Teaching Philosophy with Picture Books

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Introduction

From its inception, the Philosophy for Children Movement has questioned the use of picture books to begin philosophical discussions among young children. This trend has its roots in the work of the movement's founder, Matthew Lipman. Lipman believed that philosophical novels written with the express purpose of engaging children in philosophical discussions were better suited than picture books to the task of introducing philosophy into elementary school classrooms because only they could actually teach children how to think, the goal of the philosophy for children movement. And while there have always been advocates for the use of picture books in the P4C community, the relationship between the Lipman P4C curriculum and picture books has been an uneasy one.

As practitioners who have, for many years, used picture books in our philosophical interactions with children, the two of us believe the use of picture books in philosophical inquiries is fundamentally sound and an excellent path to encourage children to engage in philosophical enquiry. In this paper, we will consider objections to this use of picture books in order to show that they have limited or no validity. On the other hand, we will canvas a range of objections against the use of expressly designed philosophical novels to engage children in philosophical discussions.

Our position is not that one method for engaging children in philosophical inquiry is better than the other, but that each has important virtues as well as drawbacks. Our goal is to defend picture books from unjustified criticisms made against their use in philosophical dialogues; but we do not categorically reject the use of specifically designed philosophical novels either. We hope this balanced account will get practitioners to give picture books their due.

1. The Critique of Picture Books in P4C

We begin by canvassing some of the central arguments cautioning against the use of picture books to teach philosophy to young children. The first "Lipmanian" argument against using these sources notes the danger of ruining an imaginative story by treating it in too utilitarian a manner, say, by mining it for philosophical ideas. Literature should not be used for philosophy discussions, the argument goes, because that is not its "job." The function and beauty of literature will be lost if it is used simply as a jumping off tool for philosophical discussion. In response, Karin Murris claims that Lipman creates a divide between literature which is intended for imaginative play and entertainment,

and that which is directly constructed to provoke and encourage philosophical thinking.[1] In his seminal works on philosophy with children, *Philosophy in the Classroom* and *Growing up with Philosophy*, Lipman argues that what is needed is a carefully crafted and integrated curriculum to both guarantee genuine philosophical growth in the children and to support teachers unequipped with a background in philosophy.[2]

Lipman also suggests another problem with the use of picture books. He claims that, if we wish children to be thoughtful, we need to employ stories in which children are shown to be thoughtful.[3] To do this, we must have a new form of literature, "philosophical stories." Lipman himself has created this literary form, beginning with *Harry Stottlemeyer's Discovery* (1971), in which he attempted to realize this narrative structure. Subsequently, Lipman wrote a series of novels in which children are presented as engaged in the types of philosophical discussions Lipman wanted the students in his class to engage in. He was open about them not being great works of literature, but that was not his goal. He believed that the stories help children take part in philosophical discussion because the characters in the story did just that.

It certainly is true that the philosophical novels that Lipman wrote are not great works of literature. They portray children learning important philosophical lessons, such as the validity of basic forms of inference[4], the meaning of words and classification schema[5], and concepts of fairness as equity vs equality.[6]

However, Lipman's assertion about the advantage of using expressly written philosophical novels is not entirely justified. It is not at all self-evident that the most appropriate way to teach young children to philosophize is to have them read novels in which the characters are shown engaging in philosophical discussions. Can't children learn to be thoughtful from their interactions with each other in philosophy discussions even if the stories they read do not provide a model of such thoughtfulness? We see no reason to deny this possibility and we join our voices with others who have advocated for the introduction of picture books to promote robust philosophical inquiry. And, indeed, we have found that the children we have worked with using picture books do become more thoughtful as a result of their interactions with their peers under the guidance of a facilitator. It is also true that the characters in certain picture books are depicted as engaged in philosophical discussions, so that there is less of a difference than Lipman believed.

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[1] As summarized by Khosronejad and Shokrollahzadeh, "From silencing children's literature to attempting to learn from it: changing views towards picturebooks in p4c movement", *Childhood & Philosophy*, May 2020, p. 12. They reference Haynes' and Murris' *Picturebook, Pedagogy and Philosophy* (New York and London, Routledge, 2012).

