

# Exploring philosophyness through picture books:

## Insights for P4wC practitioners

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### Abstract

The present article explores the cultivation of a 'philosophical ear' by using picture books/illustrated books as tools for fostering philosophical inquiry in the practice of Philosophy for/with Children. Connecting the concept of the philosophical ear with philosophical sensitivity, the study proposes the word 'philosophyness' to refer to the disposition to engage with fundamental questions. Using a self-study methodology, the paper offers practical examples from dialogues with children, demonstrating how questioning books with open-ended and ambiguous narratives can engage young learners in philosophical dialogue. The aim is to inspire educators to cultivate their 'philosophyness' by developing a philosophical ear and using questioning books to nurture this disposition, ultimately enriching the practice of Philosophy for/with Children.

### Keywords

intellectual humility, philosophy for/with children, philosophyness, picture books, questioning books

### 1. Initial thoughts

To be a philosophy teacher, one has to accept and enjoy the risk, uncertainty and unpredictability of education as an inevitable part of one's daily tasks in the classroom. (Björnsson 2023, p. 100)

Stories have emerged as a common resource in the field of Philosophy for/with Children (P4wC), following the path from the pioneering programs of Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp to contemporary practices. Over time, P4wC practitioners have ventured beyond traditional texts, embracing a diverse range of philosophical provocations to spark philosophical dialogues. This path has led practitioners to explore artistic creations, visual representations, objects, and immersive settings such as museum exhibitions, all serving as catalysts for

philosophical dialogues. Stories, particularly picture books/illustrated books that were not originally written for P4wC purposes, have become everyday resources for practitioners worldwide. This article aims to share guidelines I have been developing from my experience using stories, specifically picture books/illustrated books, in the P4wC context. I argue that reading and working with questioning books helps practitioners to develop ‘philosophyness’.

In my P4wC practice, I have been inspired by various approaches and resources when facilitating philosophical dialogues. Since 2008, I have been developing P4wC with different groups in various contexts across Portugal. This often means I only have one opportunity to work with a specific group, and I might never work with those children or teenagers again. Consequently, it is crucial that I develop strong philosophical provocations to help me and the group engage in meaningful philosophical conversations.

Lipman and Sharp's novels provide a guarantee of philosophical content. P4wC facilitators all over the world have come a long way by creating, exploring and proposing different thinking provocations to invite participants to engage in philosophical dialogue (Björnsson 2023). In my experience, I have found that when faced with a single opportunity to dialogue with a group—typically for an hour or an hour and a half—to philosophise with twenty or twenty-nine children in a room, sitting in a circle, I need resources that can capture the children's attention in the first few minutes. Picture books, illustrated books, images and even games have proven to be truly engaging, as they draw children's attention to visuals and/or cultivate a playful environment.

An experienced practitioner may demonstrate philosophical sensitivity (Lone 2013; 2015; 2018) or a well-tuned philosophical ear (Sousa 2017) to spot potential in ‘any’ resource, story or game. A less experienced practitioner might need some guidelines to feel comfortable with the philosophical potential of the resources that will act as a trampoline for dialogue (Sousa 2021). This is why facilitators have suggested books and discussion guides that can be used to teach philosophy, such as the ones we find available online at The Prindle Institute for Ethics website.<sup>1</sup>

In this present research, I employed a self-study methodology or reflective practice, focusing on the practical aspects of my own experiences as a P4wC facilitator. This approach allowed me to reflect critically on my experiences and offer insights that

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.prindleinstitute.org/teaching-children-philosophy/>

may contribute to the understanding of using picture books/illustrated books in a P4wC context to develop a philosophical ear. My aim in this article is to share these insights, and to inspire others to undertake similar self-reflective research. By doing so, they too can explore and enhance their own practices, thereby contributing to the collective knowledge and advancement of our field.

