"I think therefore I participate": using a picture book in a philosophical inquiry with children and adults.

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Abstract

The aim of the workshop is to introduce philosophy for children (P4C) to a wider audience. Philosophy for children (P4C) was first introduced by Matthew Lipman in the 1970s as an attempt to apply philosophy in schools. Lipman, inspired mainly by Platonic dialogues, the Socratic method and Dewey's ideas on pragmatism, wrote a series of novels and accompanying manuals, so as to help teachers and children do philosophy in the classroom. The reason P4C was first introduced in the classroom was to develop children's thinking skills, particularly their ability to think critically, creatively and caringly. The workshop will begin with a brief explanation as to what P4C is and what do we mean by words or phrases such as 'stimuli' and 'community of inquiry'. Anecdotes from my personal experience from practising philosophy with children with a mixed group of adults and children in Newport will be also briefly presented. Then, attendants will have the opportunity to experience a P4C community of inquiry using a stimulus (in this case a picture book). The outcome of the workshop is to generate a philosophical debate and make the attendants realise that philosophising can be done not only through a formal academic process, but through dialoguing, exchanging and testing ideas as philosophy was first introduced in the Socratic tradition.

Introduction

Philosophy for Children (P4C) was presented and devised by Matthew Lipman in the early 1970s as a form of applied philosophy in educational settings. Lipman believed that philosophy was the appropriate tool to guide children's natural curiosity through the educational process, and develop children's higher order thinking putting emphasis on the parameters of critical, creative and caring thinking (Lipman, 2003). He introduced philosophical thinking to pupils aged 4-13, through a series of novels1 (with accompanying manuals) whose main characters are children that present different models of philosophical thinking2.

1 Matthew Lipman was the first to write novels for doing P4C accompanied by their manuals. Harry Stottlemieier's Discovery was his first novel written for P4C addressed to 5-6 grade children and analyzing mainly Logic problems. Other novels followed such as 'Lisa' (concentrated mainly on ethics), 'Suki' (concentrated on aesthetics) and 'Mark' (focused on Social-political issues) for 7-10 grade children, 'Pixie', 'Kio and Gas', for 3-4 grade children and 'Elfie' for K-2 grade children. Ann Margaret Sharp wrote novels for younger children such as the 'The doll's hospital' and 'Geraldo' and their manuals which were co-authored with Laurence Splitter.

2 Lipman, inspired by the pragmatist philosophers Charles Pierce and John Dewey, introduced the idea of a 'community of inquiry' as the natural environment where children convert from passive learners to active and collaborative researchers, who construct their knowledge and justify knowledge's truth by their mutual agreement,
The idea of doing philosophy for children has expanded, incorporating a variety of either different methods or styles of doing philosophy with children (PwC), or the use of different stimuli such as picture books and works of art. Karin Murris (1992) introduced doing philosophy with existing stories and more specifically picture books. She prefers picture books as they are usually short stories and children can focus not only on how the story ends, but also on other details within the story such as the illustration which can give totally different messages compared to the ones derived from the text (Murris, 1992, p.13). Furthermore, the young non readers can benefit from doing philosophy by listening to someone reading the story and getting the additional information from the pictures in the book (Scheinkman, 2004).

Picture books are distinguished from children's books, as the latter group are simply illustrated books. The illustration in children's books plays mainly a decorative role (Reeder, 1997). These books are not too rich for doing philosophy because there is no interaction between the two different systems: pictures and text. The word 'sophisticated' has been used for picture books to imply that there are refined connections between pictures and texts which could be interesting not only for children but also for adults (Burns, 1997b; Weller, J. 1984). The reading of the book on different levels is what can inspire both children and adults. In picture books philosophical wondering may start when the reader is puzzled by both images and text and activates his/her critical and creative thinking so as to derive meaning.

The method of doing philosophy with children has been expanded and has been used to doing philosophy with adults or mixed groups (McCall, 2009). However, there is need for further empirical research on the impact philosophy has on both adults and children.

