

# **Prospective preschool teachers learning to use picturebooks for philosophical inquiries**

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## **Abstract**

Prospective preschool teachers often incorporate picturebooks into their teaching practices in kindergartens as part of their training. However, they often rely heavily on asking children numerous questions while reading picturebooks, such as identifying the protagonists of the story, detailing the sequence of events, and exploring the who, what, when, where, and why. This approach may result in a superficial interrogation of the text, overlooking (i) the nuanced messages conveyed through illustrations or the synergy of text and imagery, and (ii) the potential opportunities that could arise if children were encouraged to pose their own inquiries through philosophical exploration, delving deeper into the themes presented in picturebooks. This research was conducted in 2023 with 36 prospective preschool teachers from the University of Crete, Greece. The research comprises two phases. In the initial phase, the student teachers established a philosophical community of inquiry and acquired several philosophical inquiry skills. Following each inquiry session, student teachers engaged in self-reflection and assessed their contributions, identifying aspects of their experience that are applicable to using picturebooks with kindergarten children. They then developed lesson plans centred around the philosophical exploration of these picturebooks. In the subsequent phase, student teachers received supervision as they implemented their lesson plans in a kindergarten and subsequently reflected on their teaching experiences. The findings illustrate both the advantages and challenges encountered by prospective preschool teachers when approaching literature from a philosophical perspective. Additionally, the student teachers reflected on the interconnectedness of literature and philosophy, as well as the potential benefits for both educators and children through this integrated approach.

## **Key words:**

literature, P4wC, picturebooks, preschool education, preschool teachers' training

## **Introduction**

There is extensive literature supporting the use of picturebooks in educational settings including Early Childhood Education (Arizpe & Styles 2015; Brouwer & Daly 2023; Fuimaono, Daly & Kelly-Ware 2023; Kelly-Ware et al 2024). Picturebooks play a crucial role in early childhood development, serving as powerful tools for fostering imagination, empathy and critical thinking skills (Ganea, Ma & DeLoache 2011), supporting language, culture and identity (Foe, Kelly-Ware & Daly 2022) and exploring diversity (Kelly 2012, 2018). When paired with philosophical inquiry, these books become even more valuable, offering children opportunities to explore complex ideas, ask questions, engage in meaningful discussions, and develop their own philosophical perspectives (Lipman 2003). By delving into the themes, characters and moral dilemmas presented in picturebooks, children can begin to grapple with fundamental questions about identity, ethics and the nature of existence (Haynes & Murris 2012; Wartenberg 2009).

The study of literature and philosophy in schools offers numerous opportunities for interdisciplinary exploration and intellectual growth. Both disciplines share a common goal of promoting critical thinking, self-reflection, and ethical inquiry among students (Nussbaum 1997). Literature can evoke emotions, stimulate imagination, and provoke contemplation about the human condition (Nussbaum 1997). Meanwhile, literature provides a fertile ground for philosophical exploration, as it presents narratives, characters and moral dilemmas that invite readers to ponder fundamental questions about life, morality and human existence (Lipman 2003). Through philosophical inquiry, students deepen their engagement with literary texts by analysing themes, questioning assumptions, and evaluating the ethical implications of characters' actions (Wartenberg 2009). Conversely, philosophy enriches the study of literature by offering analytical frameworks and conceptual tools for interpreting texts, encouraging students to approach literature with intellectual rigour and philosophical depth. By integrating literature and philosophy in schools, educators can create holistic learning experiences that foster intellectual curiosity, empathy and moral awareness in students in a relatable and accessible manner, making abstract ideas more tangible and engaging for young learners.

Can prospective preschool teachers provide a comprehensive learning experience for the pupils in kindergartens by integrating literature with philosophical inquiry? There is research regarding how prospective preschool teachers can use picturebooks to address complex social justice issues (Daly & Kelly-Ware 2024) based mostly on teachers' reflections upon their practice when using certain picturebooks with

children in kindergarten. Research indicates that preschool teachers, during shared book reading sessions, tend to pose questions aimed at assessing children's basic understanding of the text, primarily focusing on comprehension-level questioning and factual recall (e.g. specific events or character names), rather than engaging children in higher-order thinking, such as predicting outcomes or interpreting themes (Hamlin & Wisneski 2012; Hargreaves 1984; Heroman et al. 2010; Hindman et al. 2008). This tendency is partly due to the fact that (prospective) teachers are often not introduced to the concept of philosophy with children and have not integrated methods for philosophising with children into their teaching practice (Vansielegheem & Kennedy 2011). Furthermore, prospective preschool teachers may lack firsthand experience in understanding what constitutes a philosophical community of inquiry and how they might establish such a community with their pupils in the future (Nikolidaki 2023a).

This paper outlines a methodology for pairing literature (specifically picturebooks) with philosophy with children and integrating them into the practice of prospective preschool teachers at kindergartens. The primary research questions are as follows:

- How do prospective preschool teachers extract philosophical concepts and generate questions from picturebooks when they participate in a philosophical community of inquiry during their university laboratory sessions?
- How do prospective preschool teachers effectively facilitate philosophical discussions with pupils based on picturebooks when they are teaching in kindergartens?