[2] See Lipman, Sharp, Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, Temple University Press, 1980: chapter 5 and Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School*, Temple University Press, 1988: chapter 11 and pp. 182-185 where Lipman argues for the necessity of specifically designed philosophical literature to support teachers untrained in philosophy and to promote development in the philosophical skills of the students.

[3] Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press: 1988), pp. 186-87.

[4] *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1971). All of the novels written by Lipman and his sometime collaborator Ann Margaret Sharp can be found via the IAPC.

[5] *Pixie* (Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1981).

[6] *Lisa* (Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1976).

In their 2020 article charting the evolution of children's literature's relationship to philosophical inquiry, Morteza Khosronejad and Soudabeh Shokrollahzadeh develop such criticisms of Lipman's view. [7] They argue that Lipman's position implicitly limits philosophy to logical/rational discourse and misses the rich depths of the role of imagination in making meaning.[8] Not only does this do a disservice to literature, they say, but it also involves too narrow a concept of philosophical inquiry.

This criticism echoes one made by Karin Murris. She criticizes Lipman for positing what she calls "the ideal 'abnormal' child, the thinking child."[9] Her claim is that the children depicted in Lipman's novels are not ordinary children who are acting the way children normally do, but rather idealized children who fit Lipman's own norm of how philosophically sophisticated children will behave. From her point of view, Lipman prioritizes a very specific notion of philosophy, academic Analytic philosophy,[10] thereby failing to do justice to his own goal of creating genuinely reflective children.

While we would not want to equate philosophy with the Analytic or even Pragmatic traditions, we do not believe Murris' own posthuman approach is necessarily superior or even more respectful towards children than others. Exploring how language works and what concepts are is a primary activity of the young child and Lipman's approach does focus on this. That said, we also recognize a tendency within education to ignore the real child as a person and substitute some model from psychology or educational theory and Murris argues persuasively why that fails to honor the very real capabilities of children to reflect on their experiences. Additionally, there are recent examples of specifically written "philosophical novels" which are linked to alternative models of philosophy, such as phenomenology and continental philosophical in general. One example is David Kennedy's novel, *Dreamers*.[11]

A different argument against the use of picture books in philosophical discussions is offered by Laurence Splitter and Ann Margaret Sharp.[12] They claim that the pictures and illustrations in children's books foreclose the cognitive options of the children engaged with them. The idea is that the illustrations in picture books do "work" that is properly left to the children themselves by filling in the text with images that the author and illustrator deem appropriate.

Adults tend to assume that children need pictures in their books. Many children's books are as well-known for the illustrations as for the actual story and in some cases the images overpower the

[7] Morteza Khosronejad and Soudabeh Shokrollahzadeh, "From silencing children's literature to Attempting to learn from it: changing views towards picturebooks in p4c movement", *Childhood & Philosophy*, May 2020, pp. 1-30.
[8] Ibid., p. 13.
[9] Karin Murris, "The Philosophy for Children Curriculum: Resisting 'Teacher Proof' Texts and the Formation of the Ideal Philosopher Child," *Studies in the Philosophy of Education* (2016), 35: p. 63.
[10] It is more likely that Matthew Lipman adopted a deeply pragmatic view of philosophy based on his use of Dewey and Pierce in his theoretical works and in the many taped interviews with him.
[11] The book can be downloaded at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336312912_DREAMERS_A_Philosophical_Novel_for_Children. Another recent set of contributions can be found in the site for the P.E.A.C.E. project in Europe: https://peace.kinderphilosophie.at/index.html
[12] See Sharp and Splitter's text, *Teaching for Better Thinking* (Melbourne, AU: Australian Council for Education, 1995).

story itself and create a parallel magic allure. Since Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is depicted as blond and blue-eyed girl, it might be difficult for someone who does not share those properties to imagine herself as the questioning Alice.[13] Lipman was worried philosophy lessons using such imagery might appeal to only a small subset of the students he was interested in reaching. This was one reason he eschewed illustrations for his own novels and often used names that did not clearly signal a character's gender. Lipman wanted all children, whatever their race, gender, etc., to envision themselves in the story or picture the characters in the story as sharing their "look."

