

Non-canonical philosophy and Cordel literature in schools

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential of *literatura de cordel*, a Brazilian folk poetry tradition, as a non-canonical resource for philosophical inquiry in educational settings. While Philosophy for Children (P4C) and related movements have increasingly emphasised the role of emotion in philosophical education, non-Western literary traditions remain underexplored in this context. Situated against the backdrop of Ontario, Canada's 'back-to-basics' approach to learning, which prioritises standardised literacy over philosophical inquiry, we propose a *non-canonical philosophy (NCP)* approach that promotes non-Western literary traditions and fosters critical thinking, creativity and emotional awareness in young learners. Drawing on the distinct features of Cordel literature—its oral-poetic form, its engagement with social and ethical themes, and its capacity to evoke emotional and imaginative responses—we suggest that it offers a valuable tool for philosophical inquiry with children. Through an analysis of Cordel's historical and cultural significance, exemplified by Leandro Gomes de Barros' evocative poetry, we suggest how these texts might provoke philosophical reflection on topics like time and identity. While speculative and context-dependent, this proposal invites educators to consider how non-canonical texts can enhance existing pedagogical practices, offering a pathway to more inclusive and affectively engaged learning environments.

Key words

affect, Cordel literature, non-canonical philosophy (NCP), Philosophy for Children (P4C)

1. Introduction

In North America the practice of philosophy in public elementary schools is a rare occurrence. Philosophy is not purposefully integrated into the Canadian, Ontario curriculum—the location where we are writing from—and this can be seen in the

latest provincial policies to revert to ‘back-to-basics’ learning that focuses on literacy, math, and the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) disciplines (Government of Ontario 2024). While it is good to see the value of literacy in schools and the emphasis on teaching children how to read, we wonder if a back-to-basics approach that employs ‘evidence-based clear and direct instruction’ and restores ‘common sense’ (Government of Ontario 2024) would leave any room for the serious study of literature and philosophy in the classroom. The intersection of literature and philosophy is already hard to see in schools, and this policy isolates the philosophical potential in children even more from the classroom.

As educators who have worked in public schools (elementary and secondary) in both Canada and Brazil for more than 10 years, we wonder how the study of literature through direct instruction might unfold in the classroom. We optimistically think that education policy makers and the educator are invested in a shared commitment to student success and to building the capacity of each child. However, we suspect that a back-to-basics approach would sharply depart from the pedagogies that have made significant impact throughout the years (Dahlberg & Moss 2005; Lenz Taguchi 2010; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw 2018). Back-to-basics learning departs from our own pedagogical practices and those of the P4C field that rely on a community of inquiry to achieve understanding and intellectual growth (Murrin 2016; Sharp 1997). We think that it is important to learn the basics of how to read and support the revision of curriculum subject matter that has been in place for almost 10 years. We, however, suspect that going back to a basic approach to literacy will not leave room for the study of philosophy and non-canonical forms of literature. The emphasis on common sense and how literacy will be taught is also a matter of concern. *How* learning happens makes a difference to student success (see Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat 2013). We think that reverting to anything basic cannot and will not offer pedagogical moments of contemplation, introspection and understanding of philosophical themes that matter to children and thus shape their subjective experience.

We propose a *non-canonical philosophy (NCP)* (Rotas & Manafu 2022) approach that promotes the use of non-canonical forms of literature in schools and uncovers the affective dimension at the intersection of literature and philosophy in the classroom. The NCP approach stands in stark contrast to the back-to-basics learning approach because it problematises the restoration of common sense and resists the belief that teaching, learning and thinking must become streamlined. While a back-to-basics approach emphasises a standardised approach to literacy, the NCP approach promotes affective engagement and diverse perspectives, viewing these as critical

pathways to developing children's philosophical capacities. In rejecting the mechanisation of learning inherent in back-to-basics models, NCP aligns with pedagogies that prioritise child-led philosophical inquiry, valuing creativity and the unique experiences and questions children bring to the classroom.

