Asking Questions

Thinking Skills and Early Childhood Education

Patrick JM Costello

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reviewed by Lorna Crossman

Patrick Costello has several inter-related themes: the importance of teaching thinking skills (or 'promoting effective thinking') especially as represented through the activity of philosophy for children; the contribution to and relationship of this to citizenship education, PSE and the development of argument.

Despite its title, this book takes one particular approach to the teaching of thinking skills - that of philosophy for children. So would teachers and students reading this book actually end up knowing what philosophy for children is and how its process transforms the more usual patterns of teaching? Would those professional philosophers who doubt its viability be swayed?

The process is introduced in Chapter 3 but is sandwiched between refutations of those professional philosophers, including Mary Warnock, Roger Scruton, and John White, who suggest the enterprise is not possible with primary age children. Although the refutations and clarifications are necessary and (in my view) justifiable, the pattern of this chapter detracts from a clear description of what the process actually is. There are two chief casualties: the possibility of using non-contrived stories; and the role of questions asked by children.

Despite some tributes to the work of Karen Murris and a long passage on Bettelheim's views of the richness and necessity of fairy tales, one is introduced in this book only to the idea of using contrived stories - particularly those written by Matthew Lipman, and those written by Patrick Costello. I doubt if Bettelheim would willingly regard his book on the riches of fairy tales as lending his endorsement to such contrived stories, which Lipman himself describes as deliberately short on action and characterisation. Costello's characters sound more as though they have come from nineteenth century bowdlerised morality tales for children with his names - Knowlittle, Knowless, and Knownothing - and this from the man who has an entire chapter on indoctrination. Karin Murris uses real children's books written by a wide variety of children's authors, available to every-

body - a point far more important than the fact that she uses video as a medium for transmitting some of these stories. Contrived stories, especially those written by one author, are an issue and one that should be of importance in a discussion on indoctrination, with which this book opens.

That part of the process in which children's questions are elicited is described, but introduced rather misleadingly for those students and teachers absolutely new to the process: 'The questions asked by teachers in order to elicit the children's responses...' (p39). This statement, which on a first reading could seem to confirm the usual expected pattern of classroom life - teachers ask questions in order to elicit responses from children - would not matter if successive chapters took up the process and the role of children's questions in it much more clearly.

Unfortunately, this essential element in philosophy for children, dies a death. Chapter 4 ('Developing Philosophical thinking in the Early Years Classroom') contains about 17 pages of transcribed dialogue. There is not one example of a child initiating or asking a question, or expressing their own interest, curiosity or concern about an issue or theme in the shared text, whether written or film. The teachers retain control of all the initiating questions and set the themes for discussion.

In Chapter 5, after the full text of a contrived story, a set of questions is laid out for discussion. Costello writes (p. 52): 'Stories such as the above, if read to pupils by the teacher ... are likely to provoke thoughtful discussion.' But how do we know? Why are we deprived of the questions the children asked, or at least their initial observations - if indeed they were ever given the chance to voice any? And why was a contrived story necessary when the `real' book world and the film world supplies rich stories on the same themes? In Appendix 2 we learn nothing of what the children found curious or interesting in Costello's contrived story 'The Land of Youth'.' Costello controls the opening of the conversation about the story.

It is true that these dialogues are described as 'annotated'. But there is a significance in what we consistently omit in annotations, a hint that this part is not considered of interest or value. This impression is confirmed by what teachers do say. For example, when a video is about to be shown, a teacher says (p. 74): 'Well, shall we watch the video now? Now *I'm* going to ask you some questions after the video. So you must learn to listen to the video very carefully, so *that you can answer the questions.'* Costello himself then follows up with, 'After you've watched the story, *we'll* ask you some questions' [my italics].

Yet the way of philosophy for children as normally practised by those whom Costello names, eg, Matthew Lipman, Karin Murris, Catherine McCall et al, would be to ask the children to ask the questions and to so structure the situation that they do and are honoured for doing so. In fact, many long stretches of dialogue in this book are like the depressing classroom dialogues produced in the research on classroom communication patterns. Throughout the system such research shows children asking few questions while teachers retain a monopoly of asking them, children making

brief, unelaborated statements which are elicited by a teacher's questions and evaluated by the teacher before that teacher then moves on to the next child. There are a few exceptions, but too few. No one would gain any sense from this of the excitement of watching people like Catherine McCall and Karin Murris in action, and the transformative aspect of this process.

The dialogues are full of tag questions used by the teacher. Tag questions assume there no 'justifiable alternatives' (an expression used by Costello in discussing indoctrination). Used among peers they oil the social wheels and are therefore deliberately non-controversial - 'It's a nice day, isn't it?' Used in an educational setting they are used to summarize that knowledge to which there are no `warrantable alternatives' in order to proceed - 'So, triangles have three sides, don't they?' (I am using a Costello example of a statement to which there are no warrantable alternatives.) But they are also used unilaterally by teachers as a control and approval device in their inevitable situation of unequal power relationships; they assume assent and 'obviousness' -'We eat up our greens, don't we?' They tip easily into assuming there are no warrantable alternatives to the teacher's judgement -'That was a nice story wasn't it?'

