

Are children natural philosophers?

**Karin Murriss replies to an article
in the last issue on *Philosophy for
Children* programmes in which
Richard Fox asked: 'Can children
be philosophical?'**

*'Why do we always have to think
about something?' (Sion, aged five)*

The idea that young children can do philosophy has instant appeal. Their endless questioning about anything under the sun – and beyond – persuades many teachers and parents that this ancient subject comes *naturally* to children.

Philosophy with Children (PwC), however, involves more than just asking philosophical questions or wondering about the world. A philosophical enquiry between a large group of peers is a highly disciplined activity and it can be argued that making it part and parcel of an ordinary school day makes *unnatural* demands on the young child psychologically. This is Richard Fox's standpoint in *Can children be philosophical?* (published in the previous issue of *Teaching Thinking* Issue 4).

Here I examine some of his arguments. I have presented a more extensive and detailed response to critics of PwC in *Can Children Do Philosophy?* (Murriss, 2000; for the text see also www.dialogueworks.co.uk). Also, in *Metaphors of the Child's Mind* (Murriss, 1997), I focus in particular on the metaphors underpinning our thinking about (children's) thinking.

Fox is eager to point out that PwC practitioners need to accept the findings of developmental psychology. Children's psychological development, he says, limits the extent to which they can be taken seriously as philosophers. Fox structures his doubts about PwC in four 'problems'.

The loss of adult philosophers

Problem 1: Discussions, reading and writing are what Fox calls 'unnatural' classroom activities, causing 'general underlying tensions in the primary classroom'. Therefore, PwC is unnatural for young children. Instead, what comes naturally to young children (especially boys) is 'physical exploration and active manipulation', he argues. They want to explore the world by acting upon it. Therefore they have 'limited patience and perseverance with any classroom activity which demands long periods of inaction, of listening rather than speaking...'

Fox has a point here; but this problem is not peculiar to PwC. It could be argued that all primary schooling is unnatural; particularly in Britain which emphasises formal education at a much earlier age than the rest of Europe.

However, young children *can* sit still and be focused for long periods of time when an activity is meaningful to them; and the space that PwC provides for children's own interests and concerns is unique. It is a mistake to make a *Philosophy with Children* session synonymous with just any whole-class discussion.

Philosophy sessions are *enquiries*, not mere discussions. So there is a 'doing' of an important kind – making meaning by listening to others and sharing their experiences. The space children have within which to explore and experience their differences, and where they can make various connections, is of a very special kind.

The presence of others provides the necessary ingredient to make this process exciting. By challenging each other, with the help of the teacher's skilful questioning, the children start to build on each other's ideas. How the teacher listens and questions is crucial for children's engagement. Listening out for the philosophical in what they say adds importance to their exploration. Their concrete experiences are linked to significant abstract concepts and questions, so that they gain more insight into what they think and feel. For example, the death of one child's dog is connected with the abstract concept of 'friendship'. They learn not only about the significance of pets, and about friendship more generally, but also about that particular child and what groups can do to help answer particular questions. Excitement increases as the children continue to follow the enquiry wherever it may lead. They also experience the fact that adults are puzzled too by questions which still have no answers.

When observing and listening to children engaged in philosophical enquiries the opposite happens to what one would expect from normal classroom discussions. As the children raise the topics for discussion themselves, and the teacher skilfully encourages them to build on each other's ideas, excitement increases, and almost without exception there is huge disappointment when the session ends. Even with very young children one – hour sessions are no exception. The problem Fox is reporting does make sense for a lot of educational activities, but not necessarily for PwC.

Also, good teachers of PwC incorporate materials and

activities, which scaffold the process of enquiry. Although whole-class-size enquiries are often at the centre of a session, the children are also often divided into small groups. By observing and listening to a group of children carefully, teachers can experiment with role-play, drama, or physical thinking games (see e.g. Eagle, 2001). Art materials can be used during thinking time or as follow-up activities; the use of story-telling, videos, pictures, drama, music, picture books, puppets or other concrete objects as starting points for philosophical enquiries help to engage the children.

All learning is about instilling certain habits – PwC is no exception. Developmental psychology has an important role in helping provide the right kind of environment for teaching thinking. In particular, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget has had enormous influence on our current educational thinking. An underlying philosophical assumption of Piagetian theory is that children's reasoning will develop automatically as they get older, going through irreversible, necessary age-related stages. Any attempt to hasten this process is a waste of time, says Piaget.



Donaldson, whom Fox quotes, claims that Piaget's conclusions are suspect (Donaldson, 1978, p. 23). Donaldson says Piaget made the mistake of constructing experiments that didn't *make sense* to the young child (Donaldson, 1978, p. 23; Sutherland, 1992, p. 15). When experiments *do* make sense to the child, Donaldson suggests that children *can* decentre in imagination – a necessary requirement for thinking and reasoning well – because if a child cannot shift between different points of view, she cannot make valid inferences (Donaldson, 1978, pp. 20, 41).

