

Seen and Not Heard: Why Children's Voices Matter, by Jana Mohr Lone (2021). Rowman & Littlefield.

Evoking the old saying that 'children should be seen and not heard', Jana Mohr Lone's new book presents a powerful case for not merely hearing—but more, for *listening to* - children. Lone is the Executive Director of PLATO—the Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization affiliated with the University of Washington, Seattle (one of the leading forces for philosophy in schools in the USA)—and has been involved in bringing philosophical discussion into schools for over 25 years. She brings all this experience to bear in this book.

Before taking a good look at the book, I note that the publisher, Rowman & Littlefield, seems to have produced quite a few books in the philosophy in schools field recently, including Lone's previous book *The Philosophical Child*, and a series edited by Tom Wartenberg. That a major publisher is interested in producing such books is a welcome sign indeed.

It is worth quoting from the Introduction on the intent of the book:

[E]ven as our society has become more attentive to children's needs and interests, we still seldom acknowledge children as serious and capable thinkers or give them the benefit of paying serious attention to their deeper thoughts and questions. Consequently, we miss out on their potential contributions to our collective thinking about important topics, and we forego opportunities to interact in more reciprocal ways with the children in our lives. (xiv)

How does it go about exploring these claims?

It's a commonplace that children ask lots of questions. Yet these questions, and the musings of children in response to them, are often not taken very seriously by many adults. Lone attributes this to a species of epistemic injustice, parallel to the way that groups such as women, or people of colour have been treated: 'We minimize [children's] thoughts and feelings as fleeting or trivial or amusing, and we fail to appreciate the deeper ideas behind what they say' (p. 11).

As many of us do, Lone owes a huge—and freely acknowledged—debt to the late Gareth Matthews, whose championing of a mirror-image, rather than a deficit, model of childhood she quotes. The deficit model positions children as incomplete humans, gradually acquiring the abilities needed for full humanity. The mirror-image

conception points out that children have strengths—in imagination, seeing possibilities, language learning, being less self-conscious, more able to change their minds, and so on—that have somewhat atrophied in many adults. In a striking phrase, Lone considers the contrast of ‘human becomings’ with ‘human beings’. While much sociological literature sees this as a child/adult distinction, she comments that ‘[i]n many respects, we all, adults and children, are ‘becomings’’ (p. 15). This reminds me of the way the COVID pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the life-long balancing act between paternalism and autonomy.

Turning from such theoretical musings on childhood, Lone draws on her extensive records of conversations with children aged between 5 and 11 to present us with excerpts from discussions on 5 topics, interspersed with her own reflections on those discussions. In all, there are 28 such excerpts, ranging from 4 to 13 turns in each, with an average of 7 turns. We are warned that a few have been consolidated from several separate discussions.

In this, we can again see Lone’s debt to Gareth Matthews who, in *Philosophy and the Young Child*, repeatedly quotes the conversations of small children with adults and then analyses their philosophical import. Lone differs by using discussions between children (to which she makes few contributions). Those familiar with Lone’s 2012 book *The Philosophical Child* will recognise this pattern. That book, however, was organised by the major branches of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics. This one uses big concepts—childhood, friendship, political voices, happiness, death—each of which is a central concern of children. In this, I see something of a pivot in the target audience: away, perhaps, from those already comfortable with philosophy, more towards those with a primary focus on children. This suggests to me that the present book would be a better one for beginners, with *The Philosophical Child* a great follow up.

Any of us who have run a classroom community of inquiry will have tales of when children—individually or jointly—have come up with an idea that immediately provokes echoes in us of some famous philosopher’s position. Lone is adept at pulling these echoes out of the discussions she presents. We have to acknowledge, of course, that she chose these excerpts precisely because they are philosophically rich, a point I will return to later. At times, though, Lone goes beyond merely showing that children can hold positions similar to ones well known from the tradition. In her reflections—themselves a quasi-dialogue with the children she has quoted—she admits to times

when her own thinking on matters has been modified by unfamiliar insights from the children (e.g. aspects of friendship on pages 58 and 66).