This is important. In some of the Lipman novels you are not even sure whether the protagonists are girls or boys, although there are clues that can help you sort that out. Or can you? Likewise, the characters ethnic background are vague and open to interpretation. However, the characters, unlike a vast number of stories for children, are human (for the most part—the giraffe in *Nous* is the only exception). This facilitates, according to the classic P4C approach, a more porous and open identification between readers and the characters in the novels.[14]

The omission of pictures on the Lipman/Sharp novels has drawn criticism on the grounds that children expect and want pictures; otherwise they will find the books boring or not engaging. To give them credit, in our experience children are astonishingly tolerant of the lack of pictures in the Lipman novels and relish seeing the children in these stories through their own ethnic and cultural lens.

Although there is a history of picture books failing to include human characters other than white and middle-class ones, recently there have been many attempts to be more inclusive. One prominent example is Matt de la Peña's *Last Stop on Market Street*, in which the main characters are both African American. Such books invite their readers to identify with these characters and to explore cultures that may not be familiar to them. Another wonderful example is *Julian is a Mermaid* (2018) by Jessica Love that features a young Latino boy who likes to dress up in beautiful clothes and his understanding grandmother supports his choices. These recent picture books point to a trend that will defang any criticism of picture books based on the absence of non-Caucasian characters.

In response to these criticisms from the Lipmanians, we suggest that these philosophers betray an inability to come to terms with the wonderful illustrations that grace the pages of picture books. It seems inconceivable that anyone who has read books by Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel) and looked at his wildly imaginative drawings could think that a child's imagination would be stunted by seeing the image of a Star Bellied Sneetch or the Cat in a Hat.[15] The same holds good for the delightful images that grace *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. It makes more sense to see such images as stimulating children's imaginations rather than hindering them.

[13] Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage, 1970) captures the alienation experienced by a young African American girl who longs to be like the dolls she desires: blue-eyed and blond. That is offered to her as ideal beauty and ideal personhood and excludes her from that experience of being valued and being loved.

[14] There are many contemporary picture books that feature non-white protagonists, so the force of this objection has been blunted by developments within picture books themselves. We discuss some of them in a moment.

[15] The fact that some of Dr. Seuss' books have racist pictures does not affect our claims about his work in general.

Recently, Darren Chetty has offered a new criticism of the use of *some* picture books.[16] While he does not attempt to undermine the use of picture books *tout court*, he is concerned that certain picture books don't provide children with an adequate understanding of important and complex issues such as the nature of race and racism. He expresses concern that they might trivialize or dismiss such important and nuanced issues. Among his targets are Murris and Haynes' use of David McKee's *Tusk Tusk* in their classic text, *Picture Books, Pedagogy, and Philosophy*.[17] Murris and Haynes think the abstract and decontextualized nature of this book allows children to develop an understanding of racism. The black and white elephants in the story fight one another and eventually kill each other off. Their grey offspring return from the forest to which they have fled, only to find themselves hostile to the other elephants who do not have the same size ears as they do. Because this story avoids providing any specific historical or social context, Haynes and Murris think it allows for a good philosophical discussion of the nature of racism.

Chetty disagrees. He thinks that the abstract nature of the story presents a skewed understanding of racism according to which racism is an inherent feature of human beings (and, we suppose, elephants). But this view is clearly false. Chetty argues that we need to use books with more culturally specific and nuanced content if we hope to have adequate discussions of racism with children.

Murris responds by reasserting the validity of using books that do not have clear social and cultural contexts.

> I argue…that it is indeed the abstractness (independence of history) of the concepts embedded in such picture books that connect with children's own ideas and interests and therefore challenges adult-centered ontology and epistemology. Enquiries *with* children about the meaning of abstract concepts make it possible for adults to hear young children's metaphorical, imaginative, and philosophical contributions to the pool of knowledge.[18]

Murris is critical of Chetty for assuming that he knows what the appropriate theory of racism is and attempting to get children to come to accept it. A discussion shaped by an adult's conception of what the outcome should be for children fails to grant children the autonomy that is the proper goal of philosophical discussions.

