

# Can children be philosophical?

**Richard Fox asks whether 'Philosophy for Children' programmes really create abstract, philosophical skills in young children. He has doubts**

**H**aving been involved for several years in attempting to investigate and implement the educational programme known as "Philosophy for Children" (Lipman, 1991; Sharp and Splitter, 1995) I have developed some very mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, it still seems to me to offer a powerful framework and method for involving children in productive discussion and thinking together in classrooms (Fox, 1995, 1996, 1998). On the other hand, some of the difficulties which children have with philosophising seem to me to be underestimated in the programme's literature and training.

The main purpose of the present paper is to articulate my doubts about "P4C" (as it is familiarly known). In doing this I run the risk of giving readers the idea that I think the programme has no merits at all. In fact, however, I feel that the simple, yet subtle, pedagogy of the Community of Enquiry has a great deal to offer, as a core method of class discussion. I also consider that philosophy, in a loose sense of the word, is not altogether beyond young children and potentially has a kind of lurking role in the school curriculum, as a means of connecting enquiry and the methods of enquiry across different subjects. It also realises in practice a continuous means of promoting metacognition at different levels.

The sorts of productive thinking and discussion that I have in mind would constitute a kind of intellectual heart to classroom life, a forum within which any and all issues could be raised and considered within a clear framework of rules of engagement. Such discussions would be unbounded by worries about whether or not they were truly philosophical,



however, since in my view children do not make systematic progress in truly philosophical thinking until much later (typically 15 or 16 years plus).

Having said all that, I intend to spend most of my space explaining why I am critical of what seems to me to be an excess of optimism, within P4C, about children's thinking. I believe that this results mostly from a determination to ignore the findings of developmental psychology or to admit that there may be any real limitations to children's powers of thought. The same criticisms may apply, more or less, to other programmes that set out to improve children's thinking, or critical thinking, or have similar aspirations. I have four main points to make, each of which indicates a real difficulty which children have in this area, and which I think teachers need to take into account. The difficulties do not add up to an impossibility, but they do indicate that progress in these sorts of endeavours is likely to be both slow and irregular.

### Children are made for action

**Problem 1** is disarmingly simple. Children mostly like doing things; they are made chiefly for action. Evolution has fitted them to move, to explore, to interact and to try things out in a practical way. The Science Museum is one good place to observe this propensity. What children chiefly like to do in the Science Museum is to press buttons, turn wheels, pull levers, run about and generally try things out. This tendency towards exploring the world by acting upon it may possibly be even stronger in boys than in girls, and in younger rather than in older boys, but it effects all children of primary school age. If sat for too long in a school assembly, for example, Reception and Year 1 children actually start to writhe about physically, in a manner they cannot control. If let loose in a playground after lessons, they typically run about, twirl around, jump and shout, at least at first. These simple facts, familiar to all who spend any time with children, are for some reason seldom mentioned in psychology books. One implication is that children will have limited patience and perseverance with any classroom activity which demands long periods of inaction, of listening rather than speaking, and of attention only to the "thread" of spoken language. All primary teachers intuitively know that tasks involving some form of making or doing are initially likely to be more popular than tasks involving listening, silent reading or writing (stories are our main way of getting children to edge beyond this difficulty).

Donaldson (1992) has described in elegant detail how initially perception, action, thought and emotion are bundled closely together in children and are gradually, and partially, disassembled, during development. Thus babies seem to perceive, act, feel and think all at once; they cannot separate out thought from feeling or from action. As they get older, children gradually learn to look without touching, then to think and talk without acting, even about things they cannot see. Finally they may learn to put feelings to one side in the process of dispassionate enquiry. Of course we also know that in schools even five-year-olds, or most of them, can learn to sit quietly on the carpet and take part in a Literacy Hour, or some other relatively formal lesson. School

is the place, par excellence, where we learn to look and to think and to speak in a context where the problem at hand is represented symbolically, and where approved behaviour mostly consists of sitting still and concentrating on the manipulation of representations. All I am concerned to point out here is that P4C, and other "thinking lessons" tend to rely on discussion, reading and writing, rather than on physical exploration and active manipulation. To this extent they are "unnatural"; in a sense, from the child's point of view and many children will find them irksome, at least from time to time. The manner in which schooling systematically puts pressure on children to inhibit enquiry through intelligent practical activity, in favour of manipulating symbolic representations of reality, mostly via language, seems for some reason to be underemphasised in most educational discourse (for me it remains one of the most general underlying tensions in the primary classroom).