These goals aim to investigate the efficacy of incorporating philosophical inquiry into preschool education through the medium of picturebooks and to assess student teachers' ability to apply these principles in their future teaching practices. For the sake of clarity and to avoid any misunderstandings, the term 'student teachers' will be used to refer to prospective preschool teachers, while 'pupils' or 'children' and 'teachers' will denote the children and the educators in classroom settings, respectively.

## **Method**

This study is based on action research, engaging student teachers in planning, acting (through their teaching in kindergartens), observing, and reflecting carefully, systematically and rigorously on their teaching methods and evaluation procedures

(Borgia & Schuler 1996; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018; Katsarou & Tsafos 2013). The focus is on introducing philosophical thinking through their practice in schools, using picturebooks as a key tool. The study comprised two parallel phases conducted during the winter academic semester of 2023. Thirty-six third-year student teachers from the Department of Preschool Education at the University of Crete participated in 13 laboratory sessions and taught for six consecutive Fridays in kindergartens. Each student taught three times per semester in local kindergartens in Rethymnon, Crete. In each kindergarten classroom, there was a group of four student teachers. Each session featured one student teacher as the teacher while the others acted as critical friends, assisting and providing feedback upon completion.

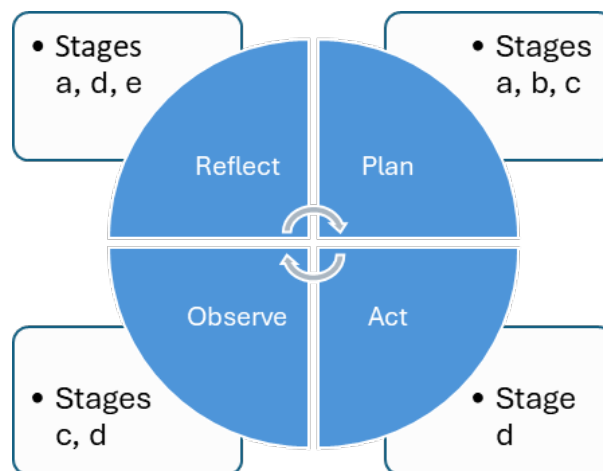
As far as the research design is concerned, the initial three laboratory sessions entailed imparting general guidelines for kindergarten teaching, completing documentation, and structuring lesson plans. Moreover, student teachers were introduced to the formation of a philosophical community of inquiry. Subsequently, the six laboratory sessions focused on equipping students with the skills to devise daily programs based on specific picturebooks.

The selection of picturebooks for constructing daily lesson plans encompassed:

- *The Rainbow Fish* by Marcus Pfister
- *Frog and a Very Special Day* by Max Velthuijs
- *Something Else* by Catherine Cave
- *The Last Noo-Noo* by Jill Murphy
- *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle
- *Animals' Letters to Santa Claus* by Sofia Nikolidaki

These selections were predicated on their ability to captivate children's attention through the interplay of text and imagery, as well as the potential for conveying varied, sometimes conflicting, messages. Most of these books have been utilised for Philosophy for Children (P4C) initiatives, facilitating multifaceted readings that afford both children and educators opportunities to delve into central, common and contestable concepts (Splitter & Sharp 1995), and to pursue diverse avenues for open philosophical discussions with children (Haynes 2008; Murriss & Haynes 2000).

The action research cycle progressed through several stages (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Action research cycle

In stage (a), the students needed to familiarise themselves with the concept of a community of philosophical inquiry. During each of the six three-hour laboratory sessions, student teachers engaged with a designated picturebook and learned to foster a community of inquiry (Lipman 2003; Sharp 2007), with the researcher acting as a facilitator.

- Student teachers took turns reading the text aloud, honing their expressive and interpretive reading skills. In instances where the text featured dialogue, they adjusted their voices accordingly. After reading, they engaged in individual reflection, followed by formulating questions in pairs or small groups for subsequent group discussion. Through a voting process, one question was selected for dialogue. Student teachers were allotted approximately 40 minutes to engage in the inquiry process, followed by around 20 minutes for group reflection on their engagement, the efficacy of their inquiries, and the types of thinking employed, supported by relevant examples.
- Additionally, student teachers were tasked with exploring the thematic connections and messages emanating from the book's illustrations and the synergy between images and text, identifying philosophical concepts. They discussed these connections with each other and the researcher.
- At the conclusion of each session, student teachers reflected individually either orally or in writing and evaluated their contributions, identifying elements applicable to their future use of picturebooks within kindergarten settings.

They also formulated questions designed to stimulate children's cognitive development.

In stage (b), student teachers devoted an additional hour to planning their teaching by devising playful activities aimed at fostering pupils' thinking across various curricular domains. The researcher also proposed activities to the student teachers, drawing on her prior experience as a P4C practitioner with children in kindergarten. These activities were subsequently critiqued and adjusted to accommodate the specific needs of children in each kindergarten classroom. Student teachers were encouraged to collaborate and become critical friends.

During stage (c), the student teachers were allowed two days to reform, modify and amend their lesson plans before teaching in kindergartens, and they sent these lesson plans to the researcher.

