

Little Philosophers

Socratic seminars can help even the youngest learners think critically and creatively.

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and Carol L. DeFilippo**

During the last hour of the school day at Hunters Woods Elementary School for the Arts and Sciences in Reston, Virginia, a group of kindergarten and 1st grade students are huddled in a circle with a parent, enmeshed in a philosophical discussion. They've just read Langston Hughes's "Poem,"¹ in which the speaker tells how he misses a friend who has gone away. Now they're wondering what the poem means.

"I think Langston was sad because his friend died," one student says.

"It doesn't say he died for sure," a classmate responds. Another student agrees, adding, "Maybe his friend just didn't want to play with him any more."

Such sophisticated thinking for 5- and 6-year-olds! But these students didn't start out thinking of poetry in this way. They are participating in a pilot program based on the Socratic seminar method and adapted for young learners and parent volunteers. Their movement toward this high level of

discussion began with both of us—the school's reading specialist and the gifted and talented specialist—trying to discover a meaningful way to provide reading enrichment for our younger learners.

Partnering with Parents

Five- and six-year-olds are renowned for their innate curiosity. Their never-ending questions and desire to share ideas verbally are a perfect fit with Socratic seminars—high-level discussions that help focus thought, encourage questions, and develop critical- and creative-thinking skills. But how could we provide this level of engagement for our students?

We realized that parents are often looking for compelling ways to work with their children and improve the quality of conversation at the dinner table. How efficient, then, to train parents on the seminar method, putting essential elements of high-quality discussion right in their hands.

We developed a Socratic seminar pilot program that consisted of four 45-minute poetry lessons. Poetry was a logical choice because its density in meaning allows for rich conversations in a manageable amount of time. Through fliers sent home

to all families in the school, we recruited seven parents who were interested in working with kindergartners and 1st graders for literacy enrichment. The diversity among the parents was representative of the cosmopolitan makeup of our student body. All but two of our parent volunteers had children in kindergarten and 1st grade.

In a one-hour training session, we introduced the Socratic method, presented the seminar's framework for developing questions and facilitating discussion, and addressed group management expectations. To ensure that parents had a clear idea of what the seminars would look like, we closed the training session with a seminar using E. E. Cummings's "In Just—." We also created a take-home handbook that provided background information on the Socratic method and the lesson plans and other tools needed to implement the program.

Even though several of the parent volunteers worked full time, most were able to incorporate the sessions into their schedules. With the

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help of the classroom teachers, we created six groups of eight students each. All 1st graders reading on grade level participated, and kindergartners were selected by their classroom teachers on the basis of their reading skills. Having eight students in a group allowed for a range of ideas even if one or two were absent. We balanced these groups by gender, ethnicity, teacher, and students' reading ability. Student groups met with the same parent for 45 minutes every other week.

Listening In: A Seminar on "Poem"

A glimpse of a seminar on Langston Hughes's "Poem" shows how a parent might begin a seminar:

The poem we are going to read today is quite different from a lot of the poems you have seen. This poem is very short, and it talks about feelings. That's true about a lot of poems you will read. I'm going to wonder about how this poem makes you feel and what pictures it brings to your mind. I think we will have a lot to share with one another about this sensitive poem.

Each student has a copy of the poem to follow along with when listening to the parent read the poem aloud the first time. Then they all join in and choral read the poem a second time.

Next, the parent introduces the third reading, "I'm going to reread it one more time. This time, let me know when you have a question so I can stop to write it down. That way, I can capture all your wonderings so we will have lots to discuss."

The parent begins to read the poem again. "Poem' by Langston Hughes."

"Why does he call it 'Poem?'" Nikko wonders aloud. "That's a funny name for a poem." The parent writes Nikko's question on the chart paper for everyone to see and continues with the poem.

"I loved my friend," the parent reads. Several hands are up in the air now. "Claire?"

"Who's his friend?" Several other children chorus that that was their question, too.

Other student questions include, Why did his friend go away? Why does he say "there is nothing more to say" and then says more things? How can a poem be soft? Together, the parent and students study the list of questions to see which are the most compelling.

