

HARRY DISCOVERS REALITY: A BEGINNING TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE WITH HARRY

ABSTRACT

Philosophical Inquiry worked well at summer school with a group of highly motivated graduated students and an expert facilitator. Could it also work with eleven-year-olds and a novice teacher? One teacher's beginning experience says yes. A first attempt at use has several requirements: 1) Select, class, time and procedure; 2) Document value of the program to satisfy educational mandates and to meet anticipated objections; 3) Approach administration for approval. Reactions of the students and teacher are recorded. Harry is believable and there is enthusiasm. It's a challenge to continue but well worth it. Drawbacks are effort, time and discussion procedure. Suggestions for meeting these are given. Advantages outweigh challenges. Students like to talk about what they think. Students with poor writing skills are often the most verbally articulate. Respect for another's ideas affects the social groups of this small (21) class.

During the summer of 1988, C & I 6303 - Advanced Methods in Philosophy for Children - was like an oasis of affirmation amid the hassles of Educational Research and Inferential Statistics. When the dust settled and finals were over, an analysis was made. There were several reasons why Philosophy for Children was so affirming and rewarding. One important reason was the expertise of the facilitator. Another factor was the possibility of there being no one right answer. Instead of a frustrating element, this was a freeing element. Finally, there was a great sense of accomplishment in stretching one's mind and being listened to and accepted.

This refreshing experience was desired for the young people of St. Pius X. They too arrive in class hassled and burdened. What a great gift it would be to give them a period of freedom and refreshment. An expert facilitator was not available and they were not as motivated as the graduate students but the joy of thinking and the enthusiasm of participating were still possibilities so a program for teaching Philosophy for Children in the Middle School was outlined.

The first step was to select a class. Small size, good verbal skills and a cross section of ability were determined as a criteria for selection. Small size and verbal skills are essential for discussion. A cross section of ability was identified because other programs are offered to the honors group only and a certain elitism is encouraged in an already competitive environment. Many fine minds are "wasting away" because of poor handwriting skills, weak study habits and lack of organizational skills. Many readers and grammar texts leave the thought provoking questions for the bright. These questions are in the corner or at the end of a group of study questions labeled extra credit. Sometimes the very student who cannot remember the specifics, which are supposed to indicate simple cognitive recall, can give the why, which as inferential is considered higher level thinking.

Based on the above criteria, a seventh grade regular English class was chosen. An additional factor used to determine this selection was that the Seventh Grade Curriculum is very dry and lacks any excitement. In the past, it has always been necessary to add a unit in poetry of mythology to spark up the year's content. This year, Philosophy for Children would provide the sparkle.

Philosophy for Children is about growing and takes time. Rather than a concentrated unit where recall and memory are stressed, one day a week for the entire year was selected. Thursday was chosen, primarily for the instructor's convenience but also because Friday afternoon is not the best time for much and this left Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday for the grammar concepts required by Texas State mandates. The procedure would be the reading of a chapter with discussion following. No grades would

be given except for participation.

Although Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery is rated as material for fifth and sixth grade, this text was chosen because it was one with which the facilitator was familiar. After one semester, it appears to be more than interesting enough and has a level of difficulty that makes it stimulating for Seventh Graders even those of above average ability. In addition, the story itself is not significant. After only a product used as a vehicle for the process of thinking. It becomes a challenge to see what is going to be contrived to stimulate them to think and what guide the story will provide towards possible topics.

This is not to say that Harry is not believable. Many students could identify with individuals or characteristics of individuals. Harry himself was embraced by several. One student thought she was really weird wondering where her idea went after she had it until she met Harry and company. If Lisa's ideas could be bats in caves, hers could go to the mall while she slept. Helium balloons, carbonation in soda, sleeping dragons and scurrying mice were all revealed as examples of what bounced around in their heads after they discovered such revelations were acceptable.

The value of the program needed to be documented to satisfy educational mandates of the State, the Archdiocese and the local School Board. Texas House Bill 75 supplies specific Essential Elements which are clearly met by the Philosophy for Children program. 75.41 a 4 and 75.141a 5 are elements covered in the program. 75.41a 4 requires that the student shall be provided with opportunities to:

- (A) choose appropriate meaning of multi-meaning words.
- (B) arrange details in sequential order.
- (C) perceive cause and effect relationships.
- (D) predict probable future actions.

