

Junior Great Books Curriculum

Introduction

Imagine a group of students sitting in a circle, engaged in discussing several interpretive questions based on the story "Thank You, Ma'm," by Langston Hughes. The students support their opinions with evidence from the text, listen to each other carefully, and before they know it, the discussion of how Mrs. Jones taught Roger right from wrong must come to end, because class is over! These students who exhibited higher-level thinking skills are not in high school or middle school, as one might have thought; they are fourth and fifth graders participating in the Junior Great Books program.

Junior Great Books (JGB) is an interpretive reading, writing, and discussion curriculum for grades K-12, although I will be focusing primarily on Series 4 in this paper. After briefly describing this program, I will look at the context of its development, its orientation and values, its purpose and content, its assumptions, its organization, its implementation, how others have evaluated it, and finally I will provide my own judgment and reflection on the curriculum.

In the Junior Great Books Program, students read a wide range of literature, from Middle Eastern folktales to fairy tales by Hans Christian Anderson to realistic fiction by contemporary authors. Using the shared inquiry model of discussion, and with a trained leader as the facilitator, students respond to interpretive questions, supporting their opinions with evidence from the text they have read and written about. This program promotes higher-level thinking skills and gives students the opportunity to read "great works" of literature, which can be defined as those that have lasting value and lend themselves to deep discussion.

Context

Junior Great Books was developed in 1962, but it was not a novel idea, as the Great Books movement had been around since the 1940s. Great Books discussion groups originated at the University of Chicago and spread to public libraries in the area and then to libraries across the country. The main proponents of this movement were Robert Maynard Hutchins, a former president of the University of Chicago, and Mortimer J. Adler, an educational philosopher. Adler believed that liberal education should be available to all people, not just the elite; his motto was: "The best education for the best is the best education for all"(Kruglik, 1990). In 1947, the Great Books Foundation was established as "an independent, nonprofit educational organization whose mission is to help people learn how to think and share ideas. Towards this end, the Foundation publishes collections of classic and modern texts for children and adults and conducts training in the Shared Inquiry method of discussion throughout the United States and abroad"(Great Books Foundation, 2006).

The development of Junior Great Books and its use in schools was influenced by several historical, political, economic and social factors. Historically, education in the United States has moved through different periods in which different approaches were emphasized. Education in the 1950s had moved away from an emphasis on the mental disciplines to a more progressive and practical education; for example, female students could take home economics and males could take wood shop. Then, with the launch of Russia's Sputnik in 1957, there was a rude awakening, as the United States began to feel it was behind other countries in the "space race." This led to the federal government's decision to put more money into developing challenging science and mathematics

curricula to better educate Americans. The concern over curricula after Sputnik was not only a political factor but also an economic one, because many people in the U.S. saw our economy as directly tied to the success of our schools. Although strengthening language arts curricula was not as much a priority as math and science, Junior Great Books was developed at the perfect time to take advantage of the desire for more rigor in our schools; it was most likely viewed as a challenging literary program for creating the kind of world-class thinkers that the U.S. was in need of.

There are also different social factors that affect curriculum development; one is that of equal rights, or equality. Many believe that schools are helping to “maintain the existing stratification in society and the differences between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’”(Parkay, 2006, p. 55). The kind of equality that is reflected in the Junior Great Books philosophy is that all students are given access to these “great works” and are then able to gain insight from them. Adler and his colleagues at the Great Books Foundation truly wanted each child, no matter their culture or socioeconomic status, to have the “best education,” which meant reading and discussing high quality works of literature.

A second influential social factor is that of a search of meaning, which can then be found while reading the works included in Junior Great Books. The solution to the problem of students feeling “disconnected from the larger society, their families, and themselves” (Parkay, 2006, p. 57) is to read and discuss the “great ideas.” Students will then be able to recognize that all human beings have the same concerns and can use literature discussion groups as a way to come together to search for meaning and truth.