

## **Sneetches, Picture Books and Children as Philosophers: Learning through critical enquiry with storybook characters as your teachers**

**Abstract.** This research paper explores the role that Children's picture books and stories can play in the teaching of Philosophical thinking and enquiry to young children and focuses mainly on the stories of authors Roald Dahl and Dr Seuss. Philosophy for Children (P4C) was first introduced in the 1970's by Philosopher and Educator Matthew Lipman and continues to be taught today, at Primary level as well as secondary, although it is viewed as controversial by certain Educators, religious establishments and parents. Examples are provided of researchers and writers who, through their analysis of Picturebooks, have uncovered rich and deep themes embedded within, that resonate with the theories of key Philosophers throughout history, including Socrates, Kant and Heidegger.

**Keywords.** Philosophy, Children, Picture Books, Matthew Lipman, Roald Dahl, Dr Seuss

What is Philosophy and why should we teach young children to think as Philosophers and develop intellectual faculties such as critical thinking? Philip A. Pecorino describes Philosophy as thought 'which is critical and comprehensive, analytic and synthetic, practical and theoretical, logical and empirical' [1] In their book 'What is the value of teaching children to question and think critically?' Deleuze and Guattari define Philosophy as 'The art of creating concepts'. [2]

Matthew Lipman, one of the Pioneers of the development of teaching Philosophy to young children (P4C) believed that Philosophy should be taught to children at an early age because he felt it was of high importance to teach the value of reasoning and strategies for Critical Thinking before possibly false assumptions about the world had been embedded into their thinking via family, educational and religious systems, making it more difficult to challenge at a later age.

Highlighting the work of key thinkers in the field of Philosophy For Children, beginning with John Dewey and Matthew Lipman and including those working within the field today, this paper will provide examples of picture books and children's stories that have been used and continue to be used in the teaching of this subject to young children. It will also focus upon the work of Philosophers and researchers involved in the analysis of children's narratives and in the identification of key philosophical themes espoused by Philosophers throughout history. This paper will explore the Illustrated stories of two major authors within the field of children's books, notably Dr Seuss and Roald Dahl, although throughout the process of research undertaken so far, it has become evident that the subject of picture books and Philosophy is merely the tip of a very large iceberg. Authors including Maurice Sendak, Sean Tan, Kitty Crowther and others have written and illustrated on a variety of challenging themes, from depression to death and these might be used as a starting point for meaningful discussion with children. Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss state that, 'Children's authors express (often unknowingly) the social, moral and political values of their society.' [3] Books which may originally have been perceived as being lightweight and merely used to entertain children, can embody deep Philosophical themes which are embedded within them and these themes can also be used to teach children to explore a variety of complex issues in an understandable form: from racism, to illness and death, to child abuse and forms of punishment and reward.

In particular, the picture book and animation of the same title 'The Star Bellied Sneetches' stand out as being grounded in themes of injustice and discrimination and there is considerable evidence that this story has been used extensively as teaching material within the subject area of Philosophy and has also been the focus of a number of essays written on the subject.

As cited on the Author's website published by Random House, Dr Seuss, otherwise known as Theodor Robert Geisel and the author of The Sneetches, cultivated his sensitivity to social injustice as a result of having been teased at school as an adolescent, for being a German American. Such themes run deep within the story of the Sneetches.

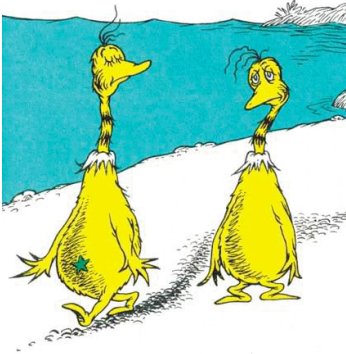


Figure1: The Sneetches And Other Stories Dr Seuss 1961

The concept of 'Philosophy For Children' was conceived of in the 1970s by Philosopher and Educator Matthew Lipman and continues to be taught and developed globally, often using his original model as a template. Prior to Lipman's work and research into the theme, it had been suggested that Philosophy as an educational subject should not be introduced into schools until children were aged 11 or 12, as before this age they were deemed too young to understand the complexities of the subject. Today, there are those working in the field of education who believe that Philosophy as a way of thinking can be used to teach pre schoolers and Dr Seuss's book 'Green Eggs and Ham' is one title that has been used as a teaching aid for children to help with learning how to ask good questions, using a system of enquiry developed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the founder of American Pragmatism. Phyllis Chiasson has written that 'where Peirce's philosophy was once impenetrable, it is now simple and practical enough to be used at the pre-reading level (as with Green Eggs and Ham)'. [4]

