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Dialogue as a playful and permissive space in communities of philosophical enquiry

Academic biography

Dr Joanna Haynes, Senior Lecturer in Education at University of Plymouth, is a practical philosopher interested in transformative and critical pedagogies, practitioner research and the ethics of professional practice. Joanna's work is informed by her experience of working with all age groups in a wide variety of educational settings. Her best known publication is *Children as Philosophers* (2002, 2008) published by Routledge and translated into Spanish and Greek. She is currently working on a further book for Routledge Research in Education Series titled *Picturebooks, Child and Pedagogy: Philosophical Perspectives*, to be published in 2010.

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Abstract

'Philosophy with children' is not only for children, can enable transformative experiences of thinking for participants of any age, and contributes something highly distinctive to the wider pedagogy of dialogue. This reflective paper offers a narrative account of the author's practitioner research in communities of philosophical enquiry with children, where research is interpreted as phronesis. Illustrating the creation of critical incidents as a research approach, the enquiry is situated within the author's working life as a university tutor in Education. The author argues that her response is shaped by early experiences and expectations of philosophy, by the aesthetic quality of material chosen to prompt philosophical questioning and by the desire to mediate constraints of the given curriculum in schools and in university based teacher education. In this context, the paper suggests that picturebooks are philosophically inviting, with their complexity and ambiguity in content and form. Critical reflection on significant episodes in the enquiry remains open-ended, dwelling on memories of childhood and on literary, psycho-analytic and philosophical sources, exploring the significance of the metaphorical and symbolic in the realm of meaning and the part these can play in dialogue. The author claims that the community of enquiry pedagogy can free up the teaching and learning space and enable creative mediation of limitations in official curricula.

Dialogue is experienced as a lenient and permissive space in which it becomes genuinely possible to 'play' with ideas.

Introduction

What can be learned about dialogue from philosophising with children? What might this teach us about dialogue in other settings, including the university? In my work as a tutor in the field of Education, the 'university' is necessarily outward-facing, a site of learning and scholarship extending well beyond the buildings in which it is housed. It involves teaching, consultancy, and research. I teach undergraduate and postgraduate students in Education Studies; trainee teachers; practising teachers engaged in short courses, Masters or Research degrees, and school students. I am curious about ways in which my philosophical background, my various roles and experiences as pedagogue, and the different contexts in which I practise as a university educator, are 'in dialogue' with one another. I am interested in pedagogy in the broadest sense of the word, whatever the educational setting and including higher education, and in the epistemological and ethical underpinnings of particular pedagogies. Drawing on my doctoral work (Haynes, 2007a), this paper discusses my practitioner research in the explicitly dialogical pedagogy of the community of philosophical enquiry,¹ (abbreviated throughout this paper as P4C²). It sets out

¹ The pedagogy of the community of philosophical enquiry has been adopted in a wide range of formal and informal educational settings, with children, young people and adults alike.

² P4C is an umbrella term widely used to describe the distinctive pedagogy of philosophising in a community of enquiry. Leading proponents in the UK have adopted the term Philosophy with Children, to reflect the idea of the teacher as a co-enquirer, engaged in dialogue with children (or with any group of participants) a mutually educative enquiry. In the UK, most practitioners draw on a wide range of material to prompt philosophical questioning and dialogue within a community of enquiry framework. The programme devised by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp in the USA in the

to illustrate the permissive and playful possibilities of philosophical dialogue: the aesthetic, intellectual and affective pull of that which is philosophically inviting; the element of surprise; the sense of freedom and collusion. The experiences related here have profoundly influenced my conception of 'dialogue' and its wider potential in the university.

Whether 'in role' as philosopher, primary teacher, parent, or university tutor, I've been concerned with making creative 'space' for thinking, and with the inclusive, egalitarian values associated with critical and transformative education³. In working with the arguably 'transformative' pedagogy of philosophy with children my preoccupation is with the ethics of everyday educational interaction. In *'A Photographer's Life'*, Annie Leibowitz writes: 'I don't have two lives. This is one life, and the personal pictures and the assignment work are all part of it' (2006:19). Likewise, I am conscious of the worlds and identities that I inhabit and how these combine to shape what becomes salient in my practice. This paper provides a taste of my philosophical work, the qualities of the dialogical space I associate with P4C and the methods I have adopted to engage with and to refine my wider practice as an educator.