## **2. 'Philosophyness'**

For those who are not experienced in facilitating philosophical inquiries, choosing a picture book as the thinking provocation can present some difficulties until they train and develop what Jana Mohr Lone (2013) calls 'philosophical sensitivity', and what Laurance Splitter (Sousa 2017) refers to as a 'philosophical ear'. Lone (2015) argues that philosophical sensitivity 'involves the development of our ability to identify and ponder fundamental questions about the human condition and to be unwilling to stop at whatever answers we find' (p. 22.) This idea is linked to what Splitter refers to as philosophical ear, highlighting that this is a key skill for a P4wC facilitator: '... this philosophical "ear" usually requires a degree of familiarity with philosophy, so that one has a sense of the great dialogical tradition that children are invited to join' (Sousa 2017).

The connection between philosophical sensitivity and a philosophical ear lies in their shared emphasis on deep engagement with fundamental questions and the human condition, akin to those we find in philosophical tradition. While philosophical sensitivity, as described by Lone, involves the active exploration and contemplation of profound inquiries regarding humanity without settling for superficial answers, the concept of a philosophical ear is, according to Splitter, vital skill for working in a P4wC environment. This skill encompasses attentive listening, timely questioning, and the ability to discern philosophical directions in dialogues. It emphasises the importance of guiding individuals, particularly children, towards thinking critically and philosophically. Nikolidaki (2023) points out that 'listening philosophically' is something that 'requires certain commitments from teachers, such as living an examined life themselves and viewing philosophy as their general theory of education' (p. 25). It involves not just hearing the words, but grasping the underlying meanings, intentions and implications. The Socratic method (Portelli 1990) is a good example of the ability to listen and respond to interlocutors, manifesting deep philosophical sensitivity to their ideas and assumptions.

In essence, while philosophical sensitivity focuses on the individual's capacity to delve into fundamental questions, philosophical ear expands this notion to include

the skill of recognising and nurturing philosophical thinking in others. Both concepts underscore the value of engaging with profound inquiries and fostering a philosophical mindset, whether through personal exploration or facilitation of philosophical dialogue. I propose the word ‘philosophyness’ to refer the disposition to seek out or to be receptive to fundamental questions or topics about existence, knowledge, values and meaning.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Questioning books

When trying to describe the criteria that make me choose a specific book over another, I first started to use the term ‘philosophically provocative books’. After a while, I started using the expression ‘questioning books’ (Martins & Sousa 2023).<sup>3</sup> To help me in the task of selecting questioning books, I established a set of relevant criteria. It is important to understand that not all books will meet every criterion, and that the list is not intended to be exhaustive.<sup>4</sup> P4wC practitioners can look at the list as a map that will help them navigate the unique territory of philosophical dialogue. The criteria aim to help us not only select books with philosophical potential but also refine our philosophical ear. For the facilitator, being among questioning books is an excellent way to prepare for the potential directions the dialogue might take. I invite readers to take a closer look at the following criteria: curiosity, expansion of thought, tension, uncertainty, reader involvement, possibilities and provocation.

### 4. How can we identify a questioning book?

Books intended for questioning do not necessarily include questions on the cover or within their pages (if we consider questions as sentences that end with a question mark). A questioning book invites us to practice curiosity, to be open to astonishment (Greek: *thaumatsen*). We really want to turn to the next page; we are truly interested in knowing what happens next. Our thinking gets expanded when reading the book: we think of hypotheses, we try to find meaning, we question, we propose answers, we put ourselves in the characters’ shoes, we practice cognitive empathy (Green 2018)

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<sup>2</sup> I struggle with finding a Portuguese translation for ‘philosophyness’.

<sup>3</sup> In Portuguese, *livros perguntadores*. I invite readers to search for #livrosperguntadores at instagram in order to find books that fit these criteria.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of questioning books was presented in October 2023 at the Educational Seminar called *Os Riscos da Educação* (Educational Risks) at FOLIO, a literary festival held in Óbidos, Portugal.

by having the opportunity to think as though we are someone else, someone who thinks differently from us.

Tension is a common trait of questioning books. It shows up when a character or a situation offers us something problematic, something that needs to be solved, as if it were a knot that needs to be undone.