### Do children have the patience for discussion?

**Problem 2** concerns group discussion and empathy. The success of discussion depends heavily on the ability to understand and value the points of view of others. There is no complete discontinuity between adults and children, here: I have often found myself impatient at having to sit through long meetings at which my own contributions are necessarily brief and spaced out at long intervals. I've also found group philosophy discussions incredibly frustrating, when no one seems to want to hear my (oh, so important!) point and others persist in taking the conversation in directions which fail to interest me. But I do have an advantage over children, in that I am more practised at the business of considering other people's feelings and points of view and at inhibiting my own train of thought whilst attending to that of other people in the group. Again, and of course, children do learn to do these things. But the primary aged child finds it very difficult. There is a well-documented, slow progression, roughly between 4 and 12 years, during which children gradually learn to distinguish between their own mental view of the world and that of other people, to co-ordinate these points of view reciprocally and to allow for them, for example in conversation (e.g. Flavell, 1985, chapter 5). This means that learning to listen well, to build one's contribution to a discussion on what has gone before, to avoid repeating points already made and in general to tailor one's ideas to the developing needs of the group, is something of an uphill struggle for primary children. In my experience, and not surprisingly, they frequently fail to sustain such a level of discussion.

### Is philosophy too abstract for children?

**Problem 3** concerns philosophy, and its methods, in relation to other academic subjects in the school curriculum. It is only really in the last two hundred years or so that Philosophy, as a distinctive subject taught in universities, has become separated from the natural sciences. (Kant, for example, was initially interested primarily in physics and cosmology). The term "natural philosophy" for many years covered both

empirical and conceptual enquiries. Now there is a pretty clear distinction: if a question is best answered by observation or experiment, it belongs with the natural or social sciences. If conceptual analysis and interpretation of meanings best answer it, it belongs to Philosophy (or to other interpretative disciplines or parts of disciplines). For the ancient Greeks, of course, this kind of division of the academy was not an issue. Aristotle famously bestrode the whole range of human enquiry, including the sciences, politics and philosophy. I think that children, too, are in this general frame of mind. If they become interested, at least for a time, in general questions (as opposed to the everyday curiosity about their own immediate interests at hand, which is more typical of their thinking) they are not at all concerned to distinguish between subjects or methods of enquiry. Thus what starts off as, say, a talk about number, or infinity, can easily turn to matters such as the creation, the nature of Black Holes, the age of the universe or life after death. Science, Cosmology, History, Religion and Philosophy are all grist to the mill, all jumbled happily together. I don't think this matters at all, in terms of holding wide-ranging classroom discussions about issues that turn out to interest children. However, any attempt to focus especially on philosophical issues and concerns, as P4C advocates sometimes seek to do, is again to go against the grain of children's thinking.

about half the subjects of undergraduate student age succeeded. Similar research shows that only in middle childhood do children distinguish clearly between the (easier) cases of asserting, predicting and promising. In general, the difference between what people actually say (or write) and what they mean (their communicative intention) is hard for young children to understand. Yet it lies at the heart of the activity of philosophising.

Philosophy is centrally concerned to examine closely what has been said and to analyse what has been meant (and/or asserted, implied, conceded and so forth). Philosophy gets going, as it were, when words are considered apart from their immediate context of communication and examined for sense, consistency, validity and implicit assumptions. Philosophy is the enquiry into what is meant, by what is said. Yet we know that primary aged children find this very distinction both unnatural (in the sense that they don't spontaneously do it themselves) and difficult (again, the argument is not that one should never encourage them to try, merely that they will find it difficult, even frustrating at times). Searle (1969) famously distinguished between the literal noises (or written marks) of a **locution**, and its **propositional content** (what is asserted, as part of an utterance). He separated from these the **illocutionary force** of the utterance (which points to the psychological intention of the speaker/writer, to state, to persuade, to promise, to command, to exhort, or whatever). Thus if I say, "I believe that it's raining," I normally intend to express my belief that it's raining. The propositional content (it's raining) is allied to the illocutionary force of my assertion (I believe that...). The same propositional content can be allied to different illocutionary meanings (as in: "I hope/fear/promise that it's raining"). The **perlocutionary force** (or practical effect) of my utterance is different yet again; for example, it may make you turn your head to look out of the window, or give my partner a hint that I want to leave, or whatever). What I mean by what I say depends, again, on such things as my sincerity, truthfulness, relationship to my audience and the relation of this utterance to what has gone before.