The unquestioned assumption in developmental theories is that the goal of the process is maturity – each stage is followed by one that is 'better' or mature. But improved handling of philosophical questions is not guaranteed by just growing up. Abstract concepts do not simply 'develop'. In order to use concepts in a sophisticated manner, thinking about them in a disciplined and systematic manner helps to 'expand' them. This is difficult for both children and adults.

Training in philosophical enquiry is possibly more relevant than *age*. Ironically, maturity might even bring 'staleness' and 'uninventiveness' (Matthews, 1994, p. 18) to the exploration of philosophical ideas, while, by contrast, children are often 'fresh and inventive thinkers'. However, Piaget called children's imaginative responses 'mere romancing' (Matthews, 1980, p.39-41), and, using mathematical thinking as its paradigm, put a one-sided emphasis on the logical aspects of children's thinking.

Kieran Egan – also quoted by Fox – provides many arguments in favour of young children being capable of doing PwC. Egan argues that the 'other half' of the child as learner – the *imaginative* side – has been neglected by many educational researchers (Egan, 1988, 1992, 1993). Egan points out that education is about, not only what we gain, but also about minimising losses, and what has been lost is 'the ability to see that world as the child sees it, transfigured by fantasy' (Egan, 1988, p. 20). Fox rejects this 'mythical thinking' as romantic and unphilosophical. But, as Egan shows, it has its own '... complex logic and ... this logic is not an opposite to rational thought' (Egan, 1988, p. 39). He regards it as the *foundation for rational thinking* and argues that this kind of thinking is certainly not 'primitive' and only less 'abstract' when we mean by 'abstraction' the kind that depends heavily on writing. The written word is much less charged than the spoken word '... with the direct energy of the speaker's body, and so the speaker's hopes, fears, wants, needs, intentions, and so on' (Egan, 1988, p. 70). Egan argues that children *do* think abstractly in the sense that they use abstract concepts, such as 'brave', 'fair', 'good', 'friend', but not dissociated from their life world, in the way that literacy enables and encourages them to be (Egan, 1988, pp. 75, 90, 91).



Adults are not better listeners

Problem 2: Fox maintains that the ability to understand and value the point of view of others is an essential part of the ability to take part in discussions. This requires politeness, patience and empathy. Children still have to learn this from the adults who are more practised in it and who are

therefore better at it. He calls this learning process an 'uphill struggle' and claims that children find it hard to sustain a level of discussion in which participants listen well and build on each other's ideas.

In an enquiry, the children create new thoughts and ideas together. When talking, they are not merely expressing what they thought before, but they are incorporating new thoughts – for example, reasons offered by others – into new ideas. In the same way, the kind of active listening demanded for enquiry involves suspension of one's own interests and concerns and an intense awareness of the thread of the argument and the needs of others. Adults may be more polite, but under that layer of social veneer there is often a great reluctance to risk thinking aloud together and letting go of cherished beliefs. PwC challenges teachers to listen to their children in a profound sense, letting go of the adult's perspective. Children and adults alike have to 'start from scratch' in a philosophical enquiry, questioning what they automatically assume to be true and often changing their minds. The adult philosopher's knowledge, experience and socialisation may be a *hindrance* rather than an asset.

Philosophy as the art of living

Problem 3: Philosophical enquiry involves seeking answers to general questions by means of conceptual enquiry. According to Fox, adults distinguish between the different subjects and methods of enquiry, whereas children do not. Fox argues that keeping these different kinds of enquiry separate goes 'against the grain of children's thinking'. He says: 'everyday curiosity about their own immediate interests at hand' is more typical of young children's thinking, and that it is hard for the adult teacher to 'focus [them] especially on philosophical issues and concerns'. This is because they easily move from scientific to historical to religious aspects of one and the same topic, he says.

Philosophical enquiries with children do transgress *artificial* subject boundaries, and the class of concepts the children enquire into is larger than that of philosophy as evolved into the 21st century. A great deal depends on the facilitation skills of the teacher to help the enquiry focus on philosophical issues. But also, in an important sense, the philosophy of PwC has 'moved on' from Enlightenment beliefs about rationality and its naïve optimism about the role of the thinker in acquiring true knowledge about the world. My personal view of philosophy differs from that of Fox, whose own beliefs are the 'cornerstone' of his fourth problem.

Problem 4: Fox mentions that philosophy is systematic, theoretic and abstract thinking and that passion has no place in philosophy. Progress in philosophy includes learning 'to put feelings to one side in the process of dispassionate enquiry'. But reason is at its most powerful when the emotions are involved; pursuit of truth itself is an emotion. The impossibility of separating body from mind is again increasingly acknowledged in philosophy (as it was in Ancient Greece).