Aims of the paper

The aim of this paper is to work through ideas with reference to an example of doing philosophy with a mixed group of children and adults, using a particular picture book (Anthony Browne’s Zoo). Particularly, the questions that this paper will address are:

- Can picture books activate children's and adults' thinking?
- Are there any similarities and differences between adults and children in the way they approach and cope with the same stimulus?

I have tried PwC with mixed groups and also with adults (undergraduate students) at the University of Wales to deliver particular subjects from Ethics.
Methodology

The inquiry took place with a mixed group at a local library in South Wales. Fourteen members participated in this inquiry including the facilitator. The group was a mixture of adults and children of various ages and was characterized for its diversity. It consisted of children and adults that were considered as people with low self esteem or low performance in school (for the children), who receive once a week for two hours extra support from adults who are willing to help them voluntarily. It was suggested to me to deliver some philosophical inquiries with both children and adults and see how the experiment would work. The findings described in this paper are from the second inquiry with the same group.

Framework for starting the inquiry

Children set the rules of teamwork before starting the inquiry. For instance, they agreed that they would: listen to each other carefully, not interrupt the others when speaking, not laugh at other people's ideas, agree and disagree with others providing, however, reasons. Then they shared a stimulus which in the particular inquiry was Anthony Browne's *Zoo*. Each member of the team read a sentence or a paragraph but had the right to pass in case the person did not feel comfortable reading. After the sharing of the stimulus the members had some time to think silently on their own and reflect on what they had just read. Then, they were invited to share their thoughts with the other members working in groups of three or four. The members of the groups changed their ideas and finally agreed to pose a question that would be interesting to investigate as a group or share it with others. When the teams were ready with the questions that they had posed, all the questions were announced and the members found connections and links between the questions that other pupils had. The final list of the question was ready and the members voted for the one they would like to discuss to the greatest extent.

The selected question became the focus point for a discussion among children and adults that involve them thinking critically and creatively. The members of the inquiry tried to answer the posed question by arguing with each other and providing reasons for that, building on each other’s ideas, clarifying their views, stating their ideas and wondering philosophically. The last member of the inquiry to speak would choose the next speaker. Usually one of the rules that was established in the first sessions was that people who have not spoken yet have a priority over the others and that the discussion should not be dominated by certain people. The facilitator intervened when the subject under discussion was obscure to some people and needed clarification, and when there were ideas that could be further or philosophically explored. Finally, the members of the inquiry summarized, reflected on the process itself and evaluated how well they thought they did.

Haynes (2002) mentions that philosophical inquiry is not a rigid step-by-step procedure but a process that depends on the quality of discussion and interaction. She also highlights the importance of listening to children’s voices as a way of doing philosophy with them (Haynes, 2007). What is described above could be slightly differently delivered in another situation, with another group of people or even with another stimulus used.

The stimulus used

Anthony’s Browne *Zoo* (1992) is a good example of a picture book that combines text with rich, detailed illustrations. While the text in *Zoo* describes a family's visit to the zoo, the illustration gives much more information concerning the attitudes of the family members towards the animals. This information wouldn’t be aptly described verbally. For instance, some of the people

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6 The group consisted of: Helen (a), Hilary (child 6 yr), Judy (a), Joan (child 6 yr), Carmen (child, 11), Alina (a), Christina (a), Loukas (child 9), Paul (a), Jessica (a), Barbara (a), Chris (child, 12), and the facilitator (myself).
have animals' characteristics such as animals' feet, horns, beaks, animal print clothing and animals' expressions which are not always directly observable because one is so familiar with what one expects to see, that one doesn't see what is there.\(^7\)

Some moments of the discussion that occurred among children and adults are described and commented below:

1) *Children imaginative thinking and ability to observe details is sometimes better than the adults*.

**Picture 2** is taken from Browne, A © Zoo

a) There is a snail at the top of an image that depicts the traffic jam before the family goes to the zoo (picture 2).

*Joan:* Why is there a snail? Why does it fly?

*Loukas:* Maybe it is a spy?

*Barbara (a):* Or because there is too much traffic and even a snail goes faster?

