

THE



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SUSAN
REIMER

Innovative program teaches children to think independently

Revenge. That was his homework assignment. Revenge? "Yeah, you know, Mom. That savage justice."

My fourth-grade son was supposed to talk to his parents about whether they had ever taken revenge. What motivated them? How had they felt afterward?

Not exactly like using your spelling words in a sentence. "Revenge, the savage justice?" Where was this coming from?

It was coming from philosopher Francis Bacon's essay "About Revenge." An excerpt was included in Joe's "Touchpebbles" syllabus. And the lesson was not about how revenge might rend the fabric of society. The lesson was about talking.

"About Revenge" is one of 30 essays, fables, speeches and art works in "Touchpebbles." Everything from the Bible and an ancient Chinese tale to Martin Luther King Jr. and a painting by Mondrian.

"We don't want 9-year-olds to quote Hamlet," says Howard Zelderman, who helped put "Touchpebbles" together. "We want the thinking, speaking, listening skills developed by the discussion."

Zelderman and his partners, Geoffrey Comber and Nicholas Maistrellis, are senior faculty members at St. John's College in Annapolis, where the study of the Great Books is conducted in a discussion model. The teacher is no authority; he is just a facilitator. The students learn from listening to each other.

The men took that principle of learning and applied it first to middle school, then to high school and now to fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms.

The text for each age group has been chosen not for the moral principles or great thinking it contains, but for the way it might build in a student the ability to think clearly, to defend his position, and to be sensitive to the feelings of others.

"We're not supposed to raise our hands," Joe says. "It's weird."

The children sit in a circle — not shielded safely by a desk. And they must talk without raising their hands. It is a struggle for them to learn how not to trample each other's ideas, to sense when another student has something to say.

"Touchpebbles" is just a year old, but it is in place in almost every elementary school in Annapolis, thanks to the efforts of Marianne Gray, a resource teacher with the county Board of Education.

"We can't force-feed our school children," she says. "There is too much information. They have to learn to think, to make decisions, to solve problems, to learn from each other."

For the "Touchpebbles" hour each week, the teacher gives up her role as the authority. She is just another student. And there are no right answers. In the egalitarian world of "Touchpebbles," there are no smart kids, no dumb kids.

In a town such as Annapolis, where ability ranges are as great as income ranges, where kids from housing projects learn beside kids from waterfront communities, "Touchpebbles" is a perfect fit.

Even for the brightest kids, the ideas in "Touchpebbles" are just unfamiliar enough to throw them off their stride. How can there be no correct answer? Why isn't the teacher telling me I am right?

Forced to listen to the ideas of street-smart kids they might have disdained before, the more able kids learn that not everyone thinks like they do. Not everyone has learned the same lessons from life.

The poorer students, who might not have held the teacher in high regard to begin with, are in their element. Poor writers, poor readers who have made their way in this world by listening come to the front, too. Disconnected kids suddenly have a forum for their ideas, and this new willingness to participate in the system shows up in other classes.

Programs like "Touchpebbles" can make parents nervous. Shouldn't they be diagramming those sentences, spelling those words? Is Plutarch on the approved reading list? "When you were looking for a job," asks Marianne Gray, "did anyone ever ask you when the Civil War started? The skills these children are learning will get them through life."

And so, the classroom discussion of "revenge, that savage justice" continued. Was "Home Alone 2" about revenge or was it about protecting yourself? Not exactly the "McLaughlin Group" here, but it is a start.

Then one student — one who had not often had "right answers" before — spoke. "If there was no revenge, then people wouldn't kill each other over stupid stuff. And there would be no gangs and no wars anymore."

With "Touchpebbles," it appears, right answers and morals are a bonus.