A REPORT ON REBECCA

The purpose of this study is to determine after a one year program (October to May), the effects of Philosophy for Children on critical thinking skills of a select group of 22 second graders at Saginaw Elementary. These students have had no previous study in Philosophy for Children and met for 170 days, bi-weekly for at least 30-minutes with no more than three sessions missed. It was anticipated there would be a significant positive difference of critical thinking skills of second graders as observed and noted by the teacher, in a recorded journal, prior, during and after the study. The teacher used Rebecca (Reed, 1986) plus the teacher's manual for the basis of instruction.

Research has shown that children can be taught critical thinking skills if it is done in a systematic way. This researcher began with "Philosophy for Children" (1982) by Matthew Lipman and used seven other research reports as well. These reports have shown that Philosophy for Children can be an effective addition to the elementary curriculum in assisting children to improve their critical thinking skills. Active research needs to continue in this area but this researcher proposed to show that second graders, when exposed to one year of Rebecca, will improve their critical thinking skills.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

Philosophy for Children was introduced to my second grade class at Saginaw Elementary by displaying a 10-inch yellow circle with "P4C" written on it. The students were asked if they knew what P4C meant and their answers were varied. Eventually they were told it stood for Philosophy for Children, and I then introduced the program set forth by Matthew Lipman.

Lipman believes that Philosophy for Children can provide some of the tools children need for effective thinking. One of the aims of Lipman's program is to increase children's reasoning skills as well as their ability to draw valid inferences. Another aim is to develop their creative as well as their logical abilities; to see connections and make distinctions. The program assists children in discovering alternatives and helps them in the goal of objectivity and consistency in their answers to questions (Alvino, 1980; Beyer, 1984).

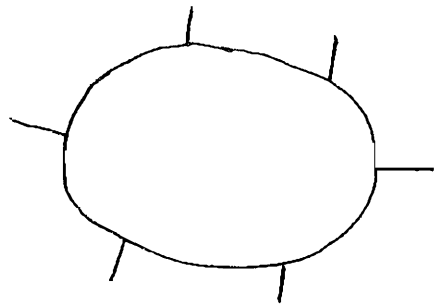
My first concern as I began implementation of P4C, was to obtain permission from my principal and administration in order to be able to include Rebecca in the language arts program. My principal, Mr. Edmund Wade, and the administrators of the Eagle Mountain-Saginaw Independent School District were very supportive of my practicum proposal. Mr. Wade encouraged me in my efforts and arranged the second grade language arts time to be in the afternoon so that I might have the time needed for our bi-weekly sessions of Rebecca.

With this permission and the aims and objectives of P4C in mind, we set out on our adventure with Rebecca. We left our homeroom and went to an empty classroom where we could sit in a circle on the floor for our P4C discussions. The first thing we did was take the time to explore the room we were in so that as we began work we could concentrate our energy on the topic rather than the surroundings. The next thing we did was establish the rules for P4C discussions. Since Canter's Assertive Discipline program is used in the second grade my children had already had a month of positive discipline practice. We established the following discussion rules:

1. Raise your hand and wait for permission to talk.
2. Each class member is entitled to participate, therefore we will be courteous to all members of the community.

3. Listen to everyone share their idea and comments then you may ask a question of a friend.

In anticipation of P4C this year, the word "community" had been inserted into the Canter Assertive Discipline program from the beginning of the school year. Each member of the class was to be recognized as an individual having his or her own interests and opinions yet respecting the views of others in our community. I felt it was important to the success of P4C to begin to establish our community even before we had our first session. After our discussion about rules this picture was introduced

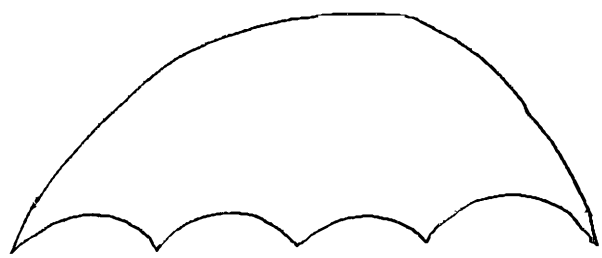


and the children were asked: "What is this?" Their answers were many:

