

Learning from Children: A Philosophical Journey

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When young children engage in dialogue which focuses on philosophical content, interacting with topics which have different possible answers, surprising insights into children's thinking are revealed. Children think about what is bad or good, examine who they are, and learn about criteria, to name a few. Through the community of inquiry and the dialogue process, they gradually and naturally take responsibility for their own thinking. It is the expectation of the children that their responses be supported by reasons. Beliefs and assumptions are scrutinized by questioning what is being said. Examples and counter-examples are part of the building blocks to logical reasoning. It is through this process that the children can and do make sense of the complex world in which they live.

Besides the individual benefits of becoming responsible, reflective thinkers, through P4C children experience the power of thinking as a community. They learn that they are inquirers in a community who together try to make sense of the world around them. With this comes respect for others. Children need to know that what they say is important. No put downs are accepted. The children learn that respect is shown by how they respond to each other. Listening and speaking are important parts of this dialogue. The children become keenly aware of the language they use while communicating with others. Interestingly, when the children participate in this philosophical dialogue in the classroom, I become an equal partner in the thinking process as well.

I, too, transform. As I actively engage with the children in this philosophical dialogue, I question my own beliefs and thinking. I catch myself making assumptions when I respond to or relate an opinion to a colleague, family member, or a friend. Being the facilitator in this dialogue with the children "forces" me to listen carefully to what the children are saying. I learn more about the children and the way they view the world by being an active listener at all times. There is power inherent in listening.

Reading, writing, and arithmetic have again taken center stage in education. With the new legislation of the "No

Child Left Behind" act, there is little discussion about having our children become accomplished, thoughtful thinkers. It is assumed that the children are thinking as they work with the various content areas. But are we genuinely nurturing our children's thinking? Furthermore, do we really want our children to think? Therefore, a critical question arises: "Does philosophy warrant a place in the school's curriculum?" I strongly believe that the discipline of philosophy and the process of doing philosophical inquiry support and empower children through dialogue to define who they are. The dialogue which ensues in a philosophical context brings a more connected understanding of what makes us human.

I have observed first graders as well as sixth graders artfully dialogue with their peers. They question and look at assumptions and the implications of their actions. However, this doesn't magically happen. Time must be set aside on a regular basis for this kind of engagement to occur. The children need time to listen to their peers and practice articulating their thoughts and feelings. Over time, a transformation does appear. It is really like seeing, in slow motion, a beautiful rose delicately blossom in front of me. Children are awesome thinkers!

Six-Year-Olds Become Socratic Thinkers Through Stories

In his passionate desire to ensure that children became Socratic thinkers, Matthew Lipman wrote several novels filled with philosophical ideas. *Elfie* (1988) was written for children in kindergarten through second grade. It begins:

Hi! I wish I knew your names. I'm afraid to ask.
Maybe if I tell you my name, you'll tell me yours.
My name is Elfie. I hardly ever ask anybody any-

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thing. I don't know why. I don't have a good reason. I'm just afraid to. I'm afraid because people might find out I don't know anything. See, that's my secret. Or one of my secrets. One of my awful, awful secrets. (p. 1)

Elfie is a young philosopher who wonders about why she feels she knows nothing while her friend, Sofia (which means wisdom in Greek), seems so perfect. Elfie marvels at how Sofia asks such wonderful questions while she, on the other hand says very little in class. Elfie senses something special about Sofia but is unable to pinpoint what it is.

In my classroom, I helped the children make connections to Elfie's stories by converting individual episodes into letters written to the class. The letter format simplified and personalized the episodes for my children. The content of the letter then spurred the children to write questions. It was the formulation of questions that created the atmosphere for philosophical wonder—questions that presumed no single right answers, but produced multiple possibilities. Group and personal inquiries initiated the search for truth and a deeper understanding of what and how people thought. It was in this search and journey as philosophers that the children became a more cohesive community of inquirers and more thoughtful, critical thinkers.