In an article entitled "Philosophical Dialogues with Children about Complex Social Issues: a Debate about Texts and Practices,"[19] Steve Williams recounts Chetty's critique of Haynes and Murris use of the picturebook *Tusk Tusk* that we have just discussed. Chetty claims that this is a good example of a complex topic reduced to simplicity and that using such a story to teach racial peace is both

[16] Cheety, D. "The Elephant in the Room: Picturebooks, Philosophy for Children and Racism" *Childhood & Philosophy, v. 10, 2014, number 19, pps. 11-31.*

[17] Haynes, Joanna and Murris, Karin, *Picturebooks, Pedagogy, and Philosophy,* pp. 115-16.

[18] Karin Murris, "Posthumanism, Philosophy for Children, and Anthony Browne's *Little Beauty*," *Bookbird* (2015) 53.2, p. 60.

[19] *Childhood & Philosophy,* July 2020, pp. 3-28.

inappropriate and falsifies the complexity of these societal issues.[20] Chetty argues that, to the contrary, one must "read against" the text. As Williams parses this criticism:[21]

> Chetty's argument seems to be that it is not likely that children's picture books alone, particularly in the form of fables, can present this level of complexity and "blending." I take him to imply that other kinds of picture books and alternative materials-or combination of materials-might be more suitable for exploring complex social issues with historical dimensions.

Williams goes on to critique Murris' recent position on picture books. As he describes it, Murris maintains that picture books are the ideal and perhaps only way for introducing children to philosophizing. She seems to want to avoid contextualizing stories in time, culture, and place, and make the locus of philosophical activity the matrix of "text, educator, and learners."[22]

Williams builds an argument which acknowledges the concerns raised by Chetty about either simplifying complex phenomena and ideas or de-historicizing them but stops short of rejecting the use of such books in philosophical discussions. He suggests that books such as *Tusk Tusk* can be used so long as they are supplemented with other materials from non-fiction as well as fictionalized accounts set in specific historical and social contexts. He offers a book by Jaqueline Woodson, *The Other Side*, as an example of a book that is located in a very specific social context, namely the deep South during segregation. The two girls in the story overcome the "rules" set by their mothers in a way that suggests that children are not bound by the same racist norms that affect their parents.

Williams continues by offering concrete suggestions on how a facilitator might "read against the text." This would involve inviting evaluative judgements, questioning implied and imbedded concepts (for example, sharing is good in the *Rainbow Fish* and hatred is natural in *Tusk Tusk*), and using carefully constructed reflective dialogues, both within and without the group setting.

Implicit throughout Williams' article is the critical point that philosophical dialogue and exploration of problematic concepts does not automatically happen. Without guidance, for facilitators and from facilitators to participants, these tools of philosophical dialogue can fail or perhaps even become tools of indoctrination. This speaks to one of our central concerns about using children's literature and picture books for philosophical dialogue. Will the teacher/facilitator be able to envision the ways in which the text and image can be used to engage in a genuine philosophical exploration but also be able to allow the children to raise unexpected questions and issues? If the facilitator has the tools to approach children's literature in ways which create a philosophical community of inquiry, then there is no reason, and perhaps every reason, to include picture books and familiar works of children's literature in the P4C canon.

[20] Ibid., p. 6.
[21] Ibid., p. 7.
[22] Ibid., p. 11. However, based on her recent writings, we would expect she would be careful to not in any way imply that the educator has any privileged position in the dialogue.

2. A Survey of the Use of Picture Books for Philosophical Discussion

Despite the admonition of Lipman and his followers not to use picture books in elementary school philosophy discussions, many practitioners—the two of us included—have ignored this warning and found picture books to be an excellent way to introduce young students to the practice of philosophy. In their recent article, Khosronejad and Shokrollahzadeh trace the changing relationship between the picture book and philosophy for children, practitioners, and theorists. They offer a helpful tour of how children's literature has been incorporated into philosophy classes with children in a variety of different ways; but they also critique what they see as missed opportunities.

Early on Gareth Matthew used familiar children's stories like the *Frog and Toad* readers to explore rich philosophical topics like friendship, loyalty, and self-image.[23] David Kennedy has used the Beatrix Potter stories about Peter Rabbit to likewise engage children into thoughtful and extensive conversations.[24] The two authors also discuss how Thomas Wartenberg developed an entire approach to doing P4C using only examples from children's literature.