*Loukas:* Yes, but why it is on the top of the page?

*Hilary:* If it was at the bottom we wouldn't see it.

*Loukas:* We would. It could be next to this pink car that has a pig tale!

In picture 3 there is the image of two giraffes in a cage. Their colour is the same with the colour of the wall making no contrast.

*Joan:* The giraffe licks the black paint because she does not have any food or water!

*Facilitator:* Why do you think so?

*Joan:* Because there is no black colour, she has licked it!

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\(^7\) This is an application of Gestalt theory, a psychological theory introduced by Max Wertheimer which refers to the function of the brain to organize given information and unify it to a meaningful whole, even if particular details do not necessarily lead to that whole.
b) There is the image of a tiger in a cage (picture 4).

Loukas: Can you see the little butterfly at the bottom of the page? She has the same colours with the tiger. But the butterfly is free to fly. The tiger is in a cage.

Barbara: Did you see that there is only a little square on the top of the image from which the tiger can see a bit of the sky?

Loukas: And it is cloudy.

Paul (a): The sky looks as grey as the wall.

Loukas: Look at the grass. Outside it has a vivid colour, but in the cage it is pale.

Comments

In the first short dialogue, Joan feels free to ask two questions. Loukas and Barbara (adult) make hypotheses trying to answer Joan’s question. Loukas asks a different question and Hilary makes a hypothesis to answer Loukas’s question. Loukas is not satisfied with the answer about having the snail on the top of the page instead of the bottom, next to the car with the pig nail. There is a very logical structure followed in this example by adults and children for both to make themselves clear to the others.

Another interesting finding is the difference in imaginative and logical thinking among children and adults. In the first dialogue Barbara who is an adult and familiar with the metaphorical use of the language (snail=slow) offers a more ‘logical’ explanation of the possible association between the snail and the traffic jam by finding what they have in common, whilst Loukas has a more imaginative approach (a snail that is a spy). Even more of an unexpected and imaginative answer was offered by Joan in the second dialogue when she justified that the giraffes do not have plenty water. If the facilitator hadn’t pushed her further to explain why she believes there is not enough water, Joan wouldn’t make her thoughts clear. Her thought may look childish, but it is perfectly ‘logic’. Joan associated the paint and the difference in colours (black and white) as it appears in picture 3. Joan linked these painting details together and associated them with the lack of water as a symptom of not treating the animals well.

This evidence agrees with the findings of developmental psychology that children have a more imaginative approach towards everyday issues (Matthews, 1994; Egan, 1988).
Children’s experiences are often retrieved from the world of fantasy wherever it is found (e.g. in books, television programmes or videogames) (Egan, 1988). Pictures often enrich the story by narrating other aspects of it which can be in accordance with the text or contrary to it. It is one of the points where literature and philosophy meet. Murris (1992) referring to Egan considers picture books as an ideal place to present abstract binary concepts such as love and hate, beauty and ugliness and odd creatures, like witches and monsters.

Children can also think in metaphors (for instance the snail as a spy) which shows a different way of understanding the world. The use of stories, metaphors, binary opposites, jokes, rhyme patterns, mystery and play are tools that match with the characteristics of children’s understanding at this age and help them develop their understanding further. The second stage refers to the children aged 7-12 approximately. The mythic layer of how children understand themselves and the world is replaced by a romantic one. Children’s cognitive characteristics that are displayed change so different tools can now serve their ‘cognitive needs’. The use of heroes that gives the opportunity for children to identify with them, the sense of wonder, the need for reaching the limits of reality and experience, the narrative understanding (where things make sense in the context of a story) are some of the tools that can help children’s cognitive development at this stage. See more: Egan, K. (1997) The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape our Understanding. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. And Egan, K. (2005) An Imaginative Approach to Teaching. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Our conceptual system is highly metaphorical; the way we think and what we experience is, to a certain point, a matter of the metaphors we use in our language. For instance, conscious is portrayed often with the word up while unconscious is down higher order thinking since they accomplish doing something really complex, such as linking a topic and a vehicle through a common ground. The topic is what the metaphor is about, the vehicle is the means by which the speaker refers to the topic and the ground is the sum of possible attributes shared by the topic and vehicle (Williams, 2002, p.17). The fact that children may have different ideas than adults, does not mean that they are illogical; children may have chosen different ways of linking a topic with different grounds which lead to an unusual metaphor. Adults listening carefully to children may realise the different ways children experience and understand their world (Haynes, 2007). Listening to the children is like opening a window and seeing the world from a different perspective (Rorty, 1981). This can enrich our understanding of children and make us think what one’s thinking gains as an adult but also what it loses (Egan, 1988).

