

BOOK REVIEWS

Picture Books, Pedagogy and Philosophy, J. Haynes & K. Murriss
September 2011, Hardback, \$155.00, 978-0-415-88080-0
Paperback, \$49.95, 978-0-415-81792-9
Routledge, Taylor & Francis
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The aim of this book is to justify why the exploration of philosophical ideas through dialogue with others challenges current ideas of curriculum and policy: an enquiry based approach to teaching and learning offers a more progressive and individualistic approach to education, running counter to traditional methods assuming the important role of the teacher must be to transmit content to learners. The authors state clearly that if teachers believe their usual role is to “deliver” knowledge then they will struggle to use picture books and contemporary children’s literature as stimuli to engage children in freedom of thought and expression.

In the introduction, the authors Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss, set out their concerns that teachers are anxious when tackling controversial issues with children. This anxiety leads them towards a censorship of children’s literature and picture books and an avoidance of risk in classrooms. A central aim of the book is to present the approach of *community of philosophical enquiry*, within the framework of *philosophy for children* (P4C), as a pedagogical response enabling controversial issues to be explored with children and young people alike. P4C, initially developed by Matthew Lipman in the 1980s, is an approach today practiced in over 60 countries as a way of “establishing high quality thinking and dialogue in classrooms” (Haynes and Murriss, 2012, p. 50).

While the authors are supportive of the traditional rationale set out by Lipman, namely that this approach encourages children to become more reasonable, think critically, creatively and carefully, they are keen to explain where their work differs from and builds on Lipman’s view. They draw from their particular experiences of using picture books and children’s literature as the stimuli for communities of philosophical enquiry with children and teachers in their role as teacher educators and enquiry facilitators. The introduction is quite critical of teacher’s decision making and professional judgement towards the choice of stimuli for enquiry. The authors view some teachers’s decision to label some picture books as “inappropriate,” as censorship. They generalise that the censoring of particular books (e.g., *Where the Wild Things Are*; *Frog in Love*; *The Three Robbers*; *The Tunnel*) is a deliberate attempt by teachers to prevent controversial issues such as death, going with strangers and disobeying adults, being discussed openly in their classrooms.

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Although the authors briefly recognise these powerful issues are usually addressed with children on an individual basis, it is not until the final part of *Picture Books, Pedagogy and Philosophy*, that they fully recognise the reality of various external pressures, expectations and relations with the children in their care which may be influencing their decision making. The introduction concludes with a summary of six arguments against censorship and risk avoidance and for the use of enquiry—ranging from the epistemological argument that children should be able to construct their own meaning and create new knowledge to the political and moral argument that schools should be more ethical and democratic.

The book is separated into three parts. Part I explores the picture books they have used as stimuli for P4C and community of enquiry in detail. It explains the history, process and rationale of enquiry. Part II focuses on the philosophical ideas of child and childhood and touches upon the power relationship existing between adult and child. Part III addresses more thoroughly the rationale for this approach. It sets out explicitly their justification for the use of communities of philosophical enquiry and the rationale to limit current censorship of children's literature.

PART I – Provocative Picture Books

This section explores the features and characteristics of the picture books Haynes and Murriss have used in their work with children during communities of philosophical enquiry. They share checklists that summarise how they chose picture books for enquiry, extracts of children's dialogue from the enquiries, along with their own analysis of books helpful for educators. Picture books and children's literature challenging the accepted view of conformity or which break with conventional rules are particularly focused upon here. They suggest choosing stimuli with the "right moral message" (p. 117) is not useful for this type of philosophy. Books that "...play with what's real, disturb readers's expectations and can be unsettling...forge new understandings and seem to break with stereotypes and social conventions..." (p. 23) are the most suitable for this type of philosophy. The aim is to encourage learners to ask the questions and build upon each other's ideas rather than learners answering the questions the teacher has prepared.

With reference to Nussbaum, Kristjansson, Lipman and Matthews, they explore the role of emotions and imagination in philosophy. They disagree with Lipman's rejection of picture books for philosophy and his view that the use of picture books and illustrations means children are passive as the picturing and imagining is already done for them. Murriss and Haynes argue that in their experience, the pictures alongside the narrative raise emotions and this in turn enables children to make meaning for themselves, drawn from the child's own experiences. They explain the limitations when narratives are chosen as stimuli for a community of enquiry because of their content and relation to the curriculum or adult aims. Their point here is that there are other reasons for using narratives and stories as a way of doing philosophy, such as the extent to which it affects and helps to shape and articulate our identities, encourages us to challenge accepted beliefs and prejudices and helps us connect the personal to the public. They justify, through a range of literature that there is a strong connection between narrative and self and it is with our stories that we engage. They state that "sharing stories with others in an environment that actively nourishes dialogical talk about

thinking and emotions help students and teachers to construct more profound self narratives and understanding of others” (Haynes and Murriss, 2012, p. 84).