Their main interest, however, is to investigate the extent to which the images in picture books are themselves taken to be objects suitable for philosophical inquiry. They label Matthews and Wartenberg as *instrumentalist* since they see them as focusing solely on the storyline itself, paying insufficient attention to the images and the story they might tell on a parallel or even conflicting track. They do acknowledge that Kennedy encourages the viewing of the pictures as a catalyst for discussion but stops short, they argue, in actually exploring the holistic relationship between word and image in the picture book genre. They wish to suggest that the nature of a picture book is multivalent and needs an articulated and systematic exploration of how the text and images work together to offer opportunities for philosophical reflection.

It is not clear what the charge of instrumentalism amounts to. The philosophers who are criticized as instrumentalists were not seeking to develop a philosophical account of picture books—a philosophy of the picture book, if you will—but only to use the books to get children involved in philosophical discussions. In practice both of us have included the visual images as part of the philosophical project. Khosronejad and Shokrollahzadeh appear to conflate their own interest in developing an account of the nature of picture books that focuses on the interplay of text and image with the use of such books to teach children philosophy.

Murris and Hayes are two practitioners who have been using picture books successfully for many years and their own account of how these imaged texts "work" in a philosophical dialogue has grown and evolved over the decades. Khosronejak and Shokrollahzadeh are particularly complimentary of their approach as well as their criticism of Lipman's disavowal of these stories:

> The reasons why Murris and Haynes have found contemporary picturebooks rich materials for philosophizing are that they bend, stretch or break the rules (39); open up space

[23] See, for example, Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 104-05.
[24] David Kennedy, "Using 'Peter Rabbit' as a Philosophical Text with Young Children," *Analytic Teaching*, 13 (1992), pp. 53-58

> between the "real" world and other possible worlds which encourages a free exploration of philosophical ideas; employ postmodern devices that disturb the reader's expectations; and hold up a mirror for the adult, encouraging a self-critical stance.[25]

In recent writings, Murris has adopted a posthuman stance which seeks to disrupt binaries at all levels. Particularly troubling to her are those binaries associated with developmental theory about children and any distinction between adult/child that might be seen as privileging the adult and his/her perspective. Her critical focus is on the over-rationalization of the Lipman approach as well as what she sees as an imposition of adult ideas onto children, thereby disenfranchising them from owning their own ideas, as we discussed earlier.

Other approaches to the use of picture books were developed in England by Robert Fisher, Roger Sutcliff, Steve Williams, and Peter Worley. These thinkers share an embracing of the picture book genre along with children's literature in general but with a more "analytical" bent. In their review of Fisher's work, Khosronejak and Shokrollahzadeh put him in the camp with Murris and Haynes but we would suggest he, and the others mentioned here, are not in the postmodern tradition (an oxymoron?) of decentering all dialogue. Khosronejak and Shokrollahzadeh do note that Fisher's attention to literary theory opens up a door for cross-fertilization from literary studies and they welcome this as a way to plumb the depths of the image/text relationship. They ultimately argue for an alternative way of considering children's literature as offering opportunities for philosophical reflection that have moved way beyond the limits of the Lipman novels. One point on which they are quite insistent is the recentering of the image in picture books to explore precisely how illustrations (from cover to title page to the end cover) function as narratives in their own right.

We offer an example of what this might mean. In *Boodil, My Dog (1992)*, a delightful picture book by Pija Lindenbaum, the young girl who narrates the story of her amazing Bull Terrier sings his praises and touts all of his virtues: courage, steadfastness, curiosity, and joy. However, the illustrations raise serious doubts as to the stellar and brilliant nature of Boodil and the humor they involve is not lost on child or adult. The reader sees the real Boodil while the child narrator sees her dog through the lens of love. This contradiction between the content of the written text and the meaning of the illustrations can be used by the facilitator to get children to see how the images and the text can function in tandem in a variety of ways.[26]

Many stories include a whimsical use of pictures to suggest such a second narrative as a supportive and enhancing account of the verbal story or perhaps even a sub/contra-text. As a result, you can use the images themselves as a parallel track for philosophical inquiry. Khosronejak and Shokrollahzadeh champion this multifaceted way to engage with pictures/text. Among the questions that would result from such a focus are: Why did the illustrator choose just that event or depiction to include? How does a picture take us beyond the written text to suggest questions, ideas, humor? We suggest that many of the advocates of picture books reviewed by Khosronejak and Shokrollahzadeh in

[25] Op Cit., pp. 14-15.