The NCP approach draws on the P4C field, which was developed by Matthew Lipman et al. (1977), and has been regarded as developing children's thinking and argumentative skills. NCP, however, departs from the P4C tradition in two ways. Firstly, P4C has assumed a predominantly Western conception of philosophy and its practice; and secondly, it has focused exclusively on children's reasoning and argumentation skills while largely neglecting affect or emotion. There have been advancements in the field of P4C, including a turn to P4C that is crucial to furthering democracy, equity, and social justice (Echeverria & Hannam 2016; Makaiau 2017). P4C scholars have also focused on the intersection of philosophy and play (Edmiston 2008), emphasising the need to support experimentation and the imagination of the child. Gregory, Haynes and Murriss (2017) have diversified the P4C field, touching on emotion and the aesthetic aspects of doing philosophy with children. Murriss (2015; 2016) has critiqued the use of children's literature in schools (specifically picture books), discussing the importance of having 'good quality' picture books in the classroom that trigger philosophical thinking rather than be used to 'locate the philosophical "in" texts themselves' (2016, pp. 4–5) (also see Haynes & Murriss 2012; Murriss & Haynes 2002). Doing philosophy with picture books is complex, and as noted by Murriss (2016), involves much more than child and text—it involves what the reader or the community of inquiry, and/or the context brings to it. Kohan (2002) has made a similar point, proposing 'The Need to think an Encounter' in the childhood classroom (p. 4).

In the second edition of *Thinking in Education* (2003), Lipman expands his discussion to include emotion and affect. He introduces the concept of *affective thinking*, which he grounds in the idea of care in education. He emphasises that thinking and emotions are deeply interconnected, as emotions shape how children learn and reason. Developing affective thinking, in Lipman's view, enhances critical thinking and reflective practice by helping children recognise how their emotions influence their reasoning—both as a guide and as a potential constraint. While Lipman and others have acknowledged the role of emotions in learning, the practice of P4C has focused predominantly on the cultivation of reasoning and argumentation. We believe that more work is needed that focuses on emotions in education and that prioritises the affective capacity of children. Such work, for instance, would entail a consideration of

what children bring to philosophy and to literature; and more generally, what context brings to text (Murris 2016).

In what follows, we present various conceptualisations of affect and emotion as it relates to children's learning and discuss how the integration of non-canonical literary texts could potentially enrich the practice of philosophy with children. We consider non-canonical texts to be those that fall outside the traditional Western literary canon often privileged in educational settings. These are texts that draw from diverse cultural traditions and challenge dominant narratives. Cordel literature, which we will discuss directly below, stands as a powerful example of such a non-canonical form. Originating in Brazil, Cordel booklets, with their vibrant woodcut illustrations and rhythmic verses, engage readers with a rich tapestry of social commentary, philosophical reflection, and folk wisdom. We engage with Leandro Gomes de Barros' work, who was a renowned poet of Cordel in late 19th and early 20th century Brazil. We engage with his work, in particular, because his prose reveals originality and a quality that provokes affect (Curran 2022). We take up his poems as a non-canonical resource that can potentially engage children's affective capacity. We conclude the paper with a continued call to incorporate non-canonical forms of literature in schools, reiterating the need to foster a more inclusive and critically engaged learning environment where the affective capacity of the child is valued.

2. Cordel literature

In the Portuguese language *literatura de Cordel* (Cordel literature) means *string literature*. Cordel booklets were traditionally hung by string and displayed for sale in street markets and shops in Brazil. For more than one century, this very particular form of literature has been the main source of current news, entertainment and knowledge on societal and historical events for more than one third of the Brazilian population (Březinová & Hopkinson 2022; Slater 1982). It is a popular literature genre that tells stories in a very particular form. The narratives are always rhymed, and they contain unique illustrations that use a technique called *xilogravura* (block print) in Portuguese. A Cordel story is published in a small booklet—or *folheto*, as it is known in Brazil. The *folheto* is printed on newspaper-weight paper and is about 4x6 inches in size, and generally ranges from 8 to 32 pages in length (Slater 1982). The booklet is then put on display to be sold, hanging on strings and thus its name is Cordel (Cardoso 2017) (see Figure 1 below). Cordel's origin is hard to pinpoint, but there is speculation that it is derived from the European literary traditions of a broadside

ballad (i.e. a one-sided piece of inexpensive paper with a ballad, rhyme, news, and/or woodcut illustrations printed on it) (Březinová & Hopkinson 2022).