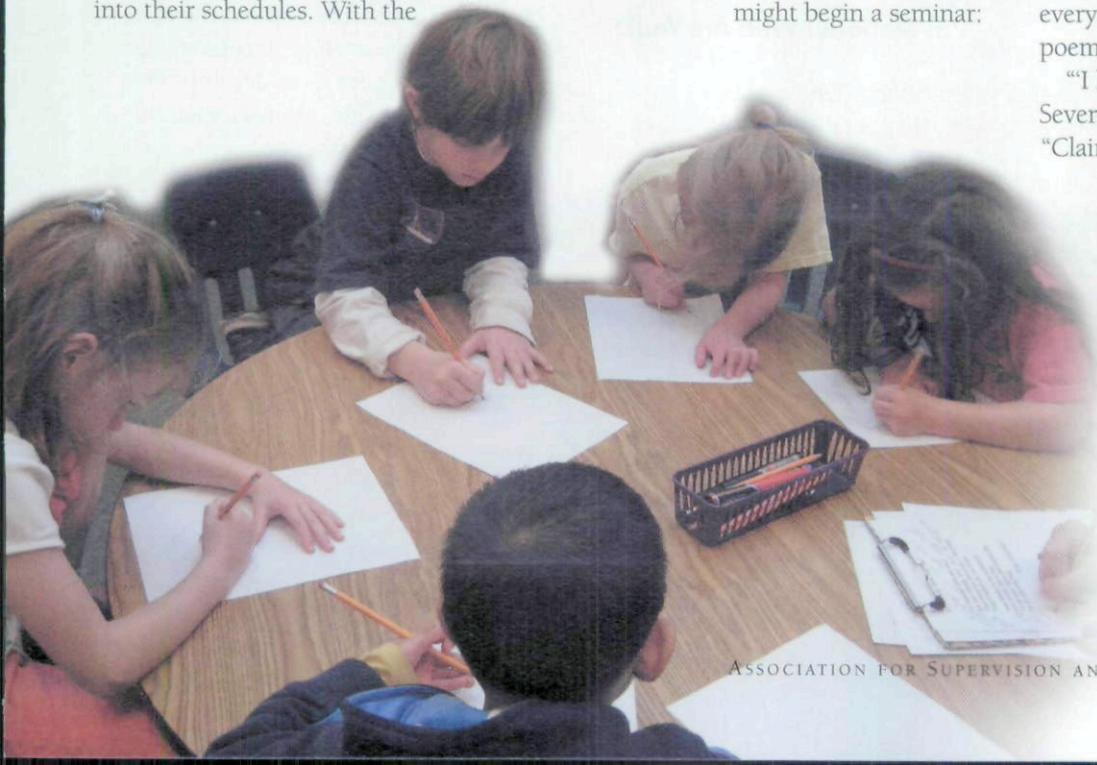


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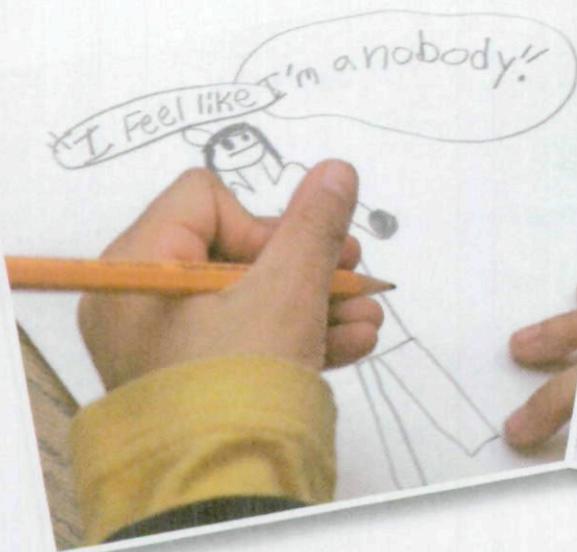


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In their Socratic seminar group, students discuss Emily Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" and respond to the poem in writing.

"What great wonderings!" says the parent. "I heard a lot of you wonder who Langston Hughes was writing about. Let's begin with 'Who is the friend?'"

"Why didn't he tell us his friend's name?" asks Yolanda. "If he's important enough to write a poem about, he should be important enough to tell his name."

"Maybe he didn't want his other friends to be jealous," says Jacob.

"Maybe it doesn't even matter who it was, maybe he just wrote it to feel better," suggests Priya, a sensitive 1st grader.

"Well, I think the friend mattered a lot," insists Claire.

The parent interjects, "What do you think it means when the poem says he went away?" Danny has his hand up for the first time that week.

"I think he moved away like my friend Varun moved away this year," he says.

"I remember Varun!" says Kari. "Was he your friend too? Are you sad that he isn't here anymore?"

Danny nods, and the parent says, "Kari asked if Danny was sad about Varun leaving. Do you think that

Langston Hughes wrote 'Poem' to be a sad poem?" Many of the students nod their heads, but not Jessie, who is frowning and looking thoughtful. "What are you thinking, Jessie?"

