HARRY GOES TO COLLEGE

Two years ago I was teaching Harry to a group of fifth graders when the football scandal at SMU became a national news story. We had recently finished the chapter concerning Dale and the pledge to the flag, hence we were thinking about rules and laws. I took a cue from Mrs. Halsey in Chapter Ten and put aside my planned lesson to let the children deal with the problem about which they were presently concerned. It was using Harry to think about current events.

A brief review of what happened at SMU is as follows:

1. money had been given to football players to attend SMU
2. this was against NCAA rules
3. it was reported that the Governor and others knew about this irregularity and did not report it
4. SMU lost the right to play football for one year

Before I could begin my lesson for the day the students asked if we could discuss what was happening to SMU. I asked how many of the students knew of this news item. Many of the students knew of the news report. Some of their parents were SMU alumni so the news was being discussed at home; others promptly joined in the discussion as we continued the lesson. The children inquired Is it OK to break a rule or law if no one is hurt in the process? . . . If you are not caught? One child asked if it was OK to break a rule or law if it was a "dumb" law. After some discussion of these ideas a child who seldom spoke asked if it was OK to break a law if it was advantageous to you.

I took a cue from these student ideas to ask the following questions:

What is a rule?
What is a law?
Was anyone hurt by this action at SMU?
Did the Governor and the others have an obligation to tell what they knew about the incident?
Do we have an obligation to tell if we know someone is breaking a rule or law?
If the students and boosters had thought of the consequences of their actions, do you think they would have acted differently?
How many people suffered as a result of the punishment?
Is that fair?
What is fair?

During the following classes we continued with themes that were addressed in this class: we discussed thinking for yourself, responsibility, consequences of our actions, trust, and self-respect.

This idea of using Harry for current events was not planned, but it was one of the most exciting moments for me in my teaching of Harry. The children were so personally involved in this matter that their dialogue was stimulated. Their emotional involvement seemed to spur their thinking. Once again this was an example for me to put aside my so carefully planned lessons and "go with the flow" of the children. I would encourage Philosophy teachers at any level: Let us look for those times when we can take the philosophical lessons of Harry and use them in the "teachable moments" students often present to us.

Pamela J. Sanguinet