1970's, is known as Philosophy for Children. This programme, that reflects key ideas in Western philosophy, is based on a published sequence of novels, teacher manuals and the training programme for teachers based at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC), Montclair State University, the base of the North American network of P4C.

³ Critical pedagogy is concerned with critiquing educational institutions and transforming both education and society (eg Freire, 1972; Giroux, 1988; Morrow and Torres, 2002, amongst many others). A critical pedagogy is one that seeks to redress social inequalities and challenge the prevailing social order and forms of discourse. It assumes that dominant groups in society tend to determine the dominant meanings attached to culture and that these are the meanings most commonly expressed through official curricula.

I begin with an explanation of the practical philosophical orientation of my research and the critical incident paradigm. I give an account of my encounter with P4C (1994) and my perception that it provided a means to creatively mediate constraints on teaching experienced during that period in schools and in teacher education in the UK. This is followed by discussion of the aims of P4C and questions it provokes about constructs of philosophy and child. The final section reflects on my distinctive 'take' on P4C and my interpretation of the wider significance of critical episodes. I conclude with some thoughts about communities of philosophical enquiry, dialogue and the university.

Educational research as practical philosophical enquiry

My discussion of my practice incorporates the overlapping spheres in which I work as a university educator. In describing research as 'thoughtful practice' and drawing on Arendt's (1968) notion of 'thinking without banisters' Nixon, Walker and Clough suggest that to become thoughtful is:

to climb the stairs without the security of known categories; because for each, the other is different, and the challenge of the other unique. Thinking is a moral necessity, without which right action is unthinkable and the onward rush of events irreversible (in Sikes, Nixon and Carr, 2003:89).

What initially motivated my research was my desire to remove obstacles to participation and strengthen children's voices in philosophical enquiry. This enquiry set out to tap my experience in education and to put it to work to achieve further pedagogic refinement through practical judgment or phronesis. As Dunne (1997) explains:

Phronesis is what enables experience to be self-correcting and to avoid settling into mere routine. If experience is an accumulated capital, we might say, then phronesis is this

capital wisely invested (Dunne, 1997:292).

In his characterisation of the 'life of practice' Dunne adopts Wittgenstein's metaphor of 'rough ground' to express the need for practitioner flexibility, responsiveness and improvisation on the one hand and the need for 'rootedness' on the other. Such rootedness is available through a practitioner's history of participation in the community of practice itself, through 'grounding' in its dispositions and the subtleties of its culture. Dunne cautions that this particular notion of a 'field of practice' is questionable in a technique and target orientated world of education (1997:378). To live in the contemporary world of education is often to experience a kind of schizophrenia, to hear voices. As a university tutor working in the field of Education over the last twenty years these voices have been ever present. Creative mediation of external demands and constraints is an absolute necessity (Osborn in Croll, 1996; Woods, 1995).

It is possible to create a humane space in the school or university classroom and to hold on to the sense that practice, of both research and teaching, has an 'open texture' (Dunne, 1997:379). Rather than P4C being a method of teaching that I sought to apply and evaluate, its process is one that I internalised, a practical everyday philosophy. Griffiths (2003:21) argues that practical philosophy is 'with and for' rather than 'about or applied to' and it is one that acknowledges its origins in the concrete communities in which it operates and then seeks to speak 'to something more universal, to something inclusive of, for instance, classroom teachers as well as academics, and young people as well as teachers' (Griffiths and Cotton, 2005). Such a rationale suited my practitioner research in the context of working in the inter-related fields of a school in my neighbourhood, initial teacher education and continuing professional development. The research was embedded

in my ongoing and local work as a university teacher in the field of Education.

The significance of personal experience, of 'rootedness' (Dunne, 1997) and of 'situational understanding' (Elliott, 2006) are expressed in feminist approaches to enquiry, which Greene and Griffiths (2003:77) characterise as 'less a theory – or a set of theories – and more a perspective, a lens, a handle on the world and its ideas, a way of acting and speaking'. For Greene and Griffiths, this perspective is held together by certain preoccupations, not necessarily exclusive to feminism, and 'each philosopher marked by feminism makes her own trajectory' (2003:75). My study was a piece of 'situated philosophy' – it took its bearings from the guideposts of my lived experience, just as Greene and Griffiths argue 'we cannot be the unmoved movers, or take the view from nowhere' (2003:77).

