

Kindergartners and “Philosophical Dialogue”: Supporting Child Agency in the Classroom

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During a reading of the children’s book *Hey, Little Ant* the kindergartners imagined what it might be like to be an ant.¹ They also pondered what might be this particular ant’s likely fate, since he steals food from humans. Would a human allow him to escape with a morsel? Or would he be crushed? Several students reasoned that it’s not okay to kill because we’re all animals, humans and ants both. Other students reasoned that it’s okay to squash an ant because ants eat our food. One kindergartner, Eric, offered a new idea to the class: “I think it’s in the middle because they only have no food left. The ant is in the middle. There’s stealing, but probably they don’t have a lot of food.”

Dialogue that Fosters Agency

The excerpt above (of a classroom dialog) reveals an experience in which young children grappled with the “middle” ground of an ethical dilemma. In considering the ant’s actions from several viewpoints, the students, in their own way, came to a better understanding of the complexity of an ethical issue. Lessons involving rich dialogue capture children’s imagination and creativity. Such dialogue allows them to think and talk playfully, to consider issues of right and wrong in stories and in their own experience, both in the setting of a school and out in the world. While teachers often have a goal of engaging their students in productive, collective discussions based on powerful texts,² examples of how such discussions might occur with younger students are scarce.³ In our own work, we have found kindergartners eager and able to participate in ethical dialogue on themes such as justice and care. Teachers who engage their students in such discussion support the potential for children to consider themselves as worthwhile contributors, as persons with a valued voice, both in classroom and beyond, in their own worlds.

In addition to the ends of consensus, agreement, or a right answer in class conversations, we use the term dialogue to



Teacher and co-author Michael D. Burroughs reading to students.

describe how teachers can engage young people in collaborative and generative consideration of how we want to live together. In her use of the word “dialogue,” Maxine Greene reminds us that educating all children in a common school involves “striving towards significant inclusion” (211) as a way to lessen invisibility, marginalization, and structured silences.⁴ Dialogical practice is important for the education of children in a diverse democratic society because, as citizens, they “are not simply to exercise power (e.g., voting; direct action), but to think with one another about the power they exercise.”⁵ Teachers can help children shape their power towards responding to social issues around them within a wide range of thought, voice, and difference. The practice of dialogue supports the realization that, as citizens, young people should engage with and learn from one another to realize that their actions do not only impact themselves (and involve their own rights), but also impact others (and involve responsibility, which is an awareness of the rights of others).

For adults, embracing dialogue in the kindergarten classroom as a teaching method involves calling into question children's (often-assumed) inability to consider the perspectives of others. Children are developing cognitive and emotional skills as they practice empathy, perspective taking, and reasoning, but these qualities are not entirely new in the child. With appropriate scaffolding and support, children demonstrate that there is rich potential and growth through dialogue with others. In fact, the ability to consider others' perspectives and values at a young age has been described as a "springboard" for empathy development in early childhood.⁶ Contemporary research demonstrates an emerging capacity for empathy and perspective taking in early childhood.⁷