After each preparation session with a specific picturebook during laboratory lessons, student teachers taught weekly during stage (d) at various kindergartens. Each week, the researcher supervised a subset of student teachers engaged in kindergarten teaching, documenting their practices and the utilisation of picturebooks in classroom settings.

During half-hour segments preceding each laboratory session in stage (e), the researcher provided individual and collective feedback, highlighting exemplary practices and areas for improvement based on observations made during student teachers' practices in schools. Student teachers were encouraged to articulate rationales for the effectiveness or shortcomings of their practices and propose alternative approaches based on their observations. Time was also allocated for student teachers to share their experiences and practices that could be incorporated into future lesson plans organised by students.

The research data came from observations and notes generated by the researcher during the laboratory sessions. Secondly, data came from lesson observations by the researcher of the student teachers' teaching. And thirdly, data came from student teacher portfolios submitted at the end of the semester, which included lesson plans, samples of facilitated dialogues with pupils, written reflections on the facilitation strategies employed, and final reports encompassing self-assessment and peer assessment within each classroom group of four student teachers. All the data was originally in Greek, which the researcher translated into English.

## Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from all participants. Specifically, permission to conduct the research was granted by the Chair and the Assembly of the School of Education, Department of Preschool Education at the University of Crete. Student teachers consented to the use of data collected from their teaching interventions and observations in kindergartens, which would be further processed and analysed by the researcher. To protect the identities of children and preschool teachers at the kindergartens, all the data has been de-identified.

## Findings

Table 1 indicates how the data was collected and how it links to the research questions.

**Table 1:** Links between data and research questions.

| Data collection points                                                                     | Links to research questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Laboratory lessons                                                                         | Research Question 1: How do prospective preschool teachers extract philosophical concepts and generate questions from picturebooks when they participate in a philosophical community of inquiry during their university laboratory sessions? |
| The supervision of student teachers during their teaching practice in kindergarten schools | Research Question 2: How do prospective preschool teachers effectively facilitate philosophical discussions with pupils based on picturebooks when they are teaching in kindergartens?                                                        |
| Student teachers' written reflections during the laboratory lessons                        | Both research questions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

## The laboratory lessons

In the laboratory lessons, student teachers were encouraged to immerse themselves in inquiry and engage in philosophical dialogue. I assumed the role of facilitator during these sessions, which allowed time for reflection and discussion of questions or dialogues among the student teachers. They were invited, through dialogue, to uncover hidden concepts and generate questions that could foster deeper thinking in young learners. Table 2 illustrates the concepts identified by the student teachers and some of their explanations and justifications as noted by the researcher.

**Table 2:** Concepts that emerged from the picturebooks.

| Picturebook             | Concepts                 | Student teachers' comments and justifications                                                                                       |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>The Rainbow Fish</i> | Being egoistic           | The Rainbow Fish was egoistic because it wanted to keep the scales for itself.                                                      |
|                         | Being kind               | Being kind means that all the fish should be beautiful. Therefore, the Rainbow Fish should give away some of his shiny scales.      |
|                         | Sharing/not sharing      | Sharing is caring for the others and yourself. The Rainbow Fish should share his shiny scales.                                      |
|                         | Being unique             | All fish are different and unique. They all have to be accepted.                                                                    |
|                         | Being different          | The Rainbow Fish become happy when it started sharing.                                                                              |
|                         | Happiness                | The Rainbow Fish exchanged its shiny scales to become friends with the other fish.                                                  |
|                         | Acceptance               | Why was the octopus considered to be wise? How does an octopus give advice to a fish? How does it know what is the best for a fish? |
|                         | Wisdom                   | The Rainbow Fish compromised and gave away some of its scales to gain acceptance and friendship.                                    |
|                         | Giving advice            | The Rainbow Fish was altruistic because it gave its scales away without expecting something back.                                   |
|                         | Changing                 | Is it only me that I think the little fish is a bully? It convinces all the fish not to interact with the Rainbow Fish.             |
|                         | Exchanging               | The little fish is so self-confident and achieves what it wants to get (the shiny scales).                                          |
|                         | Friendship               |                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | Respect                  |                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | Compromise               |                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | Altruism                 |                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | Bullying                 |                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | Self confidence          |                                                                                                                                     |
| <i>Something Else</i>   | Loneliness               | Something Else has been really lonely and totally rejected by the others.                                                           |
|                         | Being Different          | Something Else is different because you cannot tell what type of animal it is.                                                      |
|                         | Feeling rejected         | However, everybody is different, aren't they?                                                                                       |
|                         | Acceptance               |                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | Caring                   |                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | Friendship               | Something Else tries to adapt and do things like others do but unsuccessfully.                                                      |
|                         | Matching with each other |                                                                                                                                     |