The marriage of personal and professional concerns and the situated outlook of the research are rooted in an orientation towards social justice (Griffiths, 1998; Sikes, Nixon and Carr, 2003) as well as in feminist perspectives in philosophy (Benhabib, 1992; Greene and Griffiths, 2003). This integration expresses connections between passion, imagination and reason and between private and public domains, shaping my conceptions of 'listening' and student 'participation' in philosophical dialogues. In my research these ethics were articulated through the exploration of significant moments of experience and through their narrative representation. Benhabib (1992) suggests that female experience tends historically to be attuned to the narrative structure of action and the standpoint of the concrete other or what she terms the art of the particular. My doctoral thesis drew on autobiographical material that had a bearing on my experience and understanding of child, on my efforts to provide children with opportunities to express their ideas, on the meanings I attached to episodes of

classroom talk, on my interpretation of the pedagogy of philosophical dialogue (Haynes, 2007a).

Critical episodes of practice in practitioner research

Research begins from what catches our attention. A number of accounts are offered of those events that trigger an enquiry and alert the researcher to a 'something' to be questioned. McNiff (1993) refers to moments when practitioners identify a concern through a felt gap, or contradiction, between values and action (McNiff 1993:33). Mason (2002) refers to these moments as 'noticing' and has distinguished 'forms of noticing' (2002:33) as well as practical processes for using these in a disciplined way to inform professional judgment. Tripp (1993) suggests that incidents in practice become significant when they strikingly appear as an example of a wider social category or dramatically contrast with previous experience. These events stand out and can become turning points in professional life. The moment of surprise, awareness or noting the distinctive character of such events is a first step, but for the episode to become critical it has to be interpreted and interrogated Tripp, (1993:25). The salience of events in practice may not become conscious at the time of their happening. Brown suggests that critical incidents are:

memorable detritus found within the sediment of our lives...they include those moments which refuse to leave our consciousness or which make their impact by unexpectedly re-entering our thoughts after the event which was their genesis. Their usefulness to us are as pieces of grit around which we can attempt to form a pearl (1994:1).

An incident becomes critical when it leads to increased sensitivity to values and to re-examination of implicit beliefs and theories. Tripp writes:

critical incidents are not 'things' which exist independently of an observer and are awaiting discovery like gold nuggets or desert islands, but like all data, critical incidents are created. Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. (Tripp, 1996:8)

Tripp (1993:97) argues that certain kinds of critical incident are more strongly directed towards biographical and political understanding. These are often emotionally charged and lead to searches into the autobiographical origin of values expressed in a particular response to a situation. Such critical episodes help to describe the relationship between a practitioner and the context in which s/he is working. Although not the only form of data collected, critical incidents during the three year period of practitioner research in a primary school formed the dynamic core of my enquiry. Such incidents were explored through dialogue with trainees, practising teachers and critical friends in the course of my everyday university work and this further informed their analysis, as did a wide range of literature in childhood, philosophy and education. A series of such incidents taken together can constitute an auto-ethnography and/or situated philosophy, as is the case with my doctoral thesis.

Critical incidents may start life as anecdotes. An anecdote is a short narrative of a striking incident, associated with the oral tradition. Van Manen (1997) has written of the value of anecdotes in researching and writing about lived experience. Anecdotes form a counterweight to theoretical abstraction and are a valuable implement for uncovering meanings: 'anecdotes possess a certain pragmatic thrust. They force us to search out the relation between living and thinking, between situation and reflection' (p119). Anecdotes have often enjoyed low status in scholarly work where empirical generalisation is the aim. Van Manen argues that the anecdote is valuable in a

different way, a 'poetic narrative' that refers to a truth still difficult to articulate, perhaps symbolic and metaphoric, rather than literal in character (1997:116-21).