She points to her copy of the poem. "It has the word *soft* in it, and *soft* doesn't make you feel sad. *Soft* is nice."

"Yeah," agrees Kari, "and I think the most important word in this poem is *loved*, and that isn't sad either!"

"I'm Nobody! Who Are You?"

I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know.
How dreary to be somebody!
How public, like a frog
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!

—Emily Dickinson

Source: From *Poems by Emily Dickinson, Three series, Complete*, by Emily Dickinson, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd & T. W. Higginson, 1896, Boston: Roberts Brothers.

After about 10 more minutes of discussion, students take five minutes to reflect quietly and write a letter or draw a picture for a friend that demonstrates their understanding of the poem. The children each carry a copy of the poem home to share with their families.

Assessing Growth

The overall purpose of our seminar program was to provide an opportunity for students to explore poetry and discover the richness of shared ideas and experience. The *National Standards for the English Language Arts* provided the foundation for us to develop three categories to guide our assessment of student growth:

1. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate the mechanics, rhythm, and main ideas of poems.
2. Students are knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of poetry groups.
3. Students' active participation in poetry groups enhances their comprehension, interpretations, evaluations, and appreciation of poetry.

We developed a five-point scale for each of our three reporting areas. When we

compared the pre- and post-assessment scales, student growth exceeded our expectations in all three areas.

Then . . .

Before launching the seminars, we conducted a pre-assessment focus group and preliminary seminar on Emily Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" (see p. 68) with six students, a representative sample of Hunters Woods kindergarten and 1st grade classes.

In the interview, the students indi-

words. One said poets could "zigzag words across the page if they want to." We still had one holdout who did not like poetry, but three thought it was great.

Most impressive was the fact that all of the students now liked to hear other people's ideas. Nashad said, "I like to hear other people's [ideas] because my ideas might be weird and then I understand it better." Emma said, "It's sometimes exciting to hear the other people's ideas."

Poetry's density in meaning allows for rich conversations in a manageable amount of time.

cated that they had a limited understanding of poetry, ranging from "nothing" to "it rhymes." Only one student said that she really liked poetry. Even worse, none of the students wanted to know their peers' ideas or opinions.

During the seminar, the students' questions centered on word definitions: "What does *banish* mean?" "What's a *dreary*?" The most sophisticated response was "How public like a frog doesn't make any sense." Students weren't able to respond to the poem either in writing or by drawing. Reba expressed the group's frustration by saying, "I don't have any pictures in my mind about that poem."

. . . And Now

Flash forward to the conclusion of the pilot, when we reconvened the focus group and repeated the interviews and seminar. Most of the students indicated that now they thought poetry was fun. They knew that although it could rhyme, it did not have to. Two students commented that poets could make up

We told the students that the parents had agreed to continue the poetry groups to the end of the year and asked them to choose an answer that expressed how they felt: either Great, OK, or Why Me? Three said, "Great"; and two said, "OK"; but Benny said, "Why me?" We thanked Benny for sticking with the program even though he hadn't really enjoyed it and told him that he would not have to participate for the last three sessions. His response was immediate—"Change my answer to OK! You can go all the way to great if you have to!" He was an enthusiastic participant for the remaining poetry groups.

In the repeat seminar on the Dickinson poem, the level of questions was richer and more thoughtful than in the earlier session:

"Maybe she feels like a nobody," said Emma.

Jahar responded, "What's a nobody anyway?"

"I think a nobody is invisible," said Lina.

Benny replied, "I've felt invisible before."

"So have I!" echoed Reba and Nashad.

When asked to respond to the poem, students did not hesitate. Four students drew pictures and wrote an explanation of their drawings. One simply drew a picture. Lina wrote this little poem:

Just Me

Just me.
All me.
Why is it
Just me?

"It has to be a little poem," Lina told us, "because Emily makes me feel like she is very little in her poem. I hope she didn't always feel that way."

Begin Young

As we develop new ways to appropriately challenge our littlest learners, it is essential to remember the importance of developing foundational skills in critical and creative thinking. Adopting a dynamic teaching strategy like the Socratic seminar is one way to capitalize on young students' natural eagerness to question and discuss.

Socratic seminar for kindergartners and 1st graders is alive and flourishing at Hunters Woods Elementary School for the Arts and Sciences. Parents and students requested more lessons to last until the end of the year, and we obliged. What started out as an attempt to provide additional reading enrichment has since become proof of the power in partnering with parents to strengthen a vision of educational excellence that begins with our youngest learners. **EL**

¹Hughes, L. (1994). Poem. In *The dream keeper and other poems* (p. 12). New York: Scholastic.

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