Such subtleties of communication are largely lost on children, who tend to assume that you meant what they thought they heard you say. Olson (1994) traces in detail how the invention of writing and the long historical development of literacy may have influenced our ability to think in these detached ways about words and their interpretation. As he puts it in one place:

"The central achievement in reading texts critically is a new consciousness of what a text *could have meant* or *could mean* to a putative reader." (Olson, 1994, p. 135).

With this in mind, I think that the detailed and deep comprehension of a text, such as a story, is a prior issue for children to work on, before they are (mostly) ready to start analysing any general philosophical issues embedded within it. Another way of putting this problem is to say that philosophy is concerned with second-order questions. It concerns, for example, not whether or not it's wrong to steal, but what sorts of criteria and arguments we should use in making such moral judgements. Children have yet to sort



### Can children recognise subtleties of meaning?

**Problem 4** concerns language and meaning. I have to change gear, here, and get a little technical. Consider the following statement:

"We're out of milk. I'm going to the store."

Astington and Olson (1990) included this as a statement by a character, Barbara, in a story in which she wanted to sneak out of the house and buy Adam a present, without him knowing. Subjects were asked to judge, after the story, which of the following alternatives was correct:

Barbara **means** that she is going to buy milk.

Barbara **concedes** that she is going to buy milk.

Barbara **asserts** that she is going to buy milk.

Barbara **implies** that she is going to buy milk.

Very few 12 year-olds could get this right and, indeed, only

out second-order from first-order questions and are not much interested in them, since they don't really understand them. They may discuss the rights or wrongs of stealing, but they are unlikely to make much progress in understanding ethics. This may not worry supporters of P4C at all, but for me it has the implication that one cannot expect much genuinely philosophical progress in P4C groups. They tend to display occasional glimpses of philosophical thinking but then revert to their everyday mode of thinking (at best what Donaldson calls the "intellectual construct" mode). Thus, it is rare for children to begin to go beyond particular points and anecdotes and to articulate the general underlying issues or problems raised by a discussion. Kuhn (1999) argues that it takes children years to realise fully (i) that assertions are not simply reflections of reality, (ii) that assertions are not simply and certainly true or false, (iii) that knowing is a human and fallible process and (iv) that, nevertheless, it is worth comparing and evaluating assertions, using reason and evidence (as in philosophical enquiry).

### Is children's philosophy really philosophy?

It is bracing and exciting to throw off the reservations of psychologists and to commit oneself to the idea that children are not barred from any kind of enquiry. P4C was, in its early days, much encouraged by its success in ignoring the limitations proposed by Piagetian cognitive developmentalists. There is an unwarranted romanticism, however, in continuing to ignore what later research has continued to suggest, namely that it takes children many years to have a clear understanding of general, abstract, second-order questions, unrelated to any particular time and place. Egan (1997), in his fascinating account of educational development, has 'philosophical' as his fourth level of understanding, belonging roughly to the post 15-year-old period, and reached only by some, not all, children. I think this is right. Donaldson (1992) calls the same level of thought the "intellectual transcendent" mode, emphasising its extreme disembodiedness from particular contexts and interests. For her it represents "a shift of concern from things-in-relation to relations themselves" (ibid. p. 127). It is crucial to progress in mathematics and science, and no doubt most disciplines, as well as in philosophy. If one pursues philosophy in this sense (systematic theoretical thinking) with younger children, who are in Egan's 'mythic' or 'romantic' phases, one gets an odd mixture, which has its charming moments, but one doesn't get clear, systematic progress in understanding philosophical issues.

These problems do not constitute a reason for barring general discussions with children about ideas, or indeed to doing preparatory work on philosophical thinking. Rather, they add up to a series of predictions about the kinds of difficulty and lack of clear progress that one is likely to encounter in such discussions during the primary school years. Of course one is always free to define philosophical thinking in a more liberal manner, for example as any and all sorts of "wondering about the world." But I feel that this kind of thing should be distinguished from the kind of



systematic theoretical thinking in which academic philosophers typically engage. Moreover, in the case of such general "wondering," philosophical issues appear to have no particular priority and will turn up alongside historical, scientific, literary or other sorts of issue. A more realistic acceptance of the nature and pace of children's cognitive development would also allow for a better assessment of children's progress in thinking and communication, during such discussions, indicating what difficulties they are having and suggesting how they are moving towards being able to do philosophy as defined above.

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