[26] For another example, see Turgeon's article, "Deconstructing the Artistic Impulse through an Examination of David Wiesner's *Art and Max*," *Analytical Teaching and Philosophical Praxis*, Vol. 37, No. 2, July 2017, p.36-40.

practice do include discussion of the images in the books as seeds for philosophical inquiry with the children.

3. Difficulties Involved in Using Picture Books

Having given a quick survey of the inclusion of picture books to initiate philosophy discussions, we now turn to a range of criticisms that have been put forward about using picture books in this way, specifically by parents and teachers. Their concerns may connect to some of Lipman's original ones. Most teachers at the pre-college levels are not themselves well versed in philosophy, its concepts, and tools of analysis. Using children's literature may be difficult without a lot of support, either in terms of guiding documents that highlight potential philosophical avenues for discussion or the presence of an experienced P4C practitioner who can help shape the dialogue, along with the teacher.[27] The stories while rich in potential, may lack the sequencing of ideas and the building of schema whereas stories written specifically for philosophical dialogue are created to do this. Ann Gazzard has criticized Wartenberg on precisely this point.[28]

The difficulty that teachers may experience using picture books may result in their reverting to the more familiar use of the stories in a typical language arts manner: as reading exercises, vocabulary builders, and yes, pleasurable entertainment, rather than as springboards for philosophical discussions that can legitimately take the group beyond the story altogether. The Great Books program is structured in a way that any comment or analysis of the text by the participants must be grounded in the text itself and is highly controlled by the facilitator. Philosophy for Children, on the other hand, seeks to develop discussions that move away from the text in order to explore where the ideas themselves lead.

Another challenge for teachers is letting go of the control they are used to having in their classrooms. One of the basic tenets of Philosophy for Children is to let the children determine the direction the discussion is to take. The idea is to encourage the children to explore their own ideas through interactions with their peers. In order to do this, the teacher needs to be self-effacing, that is, they must refrain from putting their own ideas into the mix or shutting down an avenue of inquiry because it was not what they had planned. There remains a strong role for them as the discussion's facilitator, but the idea that the children can generate "the lesson" may rest uneasy on them in these times of accountability.

This is a departure from the standard way in which teachers normally interact with their students. In addition, since many teachers lack philosophical background, they are put in a position of teaching a subject about which they lack specialized knowledge. This can be difficult and represents a real challenge and perhaps frustration to teachers. One of the advantages of the traditional Lipman curricular materials is that it provides a clear path for teachers to recognize the philosophical potential

[27] See Wendy C. Turgeon, "The Place of 'Philosophy' in Preparing Teachers to Teach Pre-college Philosophy—Notes for a conversation", *Analytic Teaching and Philosophical Praxis*, Vol. 32, No. 2, pp. 68-74.

[28] Ann Gazzard, "Do You Need to Know Philosophy to Teach Philosophy to Children? A Comparison of Two Approaches," *Analytic Philosophy and Philosophical Praxis*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 45-53.

in the novels, provides examples of ways that can engage their students, and a solid method of the community of inquiry.

Another potential problem raised by using classic children's stories is that such stories are often didactically constructed to teach lessons. Many of the Grimms Brothers' fairy tales end with a cautionary admonition to follow the rules. The dangers Little Red Riding Hood faces are caused by her talking with a stranger—the wolf—against her parents' warning and Charles Perrault ends his version with a very pointed warning to young ladies to beware of those wolves who often resemble nice young men. As a result, teachers using such works may see their role as getting their students to all agree on a moral, such as that "honestly is the best policy" or "sharing is always the right thing to do."

Or consider a picture book, *The Rainbow Fish*, that is hugely popular both because of the beautiful images and the inclusion of holographic scales on the fish. The real interest teachers have in this book is its ability to teach children that sharing is always desirable. But there are many problematic aspects to this particular story. Should the fish be asked to share part of himself? When we are all the same, is that so desirable? Is this *The Communist Manifesto* in disguise? Unless the teacher is well prepared to problematize a story, they might quite normally revert to seeing stories as teaching moral lessons. Although that might be useful in some contexts, it is not the open inquiry Philosophy for Children wants children to participate in.