Finally, it is fascinating to note children’s abilities to pick up details and comment on them. Such an attitude justifies that children are more observant and driven by details, while adults may have a more holistic approach about the understanding of a situation as can be explained through Gestalt psychology. When Loukas mentioned about the pig tail in the pink car, all the adults of the inquiry opened the books at the specific page to notice it and many admitted that they had not seen it before.

Egan (1997) takes into consideration the imaginative aspect of children’s thinking “the other half” of the children’s thinking. Egan (2005) recognises three different stages from which children’s cognitive development goes through: a) the mythic, b) the romantic and c) the theoretic stage. The first stage refers to the children aged 4-7 who understand the world in an imaginative – mythic way. The use of stories, metaphors, binary opposites, jokes, rhyme patterns, mystery and play are tools that match with the characteristics of children’s understanding at this age and help them develop their understanding further. The second stage refers to the children aged 7-12 approximately. The mythic layer of how children understand themselves and the world is replaced by a romantic one. Children’s cognitive characteristics that are displayed change so different tools can now serve their ‘cognitive needs’. The use of heroes that gives the opportunity for children to identify with them, the sense of wonder, the need for reaching the limits of reality and experience, the narrative understanding (where things make sense in the context of a story) are some of the tools that can help children’s cognitive development at this stage. See more: Egan, K. (1997) The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape our Understanding. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. And Egan, K. (2005) An Imaginative Approach to Teaching. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

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Even more impressive are Loukas’s comments in the third dialogue. Loukas points to such a small detail (the butterfly at the bottom of the page), which is hardly noticeable, noting that it has the same colours with the tiger. He also points out that the grass has more vivid colours outside than inside the cage. Even if he does not elaborate further on freedom, and maybe this is an omission from the part of the facilitator, the child understands even intuitively the difference that freedom makes to the animals behaviour, even to the environment inside and outside of the cage. These responses seem to align with the findings of Styles and Arizpe’s case study (2001) on reading Browne’s Zoo to children aged 4-11. They found that children even if not confident yet at reading print, demonstrated impressive capacities for analyzing images.

2) Moments of the dialogue inspired by the questions chosen

Question: Are people animals or not?
Joan: Are we animals?
Facilitator: What do you think?
Joan: I think we are animals. Look the gorilla hides himself and the boy is in the cave and hides himself as well. (She refers to the page where the child has the strange dream of a child in an animal’s cage.)
Facilitator: Does that similarity makes you think that they are both animals?
Joan: Yes.
Facilitator: What do the others think about that?
Paul: The gorilla hides himself. He is so lonely.
Chris: Maybe he is scared if the people knock the glass (He refers to the glass around the gorilla’s cage).
Judy(a): He does not have anytime for himself but people have when they are in their houses.
Joan: I think we are animals. Look, children are fighting like animals…mmm the animals don’t fight.
Carmen: Yes we are animals. We came from the monkeys and we do things like the monkeys. We eat, climb, walk and mock.
Hilary: The father looks as he has cloud-horns!
Carmen: That’s shows he is like an animal.
Loukas: He behaves as an animal. See at the next page, he makes the impression of a gorilla and hits himself.
(Facilitator S. Nikolidaki’s log 09/03/2010)

