

## **HARRY AFTER SCHOOL**

I love doing Philosophy for Children or Analytical Thinking better than anything else I teach, so when I was given the opportunity to offer a class in an after-school time, I was eager to attempt the experiment. This particular class was offered as part of an extra-curricular program in an elementary school in Austin, Texas, but different from the one in which I teach. It was to be opened to fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students in the last eight weeks of school. The sessions were one hour in length and met once a week. Publicity and registration were handled by the principal of the school. A limit of eighteen students was set for the group and sixth graders were given priority.

The principal of the school where I teach kindly allowed me to leave school during the last period of the day, which was my scheduled planning period, so that I could drive across town in time to be ready for the group as soon as school was over for the day.

It was with a special kind of anticipation that I met with this group. I was very much interested in the expansion of this program into the community, since innovative programs seem to take a great deal of time to incorporate into public schools. I was excited to learn about the interest that might exist in community education classes as a place for future offerings, but first I needed this learning experience of working with young people during an after-school time.

### **THE BEGINNING**

We met in the AV room of the school. I arranged the chairs in a circle. When the participants arrived, we introduced ourselves and talked informally. The principal came in and gave a brief introduction and welcome to the group.

I began by giving a brief statement of the purpose for the group and some expectations of how we might best proceed. The ground rules were listening and speaking with respect for each other and for our ideas, and giving reasons for our thinking when stating opinions. The members of the group were very attentive and were eager to participate in the "Detective" and "Petal Around the Roses" games. I used these two games to provide a contrast between this kind of discussion group and the more familiar one found in a typical classroom. We talked about the differences between inquiring cooperatively and inquiring competitively as demonstrated in the two games respectively. It became apparent in the process of playing the games that many of the participants did not know each other by name so we then proceeded to play yet another game. This was the memory game with the name attached to a mental activity, i.e., "My name is Susie and I am imagining myself sitting on a beach." There was a great deal of cooperating and prompting going on as we made our way around the circle, after the initial moans associated with this kind of testing of our individual memories.

We then moved to the first chapter of Harry. After reading it, I led them through the chapter analyzing the sequence of events and the structure of the chapter which illustrates a model for inquiry. Then I asked about other ideas they found interesting. The list we derived provided the basis for the discussion which would occur the following week.

As we were about to conclude, some of the participants said they had read this story before. I was puzzled because the school where I teach is the only one which still has a program. We ascertained that these sixth graders had been introduced to the program as fourth graders in the school where I previously had taught. The teacher introduced the program to them but then discontinued the sessions. Given the repetition involved, I suggested they might not wish to continue because we would be covering the same chapters again. To my delight, they said they really enjoyed the discussions and did not mind repeating the reading material.

In reviewing the first day, I realized I really did not know why these youngsters had signed up for a class with the prodigious title, "Analytical Thinking," so in the beginning of the next session, I asked about their reasons. Many had come because of parental urgings and a few others said they were curious about what a thinking class might be about. I noticed that not all eighteen members were there and did a kind of informal check to find out about those missing. This was the first time I realized that one of my expectations for this group would need to be altered from those I had as a classroom facilitator. In the classroom, students can and do choose not to come to every session of our Discovery classes, but they are in class, usually listening to discussions and participating without actually sitting with their group. Then the next session they join the group, participate fully without losing any continuity, either with trust or content, with their community. But in this group, variation in attendance was a factor to be anticipated and dealt with. Competing responsibilities made the group very flexible and not as cohesive as I would have wanted, since building a community involves participation, commitment, and trust. The group ranged from eight to fourteen people from session to session. There did emerge a core group of about eight regular participants who represented all three age groups.

### THE MIDDLE

In the sessions which followed, I was challenged by another change in expectation from classroom-based to community-based group facilitator. I simply did not anticipate having to deal with behavior problems. After all, in many ways this was an educator's dream--students choosing to come to a class on their own time, no grades, and no imposed school rules to follow. In the first situation I will describe, the challenge was met with humor and the outcome was positive. In the second, the situation provided an occasion for some learning, but I fear for some disappointment as well.

In the first case, one of the sixth grade boys had brought to the group as part of his repertoire the notion that he was an alien from a galaxy far, far away. He was a very active participant. When asked for reasons for some of his opinions, he would often qualify his responses with the idea, since the technology of his planet far surpassed ours here on Earth, his explanations would be beyond our understanding. I quickly realized that E.T., while enjoying the attention this got him from the other members, could be sufficiently distracting that the group would come to make little progress in discussion. Initially, I tried to dilute the effect of the distraction by redirecting questions to other members or asking for their reasons for opinions which they were offering. This strategy worked sometimes, but because some other members liked the humor of the situation with E.T., they often redirected the conversation back to him. So then I asked him to think as an earthling and give reasons based on that identity so we could be on the same footing. He liked the challenge and humor of this. Not too long after that E.T. went home, and the youngster who remained proved to be a very faithful member of the group giving excellent reasons for his opinions.