Of course, this is precisely where the notion of reading against the text (or "grain") gains traction. A skilled teacher can ask the children if they agree with what the book says about sharing, initiating a discussion of the virtues and limitations of sharing.[29]

The problems we have just canvased make us aware that using picture books for elementary school philosophy discussions is not without its problems. But we still join the advocates for picture books as a useful means for getting young children excited about and conversant with philosophical topics. We turn now to some suggestions for minimizing the problems we have just see in the use of picture books.

4. Picture Book Philosophy: A Positive Account

We believe that teachers who want to use picture books to introduce philosophy to their students do not face insurmountable challenges. Since teachers are required to use some picture books in their classroom, this method of teaching philosophy relies on materials that the teachers are familiar with, even if they are not used to teaching those texts in the way that we are recommending. The use of such stories might render the activity of philosophical dialogue as more readily integrated into the existing curriculum. There are no reasons why teachers need to feel that picture books are not appropriate to use to teach philosophy.

[29] See Claudia Mills, "Slave Morality in ***The Rainbow Fish***," in *Philosophy in Children's Literature*, edited by Peter Costello, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), pp. 21-40.

One important fact to remain aware of is that a teacher's knowledge of philosophy is not something that is set in stone forever. Although a teacher may be able to begin teaching philosophy without having a great deal of previous knowledge, they will generally acquire a better understanding of philosophy through facilitating discussions in their classrooms. Philosophical knowledge is therefore not a possession that a teacher has that is set once and for all; we need to treat philosophical knowledge as something that is acquired through a dynamic process.

There are a wide range of materials that teachers can use to acquire greater knowledge of philosophy in general and of the more specific issues raised by a particular book. In the book that he wrote to help teachers use picture books, *Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy Through Children's Literature*, Wartenberg includes discussions of the philosophy contained in eight picture books that are suitable for use with young children. The idea is to provide teachers with enough philosophical background that they will be comfortable facilitating discussions of abstract concepts. In addition, his website—teachingchildrenphilosophy.org—presents both a short discussion of the philosophy contained in the more than 150 picture books featured as well as questions to use to initiate a philosophy discussion in their classrooms. In a relatively old article,[30] Turgeon outlines ways that teachers and professional philosophers can craft manuals to accompany works of children's literature. And with the expansion of new materials for doing philosophy with children, one can find a wealth of support material and new ideas from scholars around the world. In her recent book, *Philosophical Adventures with Fairy Tales*,[31] she provides support both in terms of suggestions for philosophical themes and techniques to use to promote philosophical enquiry. There are also websites, such as that of the International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children, that can offer information about theory and practice.[32] And the PLATO site can likewise provide valuable support for teachers and parents. [33]

Teachers are not limited to materials expressly designed for philosophy for children sessions. There are many books that are available to introduce philosophy to the general public. The "for beginners" and the Oxford short guide series, for example, attempt to make philosophy accessible to a wide range of people, not just college students. Teachers may find these helpful in providing them with the background they feel they need in order to facilitate philosophy discussions in their classrooms.

The world wide web has also made it very easy to access useful information. In addition to Wartenberg's website,[34] there are many sites dedicated to introducing people to philosophy. In addition, many college and university philosophy home pages provide links to websites that introduce philosophy to non-philosophers.

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[30] Turgeon, Wendy. "Developing Philosophical Manuals for children's Literature," *Philosophy for Children on Top of the World: Proceedings of the Eight International Conference on Philosophy with Children,* Hreinn Palsson, Brynhildur Sigurdardottir, and Barbara B. Nelson (editors,) 1997.

[31] Turgeon, Wendy C. *Philosophical Adventures with Fairy Tales,* Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield: 2020.

[32] See https://www.icpic.org/our-research/ for links to materials and new publications.