Another criterion is uncertainty, and maybe this is one of the criteria that facilitators tend to avoid. Uncertainty is at the heart of a philosophical dialogue; even though we (the facilitator or the participants) choose the starting point of the dialogue, it's not clear which direction the dialogue will take us. In a questioning book we face and embrace uncertainty, we deal with the opacity that we wish to become transparent (Caeiro 2023). 'Certainty and security cannot always be assured' (Haynes & Murriss 2012, p. 7).

In these books, there is a clear call for reader involvement, encouraging the reader, whether alone or in a group environment, to engage in practices such as verbalising, drawing and reflecting on their dialogues. A questioning book offers possibilities; the book does not limit itself to a single way of seeing the world or even presents lines for different points of view – perhaps even opposing or contradictory ones. A questioning book does not focus on sending a message or a certain moral message.

Finally, there is the element of provocation. A questioning book touches us on the shoulder, nudges our thoughts, bothers us, and urges us to ask questions or to propose hypotheses. We are invited to challenge our assumptions and our beliefs.

Questioning books can be looked at as a trampoline for raising fundamental questions and philosophical concepts. I would like to share some examples of questions shared by children and young people that came up after working with questioning books. Table 1 presents us with questions shared by participants during P4wC workshops.

**Table 1:** Questions or ideas shared by participants after working with questioning books.

| Questions                                               | Book (title, authors)                                         | Participants' age (approx.) |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| What is death for?                                      | <i>Para que serve?</i> , Madalena Matoso & José Vieira Mendes | 8/9 years old               |
| What is a deep question?                                | <i>Museu do Pensamento</i> , Joana Bértholo                   | 15/16 years old             |
| Why, in some places, do neighbours not know each other? | <i>Obrigado Uma História de Vizinhos</i> , Rocio Bonilla      | 9 years old                 |
| Will we all speak the same language?                    | <i>O Dicionário do Menino Andersen</i> , Gonçalo M Tavares    | 7/8 years old               |
| Are desserts good or bad? What is a dessert?            | <i>Petit, o Monstro</i> , Isol                                | 3 years old                 |
| Can a prison be someone's home?                         | <i>Cruelty Bytes</i> , Ellen Duthie & Daniela Martagón        | 8/9 years old               |

## 5. Abundance and absence in questioning books: *¿Hay Alguien Ahí?* and *Discórdia*

In the following section, I will offer insights from my P4wC practice concerning two books, one published in Portugal and the other in Spain, that I've been working with both as a resource and as an inspiration to facilitate P4wC workshops. My aim is to inspire fellow facilitators to exercise 'philosophy' and create their own guidelines for the questioning books they come across with. Sharing is at the heart of the community of philosophical investigation; when we engage in a dialogue we share ideas, questions, doubts and answers. I wholeheartedly advocate for P4wC practitioners to embrace this spirit of sharing by disseminating books and resources across different languages, allowing different voices to be heard.

*Are there questions on other planets?*

Picture the following scenario: Planet Earth is contacted by beings from another planet that are genuinely curious about humans and human life; so curious that they leave us a handful of questions. *¿Hay Alguien Ahí?* (*Is there anybody out there?*), written by Ellen Duthie and illustrated by Studio Pattern, explores an exercise familiar to facilitators that helps us think about questions and answers: the alien that is curious about human existence. In 1981 Matthew Lipman already proposed such an exercise

in the novel *Pixie*: 'So Mr. Mulligan offers to help them. He proposes a thought experiment. Imagine, he suggests, a visitor from out of nowhere. His name is Adam, and he knows language, including both words and their meanings. However, he has no experience and, therefore, no memories' (Lipman & Sharp 1982, p. 314).

Thinking about a being that has no experience or knowledge about humanity and that asks for our help to understand humanity is a powerful exercise or technique (Fletcher 2023, p. 341) to help the participants to explain and articulate concepts inherent to our daily experiences. For example, we experience friendship by playing a game with our friends or by dialoguing with our friends. So how would we explain friendship to an alien?<sup>5</sup>

*¿Hay Alguien Ahí?* is organised via fourteen big questions that announce fourteen topics and are followed by a double page filled with more questions around that topic. Here are some examples of the big questions: 'Are you human beings good people?', 'How do you know what you know?', and 'Have you found the meaning of life?' In the last two years I have engaged with this book with different groups of children. My main approach has been to choose in advance two or three big questions to invite the group to think and to dialogue. I try to choose as randomly as possible, by opening the book at random, trying to ensure that my personal interests do not influence the choice of topics. Since the book is written in Spanish and I work mostly with Portuguese children, I do not invite the group to read it aloud. Choosing the questions in advance allows me to translate the material and guarantee the quality of that translation.