On the theme of Philosophy as a taught subject, Chiasson says: 'it offers the possibility of not simply passively consuming books, but opening up debate and feeding a child's natural curiosity' [5]

In his book 'Thinking In Education', Matthew Lipman suggests that pre school children are naturally inquisitive with an almost inexhaustible curiosity and he goes on to suggest that before the acquisition of language, children are trying to make sense of their world and that the family is central to that world and the place in which they will make many discoveries. Lipman claims that the child's natural excitement and motivation to learn starts to trail off within five to six years of age and within a short period of time of starting school and engaging with the school environment. He implies that one of the reasons for this waning in motivation is due to the structuring of the school system and the manner in which lessons are taught and he cites these systems and practices as being partly responsible for quashing the child's natural curiosity.

Amongst other teaching aids that he used within the context of the educational environment, Matthew Lipman introduced children's novels and Picture Books (and also wrote a number of Philosophically themed novels) as a starting point for Philosophical discussion; the terminology that he used to describe such activity was 'enquiry'. Within the teaching and learning environment, Lipman took on the role of a facilitator (rather than following the more traditional model of an authoritarian teacher who held the authority and knowledge and who disseminated this to a passive audience) and had children sit in a circle rather than formal rows and encouraged them to take turns when responding to words and images and when asking questions, so that the participation followed a much more active and lively direction. Those children who were not speaking were encouraged to treat the others with respect and to cultivate good listening skills. Lipman proposed that children might be encouraged to learn to take responsibility for when to act or when not to act in relation to certain situations through engaging with stories and through relating to characters in those stories.

In an interview by Ron Brandt titled 'On Philosophy in the Curriculum', his Conversation with Matthew Lipman gives us insight into the process, 'What goes on In a Philosophy for Children class? By discussing what happens to the characters in a novel, they can talk about things in the third person: somebody else is the one involved. They become accustomed to asking each other for reasons and for opinions, to listening carefully to each other, to building on each other's ideas. I've seen 1st grade children, when another

student voices an opinion, call out softly, "Reason! Reason!" [6]

And perhaps, using the characters to ask questions, the experience is ultimately less personal, that is - not assumed to be the pupil's own thoughts, therefore it is easier to allow the character to be the carrier of mistakes, rather than the pupil. In 2003, in defense of the continued development of embedding Philosophy as a taught, practical subject within the school curriculum, Matthew Lipman wrote: "The key concepts with which I will be working are not precise, clear-cut, and technical; instead, they are rather diffuse and contestable. They include such redoubtable stalwarts as inquiry, community, rationality, judgment, creativity, and autonomy, all of which have about them more than a whiff of traditional philosophy. These are, nevertheless, important concepts for any theory of education, and we had better confront them head on rather than risk becoming even more confused by trying to steer around them." [7]

Other key thinkers and researchers in the field, include Gareth Matthews, whose thinking was influenced by Lipman and writing in 1980, he challenged us to address how we think about children and encouraged a reappraisal of them and their innate intelligence. In the book 'Philosophy For Children In Transition', Matthews, emphasized the need to rethink the child, not as an ignorant being, but as a rational agent who already has the capacity to reason philosophically, and he thereby opened a space for the emergent field of what is now known as philosophy of childhood [8]

Matthew Lipman acknowledged the influence of American Philosopher John Dewey (1859 – 1952) on his work in education and in particular, upon the development of Philosophy For Children as a practical subject. Dewey was a Philosopher, Psychologist and major voice in Educational Reform and in the Progressive Education movement. He was responsible for formulating the practice of 'Reflective Thinking' in education, a proactive approach created to challenge the more common and traditional form of educating children, in which Learners were expected to passively assimilate information from an all knowing font of knowledge (namely the teacher) who held an authoritarian stance in the classroom. Reflective thinking encourages children to actively participate in their learning, they are encouraged to develop critical thinking skills in terms of questioning problems with the intention of finding their own solutions. Lipman paid tribute to the enduring impact Dewey had on his work in the field, but also notes the limitations of his predecessor's more theoretical approach:

'Philosophy for Children is built unapologetically on Deweyan foundations. On the other hand, Dewey's approach, through its lack of philosophy in the classroom, experiences much greater difficulty in achieving Deweyan goals. Dewey nowhere discusses the educational use of elementary school philosophy. [9]

Dr Seuss' picture book 'Oh The Places You'll Go!' is a powerful example of a story which might be used as a tool for encouraging children to philosophically question their choices and rationally learn to analyze challenges and is discussed in the book 'Dr Seuss and Philosophy: Oh The Things You Can Think!' by Jacob Held. For example, the theme of courage is highlighted as a key area for possible discussion.

