

Picturebooks, Pedagogy, and Philosophy

A review of Joanna Haynes & Karin Murriss'

Picturebooks, Pedagogy, and Philosophy by Richard Morehouse.

Richard Morehouse

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Joanna Haynes & Karin Murriss

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There is no guideline or insurance policy to cover the new and unfamiliar territory that we enter by encouraging children to think independently, to question and to engage in dialogue” (Haynes & Murriss, 2012, p. 183). I chose this sentence to open this review as it provides a quick picture of the nature and style of the book. This work provides no easy answers for the uses of picture books but instead is a comprehensive examination of how picture books contribute to our understanding of pedagogy and philosophy. If one reflects on the title, one may notice that it does not include a reference to Philosophy for Children. This appears to be intentional. My sense is that the authors consider themselves educators of philosophy who use picture books as a way to teach philosophy. While the authors advocate for the teaching methodology that is grounded in the work of Matthew Lipman and others involved in Philosophy for Children (P4C), the authors do not wish to only address this narrower audience. They are educators and philosophers who use P4C as a part of their teaching approaches. “Picturebooks and philosophy for children (P4C) provide a framework to support adults’ exploration with courage and confidence” (Haynes & Murriss, 2012, p. 1). The semantics here are important. The authors are saying that in addition to being a methodology for teaching, P4C is a way of looking at and understanding philosophy and picture books in the classroom and as a way of supporting this exploration by adults.

The introduction to the book, entitled “Censorship and Controversy in the Classroom,” is used to raise awareness of censorship and problems that could occur in reading and discussing picture books philosophically. Haynes and Murriss are concerned about the effects of emotions and the “upheaval of thought” that accompanies the growth of our knowledge (p. 2). To gain a working sense of the emotional affects and the upheaval of thought that happen when children are engaged in thinking and talking together, the authors draw on deep and wide reading in the nature of the child, the nature of education and the nature of literature from writings of philosophers, social scientists and social theorists (psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists) and educators as well as their own experience and reflection. The introduction is peppered with some great panels (p. 7; p. 10; p. 11; p. 12; p. 13 & p. 14) from some exciting and interesting picture books and end with a diagram showing arguments against avoidance and censorship in dialogues around picture books (p. 17). This chapter may move the reader to begin a small experiment in a class, or to a deeper examination of picture books as tools for philosophical discussion; it may even move potential users of picture books to a fuller embrace of picture books as a method of teaching philosophy. If the readers are engaged by this introduction, they will be pulled further into experimentation and reflection on *Picturebooks, Pedagogy, and Philosophy*.

“Provocative Picturebooks” is the first section of the book. The next two sections of the book are entitled “Being a Child” and “Philosophical Listening.” “Provocative Picturebooks” is not merely a titillating section teaser title but a signal of what is to come: “Playing with Dangerous Picturebooks” (Chapter 2) and “Not so Innocent Picturebooks” (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 is on the move “From Philosophical Novels to Picturebooks.” This section should prove of great interest to practitioners of P4C who have dismissed picture books without using them. Sadly, after 30 years of sporadic work with children, and teachers using Philosophy for Children approaches, I place myself in that group, but not for much longer. The move to picture books presented in Chapter 3 requires a close reading, as do the 50 plus pages that come before it.

The quote that follows is a good example of the depth of the authors’ understanding of the scholarship that they utilize. While they do not source this particular idea (nor should they), my own reading led me to recall the early and more recent work of Jerome Bruner. The authors write, “Literature that contains both the everyday and the strange and unfamiliar mediates philosophical understanding. Philosophical enquiry requires delicate facilitation between the abstract and the concrete, otherwise learners and teachers lose themselves in meaningless abstraction” (p. 62). To me, this quote is reminiscent of *Acts of Meaning* (1990) in which Bruner writes about the canonical and the unusual. The passage from Haynes and Murriss also resonates with Bruner in both *Toward a Theory of Instruction* in which he discusses ways to make pedestrian content fresh and lively (1966) and *The Culture of Education* in which he challenges us to understand and re-think our intuitive or folk pedagogies (1996). As an aside, the early Bruner was also an influence on the thinking about and the development of Lipman’s community of inquiry approach to P4C.

Within the same paragraph, the authors further enrich the readers’ understanding of how education and philosophy inform each other. Haynes and Murriss cite Jean-Francois Lyotard on the nature of philosophical texts. A reading is only philosophical when:

... it is autodidactic, when it is an exercise in discomposure in relationship to the text ...

Teaching philosophy is not the transmission of a ‘body’ of knowledge, knowledge of how thing should be done or what to feel – but simply that it is to be done (pp. 61 -62).

Lyotard’s point is also Lipman and colleagues argument for “doing philosophy”. Haynes and Murriss articulate and extend these ideas first in this chapter and then throughout the book.