* an insect
* the top view of an almost bald man with his hair sticking out
* the sun
* a flower
* a dog's collar
* a bracelet/necklace

After several minutes of proposing answers they said, "We give up, please tell us." I told them I didn't know and they were astonished. The looks on their faces expressed total amazement. I told them as we worked through our P4C I wouldn't always have the answers and that I too was a member of the community seeking answers and wanting to learn and grow. I was surprised at how well the students accepted this, but they were curious as well because they wanted to know why I went to a college that didn't know the answers. I then shared with them some of the background of the P4C program and they thought it was great that they were going to get to go to college with me through Rebecca. They also said they thought it was neat that two doctors were coming to visit. It was explained that Dr. Reed and Dr. Rembert were college professors, not doctors, who would examine them if they were sick.

Our next meeting began with a review of the rules for discussion. They were asked if they had any questions from our last meeting and there were none. Another picture was shown



and again the children were asked: "What is this?" They answered:

* an umbrella with the handle missing
* the moon turned upside down

* waves of water
* a piece of melon with teeth marks
* the frown of a jack-o-lantern
* an insect

These first two meetings went very well. They respected and followed the rules and I didn't feel I had to be involved as a teacher but felt like a member of the community.

The next week I was out due to illness and the following week was Fire Prevention Week with programs scheduled on both Tuesday and Thursday. These missed sessions concerned me because I believe consistency in the presentation of the material to be an important factor in the final outcome.

My October 13th journal notes begin, "It was GREAT!". We started Rebecca. I read the first page, and asked the children to tell me what we had learned about Rebecca. They restated the facts: she is eight-years-old, she has black hair, lives in a tree in her backyard, her backyard is next to Robert's backyard and Robert is her friend. The children were then shown two 9 x 12 sheets of paper with the words "Similarities" and "Differences" written on them and asked to define the words. They responded that similarities are how two or more things are alike, and differences are how two or more things are not alike. We then explored how we were similar to Rebecca. Two of my boys said they were like her because they had black hair. Several commented they were the same age as Rebecca. Those who didn't have black hair or were not seven-years-old said they were different.

Pushed to go beyond the facts on how we could be similar or different than Rebecca, they listed on the similar side: we all have feelings; we all have eyes, ears, nose and other physical similarities; we can all think, remember, learn and teach; we can all perform some of the same tasks, and we all have parents. (A side line discussion to this was the arrangement of parents: natural, step parents or single parent families.). The differences they noted could be the same items as the similarities, different color eyes, hair, size of hands, feet and body shapes. The children really seemed to enjoy this discussion. They got excited yet respected our rules. When told we needed to close our P4C and move on they all booed in unison. This really gave me a boost, but we headed back to our regular classroom.

Our next session opened with a display of 10 items and the children were asked to group the objects in terms of one characteristic they shared in common. We then arranged the same objects into different groups giving the children the opportunity to attend to different characteristics of the same objects. The children really enjoyed this hands-on experience and much to my pleasure all of the children participated, even though several of the groupings and reasons for doing so were repeated. The children seemed to be very relaxed during this session and no one seemed to feel pressured to perform.

On page two of Rebecca, Rebecca introduced her green elephant who eats sunflowers and she asked:

> What if you had an elephant--would it be green? Would it eat sunflowers? See what I mean! These things are so hard to think about!(p. 2)

As the discussion was opened the children thought it would be great to be able to have a green elephant for a pet. They would ride him through the neighborhood, charge money for their friends to ride, use him as one would a ladder to get in trees or on top of a roof. The children were then asked if they really thought Rebecca had an elephant for a pet. They paused and one boy summed it up: "Chances are she doesn't but it's a neat idea."

Next the children were asked to distinguish between reality and fantasy (fantasy

was chosen over whimsy because it is included in our MacMillian Reading Series). The children described reality as something that can and does happen even though they thought some "real" things were very strange indeed. They described fantasy as things, people, animals or places that are made up in a person's imagination. Some examples they gave were animals who wore clothes and talked, cars that could fly, talk or think, castles in the air and green elephants that eat sunflowers. Here we determined that Rebecca could have an elephant, it could be green if she dyed or painted it, but the chances were she did not have a green elephant, that she used her imagination to describe her pet. This discussion was followed with an art activity where each child was given a piece of paper and asked to draw a picture of a pet they would like to have. Most of the pictures were traditional; dogs, cats, rabbits, horses and hamsters. Three of the students let their imaginations run wild and came up with creative pets that were combinations of several animals together. Next year I will suggest that the children use their imaginations more; to be more creative in their approach of an unusual pet.