Here are examples of what Lone called, in the Introduction, children's 'potential contributions to our collective thinking about important topics'. Matthews has made similar claims (e.g. 1994, pp. 11-12) that a child may come up with a view that is superior to that of adult philosophers (I have discussed this in Sprod 1999/2014). While it is not difficult to see how a child might provide philosophical insights new to a particular adult, or even a group of adults, the claim that they may contribute to our *collective* thinking is a strong one indeed, and may need extraordinary evidence. I am not sure that I have seen such evidence yet. Perhaps we see a glimmer of it in the comment of a college student (who had observed a discussion between younger children) that they have never seen a 'more open and honest conversation about racism' (p. 110).

Still, if we don't listen carefully to children, we are never going to get the opportunity to see if it is possible. But before I turn to the final chapter, entitled Listening, I want to ponder on the use of a few hand-picked excerpts drawn from a large corpus of recorded discussions. In this, I am not trying to disparage Lone, who has excellent reasons for taking this approach, but rather to think about the way research into philosophy in schools has been carried out.

In choosing specific excerpts, we can illustrate the philosophical capabilities of at least some children, some of the time. Yet this does not answer questions such as how often this happens, or how many children can do it, let alone what the conditions are under which they can do it, and how they can be assisted in doing it more often. Answering these and many more vital questions requires careful analysis of a variety of complete discussions, preferably including discussion series with the same group over time. Such work is both time and resource consuming, but it strikes me that it is necessary if we are provide robust empirical backing to many of the theoretical claims that have emerged in the 50 years since *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* was first published.

To the final chapter. Here, I feel that Lone's emphasis has shifted. Now, we are not presented with the deep philosophical thoughts of children on listening, but with Lone's reflections on what it takes, and what it means, to listen properly to others. And while her ideas would also apply to children, the emphasis here is on what adults can do. As such, there is much of value for teachers and parents in their interactions with children. 'Too frequently, we hear but we do not listen—we recognise the words

being said to us, but we don't stop to appreciate what the speaker is trying to tell us ... This is especially true of adult exchanges with children' (pp. 158-159).

Children are often admonished to listen, Lone notes, but this usually means 'to adults'. We adults need to pay children the same respect. Her reflections on what this requires of us contain many pearls of wisdom. We need to be curious about exactly how the child is construing things. This can require teasing it out, rather than saying 'Did you mean ...' and laying our own views over their words. Given that adults have more power, children can be reluctant to correct us if we get it wrong.

We need to be open-hearted and receptive, employing a kind of detachment from our own thoughts, judgements and feelings. Lone notes that children often do this, being less certain they are right. So they are patient—and generously give others time to try to articulate what they mean. We need to truly concentrate on the speaker, rather than our own thoughts—and that we be seen to be doing so. Our body language is important.

Lone echoes a favourite technique of mine: the use of silence. I cannot now remember who first said to me that 'philosophy is slow thinking'—it was long before Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* came out—but I have seen the power of resisting the urge to fill every silence. Lone observes that children are often more comfortable with such pauses than adults.

Moreover, we need to pay attention to the ethics of listening. We should acknowledge our puzzlement, confusion or lack of understanding, listening generously and respectfully, and encourage children to do the same. 'The openness of a good listener depends on a willingness to re-examine one's own opinions and, potentially, to have one's self, one's character, transformed by what one hears' (p. 173). If we can encourage this in childhood, we may help more children retain it into adulthood.

Finally, how can Lone's book help those of us who, like her, discuss philosophical topics with children in classrooms? The task of the facilitator in a Community of Inquiry is a complex, yet vital, one. We need to be monitoring behaviour, keeping an eye on the time, looking for potentially valuable routes the discussion may take, thinking about whether an exercise or a breakout might be fruitful, wondering whether to ask another question, checking whether some students are missing out ... and the rest. But in amongst all this, actually listening very carefully to what the students are saying to each other and to us is central. Many of those other tasks depend on getting this one right. Jana Mohr Lone has shown throughout this book that she is

a very good listener, and we—teachers, parents, anyone who interacts with children—can all learn from her detailed and thoughtful analysis of why children’s voices matter, and how we can attend to them.

Tim Sprod

References

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