

TOUCHSTONES for class fire keen discussions

Curriculum: St. John's College Great Books program is adapted for younger students, provoking lively debates in a Linthicum classroom.

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The Friday morning routine in Juliet Iannoli-Catanzaro's seventh-grade language arts class at Lindale Middle School in Linthicum starts with rearranging the room. The desks are swung into a circle and pupils take their seats by their friends.

Seventh-grade gossip quiets quickly as "Ms. Iannoli" passes a slim paperback to each pupil in the weekly Touchstones discussion program, which has roots in the Great Books curriculum at St. John's College and is used in dozens of schools throughout Anne Arundel County.

Any resemblance to a college seminar is not accidental. The nonprofit Touchstone Discussion Project was founded in 1984 by three St. John's tutors, as professors there are called.

"We were thinking about how, at St. John's, students explore and develop a variety of skills and we realized that it could be applicable to all grade levels," said Howard Zeiderman, one of the founders and now president of the Touchstones project.

"We wanted to enable students to take initiative and responsibility for themselves and their education."

More than 200,000 students have participated in a Touchstones program, from Durban, South Africa, to Harlem, N.Y. In Anne Arundel County, 16 middle schools and 54 elementary schools offer the Touchstones curriculum. More than 250 county teachers have been trained in the curriculum.

Baltimore has contracted with Touchstones to provide training, materials and support in language arts and math at two of the New Era Academies that are to open in the fall, innovative high schools funded partially by the Gates Foundation.

For several years, Maryland prisons also have used Touchstones programs. And after-school programs such as Safe and Sound and Good Now are implementing the program.

"Discussion is a great equalizer," said Zeiderman, "We have found that the program is as successful with kids who are behind grade level as it is with gifted and talented kids."

The readings, from texts as diverse as The Autobiography of Malcolm X and Homer's Odyssey, are short, meant to be read on the spot, not for homework. While they may be ancient or from a different culture, they have a familiar theme - a "touchstone."

Iannoli-Catanzaro has used the program weekly in her language arts classes since the beginning of the school year.

"The kids are definitely more articulate in Touchstones because they are not limited by the topic," she said. "But it's not an easy curriculum, as an instructor."

At its core, Touchstones turns some traditional classroom management techniques upside-down. Iannoli-Catanzaro said her job in Touchstones is to let the pupils look to one another and not to her. "I try not to engage them, I want them to engage each other," she said.

In high schools, after the first year, the program is run entirely by students. "This really breaks up factions in the class," said Zeiderman, and it helps curtail the adversarial relationships that can develop between teen-agers and teachers.

On a recent Friday, Iannoli-Catanzaro first read aloud and then asked the pupils to reread silently a Nigerian folktale called "An Unlucky Man?" - a twist on the familiar tale of the traveler dressed in rags who is treated poorly by the rich farmer but welcomed to share the meager offerings of the poor neighbor.

During the discussion, the pupils followed four rules: don't raise your hand, don't interrupt, no side conversations and respect each other's point of view.

The theme in Iannoli-Catanzaro's class that day seemed to be "good intentions gone bad." The pupils were asked to write about a situation that fit the theme. Pupils broke into small groups to discuss scenarios and outcomes.

The discussion was freewheeling but never out of hand. Eighteen of the 24 pupils participated without hesitation.

After the small groups hashed through real-life scenarios, they returned to the large group and Iannoli-Catanzaro asked them to relate their discussion back to the Nigerian tale.

Again, lively debate erupted, with little intervention from the teacher - except for the occasional reminder for someone to put his or her hand down.