

Philosophy comes easy to fifth-grader

HONOLULU (AP) — To some, the study of philosophy conjures up images of long-drawn-out metaphysical discussions. But to a fifth-grader here it is "fun and easy as pie."

Megan, a 10-year-old at Benjamin Parker Elementary School in nearby Kaneohe, is talking about "Philosophy for Children," a program that started on the mainland and is being introduced in Hawaii schools.

The program teaches kids how to think, says University of Hawaii philosophy professor Roger Ames, project director. Ames, together with Drs. Thomas Jackson and Karen Lee of the UH philosophy department, developed Hawaii's program.

"Kids are graduating and don't know how to think. They can give you back information they have memorized, but as soon as you ask them to think for themselves and give reasons for their answers they are lost," Ames says.

Philosophy in this program is not the jargon-heavy discipline found in traditional philosophy classes. Students do not discuss Plato or Hegel's dialectic. However, through dialogue, they are using a dialectic approach to the discussion, Ames says.

They are analyzing, refuting and questioning scientific, social and philosophical principles in the manner children understand.

They are learning to think critically, Ames says.

The idea is to get children to talk about things that interest them and they can relate to, says Evelyn Teramae, a teacher at Parker Elementary. For instance, while discussing something topical, like Halley's comet, students are also learning

about logic in sentences, she says.

Another aim is for children to apply the analytical skills acquired in class to their other studies and their personal lives, Teramae says.

Children love to talk about concepts such as friendship, fairness, reality and truth, say teachers involved in the program. Class discussions are the most powerful tool for getting children to think, say developers of the program.

Classes at Olomana School, a facility serving troubled youths, focus on social issues such as responsibility, sex roles, victims and the judicial system, says Lee, head of the Olomana project.

The course, she says, enables students to openly talk about "taboo" subjects. The students are motivated, with some of the discussions approaching college level, she says.

According to Lee, this is the first time a philosophy course has been taught at a correctional facility in Hawaii.

The idea of a teaching method that could help children develop problem-solving skills is not new. The technique was first pioneered about ten years ago by Matthew Lipman, a philosophy professor at Montclair State College in New Jersey.

Lipman felt youngsters — and college students — were lagging in their ability to resolve problems critically. So he founded the Institute for Advancement of Philosophy for Children in Montclair, N.J.

In 1980 the Educational Testing Service in Newark, N.J., conducted a yearlong study involv-

ing 2,500 students against a control group. The results were dramatic.

Students taking philosophy showed an 80 percent gain in reasoning skills, a 66 percent gain in reading comprehension, and a 33 percent gain in math-related skills.

Although interest in the program among Hawaii's education community continues to rise, some school officials remain cautious, saying they have seen many "innovative" programs come and go.

Honolulu District School Superintendent Claudio Suyat says the program is expensive and it is too early to tell whether it works.

But others see the program expanding, believing that in an "information age" children need to go beyond the basics and develop a higher level of reasoning. This program gives children the opportunity to interact, and integration is essential for effective learning, they say.

The ultimate goal, adds Ames, is to establish philosophy as an integral part of Hawaii's school curriculum.

Catholic School Superintendent Monsignor Daniel Dever, a staunch supporter of the program, says he would like to see philosophy taught in every Catholic school.

Says Sister Edna, Dever's associate in charge of curriculum, "examining the rational aspects of religious doctrine occupies theologians full time. If philosophy teaches students to think, then 'they are one up' in a world where critical thinking is essential."