Anecdotes have an important function in some schools of philosophical research. They furnish the concreteness of lived experience and act as a levelling device. Van Manen claims:

the paradoxical thing about anecdotal narrative is that it tells something particular while really addressing the general...and vice versa, at the hand of anecdote fundamental insights or truths are tested for their value in the contingent world of everyday experience (1997:120).

Van Manen concludes that the significance and value of anecdotal narrative are situated in its power to compel, to lead to reflection, to involve us personally, to transform by being touched or moved and to measure one's interpretive sense. The 'validity' of an anecdotal narrative is expressed through its persistence and through the extent to which it resonates with the experience of others.

Wild Things: an anecdotal narrative of my first encounter with P4C

My first awareness of philosophy as a distinctive sphere of experience came through immersion in the language, imagery and rituals of Catholicism and introduction to French literature and philosophy, whilst boarding at a Belgian convent school, between the ages of 9-14. Later, an English teacher's passionate knowledge of his subject alerted me to the philosophical richness of fiction, poetry and drama, and to the possibility of 'bringing meaning' to narrative and linking narrative to philosophical ideas. These early experiences were formative.

Similarly, I was introduced to philosophy with children through a workshop demonstrating an approach that

took picture books as the context for opening enquiry, pioneered by the Dutch philosopher Karin Murriss (1992)⁴. She had a baby boy with her at the time and her older daughter was there too, helping to care for the little one. I was struck by the presence of the baby and by the way Karin moved between leading the workshop and keeping an eye on him. I was taken with her warm, direct and humorous delivery and impressed by the thoughtful way she listened and responded to participants, such a refreshing contrast with modes of 'delivery' most common in schools and teacher training at that time. The book chosen for our enquiry was Maurice Sendak's widely acclaimed *Where the Wild Things Are*, first published in 1963.

Sendak's story opens with Max, a boy dressed in a wolf suit, chasing his dog with a fork raised, weapon-like, in his hand. We do not see Max's mother, but read that she calls him 'wild thing' and he responds 'I'll eat you up'. Max gets sent to bed without his supper. In his room, a forest grows, an ocean appears. Max sails off to an island inhabited by 'wild things'. They make him their king. There is a 'wild rumpus' led by Max until he becomes tired and longs for home. As with a number of this author's works, this book explores the ground that becomes available to children in the absence of adult intrusion and supervision, a subject close to Sendak's heart (Murriss and Haynes 2000).

'What puzzles you in this story?' Karin asked. Aroused by the question, 'why do we sometimes want to eat the people we love?', I thought about my children when very young, that I sometimes described their bodies as 'edible'; of occasionally having the urge to bite my

⁴ There is growing scholarly interest in picturebooks from literary perspectives. The philosophical value of picturebooks and their sometimes controversial nature is developed by Haynes and Murriss in a forthcoming volume on picturebooks, pedagogy and philosophy to be published by Routledge Research in Education Series in 2010.

lover's shoulder; of the way in which being in love, or losing one we love, can sometimes kill the appetite for food, or that another's love can be all consuming. I contemplated the language that links love and desire with taste, ingestion or consumption. Through the thinking and dialogue that followed, I had a strong sense of recovering something lost from the educational domain. The comparison between the story and my felt sense of intrusion and supervision by external authorities in education is worth noting here.

There were a number of ways to analyse this experience. I began by considering salient features in my recollection of this event, the emotions that it evoked and connections with my life and work at that time. What stood out were:

- the presence of the baby;
- desire and arousal, the playful overlap of appetites: for love, for food, for ideas;
- the ambiguity of Sendak's book
- reclamation of something lost;
- the sheer pleasure of philosophical perplexity;
- the sense of freedom to respond.

The presence of the baby and the connections made between eating and love appear to be linked. They allude to the roles of mother and lover that Karin seemed able to bring into the room with her, as well as to my own (lost) being-child. I had returned to full time work only four months after the birth of my second child. At this time he was four years old. My job as a university lecturer seemed remote from his world and my work as a teacher educator seemed remote from the world of primary schools and children. The references to the rediscovery of something lost reflected these separations and absences in my university teaching at the time.