To Socrates, words were illusive. He re-examined meanings by asking questions to which he did not know the answers. Coming to know what these concepts (e.g. justice, piety, knowledge, or happiness) meant always brought him back to the original position of not knowing. He then cheerfully proposed to begin again. Thinking through reasoning was what he wanted to teach the young Athenians. The "unexamined life was not worth living."

In *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt (1978) heralded Socrates as the model of a thinker. She argued that thinking was what made it possible for words to have meaning. Words were like frozen thoughts. The thinking process is what unfreezes the thought that then helps us to make sense of the word in the context of our experiences.

Stories from First Graders' Philosophical Conversations

I wanted to make the invisible visible. Through this unveiling of the children's inner self, I began to better understand their actions in the classroom. They showed me how remarkable their thinking was. The children became my guiding light, showing me how to make learning more meaningful and pertinent. And I'd like to believe that when they articulated their thoughts, they began to better understand themselves.

I started with this letter from Elfie. (Lipman, pp. 15-17)

Dear Class,

Mrs. Tripp says, 'We are going to get a visit today from Mr. Sprockett.' Mr. Sprockett is

the principal of our school.

Later in the morning, there's a knock at the door. Rat! Tat-tat! The door is opening. Oh-oh, here he comes!

Mr. Sprockett is wearing a blue suit with a green tie and brown shoes. He smiles and rubs his hands together. 'Boys and girls!' he says.

Cindy and Bruce are still whispering to each other. Mr. Sprockett's smile gets a little smaller. 'BOYS AND GIRLS!' he says. 'I have an announcement to make.' He waits and waits.

We are all very, very quiet. I think to myself, 'Maybe that was his announcement, and now he'll leave without telling any more.'

But no! Mr. Sprockett says, 'How would you like to be on television?'

We clap our hands and say, 'Yeah! Yeah!

Love,
Elfie

The questions generated by the children as a result of this letter presented a glimpse into the complex world of children's minds. Like narrative stories, these questions revealed how children thought about themselves and the world.

I wonder where are you, Elfie. Are you fine?
I wonder why Mr. Sprockett said somebody is going to be on television.
How come he waited and waited?
How come he is wearing a blue suit and a green tie and brown shoes? Why was the principal mad?
How come they got a visit from Mr. Sprockett?
I wonder if they have cookies.
I wonder if Mrs. Tripp likes to be a teacher.
I wonder if the principal likes shapes.
I wonder if you guys need to visit him.
What were Cindy and Bruce talking about?
Why are Cindy and Bruce whispering? They are going to get into trouble.
Why do Cindy and Bruce whisper? They can talk after.
Is the principal mean?
How many friends do you have?
How does your class look like?
Do you have long recesses?
Is your teacher a cousin to your principal?
Could you go to the bathroom when the principal is talking to you?
Did your principal go to another country?
Are they talking about something important?
Is he (the principal) a bit nice?
Why do they like to whisper when the principal comes to the class?
I know Cindy and Bruce like to whisper.
Why do do they like to whisper?

Why did they whisper when the principal was talking? Cindy and Bruce shouldn't talk.
 Why does the principal have to be mean? I wonder.
 Dear Elfie, do you like your principal?
 Would you like to be on T.V.?
 Why is the principal getting mad?
 Why did the class whisper?

Our community of inquirers then used these questions to dialogue which challenged everyone's thinking. Clarification (what do you mean by...") and reason-giving became necessary thinking tools. Implications and assumptions were examined. To expand critical thinking and reasoning abilities, the children were expected to provide examples and counter-examples to support stances they were taking. The community of inquirers questioned the validity of what was being said. Was it really true? Not all children developed their thinking skills at the same rate, but I have no doubt that the ones who were not speaking up were listening. This deep-level thinking took practice and commitment on the part of the students and me. This was a learning journey with the clear goal being that eventually all students would feel confident and safe to share their inner thoughts and feelings.