While not wishing to undervalue the next three chapters of this section, “Picturebooks as Philosophical Texts,” “Emotions and Picturebooks” and “Literary and Philosophical Responses to Picturebooks,” as they contribute greatly to understanding this provocative book, I hurry on to yet another all too brief examination of the second section entitled “Being a Child.” But before leaving “Provocative Picturebooks,” I refer the reader to the conclusion of the section. Haynes and Murriss offer an outline of what they considered significant when selecting Picturebooks for children and adults. The authors organize their criteria into three groups: epistemological, ethical and political, and aesthetic (pp. 121 – 122). This summary is very helpful given the nuanced enunciation of the ideas in this section. The reader, however, should not use these two pages as shorthand for understanding the material, but rather as a vehicle for reflecting on their own understanding of the ideas presented here.

“Being a Child” is the second section of the book. The four chapters are entitled “Slippage Between Realms,” “Taking Dogs and Moving Bears: The Realms of Meaning,” “Philosophy, Adult and Child” and “Authentic Ownership of Knowledge and Understanding.” I will condense the content of “Slippage Between Realms” with a quote that begins the chapter, it “explores the relationship between art and reality” (p. 125). The authors’ inves-

tigation of art and reality is rigorous and comprehensive. I have one small exception to their accuracy. They cite Kieran Egan as correctly arguing for a broader and more nuanced understanding of experience, but incorrectly citing Egan as agreeing with Dewey regarding the challenge of moving from the local to the exotic (cf, Egan, 2002, pp. 107 -114).

“Taking Dogs and Moving Bears: The Realms of Meaning” focuses on imaginative philosophizing, in other words, how the child and child-like play with ideas, pictures and words in a community of inquiry that can contribute to philosophy. Perhaps it does not need to be said in this review that philosophy inform our work with children, but work with children also informs philosophy. Additionally, careful attention to what children say and listening with a philosophical and non-judgmental hear, can also inform developmental psychology.

“Philosophy, Adult, and Child” argues that P4C can be transformative of educational practice by providing an approach to inclusivity of both contents and participants via the community of inquiry. In the following statement, the authors’ nuanced perspective on P4C is clearly stated. They write, “Our approach is to consider good conditions for critical and responsive enquiry and dialogue based on contextual experiences, rather than proposing universal approaches to P4C” (p 157). The authors are also supportive and cautious about the role of measurement of achievement. They argue that independence and the exercise of agency may be stifled if measurement exerts too large a presence in the teaching and learning environment (p. 161). The chapter ends with a list of key areas of choice for teachers to consider when making decisions regarding the relative risk and merit of teaching within the moral domain. “Philosophy, Adult, and child” and the book, as a whole, are examples of “thinking aloud,” which I characterize as an invitation to observe the authors’ thinking processes as well the content of their thoughts. Their approach allows readers to feel they have an invitation to think for themselves by using the depth, breadth, and contours of the information provided.

My comments on the previous chapter provide a helpful bridge to “Authentic Ownership of Knowledge and Understanding,” the last chapter of this section. In this chapter, the readers are invited to embed the idea of an open-ended dialogue that nonetheless provides a safe environment for disagreement and the “owning” of one’s voice into his/her work with children and adults. This openness and skepticism is grounded in a classroom culture that is supportive of individuals in their personhood. Paradoxically, to own one’s knowledge and understanding, a person needs to be open-minded and to have opinions, to speculate about and give support for what is as well as what might be, to acknowledge the ideas of others and to disagree with them, and sometimes with one’s own ideas. The culture of the classroom advocated here might well be called a democratic laboratory (p. 183).

The three chapters that end the final section, “Philosophical Listening,” of this enjoyable and thought-provoking book are as follows: “Listening and Juggling in Philosophical Space,” “Listening and Not Listening in Schools,” and “Toward a Critical Practice of Philosophical Listening.” My comments on “Toward a Critical Practice of Philosophical Listening” will provide the bookend for this review. This chapter lives up to its title and provides an integrative retrospective for the book.

“Throughout this book the community of philosophical enquiry has been proposed as a radical approach to education” (p 218) and a challenge to the delivery model of teaching. The authors convincingly argue that a community of philosophical enquiry is embodied and situated. The approach demands an acknowledgement of children’s diverse, lived experiences (p. 219).

A last quote provides a verbal illustration of the scholarship, engagement, and humility exemplified by Haynes and Murriss:

or top down professional development, we propose a critical framework for learning about P4C through experience, drawing on action research, and practical philosophy. ... Whilst we are willing to share and theorize about our experiences with others, we avoid positioning ourselves as 'having the answers' to give to other educators. (p. 225)

This book demands a close reading as the authors have extracted a rich vein of knowledge from their wide and diverse reading, and integrates their experience and wisdom as illustrated by the well-woven fabric of critique and examples that are at the heart of this work.

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