

Philosophy in Classrooms and Beyond: New Approaches to Picture-Book Philosophy, by Thomas E Wartenberg (ed) (2019), Rowman & Littlefield

Using picture books as a means of initiating philosophical discussions with younger children is an idea that has occurred to a number of people involved in P4C/Philosophy in Schools in various parts of the world. Some went on to develop support materials to encourage teachers to go beyond reading picture books to/with their classes to drawing the students into a community of philosophical inquiry. Early examples include Karin Murriss (then in the UK), Chris de Haan and colleagues, and (independently) myself in Australia, and Tom Wartenberg in the USA. As well as Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp, Tom's work drew on the writings of Gareth Matthews, both in his 1980 book *Philosophy and the Young Child*, and his regular columns on the philosophy in picture books in the journal *Thinking*.

In his preface, Wartenberg outlines his own journey, leading to the publication of his 2014 book *Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy through Children's Literature* (henceforth I will refer to this book, and the program it describes, as *BILK*). Inspired by Tom's work, often through that book, a number of others have taken Wartenberg's ideas and adapted them. The book under review here contains six chapters that show how, according to their own circumstances, others have developed their programs. The seventh chapter, again by Wartenberg, shows that he has not stood still, but extended his ideas to a new application.

Given that all the authors are based in the USA, it is probably understandable that this book is very much focused on that country, with one notable exception (of which more later). Perhaps a little more surprising is the fact that—apart from Roger Sutcliffe's foreword, which situates Wartenberg's work within the broader international P4C movement—there is very little reference to any of the work done, or approaches developed, in other countries. Indeed, there is scant reference to any theorists or practitioners of P4C beyond Wartenberg.

As each of these projects arises from *BILK*, it is interesting to see the variety of modifications made to that model. In outline, the projects described in these chapters are:

1. Erik Kenyon: an ethics course for pre-schoolers, run by undergraduates.
2. Stephen Kekoa Miller: a school-wide philosophy program, involving both senior high school students running classes in the middle school, and

philosophical discussions in groups where the ages range from young teenagers to retired adults.

3. Stephen L Esquith: a collaborative project between a university in Michigan and a school in Mali, using picture books co-written and illustrated by Americans and Africans working together.
4. Ali Bassiri: a scheme to train non-philosopher adults to run communities of inquiry in elementary schools.
5. Mitchell Bickman and Laura Trongard: a school-based project to train high school students to facilitate philosophical discussion with elementary aged children.
6. Daniel Groll: a college-based course for undergraduates relatively new to philosophy that both strengthens their philosophical capabilities, and trains them to work with first and third grade children.
7. Tom Wartenberg inverts his model somewhat, by using picture books as a base for an introductory undergraduate philosophy course.

To simplify matters somewhat, we might characterise the original *BILK* project as containing these three defining features:

(A) training college (university) undergraduates to build philosophical communities of inquiry (CoI) ...

(B) based around picture books ...

(C) with Grade 2 elementary (primary) school children.

Feature A concerns the nature of those who are being trained to be CoI facilitators. Chapters 1, 3 and 6 follow *BILK* in using undergraduates. Projects 5, and to some extent 2, go younger, using high school students as the CoI leaders, while 4 prepares non-philosopher adults for this role.

All but one of the projects use picture books as the triggers for discussion. Most of the books mentioned are drawn from the *BILK* canon, or its website offshoot, www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org. The most intriguing books are those specifically created as part of the Chapter 3 project, via a collaboration between Michigan State University's Residential College in the Arts and Humanities staff and

students, and teachers and students at the Ciwara School in Mali. These books draw on Malian fabric motifs and styles, and raise issues to do with peace building in that troubled country. The one exception is in Chapter 2, where picture books are not explicitly mentioned. While that chapter does not make it clear what materials are used in each of their quite varied CoI settings, both excerpts from academic philosophy and items from popular culture are instanced.

The target age group for the CoI—feature C—varies considerably, from pre-schoolers (1) through the elementary grades (3, 4, 5, 6) to undergraduates (7). Chapter 2 provides the most varied program, with students engaged in philosophy in both the middle and high schools and, in outside school hours settings, in CoIs that also include adults—former students, teachers, parents and board members, sometimes participating virtually. The age range of participants can be more than fifty years.

