Notes from the Field
Philosophy for Children and Art Workshops

Nurşah Yılmaz and Yılmaz Murat Bilican

Translated by Irmak Ertuna Howison with Google and ChatGPT

Our paths crossed seven years ago when we had recently adopted the P4C (Philosophy for Children) method as philosophy teachers. Our shared enthusiasm for P4C resulted in collaborative development and facilitation of different workshops. In Izmir, where we reside, we became involved in workshops organized by the local government on weekends. These programs were specifically tailored for children aged 7-10, particularly those residing in underserved areas. The Ministry of National Education does not have any pedagogical approach related to Philosophy Education for Children. Consequently, our efforts in this area rely solely on collaboration with municipalities or non-governmental organizations. We initiated introductory meetings to elucidate the P4C method, aiming to integrate it into the activity programs organized by municipalities for children. Subsequently, the municipality coordinated the involvement of volunteer students and provided meeting venues using its internal resources. This enabled us to conduct P4C Workshops consistently every weekend for a period of three years. Concurrently teaching in schools and participating in these workshops as facilitators, we found immense inspiration in the children's eagerness and passion for active engagement. After depleting the widely available stimuli resources in our workshops, we soon found ourselves in need of fresh materials. Turning our attention to children's literature, both in Turkish and translations from other languages, we engaged in an intensive reading initiative. From this exploration, we carefully curated a selection of approximately 40 children's books to incorporate into our investigations. Creating content for philosophical inquiry, we had the opportunity to apply most of these selections. Driven by the aspiration to share our insights with a broader audience, we compiled our work into a book, which was published in 2019.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, while conducting online workshops, we recognized the potential effectiveness of utilizing visual stimuli. In each session we used a work of art as a stimulus to initiate an inquiry using P4C methods. This realization prompted us to explore the realm of visual arts. Subsequently, we underwent an extensive preparatory phase, meticulously selecting works of art for our projects and conducting in-depth research on them. In this article, we aim to elucidate the rationale behind and advantages of employing works of art. Toward the conclusion of our discussion, we have included a practical application as an illustrative example. (Moreover, we have documented the applications involving works of art in a book published in 2022—see references.)

Why Art?

All children inherently possess an interest in various forms of artistic expression. We use the term "by nature" because, owing to their age, they find themselves in the most conducive phase for creating, dreaming, playing games, and producing artistic outputs. Childhood, characterized by heightened sensory perception, marks a period when children observe their surroundings with keen attention, striving to learn and comprehend. Simultaneously, this heightened sensory perception contributes to a rich world of imagination, prompting the child to reconfigure, modify, and experiment with their surroundings—driven by a natural inclination to play. In this context, it is pertinent to recall Nietzsche, who, inspired by Heraclitus ("time is a child playing by moving the checkers from side to side"), discusses the similarity between the artist and the child in the quest to understand becoming in terms of being and change. In *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche likens the activities of both the artist and the child to playing games. Both play innocently, outside the judgment of the moral sphere. Considering these attributes altogether, the profound connection between children and art becomes more apparent. Children engage with artistic creations with a freedom unencumbered by adult limitations. They express genuine interest, draw inspiration, emulate the artist, dream alongside the artist and interpret the work of art, all of which are, in a sense, a child's natural inclinations.

While our work with art doesn't aim to educate details about the history of art, it still serves to foster the development of conceptual thinking skills through art. This endeavor is not restricted to children with pre-existing artistic talents; it is designed for all children. Its overarching goal is to assist them in forming a unique bond with life through art, expanding their worldview, fostering personal sensitivity about themselves and their environment, instilling an interest in various artistic disciplines, and cultivating an aesthetic appreciation for art.

Notes about the Preparations

We can say that we were quite anxious when we started. We were going to discuss artists such as Bruegel, Magritte, Dali, Klee, and others with elementary school children, and we couldn't predict how the children would react, but we were determined to try. When we completed the first workshop, our anxieties were replaced by new and higher goals. We decided to use P4C methodology for our inquiry using works of art. The children were often ahead of us with their unexpected thoughts fueled by rich imaginations. The initial results we obtained boosted our confidence, and we embarked on reproducing examples from almost all art movements, ranging from abstract expressionism to pop art and surrealism. We thought and discussed extensively about each selected artwork, deliberating on the questions we would pose to the children and their potential responses. This thorough preparation facilitated our work during the inquiry. We discussed and structured each selected artwork, thinking about the questions we would pose to the children and their potential answers. One of the most touching occurrences, often absent in adults, was the unbiased approach of children towards artworks from any movement. In most workshops, we discovered that, thanks to the children, we could reach entirely new concepts beyond the typical, predefined ones. Another crucial point was that our art workshops, compared to other P4C workshops, tended to be more energized and fun. This indicated

that children, by their nature, could establish an easier and stronger connection with art. The following section includes sample questions and children's answers.