It seems possible that I felt unable to address my values as an educator or to creatively access my childhood or

motherhood in my university teaching, and Karin seemed to be suggesting a way to integrate these aspects of self, through her view of picturebooks, through the openness of the method of teaching, and through the way in which she was choosing to accommodate her mother and teacher selves. Nias (1984) has written of this wish to preserve beliefs and practices integral to 'substantial selfhood' as a common concern for teachers. The effect of the workshop was liberating for me. It reconnected me with my own children, with the value of the open questions children ask when very young, a kind of perplexity, playfulness and engagement that were absent from target orientated models of teaching in the ascendancy during this period and which were dominating the teacher education programmes in which I was involved.

This event provided a much needed source of resistance during a time of growing concern about the limitations of the official curriculum of schools and in the field of teacher education. Like many of my fellow academic colleagues in Education, I felt imagination and creativity were being stifled by an over-prescriptive curriculum. Many teachers in schools felt that children's opportunities to take the initiative and flexibility to pursue their interests had been seriously curtailed. By contrast, the use of picturebooks to stimulate open-ended philosophical dialogue appeared to offer a means to enable children, trainees and teachers to think and speak for themselves. In a political climate in education experienced as repressive, being reintroduced to my philosophical self made a different kind of dialogue seem possible.

Murris interprets philosophia as 'love for wisdom, when love includes desire: philosophy is a constant craving for food for thought ...' (1992, Introduction Booklet:14). She argues that the picturebook is an excellent vehicle for philosophical thought, for children and adults alike. Illustrations and text awaken the sensory appetites.

Picturebooks invite an intellectual and an emotional response. We were not asked to explore the meaning *in* the book but are offered it as a starting point for investigation, beginning with the meaning given from within our own experiences. It is easy to see how this rationale for Murriss's approach to teaching philosophy in school echoes the ways in which I had come to philosophy through literature, through sensual experience and through being treated as an independent meaning maker in the context of exploring works of literature. Examples of work with children referred to in the final section of this paper illustrate the significance of such narrative reference points, the playful and lenient space they open up, as well as the notion of 'philosophically inviting' material and its place in the creation of dialogue, which could have much wider pedagogical implications, if the principles of this approach was taken up by university tutors, for example.

Philosophy with Children – Philosophy and Child

Proponents of philosophy with children argue that its practice encourages reasonableness and initiates children into public discussion of morality and values, including democratic values (Fisher, 1998; Lipman 1991, 1993; Splitter and Sharp, 1995). P4C brings to the surface deeper questions about constructs of 'child' and 'reasonableness', the undemocratic nature of schools themselves, the reproductive nature of institutional discourses, routines and curricula and the uncertainty of any global project in a postmodern world (Haynes, 2002, 2005; Haynes and Murriss, 2007b; Kohan, 2002; Vansielegheem, 2005). Practitioners variously emphasise the teaching of 'thinking skills', 'emotional intelligence' or 'citizenship' in the effort to make P4C 'fit in' with current preoccupations and policy agendas and to get it taken up in schools, arguably compromising its 'transformative' potential.

The suitability of philosophy for children has been challenged by those who argue that younger children are developmentally incapable of the type of abstract and de-centred reasoning that they believe is required in philosophy (Kitchener, 1990; White in Griffiths, 1992). Cross-cultural studies of play and its importance in children's learning and health have led some to questioning the wisdom of an activity like philosophy with children as developmentally inappropriate (Fox, 2001). These early discussions about whether or not children can do philosophy concerned the capacities of children to act like adult philosophers (Kitchener, 1990; White in Griffiths, 1992).

When it comes to dialogues between adults and children, Brazilian philosopher Walter Kohan turns this argument about the construction of knowledge on its head:

Children will build their own philosophies, in their own manner. We will not correct the exclusion of children's philosophical voices by showing that they can think like adults; on the contrary, that would be yet another way of silencing them (Kohan, 1999:7).

For such writers, if dialogue is to be transforming, it implies a re-examination of the nature of schools themselves and the goal of reasonableness in that social context, an investigation of what it means to teach for thinking and of the nature of thinking itself. They suggest that the inclusion of children (and arguably other previously unheard voices) in philosophical discussion is a critical action that alters the ground of philosophy and the process of education through philosophy. Kohan writes:

One of the functions of philosophy is to problematise dominant orders of discourse, practice and interpretation ... it is a form of social critique and a form of creativity proposing alternative (Kohan, 1999:2).