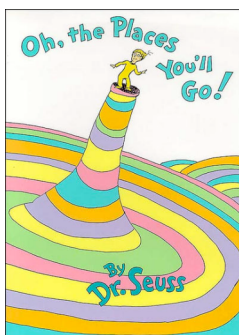


Figure 2: Oh The Places You'll Go! Dr Seuss 1960

Held describes the main protagonist in the narrative as coming up against a series of challenges in which his courage is tested. Within the context of the book, links are made with themes explored by the Greek Philosopher Socrates, who spoke at length on the theme of courage (often within a militaristic context) and posed questions as to what bravery meant and what steps and maneuvers people might need to take in certain

situations to prove how courageous they were. Socrates also felt it necessary for a person to gain an understanding of why, if they had made a bad decision, they might have made the choice they had and through the use of critical enquiry, come to an understanding of sorts about how to make a different set of choices if in a similar situation, hypothetically leading to a better outcome. The use of questions ('Critical Enquiry' in Philosophical terms) is used within the text of 'Oh The Places You'll Go!' to encourage and enable children to think for themselves and try to solve the puzzle of what the character might do next. Through identification with the character, they might then transfer this logic to their own personal situations.

Seuss' book can be read as a metaphorical exploration of the challenges that life will present a child with and he uses conceptually rich visual representations such as mazes and roads to illustrate themes such as journeys and puzzle solving in a manner understandable to children, within the story. Seuss also encourages risk taking and the empowerment of the child, but the character is also taught to consider risk and its implications, as playfully illustrated in the rhyming text:

'You will come to a place where the roads are not marked.  
Some windows are lighted but mostly they're darked.  
A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!  
Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?  
How much can you lose? How much can you win?' [10]

The use of questions directed at the character (reader) in the story enables children to identify with the character in the story and could assist with internalizing such questions for themselves. This questioning approach supports theories of the value of critical thinking. Seuss encourages the child to become the hero of his or her story and master of their own destiny and might be seen to embody certain ideas relating to theorist Kurt Goldstein's notion of self actualization, which although far too complex for a young child to understand, might be instrumental on some level in teaching a child to take responsibility for their choices and to internalize a self questioning voice. Seuss' illustrations - stylized linear drawings, filled with bright blocks of printed media, infuse the imagery with a playfulness that is reflected in the rhymes. Seuss had an innate understanding of the enjoyment children find in repetition, rhyme, alliteration and Onomatopoeia.

Perhaps one of the reasons these books are so popular with children - apart from the colourful, eye catching illustrations, weird and wonderful characters and use of repetition and alliteration, is that they don't patronize children, but instead characterize them as intelligent beings with a sense of agency. This book, in particular, begins by empowering the child with encouraging language - the text assumes that the child is smart and will work out what to do next, independently of interference.

Gareth Matthews (1980) writing about the theme of Philosophy for children and its suitability:  
'Emphasized the need to rethink the child, not as an ignorant being, but as a rational agent who already has the capacity to reason philosophically, and he thereby opened a space for the emergent field of what is now known as philosophy of childhood' [11]

The following quote by William James reinforces the notion that Philosophy is worthwhile when it has a real application to life and this was one of Matthew Lipman's aims in bringing Philosophy to the classroom and in the teaching of Life Long practical skills to children: 'James asserts that one of the crucial features of a worthwhile philosophy is that it makes a real connection with life. So, James's philosophy is primarily concerned with life and not with abstractions and polemics that have no influence on human action.' [12]

In a chapter of the book 'Pragmatism, Education and Children', Dr Philip Cam also cites Philosophers Michel de Montaigne and John Locke as having been very influential on Lipman's work within the field of education. Based in Australia, where Philosophy For Children is implemented in every state, Philip Cam is a Doctor Of Philosophy and is the author of 'Thinking Together, Philosophical inquiry for the classroom.' [13]

Lipman writes, in 'Pragmatism, Education and Children', that the Philosopher John Dewey, who died in 1952, was not in favour of the concept of Philosophy being introduced into schools and taught on a practical level and was against the notion of 'Philosophy In Education'. He left no instructions as to how his Philosophical theories of education might be embedded within the school Curriculum. He states that Dewey, like many other Philosophers of his time, believed that Philosophy should be purely theoretical and not integrated into the classroom as a practical subject that children might engage with.