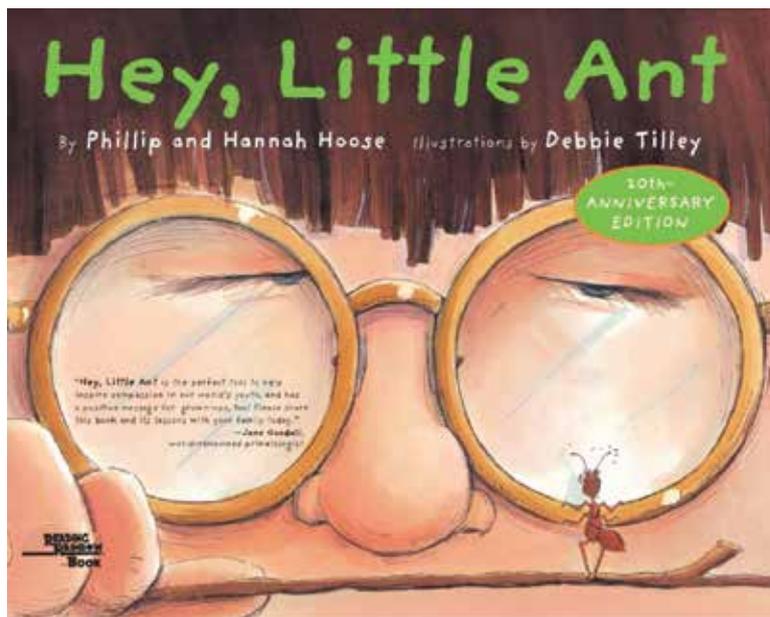
By winter break of the school year, the children engaged in group conversations, deliberations, or "morning meetings" almost daily. The lead teacher deliberately evaluated children's verbal and cognitive skills of listening to others, sharing thoughts, and articulating one's own ideas. These prior experiences supported the conversations (described in this article) that children had with co-author Michael D. Burroughs, a guest teacher and university philosophy professor. We focus in on one reading of *Hey, Little Ant* through an instructional framework for fostering dialogue around a text and illuminate key considerations for teachers and practitioners:

1. Finding a provocative dialogue prompt,
2. Framing the space for dialogue as "different,"
3. Fostering provisional thinking and perspective taking,
4. Considering the complex activity of dialogue.

1. Finding a Provocative Dialogue Prompt

Finding a provocative conversational piece or "text" is a key part of a successful and productive discussion. Photos of social interactions (e.g., issues of fairness in the classroom, conflict arising in play, etc.)⁸ and works of art⁹ can also serve as a platform for initiating dialogue with young children.

There are numerous children's books for teachers to use, and some include teacher's guides or suggestions for dialog.¹⁰ Teachers often begin by identifying the ethical or moral dilemma(s)—that is, questions that relate to issues of "right" and "wrong," but have no single definitive answer. Teachers can write several questions that are open-ended and that invite discussion and



several potential answers from students. The class can then return to these questions, and others as they arise, to support dialogue during and after a reading.

Michael introduced the book *Hey, Little Ant* to the kindergartners, which relates the story of a tiny ant that's in danger of being stepped on by a young boy. The book suspends a dramatic moment of decision: the boy must choose whether or not he will step on the ant. The ant begs the boy not to kill him, giving reasons

why he should be spared. In turn, the boy ponders the ant's guilt (the ant previously stole food from picnics) and the worth of the ant's life.

Throughout the discussion, the kindergartners raised questions and ideas about the ethical dilemma the story presents, as well as additional aspects of the story. Several pages into the book, Michael paused and asked students to close their eyes and imagine how the ant might be feeling while in danger.

2. Framing the Space for Dialogue as Different

Michael started the conversation by reminding students that they were not looking for a single "right" answer, but for ideas and possibilities to consider together. He later stated, "It's okay to disagree kindly with a classmate," and "It's even okay to change your own mind." He modeled dialogue for the children and asked follow-up questions to help children see connections between their and other children's statements.

In fostering dialogue with young students, the focal point of the class deliberately shifted from teacher-centered (or "banking") pedagogy¹¹ to cooperative pedagogy. Dialogue requires that students—not just teachers—contribute to discussion and the creation of knowledge, which can support children's confidence as active agents in the classroom. Depending on a teacher's prevailing pedagogy, we have found it may be helpful to explicitly name and signal this shift with children (e.g., telling students that their ideas are central to the lesson at hand). Because our expectations of children frame much of what children accomplish, we can work to expect them to think deeply, listen, and engage in dialogue. We can model this expectation in our actions.

When teachers provide examples of civil discourse (disagreeing, changing one's mind, or asking a classmate for clarification), young students can practice engaging in dialogue that leads to the consideration of new perspectives. Teachers can make it

clear to the children throughout regular dialogue that each of them is a vital part of the group and that they should listen, seek to understand, and respond to each other's contributions. Teachers can scaffold a dialogue by using follow-up questions, voicing statements that clarify meaning, and helping children to make connections between story elements and their own experiences. Teachers may also offer an alternative viewpoint not represented or offered in the dialogue, which is especially important if the point of view of those experiencing a problem or injustice in the narrative has not been made explicit.

