects seemed to occasion. She used the physical exercises to encourage the children to enter into a reflective mode of thinking, the imaginative exercises to deepen it and the intellectual exercises to criticize, expand and develop it. Together, they enabled average and below average children to begin to develop an automonously dialectical mode of thinking and speaking which lead them to further that mode of human activity which has traditionally been called Philosophy.

Gerard Vallone

Nancy Gumbinner appears on the cover, holding two children