Comments

The first dialogue shows in what ways animals and people are similar. Joan and Carmen argue that people are animals by providing analogical arguments. Therefore, since both gorillas and humans ‘eat, climb, walk and mock’ they must be both animals. Carmen also gives another argument (of origin) to support her idea that people are animals since they come from monkeys. Unfortunately, this idea was introduced late when it was time to wrap up the session, therefore a good opportunity to explore this idea further was lost. If more time was available the facilitator would ask ‘how can we be sure that we come from monkeys?’ so as to encourage further Carmen and see whether her answer would refer to some external authority (e.g. my parents told that to me or I read it in the encyclopaedia). Then the discussion would allow others to state their opinions on that idea and possibly the discussion would move to the matter of the origin of species. Even if this discussion never happened, it is necessary for the facilitator and the other members to reflect on the omissions or things that could have happened differently. The wrapping up of the discussion is usually a good time for such reflection so that next time things work better (Gregory, 2007).

Another moment that could have been explored further was Judy’s statement about the lack of privacy. It is interesting to see how people’s thoughts link together. Paul first wonders about the gorilla’s possible loneliness and his hiding. Chris tried to give an explanation for the hiding, therefore he is hypothesising. Judy seems to follow from Chris’s ideas and introduces the idea of the constant lack of privacy. It seems that the loneliness that Paul introduced is sometimes desirable as Judy shows with her argument. The facilitator could have picked these ideas and presented them to the other members.
Also, the facilitator could have offered room for hypothetical and creative thinking (thinking upon different premises) by asking the member “How would life be if the walls of our houses were made of glass?” Such a question could have been dealt at both the literal and metaphorical level. However, it is usually hard for the facilitator to think immediately of possible directions that the discussion can take as s/he always has to think ‘in situ’ (Haynes, 2007; Fisher, 2003).

3) Children and adults dialoguing together.

Observation of the Colours and Shapes of the images

Helen (a): There are always with bright colours the pages with the people but with dark colours the pages that show animals’ life. Also the images that show the animals’ life follow a particular sequence and the frames are always bigger.

Facilitator: Any idea why this happens?

Loukas: Maybe to show how sad the animals feel (the shape of the frame shows differences of the emotion!)

Carmen: Maybe it’s just by chance

Loukas: No, can’t be. Look (points at the book).

It happens all the time. (Regularity of the action)

Observation of the black and white pages in the beginning and ending of the book

Hilary: I don’t like the ending. It is not happy. It starts with the black and white page and finishes with black and white pages. Why?

Facilitator: Any idea why this happens. Why do we have these two sheets?

Carmen: Maybe they didn’t have anything to fill them in so they left them blank

Judy (a): Black and white are not colours. It is the lack of colours so maybe both sides are not either happy or sad.

Hilary: I don’t like the end.

Facilitator: Would you like next time to think how you would like the story to end and tell us?

Hilary: Yes!

Comments

Both Helen and Judy (adults) make sophisticated observations, the first one about the use of dark colours when animals’ lives are depicted in the pictures and light colours when people’s lives in the zoo are portrayed and the second one about what does black and white means in the first and last pages of the book (the contrast in feelings between people- white and animals- black). It is interesting to see Carmen’s answer in both cases which are realistic if not nihilistic. Carmen seems to find in both cases non intentionality in the way the certain images have been illustrated. Loukas disagrees in the first dialogue and provides as an argument the frequency that Helen’s (adult) observation takes place. Loukas, no matter how young he is, is able to distinguish between incidents that happen on purpose from those happening accidentally. What he attempts is to link cause with effect.

Concluding Discussion

It seems that the community of philosophical inquiry, even at a very early stage, is a place where adults and children’s ideas merge together. Both children and adults showed respect for each others’ ideas, felt free to link their ideas together, found explanation so as to answer questions that occurred, agreed and disagreed with each other by providing reasons or agreed and found ways to link ideas together (Splitter and Sharp, 1995). Even if this dialogue cannot be characterized as academically philosophical, there is evidence of profound thinking from both adults and children. In many case adults’ and children’s thinking was critical (e.g. finding examples to
support ideas, to agree and to disagree with others) and creative (e.g. when both adults and children associated meaning to the illustration of the book or thought in metaphors).