|                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                    | <p>Uniqueness vs sameness</p> <p>Trying to adapt</p> <p>Suspiciousness</p> <p>Not knowing the other</p> <p>Failure</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <p>There is always someone to get on with us.</p> <p>Something Else is suspicious towards the other being that comes to its house. This is normal when we do not know who is the other one and what his intentions are.</p> <p>Something Else, the other being, and the child became friends. There is always room for all to fit on the same chair.</p>                                                             |
| <i>The Last Noo-Noo</i>            | <p>Bullying</p> <p>Restrictions/setting boundaries</p> <p>Being not accepted</p> <p>Being different</p> <p>Intolerance</p> <p>Attachment</p> <p>Real/not real</p> <p>Being strict</p> <p>Manners/eating habits</p> <p>Being messy</p> <p>What is good for Marlon</p> <p>Creativity vs nonsense</p> <p>Delaying maturity</p> | <p>Marlon has been bullied not only by his classmates but by his grandmother too.</p> <p>Marlon eats in front of his TV and has not picked up his toys from the floor.</p> <p>Marlon is messy. He hides his noo-noos even in his wellies!</p> <p>Who knows what is best for Marlon?</p> <p>It is so creative to plant a noo-noo hoping for a whole noo-noo crop. Or is it nonsense according to his grandmother?</p> |
| <i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i> | <p>Being greedy</p> <p>Dieting</p> <p>Feeling secure</p> <p>Development</p> <p>Survival</p> <p>Rebirth</p> <p>Changing/transforming</p>                                                                                                                                                                                     | <p>The cocoon is a shelter that protects the caterpillar and helps it transform into a butterfly.</p> <p>Is the caterpillar greedy or is this what she is obliged to do by nature?</p> <p>Rebirth: A caterpillar transforms to a butterfly.</p>                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>Frog and a Very Special Day</i> | <p>Friendship</p> <p>Being special</p> <p>Happiness in small things</p> <p>Surprise</p> <p>Loneliness/Feeling alone</p> <p>Feeling appreciated</p> <p>Birthday</p>                                                                                                                                                          | <p>The Rat finds happiness and pleasure in everyday small things.</p> <p>Frog's friends lie for a good reason. They prepare a party for him.</p> <p>Is it right for the frog to feel so negative and lonely?</p> <p>Frog thinks that the hare is not a good friend because he goes to a party without</p>                                                                                                            |

|                                            |                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                            | Lying for a good reason<br>Misconceptions                                                                            | inviting him. However, it turns out that<br>Frog has misunderstood.                                                                                                                         |
| <i>Animals' Letters to<br/>Santa Claus</i> | Gifts and presents<br>Animals' rights to<br>Christmas presents<br>Possible/impossible<br>Contributing<br>Celebrating | The butterfly, along with the other insects,<br>claim their rights to decorate the Christmas<br>tree and receive presents.<br>Everybody can contribute to the Christmas<br>tree decoration. |

During the laboratory sessions and through dialogue, the student teachers had the opportunity to reflect on their own ideas and recognise their potential preconceptions and misunderstandings. They were invited to examine the presuppositions that were taken for granted in some of their statements. For example, when reading *The Rainbow Fish*, one student teacher said, 'Being friendly means that all fish should be beautiful. Therefore, the rainbow fish should give away some of its shiny scales'. But how is kindness related to the concept of being beautiful? Why should all fish be beautiful? Similarly, what does it mean to take care of yourself if you have to give away your own prized possessions? Student teachers could stimulate each other and find good arguments to support their views.

Table 3 shows some of the questions generated by the student teachers for each picturebook. Students wrote their questions on Post-It notes and affixed them to the whiteboard, allowing everyone to review them.

**Table 3:** Questions formed by student teachers.

| Picturebook             | Questions formed by the student teachers during the laboratory lessons                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                         | Questions about content                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Questions for kindergarten pupils                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <i>The Rainbow Fish</i> | What does it mean to be wise?<br>Do you always need to give something (scales) in order to get something else back (friendship)? Is that a compromise?<br>Is it OK that everybody look the same at the end of the story? | Can an octopus know what is best for a fish?<br>Is the octopus wise? Why? Why not?<br>Was the octopus' advice wise?<br>What could an alternative advice be? What would you suggest the rainbow fish to do? |

|                                    |                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                    |                                                                                                                                                                         | If you were the rainbow fish, would you give away your shiny scales?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>Something Else</i>              | Is it necessary to be the same?<br>Who decides what is different?<br>Is it bad to be different?                                                                         | What makes us different from the others?<br>What makes us the same?<br>Does normal exist?<br>What if being different is not acceptable?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <i>The Last Noo-Noo</i>            |                                                                                                                                                                         | Can noo-noo trees exist? Are they real?<br>Can a dad/mum/your doll/a baby have a noo-noo? (Explain in each case)<br>Would you like to have a noo-noo?<br>Is the dragons' behaviour towards Marlon right? Why? Why not?<br>What makes a behaviour proper?<br>Where would you hide the noo-noos? Why?<br>Would you like Marlon's grandmother to be your grandmother?<br>What makes someone strict? What does it mean to be strict? |
| <i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i> | Is the cocoon a kind of shelter?<br>Is waiting important for transforming to something else?<br>Do we live to eat or eat to live?<br>Why was the caterpillar so hungry? | Would you like to transform to something else? What would that be? Why?<br>Is there healthy and unhealthy food? What makes food unhealthy?<br>Why did the caterpillar change?<br>Did it know in advance that it would become a butterfly?                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>Frog and a Very Special Day</i> |                                                                                                                                                                         | Is birthday a special day? What makes a day special?<br>Is everyday special?<br>Was the hare a good friend for the Frog? What makes a good friend?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

|                                        |                                                                                                      | Is it OK to tell lies for a good reason?                 |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Animals' Letters to Santa Claus</i> | Is it possible to have Christmas during spring (so that butterflies and insects can also celebrate)? | Are there things that are impossible? Which things? Why? |