'That was a silly thing to do wasn't it?' The linguistic form does not permit discussion. In these annotated dialogues, tag questions appear frequently in the contingent teaching (that teaching which needs a response form moment to moment, rather than an initiating question or expositional monologue). They frequently accompany an evaluation with no questions raised to take the thinking further on. For example (p. 53), 'Zack [a pupil] «Don't chuck stones at cars.» MB [teacher] «Right. That's not a very sensible thing to do is it?»' Wouldn't good contingent teaching here ask, 'Why not?' so that Zack is helped to clarify his thinking and give him an entry into expressing his understanding of causal relationships and consequences? Or good contingent teaching in philosophy for children might inform him that he has given an appropriate example (the children have asked what 'to be sensible' means). 'That seems a good example of being sensible Zack - can you tell us why it's sensible not to throw stones at cars?' At least in this way he would acquire a vocabulary which other children can begin to use.

Much of the dialogue takes that pattern. This is not discussion, nor is it extension of children's thinking. It lacks all the transformation of communication patterns and of the role of the teacher demonstrated so vividly in the *Transformers* video, to which Costello refers, in which Catherine McCall worked with 6 year olds.

In other places the children's thinking is taken from them. For example (p. 51): 'Gareth: «Don't let dogs in the playground.» MB: «You don't let dogs in the playground - they might make a mess mightn't they?»' But how do we know this was Gareth's priority and reasoning? Might not he have been going to say that other children might get frightened? Or that a dog might bite someone? The tag questions assumes the obviousness of what he was saying. But it is not obvious at all and all he needed was that contingent facilitative question - 'Why not?' (It is also very difficult for a child to disagree courteously with a teacher-asked tag questions.)

Not once are the children handed the word 'example' though this is what they are all giving. Indeed it is hard to imagine how else one could answer the instructions and questions set by the teacher. What does 'being sensible', 'help each other', mean? Indeed the school rules which are supposedly under discussion need questions hurled at them. How does one obey a 'rule' which simply says `Be sensible'?

What this in turn deprives the children of is a model for their own contingent interactions with other children's contributions. There is no vocabulary being acquired which can help them evaluate their own and other's thinking. There is no model that can be internalised for listening carefully and questioning another child in a helpful way. Yet this is normally regarded as progress within a group, i.e. when children can see the problems in what somebody else has said; or when children can appreciate a good example or a good argument. Another missing feature is held to be important by Lipman and Catherine McCall - those small strategies which turn monologues into dialogues. For example, 'I agree with ... when she says ...' or 'I don't agree with ... when he says ...'. There is next to no interaction among these children represented in this book until one reaches chapter 6 ('Teaching Young Children the Skills of Argument'). Elsewhere, contributions are overwhelmingly addressed to the teacher with little reference to anyone else. The dialogues read much more like a rather poorly conducted circle time.

Does it matter? This book includes a concern with citizenship education. As citizens we do not need to be, or have, only people who can solve problems; we need to be, and have, people who can 'find' problems; who can question what is being put forward as 'obvious'. If we are handed racist literature, no one is going to be there to identify it as racist literature; to ask us questions to 'understand' it. We have to be able to ask the questions of the text. Costello (1). 101) describes philosophy for Children's broad aim as 'to foster, in a manner which is respectful of the child, those mental habits which are the foundations of successful living.' One of those habits is to ask one's own questions, find one's own themes, and sometimes resist the 'agenda' of a writer.

As educationalists we are told our role is to stir children's curiosity, help them develop questioning minds. What then is the point of teachers monopolising all questions? How can children develop this except through the practice and practising of asking questions? It was one of the most important innovations in Philosophy for Children, replacing the normal pattern where a teacher reads a story and then asks his/her own questions; or watches a film piece with the children warning them to watch it carefully in order to answer teacher's questions, not their own.

It has been argued that the problem for teachers in changing their communication patterns in the classroom is the deeply internalised image of the teacher as the person who must know it all; the person who monopolises question asking; the person whose job it is to evaluate each contribution a child makes so that others know what kind of things to say. Costello is concerned with teacher training. In no way does this book give the kind of picture of Philosophy for Children that could help change that image and hand over the practice in questioning and thinking to children.

It is interesting that in Chapter 7 ('Early Childhood Education and the Preparation of Teachers'), he suggests that, in working with transcripts of dialogues, two important questions should be used to initiate discussion. First, what are the key themes of each dialogued Secondly, what evidence is provided of children's abilities in regard to thinking, reasoning and argument? Nowhere does he suggest that one should consider who set those themes and why, whether the children's themes might have been different; what the role of the teacher was in taking the children further in their ability to think, reason and argue. Yet all the research indicates that it is teacher behaviour that needs to change. I would agree with Costello's acceptance of the inequality of experience and knowledge between pupils and teachers therefore necessitating non-symmetrical relationships. The point is that excellent use has to be made of precisely that asymmetry.

NOTES

1. Contrived stories are also an odd genre in that they confuse what is accepted as fictional and what language game is actually being played. Appendix Two refers to Costello's story the Land of Youth. A long discussion with his 8-11 year olds might have been helped by the words 'literal' and 'non-literal' or ·metaphorical', and what happens when one confuses the two, as well as the language of 'proof and evidence' for in the language game of story and poetry, people can claim the sun smiles and very young children show they can distinguish this from 'reality'. That is the joy of nonsense nursery rhymes. Yet a real and admittedly rather puzzling personal experience to which Richard is laying claim and would have been very interesting to explore in terms of evidence, proof, causal and explanatory chains of reasoning , is ignored. Surely it is possible to write a story which does not confuse these two 'games'?

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