Figure 1: *Folhetos* hanging on strings. (Source: Diego Dacal, licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic](#) license)



The oldest known *folheto* dates to the 1890s. It is, as noted above, a challenge to accurately position Cordel as originating from European chapbooks (Slater 1982). There exists a lack of archival evidence to support claims that Cordel was in fact directly imported from Europe, although there are resemblances in style and content between Cordel and other forms of popular literature in France and Germany, such as the *littérature de colportage* and the *Volksbücher* (Cardoso 2017). Cordel also shares many aspects with other existing forms of popular culture in Latin America, such as the *Corridos* found in countries like Mexico, Nicaragua, Colombia, Chile, and Argentina (Slater 1982). These stories are told through rhymed verses that resemble and sound like music. The *folheto* is, on the contrary, written and sold with the purpose to be read, not sung like the *Corrido*. A Cordel seller does not follow the tradition of the *troubadour*, who must sing and play a guitar to draw an audience and convince

them to buy their story. Additionally, the variety of topics addressed by Cordel writers is much broader than what can be found in *Corridos*. Tales of bandits, news updates, and religious stories are told, but *folhetos* also make use of a larger number of themes, including stories of love and loss that echo those of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and the tale of *Sleeping Beauty* (Slater 1982).

Although the books are seen as an accessible text, there is nothing basic about them. Cordel stories tackle complex societal issues through the artistry of language, which takes shape in many forms. They are produced for the public by street poets and writers from the outskirts of mainstream literature and serve as a means of communication and expression of the nature of reality in Brazil (Santos 2018). The booklets have never been part of any literary and/or academic canon. However, in recent years Cordel literature has been receiving attention for its unique characteristics in universities, art galleries, and book fairs, where the booklets are studied and analysed by scholars in Brazil and abroad. By embracing non-canonical forms of literature like Cordel, with its emphasis on emotional resonance and social commentary, NCP seeks to foster a learning environment where critical thinking and affective exploration go hand in hand.

3. Affect and emotion

There are many conceptualisations of affect and emotion, and of their interrelations. Following Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia (1973), we understand affective capacity as the way people—in this case children—deal with things emotionally, which involves not just feelings, but also values and attitudes. Children are always in the process of developing their identity through both cognitive and affective means. Work in philosophy shows that affect and/or emotion integrates with cognition and plays an important role in human flourishing. For example, Nussbaum (2003) argues that if emotions contain in themselves an awareness of value, they are suffused with intelligence and discernment and thus they cannot be easily sidelined by educators. Aligning with Nussbaum's perspective, Lipman (2003) argues that emotions constitute a form of thinking. Emotive and/or affective thinking shape how children engage with the world and their own learning. For Lipman (2003), fostering affective thinking in the classroom requires integrating logical reasoning with emotion and ethical considerations in the decision-making process. We, therefore, recognise that affect and/or emotion does not only provide the requisite motivation for problem-solving in children, but it is part and parcel of problem-solving and decision-making. This is because children's emotions have cognitive content—they inform the child

about what matters to the child. Increasingly, education researchers are aware of the fact that a sharp separation between cognition and affect/emotion is illusory, and that this linkage can be harnessed to benefit the child (Boler 1999; Dernikos et al. 2020; Lesko & Niccolini 2016; Lipman 2003; Zembylas 2021).

Political philosopher and artist Erin Manning (2016) understands the affective dimension as an embodied movement of thought and gesture. Paying attention to the affective capacity of the child in the classroom, for instance, involves paying attention to the learning experience as it is forming. A classroom learning experience is potentially not only ripe with content knowledge such as the basics of subject matter, but also brimming with embodied experiences of sense-making that are often collective in nature. This understanding is similar to that of P4C and childhood education scholars who are interested in investigating the dynamic material and discursive elements of the learning environment and/or the community of inquiry (Hickey-Moody & Page 2015; Lenz Taguchi 2010; Malone et al. 2020; Murris 2016).