The use of *The Rainbow Fish* as a teaching tool sparked considerable debate among the student teachers. While initially impressed by its potential for imparting lessons on sharing and happiness, many students reassessed their views after further analysis. They recognised the book's potential to convey misleading messages about conformity and compromise. Consequently, they emphasised the importance of questioning such narratives and fostering critical thinking among pupils. One student teacher eloquently articulated, in her written report, this shift in perspective:

When I first read *The Rainbow Fish*, I found it fantastic! What a perfect tool for teaching children the joys of sharing one's possessions. However, our subsequent discussions revealed perspectives that never crossed my mind. What if the children learn that in order to be accepted by the others and have friends, they have to compromise and give away their uniqueness and identity? At the end of the story was the rainbow fish still a rainbow fish? It had become one fish like everyone else. If you want to be happy and accepted you have to be the same with others, is that what we want to teach the children? I am hesitant to use this book but then my mentor reminded me of its potential for sparking meaningful dialogue, provided the underlying message is further questioned and analysed and not accepted blindly.

Similarly, *The Last Noo-Noo* elicited mixed reactions from student teachers due to its depiction of bullying and contentious language. Despite these reservations, student teachers acknowledged the book's potential for inciting reflection, particularly through its visual elements. One student teacher reflected on the depth conveyed through the illustrations:

I am fascinated with the illustration. It offers rich insights beyond the text. There are so many things that had not been mentioned, but have been shown. From this picture you learn more about Marlon. He sits very close to the TV watching his favourite animations, he has not tidied

up his toys, you can comment on his diet and how healthy it is. You can see that he wants to be treated like a baby. Apart from the noo-noo, he still uses a baby feeding bottle. You can even comment on the type of toys he has. I am not sure how this information can be transformed to philosophical questions but children might find common ground and sympathise with the hero. Children might compare their everyday habits to the ones Marlon has.

After analysing each picturebook, student teachers were prompted to collaborate in groups to devise activities aimed at further fostering pupils' philosophical inquiry. The examples in Table 4 illustrate the activities suggested by the student teachers for teaching children.

**Table 4:** Activities promoting children's philosophising.

| Picturebook             | Activity suggested by student teachers                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>The Rainbow Fish</i> | <p>Role play: Children assume roles (e.g. Rainbow Fish, Octopus, other fish) and enact the scene where the Octopus offers advice. What alternative advice could the Octopus provide to the Rainbow Fish?</p> <p>Illustration exercise: Children create and decorate their own fish, arguing why their fish is the most beautiful.</p> <p>Problem-solving and illustration: Children propose different solutions offered by the Octopus to the Rainbow Fish through their illustrations. Children have to argue why they believe their solution is preferable.</p> |
| <i>The Last Noo-Noo</i> | <p>Hide and seek: One child leaves the classroom while others hide a noo-noo. The child returns and seeks the hidden object, guided by the cues from their peers. Children discuss what makes a hiding spot ideal.</p> <p>Dream tree: Children imagine and illustrate their own ideal tree, explaining its unique qualities that set it apart.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <i>Something Else</i>   | <p>Empathy exercise: One child portrays Something Else and attempts to join a circle formed by other children. The group responds by either accepting or rejecting Something Else, prompting reflection on feelings of inclusion and exclusion. Children reflect on the experience of being excluded, considering both the feelings of the excluded individual and the impact of exclusion on group dynamics.</p> <p>Similarity and difference: Children listen to music and form pairs based on similarities and differences. They articulate one</p>            |

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commonality and one difference between themselves and their partner.

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In each activity, children are encouraged to engage critically with the themes and messages conveyed in the picturebooks, fostering deeper reflection and understanding.

### **Student teachers' supervision while teaching at schools**

The observations made by the researcher during student teachers' teaching practicum in kindergarten classrooms yielded several key findings:

- While student teachers demonstrated proficiency in posing thought-provoking questions, they encountered difficulty in utilising pupils' responses to generate follow-up inquiries aimed at deepening their comprehension. Student teachers often provided neutral responses such as 'interesting point', 'great', 'lovely,' or 'does anybody have anything to add?' without delving further into the pupils' thinking. They preferred moving to the next prepared question.
- The sequence and flow of questions posed by student teachers often appeared rigid and driven by a predetermined agenda, lacking the flexibility to adapt to evolving dialogue and the interests of the pupils.
- Only a few student teachers (8 out of 36) facilitated genuine dialogue among pupils, fostering an environment where they could interact, question, disagree, and independently develop arguments without intervention. In most instances, student teachers posed questions to the children, who then responded to the student teachers.
- Despite exposure to impactful questioning strategies during laboratory lessons, many student teachers exhibited a tendency to mechanically recite questions during teaching sessions, failing to effectively engage with pupils' responses.
- Some student teachers (10 out of 36) hesitated to pose questions to children, fearing their inability to address potential queries.
- Many student teachers (15 out of 36) preferred asking questions that interrogated the text (such as who did what, why, etc.), arguing that this approach provided a safe means of assessing pupils' understanding of the text.

