

Sophia's Garden: Learning by Giving

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This spring, SUNY Cortland's philosophy and Communication Disorders & Sciences departments have teamed up to develop a unique service learning experience called Sophia's Garden. As a part of Sophia's Garden, students from each department travel to various Cortland County elementary and alternative schools to engage children in philosophical inquiry and language enrichment opportunities. Developed by Chea Snyder and Dr. Mecke Nagel, Sophia's Garden engages children in both language and philosophy like never before.

Not only does Sophia's Garden present an interesting opportunity to SUNY Cortland students, but local schools are intrigued by the opportunity as well. Throughout the spring semester, students will be traveling to Randall Elementary School, Parker Elementary School, Smith School, the Lime Hollow Nature Forest School, and the Cortland Public Library to multiple different classes with children of various ages. Using numerous means of communicating philosophical ideas, students will ask the children philosophical questions and encourage large group discussion amongst the group. In this way, students will encourage and support the children to ask questions and seek to find answers from their peers and themselves. With much student interest, Sophia's Garden will see much growth and progress in the coming semesters.

As for this past semester, the teaching assistants for the philosophy students involved in the program, Naamu Harvey and Vanessa Vegder, can provide some insight in regard to the details and progress of Sophia's Garden thus far. Naamu and Vanessa are both philosophy majors at SUNY Cortland who participated in Sophia's Garden during its debut in the fall of 2018. Naamu worked closely with children in Randall Elementary and Vanessa helped facilitate discussion in the GEMS group at the Cortland

YWCA. This spring, Vanessa lead the GEMS Jr. group at Smith Elementary School and Naamu oversaw all other groups. Here are a couple anecdotes from their experience with Sophia's Garden this semester:

Vanessa Vegder: I am extremely grateful for everything I have been afforded by the philosophy program at SUNY Cortland, especially my involvement in Sophia's Garden. Through my work as a TA, I realized the impact philosophy can have on children as well as their incredible ability to discuss challenging concepts. Primarily, I facilitate discussion with the GEMS (Girls: Empowered, Motivated, Successful) Jr. group. GEMS is a program that was created by the YWCA that brings teens, majority of whom are at-risk, together in a variety of ways, including their participation in Sophia's Garden. At Smith School, the GEMS Jr. group consists of fifth and sixth grade girls who are not yet old enough to be in GEMS. Each Tuesday, we meet for one hour to discuss philosophy. Our discussions are always based on a video or book that exemplifies a controversial issue that is relevant for 9 to 11 year old girls. After watching or reading the material, myself and another philosophy student facilitate a set of planned discussion questions. We have covered topics such as friendship, vanity, greed, wisdom, and bullying. But one discussion that stood out to me revolved around the concept of empathy.

For our discussion about empathy, the GEMS watched an animated video by Brené Brown which describes empathy in comparison to sympathy. After watching, it was clear that the set of questions we had prepared were invaluable as the girls began asking questions on their own. After ensuring that all of the girls had an understanding of empathy, I asked the question of whether one can be empathetic toward things in nature. Since this was a question they

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had never been presented, I was excited to hear their opinions. But it seemed that I had stumped them! After providing some larger philosophical context, including a description of intrinsic value, their hands shot up to the ceiling. One by one, each of them contributed to our discussion of empathy regarding the way they, or their families and friends, value the environment. I found this discussion most productive because no opinion was alike. So, not only were the girls able to answer such a profound question, but they saw how powerful philosophy can be in the midst of controversy. Amongst intense disagreement, the girls arrived at their own conclusions whilst accepting and understanding the opinions of others. By engaging in discussions such as this, the junior GEMS found that, through careful communication, they were able to find answers to important questions amongst themselves. When asked whether it is hard to disagree with people, one of the girls gave an incredibly detailed example that reflects the girls' ability to use philosophical inquiry in such communication:

Kind of because let's say: Ron pushed Judy's dog and that was it, people would look down at Ron. But then let's say he pushed Judy's dog because it was jumping on Ron's son because he wanted to play. Some people would still be mad at Ron but others would try to explain that he just didn't want his son to get hurt.

Constantly finding innovative ways to express their ideas, I continue to be astounded by the junior GEMS' willingness to understand and communicate with one another and myself.

As Sophia's Garden continues to grow, I am excited to see its impact on SUNY Cortland students as well as the Cortland community. Providing college students with the opportunity to facilitate philosophical discussion with groups of children, Sophia's Garden is not only unique, but it is an extraordinary way for students of all ages to learn, grow, and ask questions they may not have otherwise.

Naamu Harvey: To start off, I am very thankful to have been given this opportunity to be involved in the Sophia's Garden program. As a teaching assistant, I was fortunate enough to be apart of such a unique program. Since becoming a teaching assistant for the Sophia's Garden program, I have seen how philosophy leaves a positive impact on younger students. I've learned through working with these children the importance of philosophy and why it is necessary in their learning curriculum. Children are encouraged

to voice their opinions in a new way and, they are able learn from the peers as well. For most of the program I oversaw student groups at Parker Elementary, Lime Hollow Forest school and Randall Elementary. The children within the Lime Hollow Forest school and Randall Elementary consisted of first graders. The Parker children's group was a blend of first and second graders. Each week we would meet with the students from about half an hour to an hour. Each week was interesting and different. I learned a lot from the first graders, and they showed me that they know more than we think. Some of the philosophical topics we touched on dealt with morals, self-worth, friendship, happiness and more. The children were eager to participate in such topics and surprised me with their answers. But if any group surprised me the most, it was the Lime Hollow Forest School group.

During one of the readings with the Lime Hollow Forest school children, the SUNY Cortland students read the book *Red: A Crayon's Story*. After we finished reading, we asked the children questions regarding societal norms and personal identity. One of the questions we asked the students was "What makes you you?" One of the children answered, "I choose what I like, what toys I play with." The child then said only he can decide who he is. After hearing what the students thought, I noticed something different about the Lime Hollow students; they were not shy, very outspoken, knowledgeable on almost all topics and very intrigued by the readings. I came to realize this freedom, that they possessed may be due to their self-driven learning environment. At the Lime Hollow Forest School, the children are able to lead classroom discussions and they are able to learn in a new and interesting way. After seeing how this school operates, I believe it is necessary for all schools to follow in this manner. The children here are thriving and are not being pressured to follow a rigorous lesson plan. Our country needs more nonviolent teaching methods and with philosophy, we can learn how to correct the education system for generations to come.

With the Sophia's Garden program in place, we can continue to teach children the importance of philosophy and the importance of their voices. It is intriguing to hear their opinions and to discuss life topics they may have never thought about before. I am excited to see what the future holds for the children and students of the Sophia's Garden program next year.