Rhonda: I wonder where you are, Elfie. Are you fine?
 Jocelyn: She sounded fine in the letter.
 Wayne: You need energy to write letters. I don't see Elfie because maybe she's gone away to heaven.
 Emerson: I disagree with Wayne because if she's in heaven, she wouldn't be writing.
 Wayne: Maybe someone else is writing for her.
 Jocelyn: Wayne's assuming. He doesn't know if Elfie's in heaven.
 Emerson: He's not assuming. He just doesn't know if she's in heaven.
 Jasmine: Jocelyn's smart.
 Emerson: Wayne's not that smart.
 Teacher: If you're not assuming, does that mean you're not smart?
 Emerson: Yeah.
 Dr. Jackson: (Director of the Philosophy in the Schools Project) What do you mean by assume?
 Jocelyn: You don't know but you say it anyway.
 Trevor: I disagree with Wayne because Elfie wouldn't be writing in heaven.
 Royce: Elfie's smart because she writes nicely.
 Elsie: I remember Elfie wrote letters last year.
 Joanne & Royce: I remember.
 Elsie: She was sick and didn't write for a long time.
 Teacher: I wonder why Mr. Sprockett said somebody's going to be on T.V.
 Burt: I didn't know what else to write.
 Royce: Maybe the principal wants to be nice.

Jocelyn: Mr. Sprockett didn't say that. He asked everybody, but Burt said only one.
 Estelle: Lots of people want to be on T.V., so Mr. Sprockett said it.
 Teacher: (Rereads the part of the letter that refers to being on television.)
 Wayne: I disagree with Jocelyn.
 Teacher: Because...
 Wayne: I forgot what she said.
 Teacher: (Repeats Jocelyn's idea.)
 Trevor: Maybe Elfie asked the principal to be on T.V.
 Elsie: I disagree with Trevor because Elfie doesn't know.
 Trevor: Maybe some of them were poor and needed money.
 Teacher: Trevor, I have a question. Why are you thinking that poor people go on T.V. when they need money?
 Trevor: Sometimes you go on T.V. to make money.

Learning from Children's Dialogue

I learned two things by listening to these first graders during this philosophy time. First, I learned that children did connect thoughts about Elfie to their personal lives. Secondly, I learned that children did use precise words to articulate their thoughts and ideas. Particulars were important, but these particulars became interconnected. The children became theory-makers about the world they lived in.

Children Connect From and Through Narratives About Elfie to Their Personal Lives

The questions reveal that the children make personal connections to recent happenings in the classroom. For example, Jocelyn asked if Mr. Sprockett liked shapes. We were examining the concept of shapes in math. To wonder if Mr. Sprockett liked shapes seemed so natural. Alice was not so much interested in the content of the letter but curious about Mr. Sprockett's personal life and how the school operates. Her curiosity showed sophisticated thinking and feeling, sensitive to who another individual is. She seemed to have genuinely accepted the character of Mr. Sprockett.

Even at this young age children were curious about people's relationships, feelings, and the nature of good health. Why was the principal getting mad? Rhonda asked, "I wonder where are you, Elfie. Are you fine?" Questions generated by these children inevitably contained questions connected with feelings—feelings they had encountered within their lifetime. These questions sparked lively dialogue amongst us.

About ten years ago, my first graders tackled the question about whether there was one sky or many skies. (Lipman, 1988) Makanoe, a bright, sensitive, and articulate youngster related that skies were for real. She believed that skies were real because that was where her nana (grandmother) lived now. With poise and confidence, she

eloquently related her thoughts to us. No doubt, the sky was a heavenly place where Makanoe's nana could live in peace. Her grandmother, whom she loved dearly, had recently died of cancer. Makanoe found comfort in this thought. So did I.

