

Alternative ways of addressing philosophy for children

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1. Why teach Philosophy for Children?

Philosophy for children (P4C) has been questioned not only because it is believed to be beyond the reach of pre-adolescents but also because some assume it will distract students from the core subjects of the curricula, while at the same time encouraging skepticism more than learning. In times of school ratings and standardized tests, a prevailing thought is that there is no time for such a “useless” thing as “drifting speculation”. Although we could argue that philosophical inquiry has the power to both infuse meaningfulness into education as a whole and make a decisive contribution to foster critical thinking and overcome the hived off disciplinary approach; that it can promote children’s ability to think *for themselves* at the same time that it encourages them to think *with others*, within a community of inquiry, the latter being, in and of itself, a strong context for developing inclusive socialization, which is one of the higher aims for education nowadays (Banks & Banks, 2010).

The initial points of criticisms in this article are themselves currently being questioned. The Piagetian assumption that children are incapable of the meta-level thinking which characterizes the philosophical approach has been challenged by various researchers (Astington, 1993; Gopnik, *et al.*, 1999; Gopnik, 2009). In fact, it could just be the case that the philosophical thinking manifested by children is simply overlooked (Matthews, 1980).

On behalf of the hypothesis supporting children’s ability to start a philosophical inquiry, we can consider the famous song from Adriana Calcanhoto, entitled “Eight years of age”. Many of the questions introduced by the song, as good as they may be, can be said to be not intrinsically philosophical, since they have a factual and objective answer, eventually drawn from different sources, such as our daily experience or science. However, it is absolutely clear that a “drive to ask questions” is present and, above all, it is striking that some of the questions posed are to be taken under special consideration, like “Why does time pass?” and “Why do we die?” These are more than good questions. Such questions are not only philosophical but, indeed, eminently philosophical. Along these lines, why not use popular songs to do philosophy *for* and/or *with* children?

Many evidences support the idea that the “drive to ask questions” is very common in children. We can even admit that it is a universal feature of childhood. Nietzsche (2005), analyzing the spirit’s metamorphoses, uses three metaphors. The first refers to the Camel’s will of supporting even the heaviest axiological burden imposed by tradition that is shattered by the Lions’ determination to say “No” to false values in order to find his own place and his own *freedom*. *In doing so, a breakthrough is open to the Child to appear. And who is the Child* but the spirit of beginning that requires forgetting the old, the blindly accepted, and the “because it’s so”. But the Child goes beyond the Lion’s “negative” stance; the Child represents the disposition to create a new world and a new world must be created if one wants to have one. In life there are no borrowed worlds. Outside a personal meaningful construction of the world, we only get inauthenticity and emptiness (McHenry, 1997). Getting back to our issue, it is quite reasonable to admit that Nietzsche has captured children’s disposition toward questioning and playfully launch new games of meaning, just to make a parallel with Wittgenstein’s (1986) concept of “language games”.

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Now, returning to the song example, as much as that kind of questioning could be considered philosophical, one should bear in mind that philosophy is also a matter of being capable of having a *sustained* philosophical discussion. Regarding this issue, Matthews (1984) and Pritchard (1996) also provide some good insights of children's ability to sustain a philosophical reasoning process, not only for inquiry but also for argumentation.

While children's abilities to sustain a philosophical process could be a matter of discussion, one cannot doubt that children ask questions, and good ones, with a strong and authentic need to search for answers. For that alone, educators should be concerned with opening a space where children may deepen and expand this disposition. P4C not only opens this space but it also offers a dynamic methodology to address the process.

2. How to address P4C: fairy tales and popular stories

Let us consider the process of using pre-fabricated and supposedly "philosophical" novels, like Lipman's (1974) *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. The advantage of using these novels derives from their adaption to the intended process as well as from the broad span of materials already available. But one should not discard other resources. Especially fairy tales and fables, which are rich means of conveying very profound and dense symbolic contents (Bettelheim, 1976). Gareth Matthews (1992), for instance, has used simple stories, anecdotes and puzzles to start inquiries, carried out by children, on philosophical subjects. Tales, especially fairy tales, in their intimacy with children's world, can be very easily used to induce wonder and to motivate their questioning, thinking and argumentation.