I have approached these big questions in three different ways. One is to present one of those questions to the group, encouraging them to generate their own questions. I usually bring the questions written on paper, which I then display on the board or on the floor for everyone to see. This could be introduced in a single P4wC workshop, or it could help us to develop a particular topic over the course of ongoing work. While we generate questions, we have the chance to explore the topic or the topics raised by the questions from the book.

Another way of working with the three big questions is to provide six questions proposed by the book around each main question and to invite the children to

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<sup>5</sup> Fletcher highlights how this idea invites and encourages the most reserved participants in the dialogue, while also positioning them as experts, something that is uncommon in the other areas of study at school.

associate these questions to the topic present in the big questions. I always open and share the book with the group, discussing the narrative that guides the questions the book offers us. Additionally, I open the book and read the translation while showing the pages and illustrations.

The third way involves writing six big questions on pieces of paper asking for a volunteer to randomly pick one paper to get us started. Then we can discuss if the question is relevant to the group, clarify anything that seems opaque in the question, and explore the question. We don't need to worry if the question has unfamiliar words; this is a chance not only to expand vocabulary, but also to explore meaning in a philosophical way. Having the group deal with questions that bring opacity to the conversation helps us to gain consciousness of what we know and what we don't know. This way we have a chance to practice intellectual humility.

Since the questions presented in the book *¿Hay Alguien Ahí?* address contemporary issues like gender equality, sustainability, human rights, I find it necessary to conduct a preliminary investigation on these topics as preparation for the dialogue. For instance, when we are working with the question 'How is your relationship with other earthly beings?' topics like animal cruelty, personhood, human rights, and animal rights arise. Taking this into account, I try to prepare myself for dialogue by reading in advance articles or books with a scientific and philosophical framework on the subject. This kind of investigation helps the facilitator to support the group in exploring the questions in a deeper way, highlighting the complexity of the topic. When faced with complex issues as we do in philosophy, we should cultivate a sense of slowness as we walk towards transparency, trying to enjoy as much as we can the journey between the question and the answer.

Sometimes the questions and answers raised during the dialogue push the group to decide what further information is needed to continue exploring the questions. This process may involve both preliminary and follow-up investigations. These moments are precious for the children (and for the facilitator) to engage in the practice of what Alison Gopnik calls 'theory of theory', claiming that theory revision is fundamental to learning. According to Gopnik (quoted by Church & Samuelson 2017), 'The basic idea is that children develop their everyday knowledge of the world by using the same cognitive devices that adults use in science' (p. 110) and that 'learning is a process of discovering just how firmly one ought to hold theories about the world' (p. 112). Questioning books like *¿Hay Alguien Ahí?* open an opportunity for adults to think like children (who think like scientists).



*Can we learn how to disagree?*

*Discórdia* (*Disagreement*, the title of the American edition) was originally published in Portugal by Pato Lógico, followed by the American edition published by Tapioca Stories. This is the first book authored by Nani Brunini. It is a wordless book which means that the narrative is presented entirely through illustrations. Reading wordless or silent books presents a significant challenge for facilitators since we lack textual guidance. A possible approach is to silently share the book page by page, inviting children to question or comment on each page as they wish. Alternatively, children can be encouraged to observe each page attentively in silence. I have practiced this option often since it turns out to be an excellent opportunity for practicing active listening, fostering a focused and reflective state among participants.

In *Disagreement, A Guide for Educators* (2023, p. 2), the publisher suggests questions you can ask the group while exploring the book, page by page:

- What do you think is happening?
- What are the characters doing/feeling/saying?
- Why did it happen this way?
- Can you describe what's happening?
- What will happen next?