With its emphasis on the giving of (good) reasons for one's beliefs, philosophy is difficult and sometimes frustrating for children (and adults!). Giving reasons doesn't come – what Fox calls – 'naturally' and as such could cause problems in classrooms. Of course, it doesn't follow that philosophical enquiry shouldn't be encouraged and indeed Fox does acknowledge many educational merits of PwC, but doubts the ability of children to be like *academic* philosophers.

Critics often compare child philosophers with adult ones.

Of course, young children do not enquire philosophically like academic philosophers. This statement is neither surprising, nor exciting. Primary children don't do mathematics like academic mathematicians either, but they are still taught mathematics. So, how is philosophy different as a subject? Philosopher Richard Creel makes the following useful distinction:

'To be sure, philosophy is an academic subject of study... but more deeply philosophy is a way of being in the world – of questioning it, interacting with it, and responding to it. Indeed, humankind is an ongoing dialogue about the topics of philosophy...' (Creel, 2001, 10)

Children can enter dialogue about such topics too, as long as the context makes sense to them. Moreover, the right attitude for philosophy, Creel observes, has five facets: caring, courage, openness, gratitude, and assertiveness (Creel, 2001, pp. 69 – 74). The younger we start with philosophy, the more likely these facets will develop and be maintained.

Critics often compare child philosophers with adult ones. But if we, for example, compare adults who have just started doing philosophy with children who have just started, then the problems are remarkably similar.

PwC paradigm is partly a criticism of academic philosophy. Many regard Socrates' view of philosophy – not an academic subject but a *way of life* – as the prime example of philosophical enquiry with children.

Philosophy can be a suitable subject for children if '... reconstructed in ways that suit their talents and their interests' (Cam, 1995, p. 13). This reconstruction should be such that children do not learn *about* philosophy, but *do* philosophy. The teachers' role is crucial in providing the right environment for children to feel able and confident to explore abstract concepts with the help of their own rich experiences. PwC philosophy bears more resemblance to the oral dialogues of Ancient Greece than to current academic philosophy.

Creel's comparison between professional footballers and young amateur footballers is useful here (Creel, 2001, p. 5). Though there are differences, there is continuity too in skills,

rules and attitudes. Just because most youngsters play on a smaller pitch and tend to all rush for the ball at once, tell them they should wait until they are older and capable of playing 'proper' football. On the contrary, the younger we start the better, because most skills and attitudes are acquired more easily at an early age. Failure to appreciate this fact threatens to waste a golden opportunity to nurture children's abilities and realise their potential.

Karin Murriss is a Dutch philosopher who has worked with children of all age groups. She is also an expert in children's literature and her work has often been featured in the European media. She would like to thank Joanna Haynes for her helpful suggestions and critical comments on this article.

Correspondence: Dr Karin Murriss, The Old School Centre, Newport SA42 0TS. Email: karin@dialogueworks.co.uk Website: www.dialogueworks.co.uk

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cam, Philip. (1995), *Thinking Together; Philosophical Inquiry for the Classroom*. Australian English Teaching Association & Hale and Iremonger.
- Creel, Richard. (2001), *Thinking Philosophically; An Introduction to Critical Reflection and Rational Dialogue*. Oxford, Blackwells.
- Curtis, Barry. (1985), "Wittgenstein and Philosophy for Children". *Thinking*, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 10 – 19.
- Donaldson, Margaret. (1978), *Children's Minds*. London, Fontana.
- Eagle, Sue. (2001), "Celebrate, Good Times, Come On"; In: *Teaching Thinking*, Issue 3, Spring 2001.
- Egan, Kieran. (1988), *Primary Understanding; Education in Early Childhood*. London, Routledge.
- Egan, Kieran. (1992), *Imagination in Teaching and Learning; ages 8 – 15*. London, Routledge.
- Egan, Kieran. (1993), "The Other Half of the Child"; In: Lipman, Matthew (ed.), *Thinking, Children and Education*. Montclair, Kendall/Hunt, pp. 301 – 306.
- Matthews, Gareth. (1980), *Philosophy and the Young Child*. Cambridge (Mass), Harvard Univ. Press.
- Matthews, Gareth. (1994), *The Philosophy of Childhood*. Cambridge (Mass), Harvard Univ. Press, 1994.
- Murriss, Karin. (1997), *Metaphors of the Child's Mind; Teaching Philosophy to Young Children*; being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD in Education. University of Hull, October 1997.
- Murriss, Karin. (2000), Can Children Do Philosophy?; In: *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 34, Issue 2, May 2000, pp. 261 – 279.
- Splitter, Laurance J. and Ann Margaret Sharp. (1995), *Teaching for Better Thinking; The Classroom Community of Enquiry*. Melbourne, Acer.
- Sutherland, Peter. (1992), *Cognitive Development Today; Piaget and his Critics*. London, Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1971), *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.