

Trainee teachers' experiences of using picture books with the Philosophy for Children (P4C) pedagogy.

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Published version

DEMISSIE, Fufy and DOXEY, Cara (2020). Trainee teachers' experiences of using picture books with the Philosophy for Children (P4C) pedagogy. English, four to eleven.

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Trainee teachers' experiences of using picture books with the Philosophy for Children (P4C) pedagogy.

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In this article, Fufy Demissie and Cara Doxey, lecturers in *****, explore how they used a student reading group to encourage trainees to use Philosophy for Children with their classes in order to explore how picture books can encourage deeper levels of reflection and response and promote reading for pleasure. Here they present two students' experiences.

Introduction

Research states that teachers who read are the strongest advocates for reading for pleasure (Cremin et al., 2009). Children who enjoy reading have better social skills and are more likely to succeed academically (Sullivan, 2015). However, the task of promoting children's interest in reading is fraught with difficulties. A recent survey showed that 42% of children said they enjoyed reading a bit or not at all (Clark & Teravainen, 2017). In addition, government policies can support classroom cultures that don't overtly encourage reading for pleasure because teachers feel they are pushed to over-emphasise teaching reading skills, leaving less time to foster a love of reading and little room to promote authentic and meaningful interactions with picture books (Goodman and Gregg, 2010; Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018). In this article we describe a Philosophy for Children (P4C) and picture book project we undertook as part of a book club which was initiated to nurture trainee teachers' reading for pleasure. We wanted to explore whether P4C (a dialogic inquiry-based approach) impacted on the trainees' approaches to, and experiences of supporting pupils' engagement in picture books.

Why picture books?

Picture books such as *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne (1999) offer a rich but sometimes undervalued learning experience. They are unique because they 'simultaneously generate meaning from written text, visual images and the overall design' (Serafini, 2009) that enable readers to bring their own experiences to read and make meaning from the text (MacDonald, 2017). The best picture books 'bend, stretch or break the rules,' to open up 'a space between the 'real' world and other 'possible worlds' and between words and pictures. In this gap between real and imaginary worlds, children can play with conventions and explore philosophical ideas (Haynes & Murriss, 2017).

What is Philosophy for Children (P4C)?

Philosophy for children (P4C) is a structured pedagogical tool (see Figure 1) designed to improve children's thinking and to teach them to be '*... more thoughtful, more reflective, more considerate, and more reasonable individuals...*' (Lipman, 1983). It is underpinned by Vygotsky and Dewey's views about collaborative meaning making and children's questions are used to support in-depth and meaningful dialogue.

The P4C methodology

1. Getting set: ground rules and games (see below) to establish a caring/collaborative/community ethos.
2. Presentation of stimulus: to provoke interest and motivation.
3. Generating questions: to encourage pupils' curiosity.
4. Voting for a question: to extend the democratic ideals and give ownership to pupils.
5. Airing questions: to value each question.
6. First thoughts: to share first ideas about the question.
7. Building: to build on each other's ideas.
8. Last thoughts: to reflect on the dialogue and the 4Cs, e.g. *Did we listen to each other? Did we build on each other's ideas, do we question assumptions?*

Figure 1: The P4C methodology Please make this text box stand out: change the font/ colour of font/ spacing.

To achieve in-depth and meaningful dialogue, the teacher adopts a less directive and more facilitative teaching style. Teachers are encouraged to listen carefully, summarise or clarify what children say and offer some probing questions to check for misconceptions and assumptions as ways of guiding discussions. Moreover, she/he strives to create an environment where the 4Cs (caring, critical, collaborative and creative thinking) are promoted to develop children's

capacity for thoughtfulness, reflection and reasonableness (Lipman, 2003). (See Figure 2 for examples of what the 4Cs might involve.)

interest. They conducted one P4C session each using two picture books. After sharing the picture books in the previous week, they conducted the P4C enquiry the following week.

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Figure 2: *****

The project

In September 2018, we set up a book club to support trainees in their journey to becoming Reading Teachers: teachers who read and readers who teach (Cremin et al., 2009). The students were motivated by a desire to give children a more positive experience of books and reading (in contrast to their own reading experiences in school) and/or were inspired by university seminars that introduced the value of reading for pleasure and the possibilities picture books offer to engage children's thinking and views of the world. Once books were selected, trainees met every three weeks to discuss their views about the chosen children's/teen text.

But we also wondered whether the students could try this type of book-related dialogue with picture books in the primary classroom. We introduced the idea of using P4C and picture books at one of the book club meetings. The trainees were familiar with the structure as they had already participated in P4C sessions in another module. We reviewed the P4C steps (see Figure 1) and modelled how it might be used in a story reading session and how best to adapt it for their own specific context (e.g. pupil numbers, efficient voting strategies). We kept the guidance brief and emphasised the need to 'just go with it and see how it goes'. This experimental playful approach was important, because in their first school placement we did not want the trainees to be overly anxious.