Simply instructing young people on how to be good citizens might promote obedience, but not the critical thinking needed to grapple with real issues. For example, the "citizenship trait or value of the week" is one common way to teach children how to be good citizens in schools. Recognizing student or groups of students for demonstrating the characteristic or value (e.g. helpfulness) is usually part of this strategy. Lessons often, but not always, start and end with a desired outcome, demonstrable skill, or value that students are expected to master. In dialogue, on the other hand, the sharing of perspectives is a starting point, the beginning of an ongoing discernment of issues and perspectives that moves students closer to the possibility of informed action and agency in the world.

3. Fostering Provisional Thinking and Perspective Taking

During the reading of *Hey, Little Ant*, Michael asked the kindergarteners sitting on the carpet to consider how the boy in the story is feeling. In the book, the boy says to the ant, "It's good if I squish a crook like you," but the boy hesitates to do it.

Teacher: Is it okay to kill a crook?

Students: (Silence.)

Teacher: How do you think the boy is feeling?

Kate: Happy.

Carrie: Mad. He doesn't like ants and he wants to squish it.

Jade: Angry.

Rose: They [the ant and the boy] both have feelings.

Teacher: Like Rose said, the boy and the ant are alike. Do we all agree with Rose?

In this instance, some children raise their hand to agree with Rose, while others keep their hands down. One student expands on why he agrees with Rose's opinion that ants and humans are alike. Other students, one after another, add reasons why they agree with Rose:

Patrick: They both have a life.

Jack: They have eyes, hands, feet, and [a] back.

Ebony: Maybe they both feel scared.

Michelle: They are both animals [Repeating Rose's remark].

Following this discussion of similarities between the ant and boy (including their respective feelings), the class considered whether or not the ant is a "crook," which, in part, is why the boy is considering stepping on him.

Teacher: Who thinks the ant is doing something wrong? (Six children raise their hand.)

Tim: It's not nice to steal.

Jack: You can't take some food. That's stealing.

Eric: I think it's in the middle because they only have no food left. The ant is in the middle. There's stealing, but probably they don't have a lot of food.

In this last line, Eric offers a new direction in the dialogue

Pedagogical Strategies for Fostering Dialogue

Dialogue takes practice, can be messy, and has no exact script to be followed or predetermined conclusion to reach. Teachers can use the instructional framework outlined in this article as a guide to help structure these practices. We also offer suggestions and cautions for teachers based on our experiences in fostering productive dialogue.