- Several student teachers observed children's reluctance to ask questions, leading to instances of silence during classroom interactions.

An illustrative example, shown in the following dialogue, involves a student teacher's inquiry with kindergarten pupils into the concept of special days and their significance, based on Max Velthuijs' book *Frog and a Very Special Day*. The dialogue was recorded with the school's permission, and the researcher used it in a laboratory session for further elaboration and feedback. These observations prompted further discussion in a subsequent laboratory session, encouraging student teachers to consider alternative questioning approaches and to critique children's responses more analytically.

Student teacher: So, what do you think? Are there any special days?

Child 1: Yes, our birthday.

Child 2: And summer.

Student teacher: What do you like about summer?

Child 2: Everything.

Student teacher: More specifically?

Child 2: I eat ice creams and I go to the beach.

Student teacher: Do you agree with what Rat said that every day is special?

Children: No, they are not all special.

Student teacher: Anybody else? *(she waits but the children do not react)*. OK, let's move to the next question.

*At this point I sit close to the children. I tell them I want to learn more about why some days are special, and what makes these days special.*

Child 3: Saturday and Sundays are special. I go for a walk with my grandfather.

Child 4: And I go to the swimming pool.

Child 5: Afternoons are special too. We play.

Me: So every day is special! We do have afternoons every day, don't we? What about the mornings?

Child 5: No! Mornings are not special! We go to school.

Me: Isn't school something that makes our day special?

*Some children say yes, some say no. They are encouraged to move to different sides and express their ideas.*

Child 5: School is boring but I like when it is break time and we go out and play.

Child 6: No, we learn many things.

Child 7: Every day we do something different.

Child 5: OK, maybe every day is special. Mondays because school starts and Fridays because school stops. But weekend is more special.

Child 9: Christmas is special too because we get presents.

Child 3: And the day for the stray animals is special day.

Child 9: Yes, but for the animals.

Student teacher: Great ideas! Would anybody like to draw your more special day. Then you can explain me why it is special.

*The pupils draw and then explain their drawing to the class and what makes each day special.*

### **Student teachers' reflections in the laboratory lessons**

Most student teachers (32 out of 36) agreed that they found the process of analysing the picturebooks in the laboratory lessons to be very useful and thought-provoking. They were surprised by how often hidden misconceptions were uncovered through student teachers' discussions during the lab lessons, and how this process deepened their understanding and enabled them to self-correct their own misconceptions (Echeverria 2007). However, they also expressed feeling unprepared to implement what they had practiced in their teaching at kindergartens. Student teachers asserted that asking follow-up questions based on pupils' comments proved challenging, requiring meticulous listening to their responses. Some student teachers noted the difficulty of simultaneously formulating appropriate follow-up questions while actively listening to the children. This skill necessitates flexibility, mental agility, and a constant state of attentiveness. Additionally, some student teachers attributed their struggle to incorporate pupils' responses into their lesson plans to feelings of anxiety and pressure to cover as much material as possible during teaching sessions.

Below are some written reflections from the student teachers:

- 'I enjoyed the analysis of the picturebooks. I learned how to read children's picturebooks philosophically, elicit philosophical concepts, ask open-ended questions that facilitate philosophical dialogue among children, and identify connections between text and illustrations. However, I still struggle to ask follow-up questions based on children's responses. I often feel anxious about what to emphasise and what to overlook.'
- 'I appreciate the laboratory lessons where we analyse picturebooks. I find listening to other student teachers' thoughts enlightening. I had never imagined that one could delve so deeply into a picturebook. I underestimated the philosophical depth present in children's picturebooks. I used to think that asking a couple of questions to gauge children's understanding was sufficient, but now I realise it's too procedural, and I might miss valuable insights from the children. However, I still find it challenging to encourage children to express themselves freely.'
- 'Our supervisor emphasised that the key to asking philosophical questions is genuinely wanting to understand what children have to say. If you're genuinely interested, you'll ask questions that prompt them to articulate their thoughts. But how do I discern what the children want to know? It's perplexing.'

## **Discussion**

This research presents a methodology that integrates philosophical inquiry with children, utilising picturebooks as stimuli, within the practice of prospective preschool teachers at kindergarten schools (Lipman 2003; Matthews 1994). This approach facilitated student teachers' immersion in philosophy with children and provided opportunities for them to engage in philosophical discourse through the formation of a community of inquiry. They familiarised themselves with the identification of philosophical concepts, formulated philosophical questions based on the selected picturebooks, and honed their argumentation skills (Splitter & Sharp 1995). Having participated in philosophical inquiries themselves, prospective preschool teachers were encouraged to actively contribute by generating questions and designing activities aimed at fostering children's critical and creative thinking. Subsequently, utilising the same picturebooks as stimuli and the prepared activities, they conducted philosophical inquiries with children in kindergarten settings, employing a philosophising-with-children approach to each picturebook. Finally, student teachers engaged in reflective exercises to assess their experiences in

philosophising with others during laboratory sessions, their ability to incorporate philosophising into lesson planning, and the challenges encountered during teaching sessions in kindergartens (Farrell 2010).