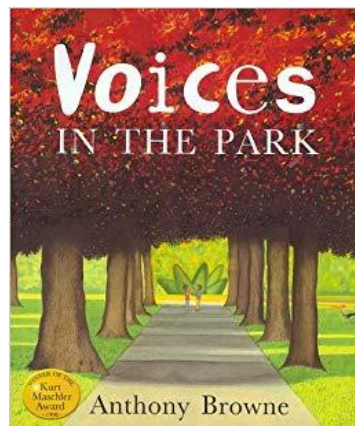
All the participants expressed a willingness to take part, however, only Bethany and Fran, who were on a paired placement, were provided with the space and time to carry out the project. After securing the required parental and pupil consent, Fran and Bethany selected ten pupils randomly from those that had expressed an

Each facilitated the enquiry on her own; the session was audio-recorded, and the observer jotted down events as they unfolded. They followed the same structure as in Figure 2, setting the ground rules, presenting the stimuli (story books) and encouraging the pupils to generate questions for dialogue.

Once they finished their placement, they emailed us their written reflections about P4C, and picture books and we discussed their experiences at another book club meeting. In the following section, we present each enquiry, followed by Fran and Bethany's reflections and our own analysis of the project.

Case study 1 - Bethany

The group of 7- and 8-year-old pupils had already read and discussed the story prior to the activity. Ten children participated in this enquiry. Bethany facilitated it with Fran observing. The chosen text was Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park* (1999), where four characters each tell the story of a trip to the park.



Themes running within this text include alienation, friendship and community. Fran noted, 'Once the book was read, Bethany invited the children to generate some questions for discussion' (see Figure 1).

The children generated the following questions:

1. Why do the characters meet each other in the same place?
2. Why are the bigger gorillas grumpy all the time?
3. How did they make friends so quickly?
4. Why do they always take the dogs with them?

The children voted for the question they wanted to ask. During the vote, they closed their eyes so that they weren't influenced in their thinking. 'Why do characters meet each other in the same place?' However, as the transcript below shows, the question did not engage the children's interest. The question was not conducive to dialogue because it was a speculative rather than a discussible/philosophical question (SAPERRE, 2010). In other words, as the transcript below shows, there was nothing contestable/debatable behind the question.

Why do they always meet people in the same spot?

Child B: The spot is popular. They live there.

Child F: It is next to the park.

Child H: They are all animals and it is in nature.

Child G: Chance.

Child E: The rides are quite good.

Noticing the lack of engagement, Bethany asked the children whether they should consider another question. The children agreed and voted to discuss one of their other questions, 'How do they make friends easily?' The extract below shows how, in contrast to the first question, it involved the more discussible concept of friendship that prompted the children to explore the question in more depth.

How do they make friends so easily?

Child A: Want to play with them.

Child B: Saves time, it is easy to make friends' then give an example of their own experience making friends on holiday.

Child C: It is sometimes hard to make friends. It is easier if you like the same things.

Child D: They may not want to.

Bethany: **Do you think that it is easy for adults to make friends?**

Child B: Yes, my mum has lots of friends.

Child E: Dads find it easier because they can play boards games.

Child F: Adults can share.

Child G: No because adults don't join in with the fun.

Child D: It's harder for adults as a stranger might ask them to steel and they would have to say no. (I think the point that the child was trying to make here is that when adults are making friends they have to think about right and wrong, not just what is fun.)

Child B: It is the same as for children.

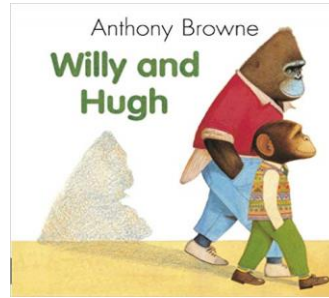
Child H: It is easier for adult cos they know more people and can meet each other's friends.

Fran's reflections on enquiry 1

'By taking part in this I learnt that I actually found it quite hard to hand over the reins to the children and wanted to get involved in the discussion... and even then I feel I was maybe involved a little bit too much as I feel that my opinions may have started to influence the children's. In addition to this, I feel like I learnt a lot about the children as the things that they talked about in their

discussion showed me how much they actually take in things that they are being taught, as a few of them brought in prior knowledge that they had been taught earlier on in the week and others showed what their interests out of school are.'

Case study 2 - Fran



The stimulus was Anthony Browne's, *Willy and Hugh* (1992) a story where two characters strike up an unlikely friendship. The same mixed attainment group of Y3 pupils had already read and discussed the story prior to the enquiry.

Fran facilitated the enquiry and Bethany observed the session. After discussing one of the main themes, Fran modelled a question 'Why are friendships important?' to help the children generate their own questions.