Taking into consideration the difficulty of using proper stories suited to children's sensitivity and understanding, Bobro (2004, pp. 80-81) says, "I have had success introducing philosophy to children through the discussion of folktales, stories handed down from generation to generation." From his point of view we should not encourage an introduction to philosophy by reading the classics; instead he proposes a "more ethnographic approach". Bobro discards the unsuited esoteric readings of classic texts and chooses the "story approach" developed by P4C since "it is reasonable to make philosophy less exotic and intimidating by using stories" (2004, p. 82). However, a question remains: Why should we prefer folktales to original philosophical stories as the point of departure like P4C does? The author gives us several reasons: educational function; diversity; provenance; ambiguity of meaning and self-interest.

Regarding the "educational function" he points out that fairy tales, popular stories and jokes "aid in the education of both young and old, by sharpening the wits and disseminating the wisdom of past generations" (Bobro, 2004, p. 83).

As to the second issue, he praises folklore for its realistic and fantastic content and cultural diversity, to which children respond eagerly and creatively, while opening a way to their imagination flow through "What if?" contexts. What is more, folklore not only presents cultural assumptions but it also expresses universal truths.

As for "provenance", it is important to note that folk tales are not the invention of a philosopher or any individual but rather the expression of a community of persons or a culture; being anonymous they are intimately connected with tradition.

Ambiguity of meaning is one of the strongest features of folktales, fairy tales and fables. Their power relies on their openness: they inspire more than they say, thus letting imagination flow so that one's understanding finds out personal means of expression.

Regarding the last reason, Bobro (2004) says folktales are generally much more interesting and meaningful because they are passed down orally from generation to generation.

As good as pre-fabricated stories may be – and some of them indeed are –, we also would prefer folk tales or the classical fairy tales and fables to trigger the work of “communities of inquiry”. A critical defense for the choice of folktales and the like is that we avoid placing ourselves in the role of storyteller supervisors who seem to have nothing to learn with the very children we are trying to tough on open-mindedness.

3. How to address P4C: films

The philosophical content of films (Cox & Levine, 2012) and their use for philosophical purposes (Kowalski, 2012; Teays, 2012; Litch, 2010) has been poignantly discussed. But, as Wartenberg (2009) notes, an intense debate on the philosophical potential of films has arisen. Some say that films do “little more than raising philosophical problems in an accessible form for film audiences, others assert that films can actually philosophize” (p. 549), meaning that films can indeed “do” philosophy.

Films can be an adequate resource to trigger simple questioning on relevant subjects as well as foster philosophical inquiry, debate and reasoning, while they can also be “philosophy in action”. Given their strong appeal to the “M Generation”², the great variety available and the widening access to them, we would be wise to take films not only as an educational resource, broadly speaking, but also as philosophical instruments.

Just to give an example, we would like to draw on Victor Flemming’s film, “The Wizard of Oz”, which we assume is common ground for most of our readers. The whole movie is a source of subject to fire children’s interest, questioning and wonder, from the music, by Harold Arlen, to the lyrics sung by the character Dorothy, played by Judy Garland.

By listening and, when possible, reading the lyrics, imagine the debates that could be triggered. What empathy can such a song create within children? Considering the curricula of Basic Education, how many interdisciplinary threads could be advanced? Let alone the change in the film from black and white to color after the tornado and, most specially, the three friends: the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Lion, as metaphors for virtues or the human complex condition. And what of the Wicked Witch and the Great Wizard of Oz? Who are they, after all? Figures of evil and goodness? What is there to say about their surprise when they discover that the Great Wizard is nothing more than a mechanical human construction? What is this saying to children about the figure of goodness? What does the “yellow brick road” stands for? The path of the righteous? One can quote Reiter (1998), just to have an insight into the possibilities, in this case from the point of view of a Freudian orientation, the referred book, film, or play, are “rich with imagery, metaphors and obvious symbolism that may serve as an extremely powerful as a catalyst for discussion of one’s own inner desires, needs and “other individual journeys of disillusionment and enchantment.” (Reiter, 1988, p. 150)

Philosophy for Children is, perhaps, a problematic endeavor, but we have many good reasons to promote it and we do not lack resources. We can use a large span of materials collected from traditional or contemporary sources, ranging from fairy tales to popular songs and films that are very well suited to engage children in a community of inquiry.

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² The “M Generation” is an expression to refer to those who are natives in the (hyper)media society that arose after the last decade of the XX century (Reis, 2008).

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