In her practice at the *SenseLab*—a philosophical and artistic thinktank in Montreal, Canada—Manning has worked to understand how the affective dimension shapes knowledge. She warns that inattention to what is felt in a pedagogical encounter paves the way for a mechanised approach that smothers affect and ultimately limits the possibilities of philosophical questioning (Manning 2018). This inattention to what matters to the child is the risk of going back to basics. Manning's (2020) concept of 'radical pedagogy,' which emphasises the open-ended and expressive nature of children's questions, offers a powerful counterpoint to the mechanisation of learning often associated with a back-to-basics approach.

Manning pays attention to the questions children pose. She explains that the child's *why* questions can never be fully answered. There is always a texture or an expressive quality—a dimension of a child's experience that cannot be fully grasped and resists control. Any childhood teacher, educator, researcher and scholar will likely tell you that children enjoy and excel when they are in the middle of a task—inquiring, questioning, enacting pedagogy, sense-making alongside their peers, the teacher, and the literary texts and objects they learn with. Children enjoy posing questions and solving problems, and they are not always keen on mastering a specific skill that requires repetition and/or procedural elements of constraint (Manning 2020; Olsson 2013).

Children's questions are perhaps not always philosophical in nature: *Is it recess yet? Is it lunch yet? Can I go to the bathroom? When are we having fun?* And yet, the philosophical

dimension is very much present in the childhood classroom when they ask questions like: *What does one hour mean? What does one hour until lunch mean? What does the period before snack mean?* If you listen pedagogically and/or engage in 'listening philosophically' (Nikolidaki 2023, p. 23) these are questions about the nature of time. Children are everyday philosophers who have the capacity to ask questions, pose philosophical puzzles and solve problems, and thus guide their own learning (see Haynes 2008, 2014; Murriss 2016, 2015). When we consider children's questions—whether seemingly simple inquiries about recess or deeper reflections on the nature of time—it becomes evident that their learning thrives in those in-between spaces of inquiry and exploration. These are the spaces where affect flourishes, where children generate an affective response in their learning. The development of NCP stems from the understanding that children's affective responses can be potent tools for learning. By incorporating non-canonical sources that resonate with children on an emotional level, educators can foster the development of crucial skills. These skills encompass not just critical thinking and problem-solving, but also the shaping of identity and values. We believe that Cordel literature, with its ability to evoke strong affective responses, holds significant potential as such a resource.

4. Cordel in the classroom

Cordel literature offers an array of complex themes and topics. The titles of Cordel booklets demonstrate the diversity of topics covered by the publications: *Nosso mundo moderno* (Our modern world), *O fim do mundo está próximo* (The end of the world is near), *Cuidados ao aplicar defensivos agrícolas* (How to apply pesticides in agriculture) and *Como ganhar dinheiro com minérios em Pernambuco* (How to make money from minerals in Pernambuco) (Cardoso 2017). The aesthetic artistry of the texts is reflected in its woodcut illustrations. A usual *folheto* cover is illustrated using the technique of block print or woodcut; and as a result, this type of art came to be greatly identified as Brazilian Northeast, signifying the culture of the region. These illustrations are so ingrained in the popular imagination that any attempt to typify Northeastern Brazilian culture in the form of an image; it is very likely that a piece of Cordel woodcut-style illustration would be used to do so (woodcut-style illustrations were used for advertising or tourism) (Cardoso 2017).

Cordel not only serves as a source of fiction but attends to political themes and is a starting point for instruction, reflection and understanding of the world. Cordel literature was not intended to be used as a source of knowledge and instruction in schools. However, in recent years, Cordel has been used as a pedagogical tool in

public schools in Pentecoste in Ceara, Brazil, to teach history and promote reading (Paiva 2021). Although the findings from the study by Paiva emphasise grade performance, they also indicate that inclusion of Cordel in the classroom boosts engagement and creates opportunities for creative outputs.