As for the first question, whether a picture book can give rise to children’s and adults’ thinking the answer is positive. Picture books are not usually designed for doing philosophy with children, so they lack the ‘intentionality’ of adding purposefully ideas for the sake of doing philosophy in an academic and often artificial way (Marriott Stuart, 1998). What makes picture books different from intentionally designed stimuli for doing philosophy is that picture books show rather than deliberately tell what might be philosophical. Picture books do not force ‘philosophy’ but often have ‘philosophy’ embedded in them. The writer and illustrator Shaun Tan (2009, p.3) claims that “a successful picture book is one in which everything is presented to the reader as a speculative proposition, wrapped in invisible quotation marks, as if to say ‘what do you make of this?’” This is a form of philosophy that comes not intentionally but one is genuinely interested to find meaning in one’s illustration. This is the philosophical thinking that takes place when children reflect on the illustration. When Loukas observed that the grass outside the tiger’s cage has more vivid colour than inside and that the tiger has only a ‘square’ of sky to look at from its cage, then he referred (if not directly) to the value of freedom. His comments certainly made the others think deeply about the illustration and the abstract ideas with which it can be associated with. The silent thinking that takes place in a community of inquiry is as important as the ideas that have been spoken out loud (Haynes, 2007).

The writing of a story reflects the writer’s philosophy (the author’s thoughts, imagination of how children could think and act, observations as to how children react, and recollection of the child the writer once was (or still is)). The same happens with the reader as beholder and reconstructor of the stimulus in a new way through questioning, inventing new analogies and metaphors, attempting to understand the writer’s initial motivation and pushing thinking into new directions.

As for the second question, there are similarities and differences between adults and children in the way they approach and cope with the same stimulus. Children have a more imaginative approach towards the stimulus than the adults. Joan commented on the giraffe licking the paint off the wall because of its thirst, could be ignored or appreciated as ‘cute’ or ‘interesting’. However, Joan’s statement has both imagination and logic when Joan elaborated further on her answer. What is important for adults is to really ‘listen to the children’ and their different approaches because they usually reflect a type of logic which can be impressive.

Children were very able in observing details that could easily have been ignored. Penicillin was discovered because Alexander Fleming was sensitive enough to pay attention to details that others before him had ignored. Genetics also appeared because Mendel was observant enough to identify differences in the colours of the flowers and the shape of the leaves of the varieties of plants that he was cultivating in a monastery. The observation of details can give food to further philosophical investigation and activate both children’s and adults’ thinking.

Both adults and children are capable of thinking in metaphors. However, adults could offer more elaborate examples. This could be due to adults’ more expanded experiences and more sophisticated use of language. Taking into consideration that most of the adults who contributed were the support workers of the children or some other adults this difference makes sense. Also, both adults and children seemed to pay more attention to

11 Mallan adopts the idea of ‘critical aesthetics’ which combine the pleasure of reading with practising critique in this reading which seems to describe partly the role between philosophy and literature. Mallan’s idea of ‘critical aesthetics’ is restricted to aesthetics whilst philosophy is broader; it includes aesthetics and does not end in it. (See Mallan, K. 1999. Reading(s) beneath the surface: using picturebooks to foster a critical aesthetics, Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 22(3), p.200-211).
the information derived from the pictures rather from the text. While I was expecting some comments on the language used in the text, it seemed that the ‘power’ of the image had the same influence for both adults and children.

The inquiries are still in process. The more adults and children practice their thinking, the more elaborated thoughts they express. Philosophical thinking and wondering does not happen in one example of a case study. It takes time and it lasts as it becomes an attitude of approaching things and thinking on the stimuli received from natural and social environment. Working collaboratively (in groups) and exchanging ideas can only help both adults and children to gain from each other and enhance their understanding. Adults can learn from children’s fresh and imaginative approach of a stimulus while children can learn from adults’ already experience and ability to state linguistically clearly their ideas and can bust their self esteem as their ideas are appreciated and worthy listening by the adults. Such collaborations between adults and children and combining of their thinking should be encouraged further in the future. Changes in the world happen when all the people’s thinking is represented.

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