PART II – Being Child

This section continues to develop the arguments surrounding the use of narratives and imagination towards shaping our identities. It aims to challenge the view that children need to be explicitly guided towards the truth by adults and presents a critical discussion about the author’s pedagogical and philosophical position. Philosophical enquiry requires a search for truth and meaning. Haynes and Murriss reject the view that children are unable to do this for themselves. They state “We cannot seriously engage with children in authentic searches for understanding if we have already determined that they lack the authority to speak from their experience or the competence to make choices about which questions to pursue.” (Haynes and Murriss, 2012, p. 155) Referring to the work of John Dewey, and their own previous work, they critically explore the power relationships between adult and child and learner and teacher’ outlining the dichotomy teachers can face between creating the conditions for security for children, versus the conditions for uncertainty, curiosity and exploration.

PART III – Philosophical Listening

This part of the book was the most engaging and stimulating for me. The critical tone from part one turns into a supportive and encouraging one: the reality of teacher’s work and the contexts in which they work are recognised. Many of the sweeping generalisations made about teacher’s judgements in part one that made me feel particularly defensive were revisited with an appreciation of the specific role challenges and sometimes unrealistic expectations of teachers in the UK. Here, Haynes and Murriss provide a supportive rationale for the use of P4C with picture books. Their positionality now appears to be working alongside teachers towards a common challenge against instrumentalism in education rather than what appeared to be blaming teachers for the complex decisions they have to make within the context of their responsibilities.

The authors share an illuminating email dialogue between them that shows them reflecting together about their use of enquiry and P4C. In the main, this part of the book gives full attention to the part that listening plays during community of philosophical enquiry. In this regard they resist the temptation, often made by authors in this area, to justify the use of enquiry as a method to improve children’s cognitive abilities such as thinking and reasoning skills. They appear to align themselves closer to Biesta’s (2012) view challenging this narrow and predetermined view of a humanising curriculum. Genuinely listening and valuing children’s ideas and giving them freedom of expression promotes individuality and exposure.

Summary

The current narrow and prescriptive view, taken from politicians about the teaching of values in schools, ignores the positive effects of a learning experience where children are listened to, able to ask their own questions and be valued as ends in themselves (Gilligan 2011). However, it would be wrong to assume that P4C using picture books is the only relational pedagogy where teachers show these values in their interactions with children (Jones 2014). The authors

go to considerable lengths to outline the complexity of P4C and highlight its success is reliant upon the teacher choosing to value the underpinning pedagogical position. They recognise there are challenges for enough time and space to introduce teachers to this approach both on teacher education programmes and in schools. However, without support, trust and confidence, teachers are unlikely to want to take more risks. Thus, the complex nature of this approach may not be fulfilled if teachers do not feel skilled to “do philosophy” with their learners. The question of what kind of philosophy this is, if at all, is likely to be raised and the authors are clear to state that this process is more about doing philosophy rather than learning philosophy. This could lead to questions about its purpose and the aim of P4C. If the aim is not solely or primarily about the development of technical cognitive abilities but more of an individual humanising approach towards children making personal meaning of their world, then how do teachers promote its rationale alongside the prescriptive nature of the national curriculum and the performative climate that teachers are faced with (Ball 2008)?

Overall, this book made me reflect upon, yet again, the purpose of education and its aim to be a humanising endeavour. The book raises questions about the role and expectations of teachers and implies that P4C can give answers. Although there is a slight danger that educators may be replacing one set of pre-defined qualities and skills advocated in the National Curriculum—for another set of qualities and skills advocated in P4C—both of which would contradict the freedom of expression and validating of children’s ideas which eschew a pre-defined identity. The experience of being listened to and having your thoughts, ideas and expressions thoughtfully explored and validated is a humanising one (Biesta 2012; hooks, 1994). It has reminded me that it is the relationships and interactions between teacher and learner that is the key part of the educative process. Regardless of the approach you are following, it is important the teacher is also prepared to be transformed in that process (hooks 1994).

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