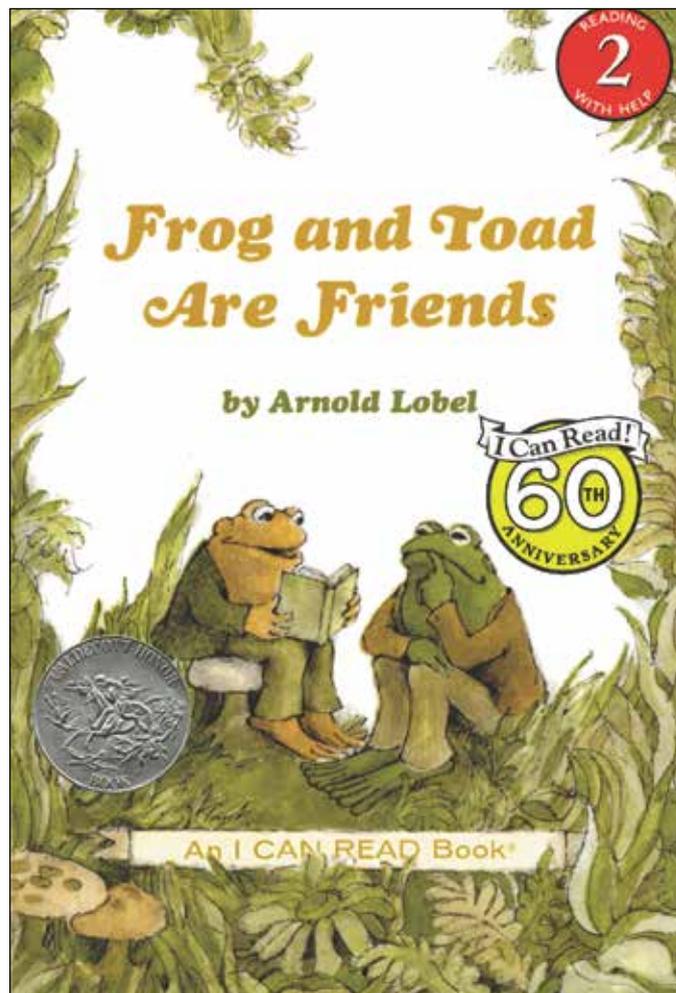
- **Choosing an Accessible Prompt:** As noted above, choosing an accessible and engaging prompt is an essential aspect of cultivating classroom dialogue. By using artwork created by the class, a photograph, or a favorite song, or children's book, children have an accessible entry point into the dialogue.
- **Scaffolding the Dialogue:** As important as getting the dialogue started is offering the proper supports along the way. As a teacher and facilitator, we can help these young citizens to engage in dialogue by the use of comprehension questions to make sure the class understands a question that is at issue, to repeat child statements so that it is clear the whole class has heard, and to use encouraging language and actions to make children feel comfortable in the dialogue. Asking children to close their eyes and imagine being a character or person's position is another helpful technique.
- **Summing Up:** At the end of a dialogue it can be helpful to ask the group to consider what they found most interesting about the session, a question they have (which can form the basis for the next class dialogue), or a new idea or point they hadn't considered before. This can bring some resolution to the session, while also providing a useful platform for future dialogues.

and an evaluation of stealing that is complex. He considers the reasons why the ant chose to steal the food and, further, why the ant is not simply a “crook,” but rather, in the “middle.” We found this moment noteworthy in the dialogue because it complicated the simple binary of right/wrong and helped the students discover how ethical dilemmas can be complicated—more than one choice may be defensible. Ethical dilemmas and decisions can be complex and multifaceted. Moreover, Eric’s assertion—and other contributions from his peers—revealed a way in which young children, when given the chance and proper support, can play a driving role in classroom dialogue.

In addition, this dialogue revealed the children’s ethical awareness and their ability to discern the complexity of some ethical decisions and competing values (for example, caring versus justice orientations). Children agreed and disagreed with one another about the feelings of the ant and the boy, and several settled on being “in the middle” regarding the ant’s act of stealing (that is, whether this act was right or wrong, and what information was most relevant in the story to evaluate this act). The dialogue seems to provide evidence that, from a young age, children can begin to reason in complex ways—considering others’ perspectives, and recognizing the potential for ambiguity in moral judgment and justice.

Rather than finding philosophical discussions intimidating, the kindergartners seemed eager for these conversations, often bubbling with energy and ready to focus on the topic at hand. The children not only discussed those tensions (right or wrong), but also went further by grappling with larger societal issues such as killing and retributive justice.

Initially, Michael asked the students to close their eyes and use their imagination to put themselves in the ant’s place, and later in the boy’s place. Elements of this process, repeated regularly in his discussions, allow for imaginative engagement with others’ worlds. The point of the dialogue was not to get the children to think a certain way about the ant’s life, but rather to explore their own perspectives alongside others’, a skill that, if developed, will serve them well in their daily lives and in their role as democratic citizens. The teacher’s role was



to discern children’s abilities in a dialogue, even as the teacher fostered a space for scaffolding these abilities in the classroom.

On another day, while discussing the book *Frog and Toad Are Friends*,¹² the class considered whether it is ever okay to tell your friend a lie (for example, telling your friend you are not home when you actually are home). The children voiced various opinions about this situation, considered others, and changed their minds. “Toad is lying to Frog,” said one child. “No, he is just tricking him,” said another. Another child explained, “Well, he really just didn’t want to play that day.” The students failed to come to a consensus opinion, but then turned to a general ethical issue—are there times when lying is not wrong? Although the children clearly looked forward to the book itself, questions like these

generated excited conversations about friendship, honesty, and justice.