Matthew Lipman acknowledges John Dewey's theories of education as having been highly influential on the development of P4C (Philosophy For Children) and states that: 'Philosophy for Children is built unapologetically on Deweyan foundations'. [14] Although Lipman built upon Dewey's theories of education and integrated these into his own work, it could be said that Dewey's approach, through its lack of practical application of philosophy in the classroom, did not have the same kind of impact within the educational system, on a practical level. Lipman goes on further, to say: 'Dewey nowhere discusses the educational use of elementary school philosophy.' [15]

Snobbery, discrimination and hierarchy. Frat clubs, Class, In groups and Out Groups. These are all themes that could be starting points for discussion with children, when reading the story or watching the animation of *The Star Bellied Sneetches*, a Dr Seuss classic. The book is a popular choice when teaching children about prejudice and discrimination and the importance of questioning and challenging such behaviours. Elitism, difference and uniqueness. Stars on and Stars off. Seuss populates his story with two groups of imaginary yellow creatures, whose difference is marked by those who have stars on their bellies and those who don't. The Star Bellied Sneetches believe they are superior with their Belly stars; they hold parties on the beaches and exclude the non - starred Bellies. They walk with their noses in the air, smug with contempt for those they consider to be their inferiors.

When the wily entrepreneur Sylvester Mc Monkey Mc Bean comes to town, he brings with him a machine that, for a fee, enables him to stamp stars on the bellies of those without. Naturally, the original star bellies are incensed, because they don't wish to identify with the others i.e. to appear to be like them and lose their sense of difference and superiority. Mc Bean then offers them the option of having their stars removed, which they take up and thus, resume their superior stance now redefining stars as common. Stars are out. Then Mc Bean plays the Sneetches newly stamped with stars, off against them and they, naturally want theirs removed so that they can be part of the 'in group'. Mc Bean continues to exploit them all with his machine, contributing to the division between the groups, until all of the Sneetches run out of money. He thinks he has upped them and drives off, far richer than when he arrived at the beach, but all of the Sneetches have learnt a valuable lesson, that they are all equally valuable and all part of the same clan, the clan of Sneetches.

Throughout this story, the underlying philosophical messages teach children to question difference and the story has been used as a teaching tool to aid the act of enquiry; to question why the wearing of a particular symbol might represent more status and what that might mean for those without them. The story teaches the pointlessness of discrimination and prejudice. The colourful and playful animation of *The Sneetches* brings Seuss' characters to life more fully, with an engaging soundtrack and songs and with vibrant colour palletes that draw the viewer into the world of the Sneetches.

'The lesson that children draw from *The Sneetches* is clear: Discriminating against people in a different social group is wrong. People have more in common than the superficial differences used to justify discriminatory policies. People are just people, we might say.' [16]

Watching the animation of 'The Sneetches' or reading the book with children might also become the catalyst for a conversation regarding positive discrimination or other types of discrimination – it offers the possibility of teaching difficult themes through engaging storylines, opening up debate and feeding a child's natural curiosity.

Elsewhere, this story has been used as a teaching aid to explain the underlying themes embedded within the narrative. In the module and paper, 'Teaching Children Philosophy' by Lena Harwood, the author explores the story of the Sneetches and addresses themes related to race and diversity. The story has been used extensively to illustrate such themes and others embedded within the story and to introduce children to the subject of Philosophy. Harwood's paper was presented at the conference titled: '[Race and Diversity in the Global Context](#)' 2008 –24<sup>th</sup> Conference on Social Philosophy, North America.

Lena Harwood, uses the Sneetches as an example to illustrate the importance of teaching Philosophical thinking to children to enable them to question assumptions or ideas that they have assimilated at an early age and to encourage them to critically evaluate and challenge these assumptions, using a simplified system of questions. Harwood describes a particular concept of Philosophy known as ontology:

‘ Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that attempts to discern the nature of the world. One particular subset, ontology, looks to determine what types of things there are in the world, and what makes a particular thing distinctive. Some metaphysicians have suggested that objects have essential properties, meaning that every object has a distinct essence. What makes a spoon a spoon is that it has the essence of “spoonhood,” whatever that might be. Others suggest that we should focus more on particular attributes or functions. In this view, the most important thing about this philosophical introduction, for example, is that it helps you understand the philosophical issues in the story. ‘ [17]

One could use this concept as a starting point for enquiry with children to enable them to question and understand what makes a Sneetch a Sneetch and what makes one in possession of a Star distinctive from one without and if, indeed, there are any major differences between the groups .