The Artworks Selected

When selecting artworks for our workshops, we did not favor a specific art movement or period. Our criteria revolved around the artwork being intriguing for children, capable of sparking their imagination, and having the potential to encourage the discovery of philosophical problems or concepts. We projected the chosen art works on a large scale—on the wall or smart classroom board—in a manner designed to capture children's attention, ensuring all details of the work were visible. Throughout our investigations, the works we utilized were primarily paintings, occasionally sculptures, and at times installations. Beneath each work, we included the artist's name, the work's title, its dimensions, the year it was made, and the name of the museum or gallery where it is housed.

Duration of the Inquiry

As inquiries can occur in diverse environments and under varying conditions, determining a universally applicable fixed duration has proven challenging. Consequently, we have opted to be flexible based on specific conditions. For instance, when inquiries occurred outside of the school setting, we allocated a total time of 90 minutes (comprising a 15-minute warm-up activity, a 40-minute discussion, a 10-minute break, and a 25-minute activity). In our school-based practices, where class sessions are typically 40-45 minutes, we structured investigations across two consecutive lessons (the first lesson covering a warm-up activity and investigation, and the subsequent lesson focusing on an activity and evaluation). Workshops were held outside the school, in venues provided by the municipality or online, on weekends and in the evening.

Age Cohorts

In our view, art isn't something exclusively crafted for children. We limited ourselves to establishing the minimum age for the artwork we intend to explore. With only a few exceptions, we deemed it unnecessary to impose an upper age limit for nearly all the selected works. For instance, when an application indicated an age group of 7+, it signified to us that we could engage with any age range, starting from 7 years old. In our inquiries, we worked on the same piece of art with children aged 7-9, as well as with individuals in high school and university, and we found that it posed no issue whatsoever. The workshops we planned outside of school were realized with the voluntary participation of parents who were interested in the subject. We registered the children in advance and created groups according to their age ranges.

Reading Artworks

At this stage, we perceived our efforts as a preparation phase for us as facilitators. We scrutinized the stimulus artwork to identify its key elements, discern what was within the work, and pinpoint aspects requiring attention. We also explored the work's position in art history, seeking to understand the artist's perspective. The purpose of doing this was to better understand the artist's world before the

workshops and to better structure the investigation with this background, rather than answer the possible questions of curious children in an ad-hoc manner. Additionally, we formulated "preparatory questions" designed for the children, ensuring a collaborative examination of the work.

Interpreting Artworks

As facilitators, we first evaluated the selected artwork conceptually. We crafted the conceptual framework to unfold during the inquiry. What philosophical questions could we explore through this work? What concepts could we delve into? The responses we had previously formulated for these questions constituted the central focus of our inquiry. During the workshops, we took a flexible attitude towards concepts and questions from the children that we had never considered. Thus, some sessions were conducted within the framework of questions posed by children that we had never thought about.

Warm-up Activities

No child can instantly think and initiate a discussion about a picture spontaneously presented to them, let alone in a group they haven't encountered before. This is why we incorporated warm-up activities and games before the inquiry. For groups unfamiliar with one another, we devised introductory games as part of the warm-up activity. The duration of these activities was limited to 15 minutes.

Presentation of the Artwork

Following the warm-up activity centered around the artwork in question, we projected it at its maximum size, ensuring that children could distinctly observe all the painting's details. Prior to transitioning to the questioning phase, our plan included a period where children would silently examine the work without offering any comments—simply gazing at the artwork for a minimum of 2 minutes. Throughout the inquiry, the artwork remained visible.

Initial Questions

In essence, preparatory questions are aimed at a close and concentrated examination of the artwork and are similar across the different works we selected. During this phase, children initiate a connection with the artwork and engage in thoughtful contemplation. We dedicated ample time to thoroughly addressing these questions before transitioning to discussion questions. At this stage, we did not ask questions from children since the aim was to recognize and describe the work of art and the questions were generally in the same category.