4. Considering the Complex Activity of Dialogue

Leading a rich dialogue can be challenging. (Sidebar, p.10) Dialogues—unlike fully, pre-determined lessons—cannot be controlled to arrive at a chosen conclusion, no matter how desirable that might be. It takes time for teachers to master this practice and it will never be perfect (nor, for that matter, is any other form of pedagogy); that is, there is always room for growth and development in the practice of dialogue. Social studies scholars Walter C. Parker and Diana Hess remind us that they do not “know anyone who claims to be an expert discussion leader, and those who are demonstrably very good at it speak mainly of their deficiencies.”¹³ As expressed humbly and eloquently decades ago by Theodore Greene, fostering a good discussion is “an incredibly difficult pedagogical feat... which I, for one, have never in my life pulled off to my entire satisfaction. I have never conducted a discussion of which I could honestly credit myself with a grade of more than 75 out of 100.”¹⁴

At its best, dialogue can be a shared inquiry on a matter of importance, including learning how to engage with people who hold different opinions, backgrounds, and cultures. It

can be especially important when a teacher wants to include children, actively, in the learning process. And, if conducted well, dialogue can be useful for including and learning about newcomers in our classrooms. Students can practice considering the perspectives of others, whether they be longtime residents of our community or those who are so often represented as “others,” such as immigrants and refugees.

While cultivating “student voice” is more common in the adolescent years,¹⁵ the early years are an ideal and worthy time to listen and honor the voice of young people, before they are “schooled” in more formal practices of discussion and debate. As teachers, we can actively listen to young people, and support their capacity to be civic agents in the world, participating with agency and creativity in the issues and challenges of our day.¹⁶

Notes

1. Phillip M Hoose and Hannah Hoose, *Hey, Little Ant* (Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press, 1998).
2. Walter C. Parker and Diana Hess. “Teaching with and for Discussion,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 17, no. 3 (2001): 273–289.
3. Ryan Colwell. “Empowering Praxis in Our Youngest Citizens,” in *Teaching for Democracy in an Age of Economic Disparity*, C. Wright-Maley and T. Davis, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2016): 146–162.
4. Maxine Greene, “Diversity and Inclusion: Toward a Curriculum for Human Beings,” *Teachers College Record* 95, no. 2 (1993): 211–221.
5. Parker and Hess, 242.
6. Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
7. Nancy Eisenberg, Tracy L. Spinrad, and Adrienne Sadovsky, “Empathy-Related

- Responding in Children,” in *Handbook of Moral Development*, Melanie Killen, ed. (Taylor & Francis, Abingdon, UK, 2006): 517–549.
8. Stephanie C. Serriere, “Carpet-time Democracy: Digital Photography and Social Consciousness in the Early Childhood Classroom,” *The Social Studies* 101, no. 2 (2010): 60–68.
 9. Christine Thompson and Sandra Bales, “‘Michael Doesn’t Like My Dinosaurs’: Conversations in a Preschool Art Class,” *Studies in Art Education* 33, no. 1 (1991): 43–55.
 10. Jana Mohr Lone & Michael D. Burroughs. *Philosophy in education: Questioning and dialogue in schools*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).
 11. Paolo Freire, “Critical Pedagogy,” in *Sources: Notable Selections in Multicultural Education*, Jana Noel, ed. (New York: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill, 2000): 171–175.
 12. Arnold Lobel, *Frog and Toad are Friends* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).
 13. Parker and Hess, 273.
 14. Theodore M. Greene, “The Art of Responsible Conversation,” *Journal of General Education* (1954), cited in Parker and Hess, 2001.
 15. Dana L. Mitra, “The Significance of Students: Can Increasing ‘Student Voice’ in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?” *Teachers College Record* 106 (2004): 651-688.
 16. A version of this article can be found the book: *Civic Education in the Elementary Grades: Promoting Student Engagement in an Era of Accountability*, by Dana Mitra and and Stephanie C. Serriere (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015).

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