Returning to the first research question and its findings, the researcher, acting as facilitator, enabled the student teachers to form communities of inquiry with their peers. This was achieved through introductory lessons on the nature of philosophical inquiry, paradigms drawn from the researcher's prior experience as a P4C practitioner in kindergartens, and through engaging students in philosophising within a community of inquiry during each laboratory session. The researcher-facilitator provided examples of philosophical questions and concepts, employed open questioning techniques, and encouraged student teachers to work in small groups, which allowed them to demonstrate proficiency in independently identifying philosophical concepts (Matthews 2022). The student teachers exhibited attentive listening, built upon one another's ideas, and demonstrated the ability to extract and discuss philosophical concepts comprehensively. Furthermore, they collaborated effectively in small groups to develop activities aimed at fostering children's engagement in philosophical inquiry (Lipman & Sharp 1982).

Judging by student teachers' reflections, the laboratory lessons facilitated several key outcomes. It enhanced the student teachers' reading aloud skills, fostering a deeper appreciation for picturebooks and cultivating greater expressiveness in oral delivery. Student teachers agreed that being expressive and making the text vivid allows a better understanding for both themselves and the kindergarten pupils. It also enhanced the discovery and exploration of philosophical concepts, achieved by attentively analysing the text, images and their interplay to formulate thought-provoking questions. Finally, it fostered the integration of picturebook analysis with the creation of activities aimed at nurturing children's critical and creative thinking abilities. Collaborating in groups, student teachers devised supplementary activities while discerning how the text and illustrations of a book could inspire the development of more interactive learning experiences (Wartenberg 2009). For instance, student teachers gleaned insightful messages from the illustration depicting Marlon seated in front of the TV, indulging in his noo-noo. This illustration provided a springboard for discussions on unhealthy dietary habits and cleanliness, prompting philosophical inquiries into topics such as child-rearing practices and the criteria for defining habits as either beneficial or detrimental.

Despite the benefits gained from laboratory lessons, student teachers encountered challenges in translating their experiences into practice. Moving to the second research

question, during laboratory sessions, student teachers frequently found themselves well-versed in the various concepts presented in each picturebook and the corresponding questions suitable for kindergarten pupils. However, in the classroom, they struggled to identify the appropriate questions and avenues for philosophical discussions to explore further. Many student teachers hesitated to inquire if children had their own questions, fearing they might lack the ability to address or connect them to the prepared questions. They experienced difficulty in actively listening to young pupils and posing follow-up questions that would encourage further philosophical inquiry. Additionally, student teachers hesitated to allow pupils to generate their own questions, showing a preference for pre-determined questions rather than embracing the potential for discussion generated by children's inquiries.

These challenges may indicate the persistence of certain stereotypes, where teachers assume the roles of questioner and answerer, prioritising comprehension over deeper literary analysis. Regrettably, student teachers often seek only comprehension through literature because this is the predominant approach they have been accustomed to at both school and university. They tend to superficially interrogate texts rather than immersing themselves in the philosophical exploration of themes and character dilemmas present in literature. Literature provides a pathway for philosophical exploration, encouraging readers to engage with existential questions (Nussbaum 1997). However, student teachers faced significant challenges in applying these practices within the kindergarten setting.

Student teachers frequently expressed a sense of inadequacy in discerning the significance of children's questions and comments. How can educators amplify the impact of children's inquiries and transform them into meaningful dialogues? Furthermore, how can prospective preschool teachers facilitate productive dialogues among children? Student teachers themselves may lack opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue and inquiry with their peers, having primarily learned to respond rather than to inquire. Consequently, implementing such practices becomes challenging when they have limited experience in doing so. While proficient in asking predetermined questions such as 'who did what and for what reason?' they struggled to foster open-ended discussions that encourage children to explore and articulate their thoughts.

The absence of philosophy lessons in the curriculum for prospective preschool teachers contributes to their unfamiliarity with philosophical inquiry. Many student teachers fail to recognise the value of philosophy in both personal and pedagogical contexts. Integrating more philosophy lessons into their curriculum could enhance

their understanding of philosophical inquiry as a form of critical thinking. As Fiumara (1995) aptly suggests, philosophising is a process intricately linked with attentive listening; listening is the other side of thinking. Student teachers have yet to grasp how philosophical inquiry can enrich both their own thinking and that of their future pupils, underscoring the need for greater emphasis on philosophical education in teacher training programs.