Cordel booklets have also served as a source of comfort during conflict and forced migration. The harsh reality of severe droughts in the Northeast—the most impoverished region in Brazil—led many *sertanejos* (back landers) to abandon their home states and migrate. At first, they fled to the Amazon region, seduced by the promise of wealth to be derived from rubber production during World War II (Garfield 2010). The booklets traveled with the *sertanejos* and they became a link between migrants and their home region, reminding them of what they left behind, helping ‘*sertanejos* adjusting when they felt homesick’ (Březinová & Hopkinson 2022, p. 458). Cordel’s way of telling stories may have its earliest start in the old European chapbooks, but it has morphed with great peculiarity, diversity and unique features. It has become a form of literature of its own, a Brazilian cultural legacy that has parted ways from its colonial cradle. In fact, Cordel has diversified and gained its own distinct identity to such an extent that it has become something else entirely, to the point where it is now officially recognised a part of Brazilian cultural heritage (Meneses 2019).

Cordel also addresses philosophical topics such as love and loss, and truth and beauty. Gomes de Barros (1865–1918) is credited with popularising Cordel literature and has contributed immensely to its development and popularity in Brazil. His poems contain philosophical, moral, social and political messages. They are not only entertaining, but also thought-provoking and accessible. An important aspect of Cordel is that it is accessible to the general public and it draws its readers in with stories that matter to them. Certainly, the implementation of Cordel in Pentecoste public schools, and the migration stories of *sertanejos* grasping onto the booklets as objects of comfort, begs us to see the affective potential of this literature and speculate what it has the potential to do in the classroom.

We think that Cordel booklets are generative texts that can provoke philosophical thinking and reflection on topics that matter to children, like their relationship to time. Taking children’s questions seriously is a pedagogical and philosophical imperative in the early years classroom (Olsson 2013; Rotas 2021). If the child’s questions about time are to be taken seriously, then an attempt to speculate with them is important—and in ways that do not shut down thinking to the level of commonsense, but rather

open thinking to a community of inquiry where thoughts and experiences of time can be studied and successively refined. Take, for example, Barros' poem about the

Lembranças do Passado (Memories from the Past)

Leandro Gomes de Barros

Era um mundo de delicias | It was a world full of delicacies

Celeste, meigo, e risonho | Heavenly, sweet and smiling

Porém passou como as nuvens | But it passed like the clouds

Como a ilusão de um sonho | Like the illusion of a dream

Nos deixando em seu lugar | Leaving in its place

O pesadelo tristonho | A sad nightmare

Barros' nostalgic poem shows how things were (or at least how Barros perceived the nature of reality) before World War I (Curran 2022). He recalls memories of a past life, using adjectives like *heavenly* and *sweet* to depict a better time. He refers to the softness of the clouds as that which carries time away like a dream that may or may not have occurred. Barros ends his sombre poem with an image of gloomy clouds rolling in and leaving in place a present time of sadness.

Musings of time passing and the meaning of life are not philosophical themes unique to Barros' work. Cordel poetry often explores themes of time and memory and the nature of reality through a nostalgic tone. It is usually through vivid imagery and vibrant prose that the poet invites readers into another time altogether—a *durational time* (Bergson 2001) where the language of *chronos* (clock time) fails. In Henri Bergson's 1889 book *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (2001), he calls attention to the qualitative nature of time and to the dynamic nature of reality. He uses the concept of *duration* in reference to the non-measurable and non-linguistic state of subjective experience. In durational time language fails because it is in the middle of engagement with a text and/or encountering a text that children *affect and become affected* by thought (see Bergson 1991; Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Spinoza 1994).

In Cordel literature and in the NCP approach, an important aspect is to pay attention to the vivid imagery and to the unsaid rhythmic language of, in this case, the poem. In an NCP lesson, for example, the theme of time and/or learning about time would

not necessarily be the focus of the lesson. It is often in the rhythm of a text or that which is not said that affects a difference—a different thought, question, meaning or way of being. In her work with picture books, Murris (2016) writes: ‘Reading picturebooks philosophically does not involve a process of finding out what pictures denote or literally represent, but requires sensitivity in bringing together what is said and what is unsaid’ (p. 5). It is in this middling and/or durational state where children can be affected by the tensions of what is said and unsaid in a philosophical encounter that ponders the meaning of life to the nature of reality, fate and freewill, and so forth.