[33] See https://www.plato-philosophy.org/

[34] See the updated version: https://www.prindleinstitute.org/teaching-children-philosophy/

All of this suggests that a teacher interested in using picture books to teach philosophy has many resources available to them that can make their job easier. While they can easily begin to teach philosophy with only a minimum amount of preexisting knowledge, they have many options for developing their philosophical understanding. Although getting some training in how to teach philosophy might be ideal, teachers who don't have access to such courses can nonetheless acquire the knowledge they need by using the materials we have just outlined. Indeed, PLATO might be able to put them in touch with an experienced mentor who can guide them in their own mastering of both philosophy and philosophical dialogue.

The main points we wish to emphasize are:

1. A teacher's store of philosophical knowledge is constantly developing as they use picture books with their students. Even if they begin with only a passing acquaintance with philosophy, they stand to develop more knowledge through their classroom activities. They will experience the excitement and pleasure of thinking along with their students about the big ideas.
2. There are many resources teachers can avail themselves of to gain greater acquaintance with philosophical theories and ideas. While these may not be necessary for a teacher as she begins to introduce philosophy into her classroom, they are there for them to use as they feel the need and can be invaluable to make them more confident in noting philosophy when it appears in the comments of their students.
3. There is likewise lots of support for teachers on methods for forming a philosophical community of inquiry and tools to use to engage students in active philosophical explorations.

As a result, we do not believe that the problems that teachers face as they introduce philosophy into their classrooms are insurmountable. They can use picture books without feeling that they lack the appropriate background for guiding a philosophical discussion.

We have not yet discussed some of the advantages of using picture books for philosophy discussions. A primary one is the delight that children have in being read aloud to. Many adults find abstract discussion of philosophy topics dull and uninteresting. When a topic is introduced through a picture book, however, the children have already been prepared to find the discussion interesting. Consider the following: Essentialism is the doctrine that every object has a set of properties that it cannot lose and still be the same thing that it is. In order for something to be a knife, for example, it has to be able to cut, for that's what knives do. But you could paint the handle of a knife, changing it from black to red, say, without affecting the object being a knife. While the ability to cut might be an essential property of a knife, having a black handle is not.

Asking children to say whether they believe that objects have essential properties is not likely to peak their interest. But asking the same question after reading Margaret Wise Brown's *The Important Book* is likely to have a different result. That's because the list of "important things" (a.k.a. essential properties) of things like the sky and rain presented in the book are so obviously flawed that students are excited to criticize the book. Using a picture book like this gives the children entrance into a

genuine philosophical topic by presenting problematic examples for them to discuss through the engaging lens of a narrative.

The fact that you can begin a philosophical discussion by asking a question about a picture book's narrative means that children are slowly introduced to the abstract level of discussion necessary for philosophy.[35] When discussing the Frog and Toad story "Dragons and Giants," for example, you might begin by asking the children whether they thought Frog and Toad were brave despite the fact that they are trembling from their adventures climbing a mountain. This is a question that employs a philosophical "big idea," i.e. bravery, but only in the specific context of the story. Instead of starting out by asking an abstract question—Can someone be brave and scared at the same time?—a philosophical discussion of a picture book starts much more concretely, thereby enabling students to see how the abstract questions that preoccupy philosophers are rooted in experiences that they themselves have encountered. Of course, you might discover that the children want to go in a completely different direction from the one you suggest. But this only reveals the power of encouraging children to question and explore ideas that interest them.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered a range of objections to using picture books to teach elementary-school children philosophy. We have seen that these objections are not fully justified, that there is no reason for educators to avoid picture books in their philosophy lessons.

At the same time, we have explored an alternative method for teaching philosophy to young children, namely using novels specifically designed for this purpose. Once again, a range of objections has been canvassed. While we do not think that these objections are completely convincing, we see no reason to prefer philosophical novels to published children's literature as a means of introducing the young to philosophy.

Children as well as most adults find picture books imaginative and intriguing. For this reason, they are a good resource to use to introduce them to philosophy. Despite a history of questioning the inclusion of such books from some philosophy for children practitioners, we hope to have shown that these wonderful books can be an exciting resource in the elementary-school philosophy classroom.

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[35] If we are honest, are adults any different? The power of movies and stories in general is that they invite us to reflect on the big ideas through a concrete situation. But adults quickly come to a realization that fiction like Shakespeare's *King Lear,* the movie *A Few Good Men*, and Virginia Woofe's *The Waves* are about far more than a myopic king, soldiers following orders, and a group of people aging.