The example dialogue between a student teacher and her pupils, highlights a notable trend where student teachers pose questions without effectively fostering engagement among the children themselves. This tendency arises from student teachers' inclination to ask questions merely as a formality, driven by expectation rather than genuine curiosity about children's thought processes. In one instance, during a discussion where pupils asserted that afternoons are special because of playtime, the researcher interjected by suggesting that if afternoons are special due to play, then every day could be considered special, given that every day has an afternoon. This intervention prompted further inquiry into whether mornings hold similar significance and whether school is a place where special experiences occur. However, the ability to pose follow-up questions based on attentive listening to children's responses and rapid, logic-based thinking remains a skill that student teachers have yet to fully develop.

What prospective preschool teachers often lack is engaging in listening philosophically to the ideas raised by children when reflecting upon a picturebook, which entails student teachers' willingness to attentively consider children's emerging intuitive theories (Gardner 1991) and perspectives with an open mind, not only seeking philosophical significance but also recognising and valuing the diverse ways in which children conceptualise ideas (Haynes 2008; Nikolidaki 2023b). Engaging in philosophical listening necessitates certain commitments from educators, including a commitment to self-reflection and an overarching view of philosophy as fundamental to educational theory (Makaiau & Miller 2012). Even sceptics among the student teachers, initially questioning the utility of philosophically reading the picturebooks, eventually acknowledged its value and agreed that it is a win-win situation for both literature and philosophy. Literature gains greater depth in analysis, while philosophy becomes more engaging and meaningful, allowing for connections to be made with children's experiences.

Children enjoy reading books and they sharpen their minds when questions become deeper, and more reflective and philosophical, forcing children to build arguments and counterarguments, identify intentions and presuppositions beneath the reading

of the books, and finally linking these to their own experiences (Nikolidaki 2023b). In their written reports, student teachers argued that the laboratory lessons and their practice in reading picturebooks philosophically expanded their understanding of how picturebooks, when approached in this way, can deepen both their appreciation of literature and its value for children. Additionally, they noted that this method of engagement allowed teachers to find greater fulfilment in their teaching, experiencing a sense of purpose and enjoyment.

## Conclusion

This research provided a methodology for approaching literature through the philosophical community of inquiry and implementing it in student teachers' practice at kindergartens. By engaging in philosophical discussions centred around literary texts, student teachers were encouraged to explore complex themes, ethical dilemmas, and diverse perspectives. Even though student teachers were not fully able to maintain with children a philosophical approach to certain picturebooks, they still gained a glimpse of the potential advantages for children's development, not only deepening their understanding of literature but also developing essential cognitive and social skills. By engaging with literature philosophically, formulating open-ended questions, and recognising and extracting philosophical concepts through group-based textual analysis, student teachers practiced (a) further developing their reasoning skills, and (b) designing activities for or with children, gaining insights into how to approach literature philosophically with their pupils, thereby exposing them to diverse human experiences, moral dilemmas, and existential questions.

The study of literature and philosophy in schools is inherently interconnected, as both disciplines engage with fundamental questions about the human condition, morality, and the nature of reality. Was the hare a good friend to the Frog in Velthuijs' *Frog and a Very Special Day*? What counts as a special day? Is it ever acceptable to lie even for a good reason? Can you use a pacifier at an older age as Marlon did in Murphy's *The Last Noo-Noo*? Is it ever acceptable to make fun of someone because he does something considered appropriate at a younger age? These questions offer both student teachers and their kindergarten pupils a deeper understanding of the potential meanings within picturebooks. If student teachers, through laboratory lessons at university, learn to ask such questions, recognise when pupils raise them in the classroom, uncover the underlying philosophical concepts, and explore these through questioning assumptions, considering alternative perspectives, and engaging in ethical reasoning, then literature can become a powerful tool for deriving enjoyment and sharpening the critical and creative thinking of both children and student

teachers. This is why incorporating philosophical inquiry into student teachers' practicum allows literature to serve as a vehicle for philosophical reflection, providing narratives that encourage readers to explore existential themes and ethical dilemmas. Teaching student teachers to read literature philosophically cultivates analytical thinking skills, empathy, and an appreciation for the complexities of human experience. By examining literary works through a philosophical lens, student teachers develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

In schools, this connection can be leveraged to foster interdisciplinary learning where children learn to explore philosophical concepts through literary analysis and vice versa. Stories serve as accessible entry points for philosophical exploration, making abstract concepts more concrete and relatable for young learners. Reading picturebooks philosophically also enables children to uncover deeper meanings and philosophical insights embedded within the narrative and find connections with their everyday life experiences. As for prospective preschool teachers, they transform their teaching experience into a meaningful endeavour that gives them a sense of purpose and fulfilment in their lives.

Further research is necessary to enhance training programs for prospective preschool teachers, enabling them to better understand the practice of reading picturebooks philosophically, listening philosophically to children's ideas, and sustaining philosophical inquiry with children. It is imperative to incorporate modules on the philosophy of education and philosophy with children into student teachers' academic curriculum. This integration would enable student teachers to recognise the significance of philosophical inquiry not only for enhancing their effectiveness in addressing literature but also for gaining a deeper understanding of the potential roles of educators and the type of individuals that could emerge if philosophical inquiry were to become a foundational educational theory and a way of life.

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