

# Learning to Think with Philosophy for Children

With Philosophy for Children, middle school students and their teachers use reasoning strategies as they contemplate perennial questions.

**N**itschmann Middle School, part of the Bethlehem (Pennsylvania) Area School District, has been using Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children program since 1979. At Nitschmann, we organized the program so that social studies teachers teach it in 6th grade, developmental reading teachers in 7th, and foreign language teachers in 8th.

Besides developing students' critical thinking skills, Philosophy for Children encourages use of the inquiry approach and improves teachers' questioning techniques. Matters of logic and other philosophical questions are embedded in special children's novels that students read and then discuss in a seminar-style arrangement; the teacher functions primarily as questioner and facilitator of discussion.

Discussion has proven to be such a powerful teaching strategy that its effects are felt in other classrooms and disciplines. The carry-over began when teachers shared anecdotes illustrating students' curiosity about concepts such as truth, education, and the meaning of words. During one class, for example, when the students were contemplating where thoughts come from, their teacher asked them to imagine a new color, one that never existed before. After class a student who had previously not made any comments expressed amazement, saying, "I had never thought about that before!" Thinking about thinking had excited him in a way that would perhaps encourage him to contribute to future discussions.

Prior to teaching Philosophy for Children, we realized that students

were rarely involved in dialogue with each other or with the teacher. Now students speculate and deliberate. They use active listening and give reasons for their beliefs. Teachers hear statements like "I disagree with John because . . ." Students are also directing questions to other students: "I don't understand how you are using that word" or "What you're saying now doesn't follow what you said earlier." Upon listening to new and valid information from others, a student who had quite systematically given reasons for a statement she had made commented to the class that she thought she now disagreed with herself.

Outside school, parents report that classroom discussions have continued at the dinner table and that students have begun to apply their "new" thinking skills at home.

Teachers, too, have been affected by the dialectical process. In the initial inservice, we assumed the roles of students in a simulated Philosophy for Children class with a member of the program's teaching staff as the teacher. At that time we were asked to think about the possibility that the mind is different from the brain. In the ensuing dialogue, a teacher who had expressed her views strongly in one direction said, "Wait a minute, I've changed my opinion. I never really thought about that before."

Although much remains to be done in developing thinking skills here at Nitschmann Middle School, staff, students, and community are pleased with the initial results. We plan to expand Philosophy for Children strategies across the curriculum. □

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Photographs by Russ Van Westervelt



*In discussions about special children's novels, students learn to challenge logical shifts in each other's assertions and, given new information, to change their positions appropriately.*

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