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Can Philosophy with Children be an Antidote to Radicalized Thinking?

November 22, 2017 by Blog Contributor

by Maria daVenza Tillmanns

After Brexit became a reality in the UK and Trump became a reality in the United States, many thought that this was perhaps the last stand of those who thought of themselves as white and entitled to their land, calling it their country. Others living in their country may be citizens of that country, but it did not mean it was theirs as well. It belonged to those of white origin. And this “fact” would embolden those who

wanted to “take back” their country and protect its sovereignty.

Initially, I too, thought this was a sign that this nationalist thinking was becoming a part of history and, while it may create havoc on its way out, it was nonetheless on its way out. I thought this, at least, until I read an article in the *New York Times* by Jesse Singal titled “[Undercover with the Alt-Right.](#)”

Patrik Hermansson, a 25-year-old graduate student from Sweden was sent undercover by the British anti-racist watchdog group, Hope not Hate. His observations are part of a new report from Hope not Hate which sheds light on this mostly online movement which gained national attention after its support for Donald Trump. What this report revealed was that “once-moribund hate groups in both the United States and Europe are enjoying a striking uptick in recruitment. The wave of potential members is young – teenage and 20- something (mostly) men appear to be exhibiting interest in far-right ideas in numbers that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.” This totally contradicted my view that in essence, white supremacy is a thing of the past. Does this report indicate that this movement is now being embraced by young people and for what purpose? The report also explained how the alt-right and the more “moderate” alt-light are set up to recruit these young people, not all that different from the tactics used by gangs or by ISIS for that matter. And the alt-light’s fan base runs in the millions. Initially, the tactics exclude explicitly racist speech. Instead it appeals to a sense of wanting to belong, and providing goals that pertain to “defending Western culture.” These goals seem worth defending and are not readily questioned. Recruits are given a sense of meaning and community. Yet, the tactics include drawing new recruits in deeper, showing videos of crimes committed by migrants and giving them activities to participate in. These tactics serve to radicalize the young recruits. The hard-core alt-right is enjoying the success reached by the alt-light and they are gaining ground – with young people.

This article truly hit home the idea that young people, by nature ideological and wanting to change the world, are easy targets.

My question is: can we offset some of their vulnerability to these sophisticated recruitment tactics by doing philosophy with children?

Philosophy for children encourages children to dwell on their own thinking and

feelings. It provides them the space to explore their own ideas and the ideas of others in their discussion group. Hearing what others say stimulates their own thinking and allows them to play with different ideas, to change their minds, and to re-think what they thought originally. In one exercise, I asked a group of teenagers I was working with to write down what they thought about a question I posed. After our discussion of an hour or so, one particular teenager held her piece of paper up in the air and declared, after I heard everybody else's ideas, this is now "useless," as she pointed to her writing. Useless may be a strong word, but it also indicates that she was more open to reason than to simply holding on to and defending her original idea.

When children are given the opportunity to hear their own thoughts and feelings, so to speak, and to take them seriously, it gives them a sense of feeling grounded and connected to themselves and to others around them. It builds a sense of trust that is needed not to fall prey to those who will try to elicit trust for their own agenda.

In my *Philosophy Now* article, "[Children, Intuitive Knowledge, and Philosophy](#)," I argue (in line with Martin Buber) that in doing philosophy with children, the child's inborn relationship is honored and as a result their relationship with the world is left in tact. It is not replaced with the structures of thinking that schooling imposes on the children. As Mark Twain so famously declared:

I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.

Leaving the inborn relationship intact helps children to cultivate their inner authority, be self-critical, to self-regulate and truly be in charge of their own thinking and decisions.

With their inborn relationship intact, the child is grounded in his relationship with the world, which in turn allows for transference, for when children integrate what they have learned, they can apply it to everyday life. In other words, integrated knowledge has become a part of the child's own knowledge and can therefore be applied to real life more readily, instead of trying to apply abstract principles to real-life concrete situations. This is of great importance, because in transferring their knowledge to the

world around them, they are less susceptible to the manipulative influences of the world around them. In her book, *Children as Philosophers*, Joanna Hayes makes a similar point when she states:

Perhaps the pertinence that is given to children's own questions and experiences in pursuing this type of enquiry is a feature that facilitates transfer and application.

