

# Introducing the Wednesday Revolution

Exchanging ideas through Socratic seminars gives impetus to expanded critical thinking.

In Buncombe County, North Carolina, we have launched a "Wednesday Revolution." The Buncombe County Schools, The Paideia Associates, and the University of North Carolina at Asheville have pooled talent and resources to enhance higher-order thinking for principals, parents, professors, and teachers, as well as students.

It all began when we participated in a four-week Principals' Executive Program sponsored by the North Carolina Institute of Government to refine and expand the critical thinking skills of participants. Among the activities was a presentation by Mortimer Adler of the ideas in *The Paideia Proposal*, in which Adler stressed the importance of providing experiences for all children to become critical thinkers, in order to prepare them for living in a democratic society. Later we received further training from The Paideia Associates in a climate of inquiry, and we began to refine the implications for our own schools.

The next step was to share Adler's ideas and recommendations with staff, parents, administrators, community members, and university professors. Later, with the assistance of The Paideia Associates, we initiated the first phase of training for school staffs and parents. Then, throughout the summer of 1987, teachers from both elementary schools received training to increase their understanding of Paideia teaching; for example, Junior Great Books training sponsored by the Great Books Foundation. And to enrich and enliven the

preparation of preservice teachers, we arranged for them to participate in the Paideia seminars with school faculties, beginning in their first year of college.

With Adler's Wednesday Revolution—the use of Socratic seminars for two and a half hours weekly—as a core, we worked out our own practical steps and made our own choices of reading selections. We adopted guidelines including the following:

- Each class would meet in seminar groups (12–25 students per group) every Wednesday morning for two hours, including a coaching and writing session.

- Reading selections for each grade's seminars would be of high quality, raising timeless questions suitable for seminar discussions.

- Depending on students' capabilities, selections would be read aloud or silently by the students or, if necessary, read aloud by the seminar teacher.

- Teachers would maintain a log, recording questions and student reactions, to be shared with colleagues.

We immediately informed parents about our plans for the "Wednesday Revolution" through newsletters and PTA presentations. They were invited to attend the seminars and read selections to students, especially students needing extra help.

Seminars began in the fall of 1987, with students in grades 2–5 reading the Junior Great Books and students in K-1 using materials selected by the Paideia Committee. Each seminar includes a cross section of students; the students sit in a circle with the teacher

and the co-leader across from each other.

Through our Wednesday Revolution, we see students gaining deeper understanding of literature and heightened interest in reading and writing. They are learning to think critically and to respect opinions of their peers. We are discovering that higher-level thinking skills can be developed in all students, not just in those in high reading groups and academically gifted classes. The following comments from low-achieving students illustrate the program's benefits: "I like the seminars because you can relax and go on an adventure with your book" and "I enjoy the seminars because you can have any opinion you want."

And what about the critical thinking skills of all the collaborators? As we work together to share concerns and solve problems, we are beginning to observe each other's seminars and critique each other's work. We are learning to accept parents as colleagues and preservice teachers as a source of stimulation. We relish the exchange between professors and practitioners. *Revolution* may be too strong a word, but our program is far from routine. □

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