(E) summarize and make generalizations. 75.41a 5 asks that the student be provided with opportunities to participate in group discussions. An increase in higher level thinking skills is an objective of the Archdiocesan School Office. Philosophy for Children provides opportunities for students to compare, summarize, identify patterns, make generalizations, explanatory inferences and hypotheses. The above listed skills and subskills are generally considered higher level thinking skills no matter what identification framework is used.

Additionally and perhaps most significantly, Philosophy for Children fits the goals of the individual community which is to prepare the youth of the community for a place in society as responsible thinking participants. Philosophy for Children encourages the respect and the sound principles of reasoning needed to participate in an adult community of inquiry.

After all the above documentation, approval by the administration was virtually guaranteed. One major objection anticipated was the addition of another element to the already loaded curricula. This was the reason for choosing the 7th grade which has an English curriculum on the light side. The seventh grade English program is not supplemented with the Spellers and Handwriting Books that the sixth grade is, nor does it have the School Newspaper, High School Entrance Preparatory Manual or other supplementary activities offered in the eighth grade.

Another anticipated objection was the current thinking that teachers should use existing materials to encourage and develop a variety of intellectual processes rather than do so through additional superficial material. If the students were able to transfer their thinking skills this objection could be met.

Approval was expected and given. The school has a high level of independence and academic freedom supported by a principal who fosters collegiality and has delegation down to a fine art. The parents are very supportive and enthusiastic about programs adopted for enrichment. A demonstration lesson where parents were the audience was planned during the Winter Open House to inform them and to encourage

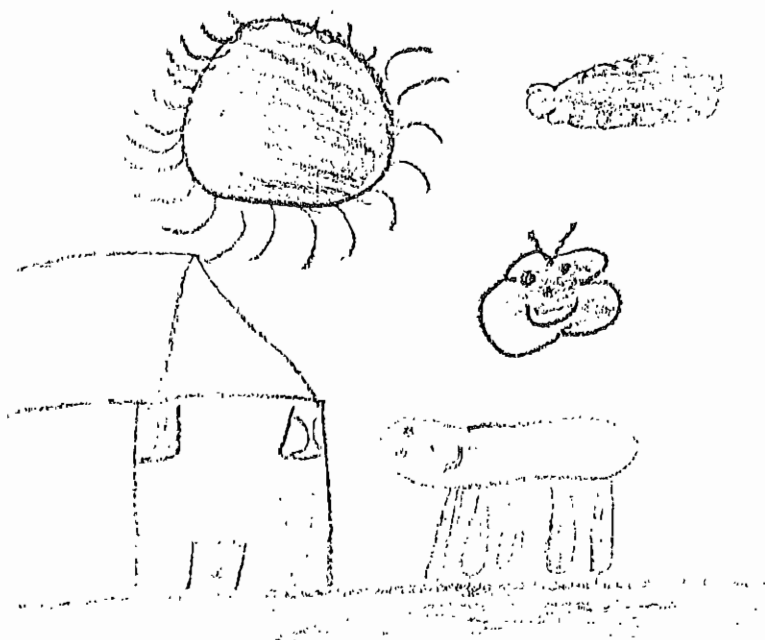
because facilitators would receive encouragements from colleagues. A city-wide or district-wide support group would also be beneficial. For now, however, the enthusiasm of the participants and the promise of transfer are the motivating factors.

The year this program was inaugurated was the year of the Presidential election and a significant local issue, the building of a sports stadium. Admittedly, these two issues are not equally significant on a local much less a national level, but they were heatedly entered into by the local adult community. The small community of inquiry in Room 5 listened more carefully and were considerably more unemotional and logical in their approach to the sports stadium in January than the Presidential election in November. In this rationality, they did not imitate their adult counterparts, so perhaps Philosophy for Children contributed to their approach. This hint of possible transfer to life was most encouraging to the facilitator and also very motivating. The participants themselves were also aware of how intelligently they were approaching the issue. They were proud of their willingness to consider opposing views and to change strongly voiced opinions.

Who are these perceptive participants? There seems to be little parallel between high standardized test scores and the stars of the community. The social stratification is also crossed. Minds seem to be truly democratic and the students have reevaluated their prejudices about several members based on an individual's insightful participation.

Last week the class discussed Dale and his refusal to salute the flag. These students go to a religiously affiliated school so nonconformity to them is particularly odious. They accepted Dale and began questioning some of the practices of their school. Has the teacher released a sleeping dragon? Will she, like Mrs. Halsey, have the children challenge future class agendas? There is some risk involved here. However, the practice of their religious customs, the teacher's lesson plans or the prescribed school agendas are not absolutes. Perhaps we too, like the bat in Lisa's poem, can correct the cave.

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