Cordel poems, on the other hand, can be used in somewhat of an instrumental way that involves identifying philosophical themes and discussing them in a community of inquiry to further refine understanding and generate meaning. A Cordel poem, for example, can serve as a framework for creating a theatrical play or performance. The potential for creative educational outputs aligns with our NCP approach, and Cordel texts are particularly well-suited to foster creativity and child-led inquiry in the classroom. Our intention in this paper is, however, to speculate what Cordel might do in the classroom and in ways that are unique to the needs of the children that will be encountered in a future time. We do not know if Cordel will resonate with children outside of a Brazilian context. We do think that Cordel and non-canonical texts in general offer diverse perspectives and have the potential to provoke contemplation, introspection and understanding of philosophical themes that are relatable and thus shape the subjective experience of children living in diverse communities, such as in Toronto, Ontario public schools. This potential for fostering contemplation and introspection directly challenges the limitations of a back-to-basics approach. By reducing literacy to a set of standardised skills and neglecting the affective dimension, back-to-basics learning risks depriving children of the opportunity to engage deeply with literature and develop an understanding of themselves and the world around them. Cordel literature, with its emphasis on social commentary, emotional depth, and exploration of complex themes, offers a powerful antidote to this potentially limiting approach. Whether it is Cordel or another kind of literature one might bring into the classroom, it must matter to the child. If it does, the child will in turn determine the value of what literature and philosophy does for them.

5. Conclusion

The inclusion of Cordel literature as a pedagogical tool in Pentecoste public schools is promising. However, it seems that the approach is a state-led initiative that focuses on implementation strategies that will boost grade performance (Paiva 2021). This

echoes what we fear a back-to-basics literacy approach will become—an initiative geared toward commonsense and grade performance. Reducing literacy to a set of standardised skills through a back-to-basics approach risks neglecting the crucial role of cultivating affective capacity in children’s learning and development. By prioritising standardised instruction, such an approach potentially limits children’s opportunities for genuine engagement with literature and their capacity to grapple with complex themes and diverse perspectives. This limitation is particularly concerning when we consider the increasingly diverse classrooms of today.

In contrast, the *non-canonical philosophy* (NCP) approach, as proposed in this paper, presents a robust alternative. By embracing non-canonical literature like Cordel, NCP fosters a learning environment where critical thinking and affective exploration are inseparable. The benefits of incorporating non-canonical texts and philosophies into the classroom are numerous, and we have intentionally refrained from providing a lesson plan for doing so. Within the classroom, Cordel literature will take on a life of its own and children will direct its potential meaning. As seen in the evocative imagery and poignant reflections present in Cordel literature, such texts can act as powerful catalysts for sparking children’s curiosity and creativity, and encouraging philosophical inquiry. By engaging with diverse narratives and alternative ways of knowing, children hone their critical thinking skills and cultivate a more nuanced understanding of themselves and the world around them. The vibrant history of Cordel literature itself provides a compelling example. These booklets, far from being mere entertainment, provided comfort and a sense of connection for displaced communities, demonstrating the profound impact of literature that resonates on an affective level.

We think that NCP and the use of non-canonical resources, such as Cordel, has the potential to add to P4C and to rethink childhood pedagogies more generally. It is important to acknowledge that shifting pedagogical practices to embrace NCP requires thoughtful consideration and support for educators. Providing professional development workshop opportunities, focused on incorporating non-canonical texts and facilitating philosophical dialogue in the classroom, is crucial. Readily accessible resources, such as curated collections of suitable texts, can further empower educators to confidently engage in NCP in their classrooms. It is also imperative that educators listen to the children they work with, and in turn value what children bring to literature and to philosophy.

We invite educators to move beyond the limitations and constraints of a back-to-basics approach and embrace NCP as a pathway to creating richer and more inclusive learning environments. By nurturing children's affective capacities alongside their cognitive skills, children become empowered critical thinkers engaged in a complex world.

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