Thomas E Wartenberg in the book ‘ A Sneetch is a Sneetch and other Philosophical Discoveries ‘ reinforces the notion, that it is not acceptable for us to discriminate against others because of physical differences. One might note the superficial visual differences between the groups, but on closer analysis, come to learn that all Sneetches are more alike than might be first assumed and even if they have differences, children might be encouraged to question whether that makes one group of more value than another.

Matthew Lipman used Philosophical children’s novels to open up debate relating to the subject:

“ ‘ Philosophy for Children ‘ is taught with the assistance of children’s philosophical novels. These novels make use of stories having an infrastructure that, as the stories unfold, reveal a correspondence to the paradigm of inquiry. The fictional children in the stories can serve as models for the various methods of philosophical inquiry. These emerge in the classroom in the form of thinking styles: empirical, analytic, intuitive, rationalistic, phenomenological, etc. Contrary to traditional philosophy, which finds it difficult to provide illustrations for philosophical ideas, these stories in their entirety serve as ongoing philosophical examples. The ongoing novel offers a particular dramatization of the life of inquiry. ‘ [18]

The same could be said for using picture books to teach these themes and certainly, a number of Dr Seuss’ books have been and continue to be used as teaching materials to underpin the teaching of Philosophy. For example, researchers at a number of Universities, globally, have taught Philosophy using picture books as an alternative to using materials purposely written to teach the subject. Amongst these are Karin Murriss of Witwatersrand University, South Africa and Joanna Haynes of Plymouth University, England. Tom Wartenberg of Mount Holyoke, Massachusetts has also developed a large body of material and proposes to use Picture books as a teaching aid within the subject area. Jana Mohr Lone, Director and founder of The Washington Centre for Philosophy For Children and author of the book ‘ The Philosophical Child ‘, has also written about children's philosophical thinking and the benefits of encouraging children to engage in philosophical inquiry.

In addition to being used in a Pedagogic manner to teach important ideas, children’s narratives have also been the subjects of analysis for a number of writers who bring to light the underlying Philosophical theories embedded in the narratives.

In the book ‘ Roald Dahl and Philosophy ‘, edited by Jacob M held, a series of essays highlight the underlying themes contained within several Roald Dahl stories, and the Philosophers who are connected with those themes and theories. These include many of the great Philosophical thinkers such as Kant, Foucault , Socrates , Aristotle and Heidegger. Like many children’s stories, Charlie and the Chocolate factory contains themes related to morality, including the children’s behaviour, the brutal punishment of the brattish children and the rewarding of Charlie for his ability to delay gratification and his modesty in the face of temptation.

In the chapter ‘ On Getting Our Just Desserts ‘ Jacob M. Held links the punishment of the children to themes explored by Foucault in his analysis of discipline, punishment and the penal system and discusses the reasoning behind these systems of punishment. The children in Willy Wonka’s factory are disciplined using traditional and old fashioned methods, which are mainly physical, aimed at harming or transforming the body and administered by machines and Held highlights the connections here to medieaval systems of punishment including squashing and stretching, amongst others. In another chapter of the book, Willy Wonka is framed as an outsider / eccentric who gives free rein to his creativity and imagination. He is often referred to by other characters in the book as ‘crazy ‘ and ‘ mad ‘ and this calls into question the way in which society labels people who don’t fit with the norm as somehow insane. The chapter explores themes of ‘ Normalcy ‘ (an American

term for normality) and the many ways in which society acts to quell the threat of those who put their heads above the Parapet, as in the extremely creative and imaginative visionary, Wonka.

In the essay ‘ Matilda, Existentialist Superhero,’ themes of morality are again explored and Roald Dahl’s Matilda is described as representing the Nietzschean concept of the *Übermensch* - the superhuman who sometimes breaks the rules of a prescribed morality through the use of her superpower of Telekinesis to overcome her Nemesis, the headmistress of her school, otherwise known as ‘ The Trunchbull ‘ and the machinations of her ignorant and abusive family. ‘ As the existentialist superhero, she finds ways to counter the obstacles they put in her path. Instead of becoming bogged down in feelings of victimhood or resentment, she uses her strength of character as well as her genius and superpowers to take the initiative to do something about her situation’ [19]