Some supporters of P4C have argued that children can do philosophy by providing evidence of children's interaction in classroom communities of enquiry and by proposing new paradigms of philosophical dialogue (Murriss, 1997) and by re-framing the concept of philosophy (Kennedy, 1999; Kohan, 1999) and the purposes and processes of education (Kohan, 2002). The theory and practice of philosophical enquiry with children continues to raise some fundamental questions about the nature of philosophy in the Western context and, in some cases, suggests a paradigmatic shift in our understanding of the creation of knowledge:

The experience of the communal dialogue which is the grounding practice of CPI (Community of Philosophical Inquiry) brings us face to face with the original condition of philosophy, philosophy not just as conversation, but as an emergent, multi-vocal and interactive story about the world, and about persons thinking in the world (Kennedy, 1999).

Kennedy argues that the oral nature of philosophical enquiry is crucial to its radical role. Children have traditionally been marginalised and their claims to knowledge and their ways of expressing their thinking devalued through a process that identifies them as *outsiders*. Paradoxically, from such a position, children have a great deal to contribute to the work of deconstruction and reconstruction that typifies philosophical thinking (Kennedy, 1999; Haynes, 2002, 2007a). Such debates are of profound importance for scholars in the fields of philosophy, childhood and education.

Rather than asking can children philosophise, can we teach thinking, what is a child, or what is childhood, my research is concerned with lived experiences of children I encounter, with the questions that emerge and the meanings they construct when thinking through P4C. I have explored and analysed the obstacles to, and conditions and opportunities for, listening to children

(2002, 2007) such as controversies and taboos (Haynes, 2005a; 2005b; Haynes and Murriss, 2009) and the exploratory and playful dimensions of children's philosophical thinking, including their willingness and capacity to operate in imaginative and metaphorical realms (Haynes and Murriss, 2000; Haynes, 2007a; 2007b). What P4C offers is the possibility of dialogue as a lenient (but not *laissez-faire*) space, and the notion of 'child' understood as the philosophical disposition and character upon which we can all draw, rather than as a fixed temporal phase of human development, as in 'childhood'.

Moving Teddies and Talking Dogs

In dialogue with younger persons, the subject matter includes both 'serious' questions arising from children's lives as well as more light-hearted and adventurous enquiries. Whatever the topic of enquiry, children (as well as trainees and teachers) have commented favourably on the permissiveness of the space made possible in a community of enquiry (Haynes, 2007b). The use of picturebooks as starting points provides philosophically inviting opportunities to move into the ground opened up by binary opposites such as good and evil, bravery and cowardice, wealth and poverty, fame and obscurity, safety and danger. Fiction offers freedom of thought and imagination rarely taken up in 'factual' scenarios. Fairy tale and fantasy often provide valuable ground for metaphysical enquiries. Many works of children's literature and TV programmes or games feature anthropomorphism and children often choose to explore questions about animals and about relationships between animals and human beings.

In some of my earliest experiences of dialogue with young children, enquiries about the powers of teddies and toys were popular: how come teddies were often in different places to where they had been left? Could they move on their own? Did they do so in the dark, or when the door was closed and they were not being observed

by humans? I noticed that it was often during such speculative moments that children became particularly absorbed and energetic. I learned that it was important not to intervene too literally or heavy-handedly but to try and respond with what Van Manen terms 'pedagogical tact' (1991). When I reported such dialogues to student teachers, some were uncomfortable and one student expressed strong concern about whether it was right for an adult to allow the children's claims about the bears moving to be left unresolved. She said that children have to be told what is real. In talking to trainees or practising teachers about this or similar episodes, I often came across the view that young children are developmentally unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. Teacher 'truth telling' or 'naivety tolerating' positions both seem to be at odds with the possibility of genuine dialogue with children. The capacity to suspend belief, adopt a stance of fallibility and listen attentively to children, are all crucial to the facilitating role in P4C: neither indulgent and sentimental, nor premature and silencing. Such classroom episodes provide rich material for trainees and teachers alike to explore their underlying epistemological beliefs as well as their constructs of child and view of their social role. Such dialogues contrast markedly with tutor led presentations on topics such as 'children's misconceptions' or 'how children learn'.