Discussion Questions

While moving on to the discussion stage, we first gave brief information about the owner of the work, its name, the year it was made and its location. Discussion questions include questions that enable the child to imagine, think and interpret what they see in the work, leading them to concepts.

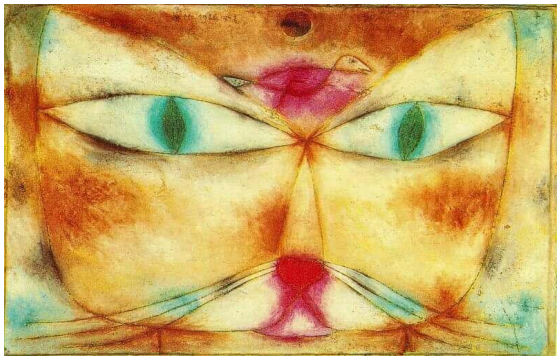
During the inquiry, it may not be possible to ask all the questions we have prepared beforehand, and sometimes children can change the main axis of the investigation by bringing a new perspective. Consequently, some inquiries were centered around the questions generated by the students. As facilitators, we have always shown flexibility in this regard.

End Activity

In this section, we include activities that we previously designed for children to reinforce the concepts discussed during the investigation and make them long-lasting.

An example of an inquiry: Is the bird in our mind or the one in the sky more real?

We showed the painting below after the warm-up activity. We encouraged children to look at the painting carefully and then moved on to the preparation questions.



Paul Klee, Cat and Bird (Kedi ve Kuş). 38.1 x 53.2 cm, 1928, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

Location and Ages 7-9

School (2nd and 3rd grade). Art museum/gallery: 7–9-year-olds who responded to an open invitation. In open air with underserved children, with the support of Volunteer Services Association through a collaboration with İzmir Painting and Sculpture Museum.

Our Preparation and Interpretation Notes of the Work

We did not share this background information with the children before or after the inquiry. Rather, we prepared ourselves by thinking about the work and learning its historical context.

This painting reminds us of children's drawings with simple lines and shapes. Ovals for the cat's eyes and pupils (and more loosely for the bird's body), triangles, ears, and nose. And a tiny red heart at the tip of that nose is striking. The cat looks eerily watchful, but also calm. A cat's whiskers look like violin strings. In his painting, Klee navigated a narrow color range from yellowish brown to bluish green. We can think about how the painter merges with colors. In this context, it is also possible to read the painting by asking questions about its relationship with the painter and the colors.

Klee was one of many modernist artists who thought and practiced that painting "creates meaning in its purity." In other words, he cared about using line, shape, and color for their own sake, rather than describing what is visible. This priority freed him to create images that were more about thought than perception. In conjunction, the bird in the painting we are considering appears to be flying inside the cat's forehead rather than above it, the bird almost in the cat's mind. The heart at the tip of the cat's nose can also be seen as a sign of its desire.

Interpreting the Work

In order to interpret this picture philosophically, we focused on the concept of "reality." The reason for this was that the bird image in the cat's head (mind) caught our eye at first glance. Therefore, we thought that by deepening the concept of "reality" we could move on to the distinction between what is real and what is mental, and from there to other related concepts. Looking at the painting in this light, some questions arise: What is the difference between the bird that actually exists, flapping its wings in front of our eyes, and the bird that we visualize and imagine in our minds when it is not there? What is the difference/relationship between something happening in our minds and actually happening? Undoubtedly, desires and needs may also determine the cat's idea of the bird. The cat's natural interest in the bird stems from its natural needs. Needs have a quality that determines our perception.

Lesson Plan

Warm-up Activity (We chose one of these to use.)

Drawing a creature: Children are asked to think of a living being that does not resemble any animal or human they know and draw a picture of this creature. Each child shows the drawing they made and explains the features of the creature they designed. (20 min.)

Drawing telephone game: Children stand in a circle. The facilitator shows a drawing to the first child and is asked to whisper what they see into their friend's ear. The child who listens tells the story to the next one. This continues and the last child is asked to draw what was whispered into their ear. (10 min.)

Preparation questions

- What do you see when you look at the painting?
- What animals are in the painting?
- How do the animals look? (Angry, calm, scared, sad, attentive, etc.)
- What shapes do you see in the painting? What do these shapes mean to you?
- What would you title this painting?

