

47th Annual Conference of the Association for Moral Education

Symposium

Views of Childhood in Moral Education for Social Justice

Childhood and Moral Education's Amorphous Future: A Levinasian Approach to Philosophy for Children.

Jonathan Wurtz (University of Memphis)

Thinkers like Nancy Vansieleghem (2005) and Gert Biesta (2011) have criticized the traditional justification of philosophy for children (P4C) for moral education. According to them, the traditional Lipmanian justification of philosophy in school suffers from an instrumentalization problem. For Lipman, philosophy should be introduced into primary and secondary schools because it is the most appropriate discipline for cultivating “critical thinking”. He further pushes the urgency of this claim by tying the figure of the critical thinker with that of the good citizen. In other words, the ultimate necessity and goal of P4C is determined by its capacity to produce the right kind of citizen for democratic life—i.e., the critical thinker. Vansieleghem and Biesta both individually criticize the traditional justification of P4C in education for being instrumental. P4C, in other words, is only legitimate in so far as it is in the service of democracy and liberal political justice. For both Vansieleghem and Biesta, this is problematic because P4C becomes an agent of the status quo all the while identifying itself as a nuanced form of education that radically allows us to rethink the capacities and responsibilities of childhood.

In response to this kind of instrumentalization issue, P4C practitioners have pushed for a more child-centered form of education that aims to cultivate children's own epistemic agency and moral responsibility. Rather than cultivating good citizens, the focus is now on cultivating the child's philosophical nature as well as enhance their agency in their own growing up through philosophy. In other words, moral education is not supposed to produce an already known and normalized subject, but is supposed to involve the children in their own subject production. While I am sympathetic to this move for many reasons, I want to argue that this new approach to P4C moral education still falls prey to the instrumentalization problem by defining childhood relative to adulthood. Through this

relative conceptualization, I argue, P4C practitioners overburden the concept of childhood with the values of adulthood, and in doing so, undermine the radical newness of childhood from realizing itself.

To begin to rethink what ethics education can look like, I turn to the moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. From a Levinasian perspective, childhood is a primordial expression of radical alterity. The child is the radically other and as such cannot be pre-conscripted within a peculiar adult moral project. By acknowledging the radical independence of childhood from adulthood, Levinas gives us a way out of the instrumentalization problem by transforming what moral education can look like. The goals of moral education can never anticipate the concrete face to face encounter that occurs in the community of inquiry. As a result, P4C practitioners cannot enter this community with already pre-made normative goals. On the contrary, from a Levinasian perspective I argue, the goals of moral education in P4C must be constructed in the immanent face to face interactions that occur in the community of inquiry. Only then will we have, according to Levinas, an ethical form of moral education.

Moral education and what is already familiar to us

Florian Franken Figueiredo (NOVA University of Lisbon)

Moral education aims to empower people to become moral agents and contribute towards creating and sustaining a more just and moral society. The 'Philosophy for Children' (P4C) programme, initiated in the 1970s by Matthew Lipman and Ann-Margaret Sharp, claims to be an adequate starting point to achieve this aim. In my talk I argue that, if moral education aims to be meaningful in the practice of philosophy with children this requires challenging the traditional pictures of childhood, education, and the nature of moral values on a theoretical level.

My talk falls in to three parts in which I present traditional pictures that need to be challenged and a final part in which I offer an alternative view of moral education. I start with the traditional understanding of the nature of moral values and argue that this understanding is based on the metaphysical idea that the existence of moral values derives from the transcendent idea of the Good. In this picture the philosophical task is to epistemically identify the ontologically presupposed values. In the second part I argue that this picture leads to a still dominant idea in education. According to this idea, education is conceived of as formation, i.e. the adaptation to *a priori* forms, the transcendent ideas (knowledge or truth). Philosophy, understood as the epistemic tool to identify the ideas, serves to facilitate good formation. Since this process is determined by ideas that exist *a priori* there is no flexible space in it for change or novelty. In the third part I argue that traditional ideas of values and education imply a

concept of child and childhood that is inadequate for the success of moral education. Children are often not conceived of as persons who have their own way of thinking and their own way of life that, as such, needs to be respected. They are often treated like unformed objects that need to be formed and become future adults by identifying the moral values that the latter have already identified. This picture leads to a distorted relationship between the learning child and the educating adult which prevents successful moral education.

Finally, I present a different view of practicing philosophy with children that might be more promising. Moral education should abandon the view that children need to epistemically identify ontologically existing values. Moral values are embedded in practices that are socially shared by children and educators. This means that, in principle, children in school are already familiar with (some) moral values which should be the basis for a dialogue about (and not an epistemic inquiry into) the values between children and educators. Children should be taken for interlocutors that are able to find out in a dialogue with educators what they think the moral values are and whether or not they are mistaken in their pre-assumptions of what they are. Moral education is thus conceived as a shared dialogue in which children and educators learn from each other about what is already familiar to them.