Ideas about children's thinking that surfaced with trainees or teachers heightened my awareness of assumptions often made in responding to children and alerted me to the sensitivity demanded by the facilitating role, if paying more than lip service to listening to children's ideas. Reflection on critical moments enabled me to consider the 'moves' I had made and the extent to which they either opened up or closed down the dialogue. Happily, the children often ignored my questions and interventions and continued with the lines of enquiry that interested them.

One such critical moment arose through children's responses to *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat* (Wagner, 1979). In this picturebook Rose is a widow who lives with her dog, John Brown. Life is uneventful until Rose spots a black cat and wants to let it in to the house. John Brown refuses and tells the cat to keep away. When Rose sees the cat she secretly gives it milk. While she is not looking, the dog tips the milk out of the bowl. This competition continues until Rose goes to bed one evening and does not get up the next day, saying she plans to stay there forever. John Brown lies there thinking, eventually asking Rose if the cat will make her better. She says it will and he lets the cat come into the house.

In the dialogue that followed the children initially expressed surprise that John Brown was able to speak until one child suggested that dogs could be trained to talk. Others agreed that dogs could understand commands and express themselves by wagging their tails and so on. Others testified to dogs' capacity to offer companionship, endorsing the dog's role in the story. Amy took the discussion to another level when she reported that her dog Benj frequently spoke, and enjoyed saying rude things to her mum – she offered an example of one such occasion, repeating the words used by the dog and her mum. One or two children asked why the dog did not speak when outside the school gates and Amy explained that the dog was embarrassed.

Amy's narrative captured the attention of the group and offered a way out of my mechanical handling of the dialogue. It conveyed meaning, but it was not obvious what this could be. The episode raised a number of questions about my role in these dialogues. How were the children using the space created by the story, and the invitation to question and explore, to express ideas about their experience? What kind of 'truth' is expressed in such narrative accounts? What are the possibilities created by such playful responses? In

reflecting on such episodes, I considered ways in which various disciplinary perspectives influential in Education would 'read' these events. I paid special attention to 'readings' of such episodes that penetrate what Gaita (2004) refers to as 'the realm of meaning'.

Sources that informed my reflection also included memories from my childhood as well as other dog tales that made use of anthropomorphism. As a small child I had a small teddy that was able to speak, thanks to my father. This bear was permitted to swear and be exceptionally rude and insulting, particularly to my father. In later years, family pets would also adopt this voice. Long after we, the children, had left home, I noticed that my father would use the pet cat as his 'mediator'. Sometimes the cat would seem to be on my mother's side and could be heard slinging insults at my dad. Sometimes, he would use the cat to voice his grievances. I've noticed that the cats and dogs that live in my household have inherited this magical ability to speak.

Winnicott (1971/1991) argues that the task of 'reality-acceptance' is life-long and that all human beings carry the strain of relating inner and outer reality. He suggests that provision of an intermediate area of experience, in which the nature of reality is left unquestioned, provides relief from this strain. He sees this realm of illusion as being retained throughout life. It appears again in the intense experiencing that belongs to imaginative work and living, the arts, religion and creative activity in any subject. Transitional phenomena do not belong exclusively to early childhood, but are a recurring aspect of human experience, bound up with meaning making.

Reference to the part played by the creative domain, in 'managing reality', links with work on the significance of metaphor in the reasoning process itself. Corradi Fiumara (1995) explores metaphor as interaction between language and life, a process that bridges the

segregated classes of body and mind and the accustomed distinctions of rational versus instinctual. She suggests:

Through a metaphoric appreciation of language, knowledge is seen not so much as the task of 'getting reality right' but rather as the enterprise of developing linguistic habits for coping with whatever reality-in-the-making we may have to confront (1995:72).

Following such arguments, Amy's story about her dog Benj can be interpreted as a poetic contribution to philosophical dialogue. Anthropomorphism features prominently in many stories and these form a major part of the literary and oral heritage of many different cultures, particularly myths, legends and folk tales, from Aesop, to Orwell and Disney. It is endemic in many cultures, expressing human relationships with nature and with reality.