In this way, the child remains in charge of her thinking and is not as easily influenced by the thinking of others. The children gain self-confidence and are less of a target for those who seek to gain the child's confidence for their own purposes.

When a child is in charge of his thinking, he can remain open to the ideas of others and allow others to impact his own thinking, without the fear of giving up his own thinking and submitting to that of others.

This is of vital importance, for too often we do not entertain the ideas of others for fear of giving up our own thinking and losing our sense of identity as well. So we tend to become defensive and stubborn, and essentially closed-minded. We only listen to the ideas we agree with, only defend our side of the story. We want to preserve our sense of self first and foremost and are less interested in the story.

Children are less inclined to hold on to their opinions. They are still flexible thinkers, driven more by curiosity than by self-preservation. They are interested in what their peers think and why. They are far more capable of changing their mind and may even change their mind several times. They often remember what one of their peers said weeks ago and how it made them think differently about a certain subject. They are interested in the bigger picture, which is what philosophy is all about. They are interested in the story, and not just themselves. When children feel self-confident, they are not afraid to hear what others think. In fact it enhances their curiosity. Self-confidence means knowing that they belong to themselves. The void created by lack of self-confidence, however, can easily be filled by someone (or something) who is intent on recruiting others for their own purposes promising to provide a sense of community she can "belong" to. For example, an adult may strive for status to create

a sense of belonging.

This can be very deceptive and leave the child and later the adult feeling betrayed when his needs are not at all met in the process. This sense of betrayal causes an increased sense of distrust in the world and erodes any relationship the child had initially. Distrust now fuels an increased sense of “staying close to home,” and seeking the company of only those like oneself, at whatever cost. This now ‘fabricated self’ lacks authenticity and spontaneity. It lacks the ability to trust and relate to others in a healthy and open way. One’s stance is self-protective and one is easily threatened by “outside” sources. And as we now know, Fake News is preferred over anything that may infringe upon one’s identity, already made so fragile by lack of trust and true relationship.

Philosophy with children enables children to gain confidence in their own thinking and feeling and that of their peers. They can openly question themselves and each other knowing they are taken seriously. What is said matters and is respected. Children learn through playing (as do young animals). And it is through taking their play seriously that children learn how to survive in a dangerous world (just as in the animal kingdom). We cannot protect children from the world, but we can teach them how to survive in a dangerous world. Too often, we as educators have stressed the importance of trying to protect our children or teaching them to protect themselves, as opposed to teaching them how to go into world with the navigational knowledge to negotiate a world that is often unpredictable and dangerous.

Doing philosophy with children gives them the opportunity to become self-critical and self-reflective. They learn to be comfortable questioning themselves and each other for the sake of all concerned. Again, the focus is on the big picture and not just on how best to protect the self at the expense of others, if need be. The focus is on understanding the complexity of real life issues and the complexity of there being so many different interpretations of those issues. Philosophy creates room for entertaining thoughts within a wider perspective and of greater depth. Otherwise, knowledge can be used exclusively for the purpose of falling in with a strongly held narrow perspective. In the US, for example, education, health care, and government have been co-opted by the business model, thereby compromising their intrinsic integrity.

Philosophy with children engages their inborn curiosity and tries to harness that curiosity so that self-protective and often self-destructive habits, such as we now see present in the alt-right movement on young minds, need not develop. We need to appeal to the child's sense of curiosity when we teach them to be critical and self-critical. If curiosity is lost, we can still teach the children critical thinking skills and logic, but transference will become more difficult to achieve. The incentive is lost when curiosity is lost and rigidity in thought is not far away.

Kristof van Rossem conducts Socratic dialogue groups in schools in Belgium. He emphasizes that the method of questioning and analyzing one's thoughts, ideas and experiences helps to counteract the radicalization of thinking. Without necessarily talking about or using words as radicalized thinking, the method itself impacts thinking in such a way as to prevent an absolutist mindset. Critically evaluating thoughts, feelings and experiences are the navigational tools we need to sail into the world with confidence and meet others where they are and learn how to listen well and see the many different ways things can be interpreted and understood. In this fast-paced world we need to slow down our thinking and reasoning. If we are too quick to assume and judge we cannot collaborate, we cannot reason together, we cannot trust the process of coming to some kind of consensus or agreement, much less understanding.