In many of our workshops, children mostly referred to the figure on the cat's head as "fish" because we had not yet uttered the name of the painting. In some workshops, kids didn't view it as a bird at first. In cases where there was no significant change in the children after the name of the

painting was said, we did not insist on saying "bird". Some of the titles children came up with for the painting are: Angry Cat, The Cat with a Heart, Romantic Cat, Cat and Fish, Cat and Chick.

Discussion Questions

We prepared some of these questions in advance. Some questions were generated by students during the inquiry.

- Where is the bird and what is it doing?
- Why do you think the painter drew the bird there?
- What kind of a relationship is there between the cat and the bird? (Love, friendship, animosity, hunter-prey.)
- What is the cat thinking?
- Is the bird inside or outside cat's head?
- Why does the cat imagine the bird? (Why is there a bird in cat's mind?)
- If you were to draw something inside the cat's mind, what would it be? What about inside a human's mind?
- Is the bird in your mind, or the one in the sky more real?
- What is the difference between the physical bird and the one in our minds (imagined birds)?
- What does it mean to picture something in our minds?
- How do we picture something in our mind? Can you think of examples?
- Does something need to exist for us to picture it in our minds?
- Can we picture in our minds something that doesn't exist?
- How do our needs affect our relationship with the world?
- Can our needs make us see the world differently?

In the inquiries conducted with this painting, which captivated and held the attention of nearly all children, we observed that the question "where is the bird?" garnered unexpectedly swift responses like "inside the cat's head." A small minority of children responded with "on its head." Subsequent questions easily led us to concepts such as thought, dream, and reality.

Upon delving into the concepts of thought, dream, and reality, we noted that the children set aside the cat and bird and began offering examples from their own experiences. In certain inquiry groups, discussions veered towards the cat's needs, its fondness for the bird (expressed primarily as love rather than a desire to eat), or the reasons behind dreams involving the bird, such as not liking it or not being on good terms. At this juncture, children moved further from the concepts of reality and imagination, expressing their opinions on desires and needs, and provided examples of needs that were in their minds at that moment.

Examples of Dialogues from Workshops

Question:

What are the differences between a bird we think of and the real one?

Answers:

-When we think, we become more free. We think of it as we wish.
-The bird in our thoughts can do whatever we want, we can think of it in any colors we want.
-He can be better friends with us.
- Our imaginary bird can be more colorful, more fun and creative than it actually is.
- The truth may be more boring.

Question:

If it was a person in the painting, what would you draw on his head?

Answers:

-Pizza.
-Heart, love.
-A beautiful view.
-The people he loves, his friends.
-My mom, my dad.

Question:

Why might the painter have drawn the bird above the cat's head?

Answers:

- Because the bird is the cat's friend, he loves it.
- Because he wants to catch the bird.
- The cat is hungry.
-He wants to play with the bird, but the bird runs away.

Question:

Can we think of something that does not actually exist?

Answers:

-Sometimes scary things come to my mind.
-Sometimes I dream, but they don't actually happen.
-Yes, sometimes I think about things that happen in cartoons, but they don't normally exist.

Question:

Are dreaming and thinking the same thing?

Answers:

-No, because we dream of the things we want to happen. But we think about the lessons.
-Yes, we think when we dream.
- The place I imagine in my imagination is more complex, but when I go and see the real thing, I see that it becomes a more orderly place.

Closing Activities

Creating hybrid animals: We distributed pages with animal pictures from old magazines and asked them to create a new hybrid animal by cutting pieces from the animal pictures they chose**.**

Do it like Klee: We asked the students "If you were to paint the picture "Cat and Bird", where would you draw the little heart at the tip of the cat's nose. We asked them to draw cat pictures with hearts, inspired by Klee's painting.

Conclusion

When assessing the workshops conducted using Klee's "Cat and Bird" painting, we observed that we successfully achieved the goals set at the outset. Collaborating with the children, we explored concepts such as thought, reality, dream, need, and desire, fostering the ability to contemplate and discuss these ideas.

Discussing and scrutinizing the painting in detail not only enhanced their conceptual thinking skills but also established a robust connection with the artwork. By the conclusion of the session, we were confident that the participating children would vividly remember this painting, approach other artworks with heightened attention, and be inclined to contemplate the meaning behind them.

References

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Author Information:
Nurşah Yılmaz and Yılmaz Murat Bilican are members of the Philosophy for Children Association