In an obituary in The Guardian newspaper the British comic actor Peter Bayliss is described by Peter Barnes as an original and an eccentric:

There was a time when he went everywhere with an invisible dog. He could throw his voice slightly and his barking was uncannily accurate. Legend has it he took the 'dog' with him to Fortnum and Mason's tea room to negotiate a contract with Cameron MackintoshHe asked the waitress for a saucer of water for his dog, and included the canine in negotiations. Every time Mackintosh suggested a salary the dog would bark. Bayliss would say: "My dog doesn't think that's enough". He came away with a lucrative contract. (The Guardian 5th August, 2002:18)

The dialogue that is possible because of the presence of Bayliss's invisible dog creates at least two planes for philosophical thinking. Firstly, it reveals the ambiguity of the power positions between the actor and the agent and shows us something of the paradoxical nature of power itself. Secondly, the invention motivates us as

spectators. It stimulates the curiosity that might be absent if the parties were to negotiate more conventionally. It helps us to question the appearance of things.

Gaita (2004) draws on his contemplation of the relationship between humans and animals to explore what it means to be fully human and to track the foundations of ethical thought. He argues that this understanding is often shaped by stories and that it is an error to assume that the cognitive content of such stories has to be extracted from its story-telling form, as science and philosophy are wont to do, in order to arrive at its factual or conceptual value. The literary or artistic forms of such stories are critical to the sphere of human meaning to which they relate. Gaita suggests almost everything important in human life occurs in the realm of meaning. He reminds readers:

Think how often literature and art more generally give us reason to say that we have come to see meaning where we had not before, or deeper meaning than we had thought possible, or even sometimes sense where we had not seen it. These are ways of seeing that are characteristic of the realm of meaning (2004:105)

Gaita suggests that the realm of meaning is of human origin and a 'gift of culture' (2004:197). Gaita's many reflections on his own and other people's dogs and other animals draw out distinctions between the psychological and moral dimensions, between what is necessary and what is possible, in human relationships with animals. He argues that it is in this realm of meaning, rather than in the nature of things or in the fabric of the universe, that our ethical thought is embedded. He acknowledges the susceptibility of this interpretative faculty to emotional indulgence and warns:

The realm of meaning in which form cannot be separated from content is

essentially rather than accidentally vulnerable to sentimentality. We can dream of overcoming sentimentality, pathos and banality, but we cannot dream of...a realm of meaning in which we are not vulnerable to these failings. (Gaita, 2004:102)

Conclusion

Gaita's comments on ethical thought in the realm of meaning point to the depth and significance of dialogue that become possible when story, experience and philosophising are creatively interwoven. I believe this has a number of implications for dialogue in the university.

Firstly, by relating stories from my experience of P4C, this reflective paper has conveyed a sense of the playfulness, freedom and richness available when 'teaching material' is philosophically inviting, the process of dialogue participatory and open-ended and the intentions of educators genuinely exploratory. Dialogue seekers need to be prepared for the unexpected, and to embrace a variety of sources of contribution to the dialogue. Sources that have a role in questioning the appearance of things, and therefore acting as contributors to creative and critical thinking and dialogue, can include intermediate areas of experience or transitional phenomena, metaphorical, poetic, fictional and anecdotal material. Experimenting with this pedagogy and listening to young children engaging in philosophical dialogue, during a time of felt limitations in the given curriculum of both schools and teacher education, offered an open space in which to consider alternatives, within the dialogues themselves, but also as a line of flight from curricular and pedagogical constraint.

Secondly the interplay between the dialogues with children and my university based work with trainees and with teachers, has prompted deep-seated questions regarding different purposes of dialogue and the

respective roles of teachers/adults and children within them. Critical incidents appear to prompt useful dialogues among practitioners about knowledge claims and the ethics of classroom practice. This creative use of episodes of experience sheds a new light on the instructive worth of 'anecdotal' material in professional training, often discouraged as a source of illumination.

Finally, the community of enquiry pedagogy is one well worth trying in the university, to enable tutors and students to explore streams of meaning and get at fundamental questions of belief and value in their subject areas, and as a powerful way of developing critical and creative thinking skills. It could be transforming of academics' dialogues with one another.

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