When working with *Discórdia* with a group of children I will 'read' the book a few times silently. This means I open the book and share each double page with the group silently. Most of the times the children spontaneously comment or ask questions about what they are seeing in each double page. Sometimes they ask to go back to a previous page to clarify something or to understand what's happening.

One of the groups I worked with came up with the idea of creating a consensus manual as an answer to the question 'Can we learn how to disagree?' Another idea put forward was that disagreement is a good thing and that is why we need to develop ways to help us disagree without being swallowed by the 'disagreement monster' (a reference to one of the book illustrations). Consensus was identified as something we need to achieve as a group of people who might think differently about a specific topic.

These are the steps that were included in the consensus manual created by a group of young people around 10/11 years old with whom I worked in 2021/2022:

- Opening the Manual.
- Sharing your ideas by writing them on paper.
- Stating why you stand for those ideas.
- Organising your ideas.
- Reading or listening to ideas of other people.
- Saying why you disagree with the other person's idea and why this idea is not so good.
- Accepting someone else's idea. Notes: it depends on the size of the disagreement; you can say 'you're right and I accept your idea' or it can happen that everyone has their own idea and that will not be a problem.
- Knowing how to deal with this (this is the translation of a popular expression that young people use in Portuguese, *saber lidar*. It means handling something without being upset with it. It reminds me of the Stoics way of living, accepting things you just cannot change; like the idea that it will be difficult to see everyone agreeing with you).
- Closing the Manual.

The work I did with children and teenagers around *Discórdia* inspired me to develop a set of P4wC thematic workshops to celebrate the 50 years of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal.<sup>6</sup> The workshops were named #LiberdadeParaDiscordar (freedom to disagree) and the focus was to invite people to talk about disagreement by practicing it. During these specific workshops I did not read or present the book *Discórdia* to the groups; what I did was to think of statements that invited people to stand for a position (I agree, or I disagree) and to justify that position. Some of the statements relate to everyday topics like 'to put pineapple in the pizza' or 'to have tattoos'. Other statements related directly to the topics raised by *Discórdia* like 'having the right to vote at the age of 16' (democracy) or 'to stop punishments' (authority).

One of the games I developed with groups of children and young people consisted of dividing the group into two smaller groups that took over a specific space in the room

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<sup>6</sup> This revolution took place on 25th April 1974, and it put an end to 50 years of dictatorship, allowing the Portuguese people to live in a democracy.

where we were working. Once people were divided into two groups, I distributed two cards, one for each group. The group on my right was the 'I agree' group; the group on my left was the 'I don't agree' group. Each participant was then tasked with thinking of reasons why someone might agree or disagree with an idea that I randomly drew from a set of pre-prepared cards.

It turns out that sometimes a person who was on one side had a different opinion. Generally, children or young people did not ask to change places; they ended up taking the game seriously, thus practicing cognitive empathy (Green 2018)<sup>7</sup> and epoché (Ferraz 2020). During the evaluation of the dialogue, some participants mentioned that they played the game even though it was challenging to set aside their own ideas and think from the perspective of someone who disagreed with them. I consider that the playful nature of the game truly facilitated the process. Practicing cognitive empathy in a dialogue that includes opposing positions fosters meaningful conversation.

Disagreement is part of the dialogue process; each person who participates in a dialogue carries their assumptions, biases and beliefs. It is natural that this perception of the world does not always coincide amongst the people involved. In the context of dialogue, it seems important to expect disagreement (without necessarily forcing it in an unpleasant way), to be available for it to happen, and to see this moment as a possibility to exercise cognitive empathy.

## 6. The challenge of abundance and the challenge of absence

*¿Hay Alguien Ahí?* demands the facilitator's preparation since it offers so many questions. This book provides an abundance of opportunities for dialogue. There are so many questions and so many ways to work with those questions. Additionally, each question can provoke another set of questions. The challenge for the facilitator and the group is to decide how to work with this abundance. By contrast, *Discórdia* does not provide the readers with a written narrative, nor with questions. There is a total absence of questions in the book. How does the facilitator and the group work with such absence?