They then generated the following questions:

1. Why are friendships important?
2. Can you choose if you have a friend or not?
3. Why do we have friends?

Once again, the children closed their eyes to make sure that their votes didn't influence each other. They voted for the question 'Why is friendship important?'

Why is friendship important?

Child A: So you're not lonely / don't get bored.

Child B: So we can play together. If you have more friends, you can play better games, for example, tig.

Fran: **Can we have too many friends?**

All children: No!

Child C: If you only had one friend and they were ill, you wouldn't be able to play.

Child D: You can have too many – not just at school. You can have family friends etc. too.

Child E: If you hurt yourself and you had no friends it would be difficult because it's hard to hop! You need something to hold onto.

Fran: **So what do friends do?**

Child F: They can hold you.

Fran: **Do we think child friendships are the same as adult friendships?**

Child A: No, adult friendships are more about going around to each other's houses for cups of tea. (The child referred to an assembly earlier in the week where the head teacher sat at the front of the hall with a cup of tea and discussed who he would invite round for tea if he could choose anyone in the world.)

Child B: Adult friendships are different because you do more work and play fewer games.

Child C: Adults need friends otherwise they have no one to talk to when walking home from work / university.

Adult friendships involve helping each other and talking to each other.

Bethany's reflections on enquiry 2

'It was interesting to see how the children responded to this way of learning, how the individual children interacted with each other, and how it was different to how they interacted in 'normal' lessons. For example,

child B had quite a bit to say in this session whereas in class this child is normally quite quiet. The children had some very in-depth and insightful discussions. I learnt a lot about how children think and that they pick up on more than I realised. The stories were a great way to provoke thought and discussion between the children – they were all very enthusiastic about taking part.'

Reflections

The evidence from the transcripts and the trainees' reflections suggested that using P4C with these two high-quality picture books had positive outcomes. The children showed that they could generate thoughtful questions and take part in rich discussions about the nature of friendship. They also related the story to their own experiences and explored different perspectives on friendships. In Bethany's enquiry, for example, they explored the differences between adult and children's friendships and their own perspectives about the similarities and differences. From a P4C perspective, the focus on 'friendship' is significant; friendship, like beauty and fairness are philosophical concepts. They are ideas that are common to our experiences, contestable in nature and open to discussion. Thus, when stories contain these kinds of 'chewy' concepts, they invite dialogue, reasoning and alternative perspectives (SAPER, 2010). Thus, in contrast to the question 'Why do they always meet in the park?' the more philosophical 'Why are friends important?' resulted in a richer discussion because unlike the first question, what *counts* as a friend is a contestable idea.

Another positive outcome was the children's level of reasoning. For instance, in Bethany's enquiry, the pupils provide good reasons why adults (in contrast to children) might or might not find it easy to make friends. Similarly, in Fran's enquiry, the response to the question 'Can you have too many friends?' leads some of them to argue that it is better to have more than one friend: '*if you only had one friend and they were ill, you wouldn't have anyone to play with*', and '*if they hurt themselves, it would be difficult because it's hard to hop... you need something to hold on to.*' This is a sophisticated example of consequential thinking; it involves a chain of reasoning to justify why it is better to have more than one friend. We argue, therefore, that this level of thinking was a product (in part at least) to the high-quality picture book (that engaged the pupils' interest) and Fran's facilitation (embedded in the P4C approach).

Finally, the experience provided a valuable context for Fran and Bethany to reflect on their teaching roles. The first year of teacher education is understandably overwhelming with limited opportunity to stand back and reflect on teaching approaches. However, it seemed that **the** project enabled them to notice the children's contrasting interaction (in P4C and normal classroom), the quality of the discussion, their assumptions about children's capabilities and the P4C pedagogy. More deeply, Fran's reflection also touched on the contradictions between the traditional role of the teacher as the expert, and the learner-centred, enquiry-based approach in P4C as evidenced in her sensitivity to the dangers of taking over the discussion, whilst also noting the difficulty of 'handing over the reins to the children'. In summary, combining P4C and picture books provided a valuable opportunity for teacher reflection.

Next steps

The overall aim of the reading for pleasure agenda is to excite and motivate children to read so that they gain all the attendant benefits of reading. Our aim in this project was to introduce the trainees to a pedagogical approach that could make a small contribution to fostering children's love of reading. Overall, we feel that the combining picture books with P4C was successful because the children were motivated to engage in rich and meaningful discussion, and the trainees were supported to adopt a facilitative interactive approach at this early stage of their teaching experience. It seems that P4C's structured methodology provided a useful scaffold for the student teachers that enabled them to explore a challenging teaching approach. We therefore hope that the students' accounts will motivate others to explore P4C's potential for deepening pupils' passion for reading.

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Website

Society for the Advancement of thinking and reflection in education (SAPER): www.sapere.org

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