

Nurturing Creative Productive Behavior Using the Philosophy for Children Program

I have been involved in the philosophy program at Public School 128 in Manhattan for the past five years. This morning I would like to share with you some of my experiences with the 1st and 2nd grade children that I have taught. The book we use is called *Kio & Gus* and it comes with an accompanying manual called *Wondering At the World*.

At present I am working with two 2nd grade classes, but in the past I have worked with both 1st and 2nd grade children. In the 1st grade, I read from the book to the children as it is too difficult for them to read and there are no pictures in the book. In the 2nd grade, I give each child his own book and we have a directed oral reading lesson followed by a discussion of the questions provided in the manual. I don't run the sessions as question and answer periods but instead I turn them into discussion times by setting an intimate atmosphere for the exchange of ideas and opinions. I accomplish this by doing away with all physical barriers. I tell the children to move their desks to one side of the room and then I have them arrange their chairs into a circle so that they all face one another and openly talk directly to each other making eye contact. I do not stand, walk around, or sit behind my desk asking questions and receiving answers. Instead, I put my chair near theirs and become part of the circle as a facilitator.

In that role I set an atmosphere of mutual trust and open communication in which we examine opinions, ideas and conclusions. I make an effort to convey to each child no matter what his scholastic standing in the class may be, that his individual contribution is important and necessary to the group. When children feel that you are *really* listening to them and you convey to them the feeling that what they have to say has *value* and that their contribution to the group is important, you will have no difficulty eliciting responses from them.

On the contrary, you will find that once the children really feel comfortable and at ease, your job will be to not only clarify certain points but to keep the discussion confined to the subject at hand while not diminishing their enthusiastic responses. Many times divergent interesting topics occur as offshoots of the main discussion. I keep the discussion within the realm of my general aim by suggesting, "That is a great idea and we will discuss it at a future date." I always follow up on this suggestion so that the

children learn to trust me and they see that I do not make arbitrary decisions.

The book, *Kio & Gus*, is about a boy named Kio and a girl named Gus and they are approximately the ages of my students. Kio and his older sister, Suki, are spending a summer with their grandparents who own a chicken farm. Gus is their neighbor and she lives with her parents and older brother, Brad, on a nearby farm. The adventures and discussions between Kio and Gus and their families furnish the framework for the story. The suggested topics and questions in the accompanying manual provide the vehicle for transporting the students' ideas and thoughts from the personal realm to the group arena where each child is encouraged to voice his opinion, listen to the opinions of others and to interact with these other ways of thinking or viewing a situation. In the role of facilitator, I provide the students with the means to reflect upon questions and issues in a mutually supportive dialogical setting.

Children have to be given an opportunity to work out their own thoughts and ideas. They need to discuss ways of evaluating answers without judging the answer by the worth of the person giving it but instead by judging the merits of the answer itself. I, as the leader, try to provide the children with opportunities to put their ideas into words, help them to advance conclusions and see that they justify these conclusions without feeling personally threatened. The students need to learn how to not only *hear* but to *listen* carefully to the assumptions of others as well as to be able to give voice to their own assumptions. They have to be able to discover their own inconsistent thinking as well as recognize the inconsistencies in the offerings of others. They do this best when they are put in a relaxed, nurturing environment where they can role play. The main characters in the book *Kio & Gus* afford the children a marvelous opportunity to do this.

Kio and Gus are peers of the students as they are about the same age. In the book each shares his or her own special feelings, thoughts, and opinions about their joint adventures and individual experiences.

Kio reveals his reflections about life as he tells us about his dog, Roger, and his adventures with Gus. He shares his concerns and wonders with us via his discussions with his older sister, Suki, and his grandparents. He also provides us with a glimpse of family dynamics and the differing points of view of two generations living together.

Gus is the female main character in the book and it is not until the second chapter that we learn that she is blind when she remarks to her mother, "Besides seeing, Mama, is there anything else I can't do?" Gus' disability leads naturally into a class discussion of

how a disability affects a person's life. Since Gus is a *fictional* character, it makes a discussion of the topic easier for the children to handle.

As Gus relates more and more details of her life, the children learn that Gus owns a horse which she rides by herself and that she is quite self-sufficient. This leads into a discussion of the interrelationship of the senses and how they help us to perceive the world and relate to ourselves and to each other.

Gus provides the impetus for some revealing and exploratory discussions when she questions what her mother means when she calls Gus beautiful. As Gus cannot confirm or deny her mother's statement by looking at herself in the mirror, we are led into discussions about beauty, truthfulness and believing what adults tell you.

As Kio and Gus have different personalities and different ways of regarding the same experience or thing, their discussions serve to reveal to the children many ways of dealing with similar ideas or experiences. This opens up different avenues for further discussion of the various themes offered in the book.

There are ten chapters in the book. Each chapter starts with one of the main characters revealing his or her feelings about something or asking a question. But in none of the chapters is the name of the person talking revealed. It is up to the reader to figure out who is talking from the context of what is said. This sharpens the students' thinking skills and gets them to be alert to what is going on from the very beginning of the book. It is also a story that tells the reader what has *already* happened to Kio and Gus. They are relating their past summer experiences and feelings thereby setting the mood for the children to share their thoughts and feelings about experiences *they have had*.

This leads smoothly to a group discussion where there will be an exchange of ideas and thoughts accompanied by questions, answers and evaluations of the conclusions. Two of the most rewarding aspects of teaching is to see the expression on a child's face when he relinquishes an egocentric belief and begins to mull over new ideas and facts that he has acquired. The second rewarding aspect is to watch a child's face light up when he finds the answer to something he has been wondering about for awhile.

Another bonus from the philosophy program is that the skills acquired by the children via the exercises and discussions can be applied toward their achieving proficiency in the other areas of the curriculum. Once a child starts to wonder and think about himself and his experiences in the world, he doesn't stop doing it when the bell rings – he just expands his concentration into other areas.

Teaching philosophy is a lot like gardening. You take the seeds of thought and you plant them in a

child's fertile mind. Then you nurture them with relevant and thought-provoking questions in a warm, stimulating environment. Shortly thereafter there will bloom before your eyes a critical thinking individual who will not only enrich your life and his own but the lives of everyone he encounters.

In today's fast paced, multimedia-dominated world, our students are overwhelmed with information overload. They need to be taught how to separate the wheat from the chaff, the important from the unimportant, and the pertinent from the trivial. The philosophy program recognizes this *need* and it *answers* it by offering the students the time and space to reflect, to share feelings, and to discuss thoughts. It helps them to formulate questions and to reach answers that will help them help themselves to become productive people in today's complex world.

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