Philosophy with Children as and for moral education

Claire Cassidy (University of Strathclyde)

Moral education takes many guises, often taking place in schools, arguably because it is easier to socialise children into a desired way of being (Biesta, 2015). This assumes a particular view of the child, one that sees her as an entity to be moulded into what she will become, or what society wants her to become. The sense that the child is not yet fully part of society is clear from this perspective. In many ways it assumes a Dionysian view of the child (Jenks, 1996). The Dionysian child is inherently bad, perhaps amoral, and education must be employed to create a child who is good, who fits within society. It does not serve society well to have aberrant children. Indeed, society does not welcome children who do not conform as we (adults) tend to look towards them as messianic figures who 'are our only hope that there will be a future' (Jessop, 2018, p.446), a feature that dominates as we hurtle onwards in our destruction of the planet. This being the case, we (adults) often seek to serve our own ends – salvation – through the ways in which we educate our children, and the moral education of children is paramount if society and the wider environment are to be protected. That said, if we are to take account of Jessop's concern, it is not perhaps that society must be protected but

that our idealised version of society must be protected and projected into the future for our children and we, as adults, often determine what that future ought to be.

One approach that might address the issue of children being absent in the design and development of society is practical philosophy with children and young people. Childism, that calls for a 'profound ethical restructuring' (Wall, 2010, p.3), may offer a perspective to moral education that allows us to strive for morally educated citizens. Lipman (2003) advocates the need for a moral education that allows children to be part of a community. This is premised on a different view of the child, one that moves a step further from the one that likens the child to the god of wine, ecstasy and ritual madness. Practical philosophy with children is premised on the child as being-in-and-of-the-world (Kennedy, 2010; Murrells, 2013; Cassidy & Mohr Lone, 2020). Importantly, practical philosophy as espoused by Lipman (2003) and Matthews (1994), recognises children's competence as moral thinkers. Moral thinking, one would hope, leads to moral action. Philosophy with Children enables children and young people, by furnishing them with the skills and dispositions, to progress their thinking with a view to engendering action that takes account of that thought and the world of which they are a part.

Crucially, in order to ensure morally educated citizens, the education itself should be moral. Beyond this, while moral education should be ethically driven, those who educate – teachers – need also to be ethical beings-in-and-of-the-world. It is proposed, here, that Philosophy with Children could form part of this ethically driven moral education.

Right under our noses: the postponement of children's political equality and the NOW

Joanna Haynes (Plymouth University)

This paper engages with the provocative conference question: *should moral education include attention to issues of social justice?* We are troubled by the 'should', as if action related to injustice could be optional. The conference outline acknowledges institutional constraints when educators seek to address social justice in the context of schooling; contradictions of raising questions of equality, care or respect, when children and young people are legally compelled to go to school. The conference outline acknowledges that schools can perpetuate moral harm and injustice. Such harms may be overt and systemic, or individual. Injustices may be perpetuated unintentionally when educators adopt 'progressive' pedagogies and are blind to their positionalities, or to the im/possibilities of 'safe spaces' where new challenges to injustice might emerge.

However, there are always cracks, unexpected openings, shifts and differences in the fabric of everyday life in classrooms. The conference outline mentions race, gender and disability. Notably absent are references to age. Our work has been concerned to raise issues of ageism and diminishing of child/ren, including in fields purporting to be sensitive to inequalities. Education practices cannot be ethical, without urgent attention to age/ism. Moral agency is completely entangled with political agency, and education has so far failed to address the political agency of children.

This paper relates to our association with the movement of Philosophy for/with Children. Part of the draw of the Philosophy with Children movement is its declared respect for children, its recognition, not only of children's capacities and tendencies to philosophise but the openings for childhood and philosophy of convivial philosophising. There is ongoing discourse within this movement regarding the politics of the community of enquiry, and the extent to which it lives up to liberatory ideals (Gregory, Haynes & Murris, 2017; Gregory and Lavery, 2018; Lin & Sequiera, 2017).

This paper considers the ethos of facilitation in philosophical enquiry with children, and the spatial-temporal order of the community of enquiry. Facilitation can be enacted as a chronological practice of progress and development that works against child, in terms of political agency. This paper theorises practices of facilitation grounded in philosophies of childhood that assume listening to child/ren as equals, as already able to philosophise, and against sameness. Drawing on Toby Rollo (2016, 2020), we ask how facilitation might be re-formed in respect of Rollo's notion of the plurality of children as they are, and with all that they bring, rather than to prepare children for a future they have not been included in making, for politics-as-it-is, for philosophy-as-it-is.

We explore implications of the posthumanist reconfiguration of the 'zipped' body in the light of including the disciplinary, imaginative *and* enabling energies of chronological time through the concept now/ness. We shift from 'zipped' to 'unzipped' bodies, through the notion of affect, to explore the temporal and spatial dimensions of facilitation in Philosophy with Children and children's political agency. We re-turn to David McKee's *Not Now Bernard* (1980), getting 'inside the text', and attending to the postponement of equality in Philosophy with Children.
