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Modern classes infused with ancient Greece

Methods of Socrates encourage respectful learning atmosphere

David McKay Wilson
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In an education world dazzled by the latest in technology, it may seem incongruous that the teaching style of Greek philosopher Socrates would so resonate in 21st-century suburbia.

But educators throughout the region have found that the approach used by Socrates - which encourages intellectual discourse through a series of questions - can engage young minds through dialogue.

Like many schools across the nation, schools in the northern suburbs of New York City are holding Socratic seminars as a way to investigate literary texts and teach students how to discuss issues in a respectful manner.

At H.C. Crittenden Middle School in Armonk, these seminars are held monthly, as the entire student body of sixth- through eighth-graders is divided into 44 small groups of students.

The groups, which include students from all three grades, this year will discuss texts by Leonardo da Vinci, Emmanuel Kant, Mary Shelley and Antoine de Saint Exupery.

"It's a good way to build confidence between students and teachers, and it also helps build our school culture," said Crittenden enrichment teacher Joel Goldscholl, who has organized the yearlong project. "It's an exciting process for both students and teachers."

The seminars have caught on among teachers who want their students to think about concepts and have an open exchange of ideas in a nonjudgmental setting.

At Suffern Middle School, eighth-grade English teacher Teresa Ivey said she has used Socratic seminars for the past five years and has found them a way to get students talking about what they have read.

In a recent seminar, her students discussed "Flowers for Algernon," the story of a mentally retarded man chosen by a team of scientists to undergo experimental surgery to boost his intelligence. It led to a discussion of whether such experiments should be conducted on humans and what the world would be like if everyone were a genius.

The seminars also teach her students to discuss issues in a respectful way.

"They have to have eye contact with the person they are addressing, use their name, and maintain an even-keeled voice," Ivey said. "We also tell them that it's important not to get defensive, and not to offend the other person, even if the topic gets heated."

At Crittenden, students in teacher Marylee Liebowitz's class read a poem, "Identity," which talked about pretty flowers that were watered and grew together in a fertile valley and weeds that grew alone on a jagged cliff. The students then embarked on a discussion of popularity, going along with the crowd and the benefits of succeeding alone, outside the mainstream.

By stressing dialogue over debate, educators say, they encourage students to find common ground instead of finding flaws in a classmate's opinion. This approach makes students look for the strengths in what their classmates say, rather focusing on weaknesses.

Crittenden students said they liked the seminars because they could express their views on the texts in an environment in which they were not judged on what they said.

"I love the freedom of being able to say your opinion and know that it's not right or wrong," said eighth-grader Hannah Markell.

Peekskill educational consultant Nancy Letts has fostered interest in the seminars during the past several years, holding seminars for teachers to show them how to conduct these discussion groups. She said that students across the academic spectrum can participate in the seminars, including those struggling with literacy.

"Just because a student can't read, it doesn't mean they don't think," Letts said.

She said the seminars are used at all levels - from grade school through high school.

For example, she said, a Byram Hills math class has discussed Isaac Newton's classic, "Principia," while second-graders at the Todd School in Briarcliff Manor held a Socratic seminar on the famous painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware.

At the Todd School, the second-graders were asked who was the bravest person in the picture.

They also were asked to talk about the guy standing up in the boat.

"So we had a little girl talking about her definition of bravery and that Washington looked like a man who was not afraid to face his fears," Letts said.

"The kids continue to amaze me, and I never stop getting goose bumps when I hear what they come up with."

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How Socrates did it

The goal of a Socratic seminar is to give students greater understanding of a topic. It stresses discussion, not debate, and promotes active learning, close reading, clear speaking and sound thinking.

Guidelines for participants in a Socratic seminar

- * Refer to the text during discussion.
- * Stick to the point currently under discussion.
- * Don't raise hands; take turns speaking.
- * Listen carefully.
- * Speak up so all can hear you.
- * Talk to each other, not just the teacher.
- * Discuss ideas rather than each other's opinions.
- * Cite reasons and evidence for statements.
- * Avoid hostile exchanges.
- * Question others in a civil manner.

Source: Los Angeles County Office of Education

For more information

Learn more about Socratic seminars at <http://socraticseminars.com>.

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