In the second case, there arose a familiar problem with group interactions, that is, everyone speaking at once, so that each person getting a turn or being heard properly became difficult. In the classroom, if the group does not adjust to a self-imposed order after a gentle reminder about being able to hear each other's ideas, I usually encourage use of a signal system until the flow of conversation begins taking a more orderly direction. What emerged from this ebb and flow were two discussants who consistently were engaged in private conversation. My reiteration of the desired community talking behavior, i.e., sharing all ideas with the group, had little effect. Had this remained a problem in the classroom I would have felt comfortable asking these youngsters to leave the group for that period and to rejoin us the next session knowing, if they chose to, they would be hearing the ongoing conversation and reentry to the group would not be

difficult. In this case, I tried incorporating them into the discussion again by directly asking for their views on the question being discussed. Their responses generally indicated an indifference and moreover a dislike for being involved in this way. I had also included myself as a participant at this point which was a timing mistake. I realized this mistake most fully when I asked one of the girls to please give reasons for her opinions and challenged her in turn with an alternative point of view. Her response let me know that she was not ready for my participation in the group on this level. Although we were able to end that session successfully with progress being made in the discussion, the two girls did not come back after the fourth meeting. I was saddened by what I took to be a case of mismanagement on my part. I will present what I take to be a better alternative to this sort of management problem in an upcoming section of this paper.

### THE ENDING/BEGINNING

There were only eight one-hour sessions for this group, very little time. The group had no problem choosing topics to discuss, especially with the first two chapters of Harry which are so rich in interesting ideas from which children can choose. We did not lose any time deciding what to talk about and the group's responses to the exercises and discussion plans ran very close to the form recorded in other articles. Of course, there were delightful surprises, creativity of responses, and interesting points of view that make these discussions ever new and exciting to be a part of. When the nine of us got together for our last session, we read Chapter 3. It was as if we were now beginning. Those remaining were now working together in a community. And if we had continued, we might have become a community of inquiry.

In the previous sections of this paper I have presented a brief history of an after-school Philosophy for Children group. In presenting that history, I have also tried to highlight three problems that arose from conducting an out-of-school as opposed to an in-school program. I think these are primarily problems of expectation and anticipation.

1. Attendance: How flexible can a group be in terms of people coming and going and maintain the necessary cohesion for the development of trust and content continuity?
2. Behavior management: What kind and how much?
3. Time and Timing: How much is enough to develop a community? Should time be a determining factor in deciding whether to start a group or is the overriding factor giving children an opportunity to participate in this program? And when is an appropriate time for the leader to become a participant?

In the remaining sections of this paper, I will make some comments as a beginning point for further discussion and consideration for those who are interested in working in community-based programs.

Regarding flexibility and attendance of the group, I think that if I had prepared myself with the realistic expectation that, given the other demands and interests of its members, this group would be changing from week to week, then I would have been prepared for the changes which did occur. I also would have emphasized two points in the introduction to the group. One would be the explicit statement of the goal that members attend every session possible. Another would be that those wishing to withdraw from the group be provided with a procedure for doing so which would provide the leader with some helpful evaluation information. Here I have in mind something like a postcard with a brief checklist of possible reasons for withdrawing and place for

comments which could be sent to the leader.

Concerning the question of behavior, I think that it should be anticipated that there will be participants who may choose to consistently disrupt or distract the group or lose interest. With this expectation, the leader can give some consideration to the alternatives she will use to deal with these disruptions or with participants who do seem to have lost interest. I might add that I have never had a group in which a participant withdrew because of lack of interest.

Concluding with the questions about time and timing, there are two conclusions I would like to share. One is that in undertaking a community-based program, careful thought needs to be given to how much time is available for the group. That, in part, depends on who is offering it and where the meetings can be held. As in the case described, we were dependent on the school for facility, publicity, and interest in providing this program. And after eight weeks and lots of shifts, we were just beginning to be a cohesive group. I do believe those were eight valuable weeks for all of us because we got to talk about questions we took to be interesting and meaningful. And because we found others who were interested in doing that with us.

The cohesion of the community over a period of time is a good deal more important to success than I had anticipated. Though this after-school program was requested by parents who were therefore sincerely interested in its success, the fact that it did not fall within the regular school day provided a situation in which some parents excused their children from attending for various reasons. An after-school time has the strong disadvantage of competing with other family activities. So as important as such a program might be for broadening the base of interest in the Philosophy for Children movement in the community, it must be undertaken with this powerful disadvantage in mind.

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