As I related this story to her mother that afternoon, she was delighted that Makanoe was able to console herself and articulate her thoughts to her classmate. When asked to write a note for the *Fee-Lah-So-Fee Newsletter*, this is what Makanoe's mother wrote of this story:

I think that it is wonderful for my daughter's first grade class to learn about philosophy and making it a part of her studies in school. My daughter has been able to express herself so deeply, using her own thoughts and feelings about everything in and around her. In particular, my mother had recently passed away and during my daughter's philosophy discussion, she was able to share with her class that the sky was real because there was a heaven and that her Nana lived there, so there was really a place in the sky.

Socratic thinking unfolded that day ever so gracefully. No one knew in advance—not me nor the children—that Makanoe was going to share this touching story of her grandmother. How could a dialogue of the existence of one sky or many skies connect to Makanoe's personal life and experience? But it did. I'd like to think that her peers bonded with her more deeply that day because she had shared a story about death not being so sorrowful. I marveled how this six-year-old could be so incredibly spiritual and sensitive. I felt the inherent power of having philosophical dialogue on a consistent basis in the classroom.

Children Begin to Use Precise Words to Articulate Their Thoughts and Ideas

Elsie asked, "Is he (the principal) a bit nice?" She did not want to know if he is nice or not nice. She wanted to know if he was a bit nice. Stated this way, the question posed a gradation of nicety. It opened dialogue for clarification. Their questions allowed us to see their realities, to see the purity of their wonder and their thinking. Each child presented a different view through how questions were formulated. Raising questions with "I wonder..." expressed a sense of subtle puzzlement. The "I" personalized the question of their wonderment. The words "I wonder..." seemed to freeze time momentarily, giving us pause to ponder.

Through regular philosophy time, the first graders began to understand the concept of assumptions. This was a difficult concept to internalize, yet, by engaging in regular philosophical dialogues throughout the year, my first graders intuitively grasped the meaning of *assume*. On one occasion, the class focused on Alice's question, "How many friends does Elfie have?" Dexter quickly exclaimed,

"I assume that Elfie has five friends." The words seemed to be just a natural part of his natural language. I was thrilled. Immediately, one of his classmate wanted to know why he assumed Elfie had five friends. As Dexter thought about this, his other classmates interjected, "Well, Elfie's letter talked about Diane, Steve, Ricardo, Sofia, and Linda. Elfie must have at least five friends." Isn't this such wonderful logical reasoning?

Another philosophical thinking tool used during our philosophy time was the examination of truth. Children scrutinized the claim being made—examining the truth or falsity through the process of logical reasoning. Was it for sure? Probably? Possibly? Unsure? Or no connection? How many times have you expressed a thought thinking it was the truth, but upon examination of the statement, you discovered that it was false? False claims can be made if we do not think about the integrity of our statements. If left unchecked, false claims viewed as truths will lead to erroneous outcomes.

Engaging in daily dialogue during philosophy time afforded my first graders the opportunity to use language to think. The skillful use of language expressed precise feelings and knowing. One day, Estelle thought about assumptions and truth as she wrote a story to me. It was only through her story that I was privileged to see her thinking. She made the invisible visible. Estelle wrote:

I love my teacher. Her name is Mrs. Tsuchiyama. Of course, she loves me, too. She cares about us. That's why she scolds us. But is that true? My mom scolds me because she loves me. I think I assume too much. Mrs. Tsuchiyama, do you assume too much like me?

Conclusion

My six-year-olds diligently worked hard at making sense of their questions by using their own personal experiences as springboards. They demonstrated the ability to skillfully engage in philosophical dialogue. Their dialogue contained evidence that they were thoughtful and reflective thinkers. They gained, with practice, the confidence to use these thought-provoking words to bring clarity and solid reasoning to the community. I marveled at the language that these young children used. Their stories contained a refreshing look at the world. Simply delightful! Just imagine what our world would look like with if we had a citizenry who asked thoughtful questions and responded with intellectual integrity like these six-year-olds. What a wonderful world it would be.

References

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