Children's and young people's participation in the dialogue process is essential, and allowing them to make decisions about what we will do next and how we will proceed

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<sup>7</sup> 'Such an attitude promotes tolerance with those with whom we differ. It also helps us to confront situations in which people might disagree on a matter in which neither one seems to have compelling reason for preferring her view to that of the other' (Green 2018, p. 103).

is a way of sharing the experience of uncertainty. Unlike in the more typical classroom setting, the teacher does not take on the role of knowing or directing the next step. Instead, the experience of opacity is shared, wonder is invited to be part of the dialogue, and we practice philosophyness.

With this attitude the facilitator has the opportunity of becoming just one more participant in the dialogue (Sousa 2022) if and when she/he abandons the idea of being the group leader. As Mostert highlights in an interview conducted by Krzywon (2021), as a facilitator ‘you’re stumbling around, just like the participants, ears and eyes open for new, unexpected perspectives’. Even though facilitators can and should prepare themselves as much as possible for each dialogue, there is a strong possibility that the path of the dialogue can be quite distant from what we read and investigated about. Just like jazz musicians, facilitators are invited to improvise (Santi & Zorzi 2023).

## **7. Transient thoughts**

Working with questioning books demands that the facilitator embraces uncertainty (Murris 2016; Sousa 2019) and unpredictability (Björnsson 2023). To cultivate philosophical sensitivity in teacher-facilitators, Jana Mohr Lone (2015) recommends the following:

Engaging in philosophical conversations, reading philosophy, listening to philosophical lectures, observing others facilitating philosophical discussions, and reflecting on the philosophical facets of literary and artistic works all provide experiences that nurture this capacity. (p. 27)

I would further suggest that reading and working with questioning books is a valuable means to cultivate a philosophical ear. Questioning books offer a variety of questions and topics that can be addressed philosophically, aligning with António de Castro Caeiro’s understanding of philosophy as ‘an obsession to overcome opacity and aim for transparency’ (Caeiro 2023, p. 23). The elements found in questioning books are often opaque and it is up to the readers to engage in a journey towards transparency. In this journey, questions, comment, and answers with a philosophical tone will emerge.

Being comfortable with uncertainty leads the facilitator to trust the group to work together to discover different ways of engaging with the book and with the dialogue that the book provokes. In my practice I consider that a philosophical dialogue is more than a conversation (Gardner 1996), and that it implies, on the one hand, the

awareness that our ideas can be vague or confused (Russell 2023, p. 69) and, on the other hand, a commitment to the pursuit of transparency (Caeiro 2023, p. 23).

Engaging with questioning books fosters intellectual humility by immersing us in uncertainty, prompting us to ask, 'what is this?' or 'what's happening here?', and to acknowledge that 'I don't know' or 'I don't have a clue' or 'I've never thought about this before'. Uncertainty is a defining characteristic of philosophical dialogues. We know how the dialogues will begin, but little more. Facilitators can prepare thoroughly, yet the unfolding of dialogue remains unpredictable. Both facilitators and participants are operating with the opacity present in their questions or comments. In this process, intellectual humility allows us to acknowledge the opacity and recognise the need to reconsider our ideas, reformulate our positions, or even rephrase our questions. It allows us to abandon irrelevant or unreasonable ideas. This is the attitude of someone who is obsessed with achieving clarity, encapsulated in one word: 'philosophy'.<sup>1</sup>

During my P4wC practice, most of the books I have identified as questioning books to date can be found in the children's literature category. I recommend that adults read children's literature to practice intellectual humility, even if they do not work with children. I also recommend listening and dialoguing with children, since 'children have the marks of traits that are central to intellectual humility including belief revision in the face of new evidence and a willingness to be open to, and to seek out, new information in order to form the most accurate and vertical conception of the world' (Church & Samuelson 2017, p. 118).

Through this article, I aim to inspire P4wC practitioners to train and develop 'philosophy', embracing the uncertainty and ambiguity present in picture books, illustrated books, and in philosophical dialogues, ultimately encouraging them to find a time and a place to practice intellectual humility side by side with children and young people.

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