

# Middle school students ponder philosophy

By MARY GNIEWEK

Sixth graders excitedly raise their hands, anxious to talk about a story the class has just read.

Lipman's 96-page novel, "Discovery," was followed by a sequel, "Lisa," published in 1977. The two books along with teacher manuals are the core materials for the program.

to let them discover it on their own. That's the ideal.

The children try to understand the importance of recognizing other viewpoints and of giving reasons for their own views. The key is to make them think through problems instead of settling for simple opinions.

David, a sixth grader in Mrs. Guertin's class, argues that the mind and the brain are one in the same.

"Why?" "Because there's not enough room in the head for both," he reasons.

Tracy, a classmate, disagrees with him.

"They're separate," she says. "The mind controls thoughts. The brain controls the body."

"Your mind is all over," offers a third student.

And so the conversation goes. Memories, conscious, conscience, feelings are all words brought out in the ensuing discussion.

"EXCITEMENT IS AN important part of it," said Mrs. Guertin, who displays a real for keeping her 24 anxious participants in an orderly discussion.

"When they get excited, they really do start thinking. The interesting thing is that all kids are responding, not just the bright ones."

Thinking leads the students to drawing analogies, to explaining points of view, to using reason and learning to listen to others.

The class meets twice a week. And although it's just being taught as a pilot program this year, Mrs. Guertin hopes to teach it as an enrichment course next year.

Diane Akers, a gifted education coordinator for the school district, introduced the teachers to the program. Both Mrs. Guertin and Mrs. Leydard attend a weekly philosophy course for teachers at the Oakland Schools Center in Pontiac to keep themselves up to date.

She doesn't claim to have right or wrong answers. She keeps the flow of conversation going to make sure every point of view is heard.

"The children are thinking and it goes over into other subjects," Mrs. Guertin said.

Lipman himself taught formal logic to a fifth grade class while developing his program. The result: a 27-month gain in logical reasoning by his young students.

Lipman opposes any effort by a teacher to sell a particular point of view to a class.

"What we're working with is a set of materials in which they discuss philosophical issues in their own terms and form their own points of view," he writes.

"Nothing can immunize children better against indoctrination than open discussion in a logical and impartial atmosphere of those issues which children find important to them and would like to discuss in a rational fashion."

After reading a chapter in the Discovery book, the children discuss the problem that the children in the book have been discussing.

Mrs. Guertin encourages her class to write questions on each page of the dialogue to better aid their discussion. Chapter Six deals with conversation at a slumber party.

SHE WRITES QUESTIONS on the blackboard as they're raised. But the emphasis is on the discussion itself, not aimed at finding a particular conclusion.

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"I try not to give answers. It's better



Teacher Judy Guertin revs up her sixth-grade philosophy class with thought-provoking questions like: Is the mind real? Do animals have thoughts? Is the brain the same as the mind? There's no right or wrong answers in this classroom, just a lot of open discussion on some elusive topics.

Photos by Randy Borst



Digesting dialogue from a 'Discovery' story are (from left) Monique Robinson, 12, Charleen Willson, 11, and Rebecca Duquette, 12. Below, an energetic duo, Ebony Curtis and Mike Smith, both 11, anxiously await a chance to express their views to the class.

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