Now, it seems, we are being thrown back to simply care about protecting our own interests even at the expense of others and ultimately ourselves. This false sense of "protecting our sovereignty" will only lead to war, a war of words, a war of power relations, and a war of dominance. We have been there before, many times, and the question is whether we need to go there again. If it were up to the children of the next generation, I believe they would reject going there again. Life is challenging as it is without the added pressures that result from "lazy" thinking, one-sided responses and selective logic. Thinking should be about collaborative thinking and reasoning, expanding and deepening relationships and felt expression.

Much of current thinking is too narrow in comparison to the many challenges we are facing worldwide. Thinking has to be encouraged, cultivated, liberated and set free and there is no better way than through doing philosophy with children.

Maria daVenza Tillmanns teaches a program that does philosophy with children in underserved San Diego schools in partnership with the University of California, San Diego. In the 1980's she attended Dr. Matthew Lipman's workshop in philosophy for children and later wrote her dissertation on philosophical counseling and teaching under the direction of the Martin Buber scholar Dr. Maurice Friedman.

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4 thoughts on “Can Philosophy with Children be an Antidote to Radicalized Thinking?”



Abraham Joseph

November 24, 2017 at 2:24 pm | Reply

What the author has written throws a very central philosophical question; can minds be programmed? Doesn't it have inborn, or inherent directives or predilections of Nature? If the latter is found true, then teaching of philosophy to children will be futile. If they get chance to groom their minds free& independent, the Nature's directives will take charge of their directions. Whatever he/she pre-learned will be put to test by the inherent faculty of his/her Reason, and then his/her directions will be taken over by his inherent sense of Reason. Those who never got the chance to be absolutely free, only might stick on with what had been taught to him/her!

<http://thesparkleofhumanreason.blogspot.in/2011/01/part-b.html?m=1>



Jean Bews

January 9, 2018 at 4:59 am | Reply

Maria, I like your emphasis on the importance of being open to changing one's mind. P4C allows children to understand that, while it is good to be able to argue for your own point of view, to change your mind during or after discussion, taking on board the thoughtful views of others, is equally authentic.

Children of course are not unique in having this facility. I find I often change my mind, after discussion, or reading, or deep thought. And I do feel liberated when this happens.



W. F. Twyman, Jr.

January 25, 2018 at 4:39 pm | Reply

Maria,

I enjoyed reading your insightful essay. As you connected "distrust in the world" to "seeking the company of only those like oneself," I immediately thought of vestiges of distrust in the world in Black America (historically black colleges and universities, black fraternities, black sororities, black churches, Jack and Jill, etc.) How do we inspire children to move beyond limited thinking if their horizons are hemmed in by well-meaning parents and grandparents who might distrust the larger world?

Keep writing drops of insight from your inkwell of intuition.

Wink



Maria Tillmanns

February 11, 2018 at 1:05 pm | Reply

Wink – how nice to hear from you. I appreciate your comment.

My response to your question is two-fold:

it is important to start young – in elementary school

the fastest growing demographic is interracial and interethnic.

But the purpose of philosophy is to push those ‘horizons’ outward, regardless of what children get from home...

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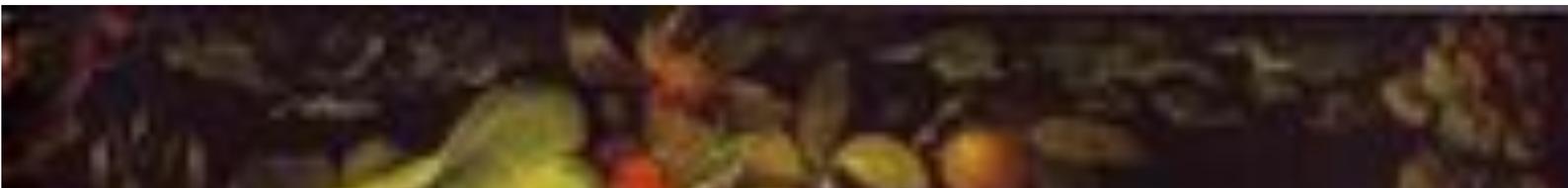
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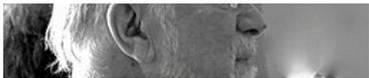


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