All the chapters cover the practicalities of running their project, some in considerable detail. For readers who might be considering starting a philosophy in school (or in the community) project of their own, this book is a rich source of hints and pointers. It is refreshing to see the authors also honestly discuss the difficulties they have faced, with accounts of how they sought to overcome them. While some are particular to their context, many are problems that can arise in any P4C project, and the advice found here is often very helpful. One quibble I have, though, is related to the strongly American focus. A number of the chapters take it for granted that the reader has a strong background knowledge of such matters as timetabling structures in American schools and colleges, as well as of terms such as ‘sophomore’ or ‘turnkey trainers’ (I am still unsure what this latter phrase means). If the book is aimed at an international audience, some tighter editing here would have helped.

But many of the chapters also venture into more theoretical matters, making some quite helpful observations. Miller, for example, muses on the aims a philosophy course ought to have, how philosophy can counter epistemic injustice; the philosophy of childhood; power and the teacher/facilitator; and the roles of counterfactual thinking and idealisation in a CoI (and their relations to the ages of the participants). Esquith interrogates the relations between philosophy and culture. Groll distinguishes two sorts of philosophical sensitivity that his course seeks to build: inquiry philosophical sensitivity (knowing your way around the field) and pedagogic philosophical sensitivity (being able to make this available to children—as he puts it, being able to ‘convey complicated ideas in a productive way’ (p. 90).

These are, he says, in some tension. An indirect tension exists because time spent learning the field takes from time figuring out how to get it across, while a direct tension exists because becoming familiar with specialised knowledge (terms, arguments, sophistication) takes you away from the sort of common discourse children use and understand. I dare say teachers training in P4C would feel these tensions too.

In a number of the chapters, I came across the idea that there are no right or wrong answers in philosophy: a statement which always annoys me. Surely, there is no point at all in searching for an answer to a philosophical question if no right answer exists, or if no putative answer can be wrong? Erik Kenyon treats this matter more carefully, when he says that a philosophical question is a 'pluralist question [that] has more than one viable answer but [this] does not permit an "anything goes" response' (p. 5). He unpacks this further to say such questions matter to children by connecting to their experience; they have no single, agreed right answer; yet they do not merely invite an opinion; and they need some answer to be able to get on with life. I am put in mind of Splitter and Sharp's account of the three Cs of philosophical concepts: they are common, contestable and central (1995, p. 130). Though Kenyon is addressing questions, not concepts, the parallels are obvious.

For two reasons—the inexperience of the facilitators-in-training, and the youth of the target audience—the plans for the communities of inquiry are often more structured than in most P4C, sometimes very much so. Possibly because many of the authors appear not to have been trained in standard, Lipman/Sharp P4C, there is no real consideration of how this tighter, more directive planning affects the nature and quality of the discussions.

All the chapters report positive impacts on the participants, though the evidence for these seems to be largely anecdotal. Generally, there are two groups impacted: those who were trained as facilitators, and those who were then in the communities of inquiry they ran. I wondered about this, particularly in the case of the younger children in the CoIs, as the number of sessions they experienced was sometimes as low as three. Do we really expect significant impacts through such little exposure? As the facilitators were in the programs through both training and delivery, it seems to me more realistic that they were impacted more, and several authors give examples of former participants who have continued in the field. Another sign of success is that, as I understand it, all but one of the projects is still running.

In summary, we have here a very useful account of some of the many ways in which Matthew Lipman and Anne Sharp's *Philosophy for Children* can develop—themselves transmuted through Tom Wartenberg's own modification, *Big Ideas for Little Kids*. Are these still P4C? Do they preserve the essential insights and strengths of that program? This book will be useful to both those who are thinking of trying some similar type of program, due to the details many of the authors give of the practicalities of implementation, as well as to those who grapple with the questions about the adaptability and boundaries of both P4C (be that interpreted narrowly or broadly) and philosophy in schools more generally.

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References

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