Our sixth session began with the reading of page three. The children giggled and answered Rebecca's question about teaching an elephant to fly immediately: "Give it a magic feather." I knew they were remembering Dumbo (Aberson, 1939) and drew them back to the words reality and fantasy. They agreed that Dumbo was fantasy, but Rebecca could still try it on her elephant. The children were encouraged to help Rebecca with their ideas on how to teach a green elephant to fly. They shared several innovative ways, attach a motor to its back that included blades like a helicopter and it could take off, or haul the elephant up a tree with a pulley then push him out and after several attempts the elephant would use his ears as a bird uses his wings. Another idea was to attach a hot air balloon to the elephant and with his trunk he could control the strings that would guide him across the sky. One of the most exciting things about this session was the fact that Mirinda and Detoubon, my two Laotian students shared ideas as well.

One of my main concerns at the end of this session was the fact we had met six times and were only on page three of Rebecca. I spoke with Dr. Rembert and Dr. Reed and both assured me we were under no pressure to finish Rebecca this year. The main concern was to continue to work on the objectives that had been established for the year: developing a community of inquiry and helping children develop their skills in thinking and communicating in an effective manner.

With this in mind we prepared for our first visit from Dr. Rembert. We started the session by reading page four of Rebecca where she tells us she loves frogs but doesn't like princes. Rebecca said she had never really met a prince but she felt certain she wouldn't like him. The children were asked to share their experiences with frogs and there were many interesting tales. They were asked about princes and the children stated their only encounter with princes had been in fairy tales.

I wanted to pursue the discussion of the relation of justification to preference and aversion. In order to do this a Halloween witch holding a basket of bubble gum was placed under a red cover in the middle of our P4C circle. The children were then asked to tell why they thought they would like or dislike what was under the cloth. One student responded he couldn't tell anything about the object, but he knew he wouldn't like it because he didn't like the color red and anything under red had to be awful. Of course, another student responded with, they would like it because the cloth was red. Our P4C rules seemed to encourage some students to take the opposite view and I often wondered if they really felt the expressed way or if they enjoyed the freedom to disagree without a judgemental finger being pointed at them. Other responses were: the shape is round so it might be a ball we could play with, another thought it might be a monster who would eat us all up. Next, one of the witches feet was shown and the children seemed more puzzled; they had no new ideas to add.

Finally, some of the witches straw hair was displayed and one student guessed a scarecrow because of the foot and straw showing. Another was sure that straw had been stuck on a ball just to confuse them. As time was running out the entire witch was revealed and comments ranged from: "How cute," to "I'd never have guessed that" or "I couldn't have figured it out." Each child was given a piece of gum as we lined up to go back to our homeroom. The children did not appear to be shy with Dr. Rembert, and his advice was appreciated: summarize the point at the conclusion of an exercise to help the students remember the issue at stake. Also be as directive as needed to promote philosophical discussions, an activity which requires more direction than is required for the mere exchange of ideas or views.

As we moved into November it was exciting to hear the children's comments as the P4C circle was displayed: "Oh boy P4C," "I love P4C," "P4C is the only time I like to talk" and "It's fun to share ideas." These comments made me feel good about our program and I sensed we as a group would continue to grow and learn together. On page six Rebecca asks several questions and the one my students focused in on was "What do you think a lot about?" This began a discussion I found depressing, yet my students interest was at a high point, so I was glad that I could be a member of the community and just listen. Aaron said he thought about his mom a lot because his parents were divorced and he lived with his dad. Several other children commented they understood because their situation was the same. Jerry Lynn then responded with: "At least both of your parents are alive, my dad is dead and I never even knew him." The children replied with an understanding of his emotions because almost half of them had lost a grandparent, aunt or uncle. I was truly surprised at their depth of understanding because I have never lost anyone close to me. This session really seemed to unite our community and once we left our P4C room the caring attitude that had been displayed continued for the next few days in our regular classroom. Our class seemed to have developed a much higher sense of community.

Our next session began with an exercise from the teacher's manual: "Tell one way you could help your mother get ready for dinner." The children responded with a variety of ideas; set the table, make the salad, pour the milk, get the food out of the refrigerator for her, fix the vegetables, go to the store on my bike and get what was needed, fix the whole thing and wash the dishes. We then discussed ways the children could help Rebecca. They answered with teaching her elephant to fly, finding her a home so she wouldn't have to live in a tree, locate sunflowers for her elephant to eat, build houses for her frogs, buy her a book so she could learn more about frogs and introduce her to a nice prince. We then pursued the criteria that would distinguish between helping a fictional character and helping a real one.

Page seven brought an interesting discussion about tears, the physical activity of crying and the mental activity of being upset. The children said the physical activity made them tired, stopped up their noses, gave them a headache, made their eyes swell and their faces wet. They cried if they were physically hurt, upset over something, happy or excited, frustrated or angry. After they had cried they commented they often felt better, or relieved that mental tension was gone even though the physical problem might yet not be solved. We ended this particular discussion with the importance of giving a brief reason for our answers without long anecdotes, explanations or examples. They agreed that more of our community could participate if this was done.

We prepared for Dr. Reed's first visit. The children were excited about meeting another of my professors and they asked quite a few questions about him: Did he teach in front of the room the way I did? Did he give me homework and grades too? We talked for several minutes about Texas Wesleyan College and why I wanted to go to college. When Dr. Reed arrived, we went to our P4C room. We began by rereading page seven and followed it with page eight. We reviewed our reasons for crying and how we

felt; then we were sidetracked into talking about how we could teach an elephant to fly. I felt frustrated because we were not on "topic," yet Dr. Reed noted in my evaluation that it is alright for the children to be sidetracked occasionally and that we might have even gone with the topic a bit longer. We returned to reasons why someone might cry and determined, in the end, that a reason can be a good reason for one person and a bad reason for another person, depending upon differences in the person's character, the situation at hand, the mood of the person and what they believed.

For our last session in November two fables by Arnold Lobel (1980) were read, "The Hen and the Apple Tree," which showed the students that it is always difficult to be something you are not. The second fable, "The Baboons Umbrella" showed them that advise from friends is like the weather, some of it is good and some of it is bad. We discussed the reasons they knew the fables were fantasy. They noted that animals don't talk to one another the way we do, that animals don't wear clothes or live in houses the way people do. We followed this with the realization that the lesson of the fable can be applied to us and our everyday lives. The children pointed out that occasionally friends do make a mistake or will try to get you to do something wrong and that sometimes friends just don't have the answers.

This departure from Rebecca helped to reinforce that P4C discussions can carry over into other areas of the curriculum. It demonstrated that P4C can be a valuable tool in all academic areas and so I was not surprised when the children asked if we could read Arthur's Christmas (1984) in our next session. Marc Brown, the author, had visited our school in late October and my students had been really excited about all of his books since that time. Arthur's Christmas shares the lesson of thoughtfulness in giving and the children really talked to each other as they shared their ideas. I was pleased they were getting to the point where they would occasionally forget me, or regard me as a member of the community and not look to me for guidance or approval of their answers.

December arrived and so did Sandy, a new student to our room. Since we were only to page nine I decided to introduce Rebecca to Sandy by having the children draw a picture of Rebecca before our next session. We took the pictures down to our P4C room and those who wanted shared their pictures and thoughts about Rebecca. The children took a great deal of pride in not only the facts they knew about Rebecca, but also in the way she was helping them to think about thinking.

Page 10 was then read and we focused on "secrets." We decided there are some secrets we don't tell to anyone, some that we might share with a friend and others yet we might need to tell. Since those we never tell and those we might share with just one friend weren't open to discussion those we might need to tell became our topic. The children agreed that if a friend told you that they had matches and were going to light a fire, then an adult should be told. An adult also needed to be told about drugs, strangers who bothered someone and if a friend's health was in danger. Safety and concern for a friends' well being seemed to be the only reason the children felt an adult should be told a secret. The adults they considered to be most helpful were parents, grandparents or teachers. They felt these adults would be most likely to help without telling how they received the information.

December passed in a flurry. Between our Christmas vacation and missed school because of snow days,it was almost a month before our next P4C discussion. As we began, we reviewed the story of Rebecca up to this point and what she had helped us accomplish. The children felt they were learning to think about thinking and as Garrett said, "It can be hard work but fun too." The children addressed the issue of why their thoughts couldn't see them shrug their shoulders and decided that thoughts are something that takes place within your mind and thoughts themselves are not physical activities. Thoughts might cause a physical reaction like helping someone

clean up their room, but you couldn't see the thought process going on within your head.

For our next session we took our slates to our P4C room and the children were asked to write down a question they might ask Rebecca if she came to the room for a visit. There were two distinct lines of questions: Those that could be answered from the text with right or wrong answers. And, those where the text had not provided an answer. The latter gave the students a bit more freedom in their answers.

The next visit with Rebecca raised the question: "Who are you like?" They went around the P4C circle and dealt with physical qualities first: I am like Lindsey because I have blond hair; I am like Liz because she is tall; I am like Jason because I have dark skin. Then the children moved into personal qualities: I am like Jill because I am friendly; I am like Amie because she is helpful; I am like Jeremy because I am kind. They stayed on target giving brief explanations and didn't move into any negative or unkind comparisons or remarks.

We moved into the second half of Rebecca and the children were delighted to be dealing with elephants once again, even elephants with orange ears. The exercise included building upon a crazy idea with each student adding something a bit more crazy. The children started with the animals we had been reading about in our math problem solving class. This activity showed me once again that P4C is crossing over into other areas of the curriculum.

This carry-over was again reinforced when our Valentine's party threatened to come to a grinding halt. The mother that was in charge of our games was unable to come so I gave the children a vote. We could choose a game or show the mothers who had come a P4C session. They voted for P4C. We cleared out our desks and formed our P4C circle. The children were asked to tell the facts they knew about Rebecca and then what Rebecca was trying to do for us. The only problem was keeping order, for each child wanted to share with the mothers who were watching. The children enjoyed themselves a great deal and the mothers comments were very favorable.

In order to prepare for our next session, the children were asked to go through a huge box of magazines and cut out two pictures: the most colorful picture and a picture of the prettiest woman they could find. They were also told to be prepared to give reasons for their selections. Later in the week we went down to our P4C room with our secret envelopes and first showed our prettiest woman and told why we thought she was pretty. The children gave many answers: hairstyles, choice of clothes or jewelry, she looked like their mother, the colors she wore, her style in posing and her smile. Next we talked about our most colorful picture and their answers included: bright colors, rainbow colors, the object evoked a fond memory such as grandma's quilt or garden. I listed the reasons as they talked and then we reviewed them and closed our session. The children seemed very pleased with their session and all of them had participated.

As our adventure with Rebecca drew to an end, I felt we had come a long way in meeting my objectives for the year. The first had been to establish a community of inquiry and I felt the children blossomed in this area. At first shy, then tentative, and finally with confidence, the children began to enjoy the freedom of being able to express themselves, to give reasons for their beliefs, to have a different opinion and know they wouldn't be ridiculed or harshly judged by their peers. The second objective I had set was the development of more effective thinking skills and increased proficiency in the children's communication skills. Through observation, notes from my journal and teaching experience I can say this was most certainly accomplished. I felt the children had come a long way in meeting the objectives for the year, and knew that P4C added a rewarding dimension to our classroom curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

As a teacher I need to continue to increase my ability in helping the children realize these objectives and to be a more effective listener. Rereading my evaluations from Dr. Reed and Dr. Rembert I realize there are several other areas I want to continue to work on next year:

1) focus on the discussion topic by challenging students to define key concepts from the beginning;
2) sharpen questions so that students answers reflect an understanding of its meaning;
3) summarize the point of the discussions to help students remember the issue at stake; and
4) vary the activities of the lessons so that the sessions do not become too wordy.

One of my main concerns is that P4C might stop with my second grade class at Saginaw Elementary. I feel the new thinking and communication skills that the children have acquired will be shut off as they enter third grade. Once again the children will move back into the traditional method of questions and answers with teacher directed exchanges. I can only hope that my children will continue, within the confines of their minds and imaginations, to ask the unusual question and to seek alternate answers to questions that are raised. I know I will, and that I look forward to continuing to work with Rebecca next year.

Carol Johnson

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