Figure 3: Matilda Roald Dahl 1988



Figure 4 : Matilda Roald Dahl 1988

Matilda is described in the book as intellectually gifted (unlike her ignorant and neglectful family) and does not simply succumb to an externally imposed learning of morality, but decides for herself how she is going to live her life, in the true sense of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* , thus she does not blindly follow rules but makes her own informed choices. In the story we learn how she will creatively use her special powers to overcome a large, adult bully – The Trunchbull , headmistress of her school. We see also, how within the context of her bullying family, she uses her intellect to outwit them and we also come to understand how they are intimidated by her intelligence and try to disempower her. Quentin Blake’s illustrations of Matilda are rendered using his signature expressive outline that imbues the character with a sense of animation and playfulness. There is an innocence implied through Blake’s characterization of Matilda that remains throughout the illustrated version of Dahl’s classic that perhaps, is not necessarily reflective of her feistiness and wiliness in the face of her adversaries.

In the US, Roald Dahl’s books have been criticized and sometimes banned, due to the negative representations of adults and parental figures that are often abusive. Within the context of the book ‘Matilda’, her genius is threatening to the family she lives with and a threat within the school environment and perhaps some families and educational institutions recognize themselves represented in the narrative and wish the material to be censored, as it challenges their perception of themselves. Certain religious groups and libraries have tried to ban the books in response to the challenging content.

In the chapter, ‘ Matilda and The Philosophy of Education ‘ ( Roald Dahl and Philosophy ), the relationship that unfolds between Matilda and her teacher Miss Honey is a supportive one in which Matilda’s unique talents are nurtured and encouraged. The teaching that Miss Honey engages in is described as being reflective of that of Progressivism. Miss Honey challenges the school’s system of grading children according to their ages regardless of talent and skill and suggests instead, that children should be taught according to their existing needs, which in a practical sense, might be more challenging to existing school systems. Connections are made with the philosophy of home schooling and alternative school systems, such as Summerhill , whereby creative learning and self directed learning underpin the educational structure. The philosophy of Progressivism was originally introduced by the French Philosopher, Rousseau (1712-1778) and author John V. Karavitis writes that: ‘ The strictures and harsh punishment of the strict school system made no sense to him....For Rousseau, nature is the best teacher, and the student must actively interact with the environment to learn effectively. ‘ [20]



## Conclusion

There are two main strands to this enquiry; one explores the role that picture books might play in teaching children to engage in Philosophical Enquiry and the second highlights a range of researchers and writers finding Philosophical meaning in children's novels and picture books and relating these with the theories of some of the major philosophical thinkers and theorists throughout history. These findings could be said to raise the profile of picture books and stories for children from seemingly shallow entertainment, to valuable portals containing deeply meaningful lessons that are embedded within the text and images, and which can teach children deep lessons about life and the world in which we live. Aided by parents and teachers who guide the children through the stories and gently challenge them with questions related to the text, children might be encouraged in the active participation of understanding the stories and ultimately engage in deep, rather than passive approaches to learning.

One might conclude that Philosophy has always existed within the context of certain children's stories and most notably, within the context of the fairytale, in which metaphor and symbolism are often used as a means to explain complex ideas. Some of the books mentioned in this paper, and in particular, stories such as Roald Dahl's 'Matilda', function as contemporary fairytales and like their original counterparts, are stories in which the endings were not necessarily happy. There are strong correlations with Matilda and Cinderella, for example, particularly at the beginning of the story in terms of her relationship with her family, although in Matilda one might say that Dahl has created a feminist superhero in the child who overcomes the bad family and the bullying monster who is The Trunchbull. Matilda does not look for a male character to rescue her, but instead looks within herself to draw upon her own strengths and with the support of Miss Honey overcomes the bullying behaviour of the headmistress.

This particular story throws up questions relating to morality; for example, should Matilda simply have adopted the role of a passive, well behaved child who (as described in the 'The Drama Of The Gifted Child' by Alice Miller in the chapter 'Honour Thy Mother and Thy Father') is taught to obey at all costs and be compliant even when being harmed, or was she right to defend herself, even if she caused discomfort to Trunchbull and family members? One might ask whether it is a sign of psychological good health and the child's right to protect her self from harm, especially when it involves challenging authority figures and even if self-protection might cause harm to her persecutors? Matilda is certainly a gifted child and is suffering within the family and the school system because of her curiosity and genius and behaves in ways in which a demure and compliant child would not.

Matthew Lipman and others working in the field of P4C, certainly felt it important to teach children to think critically and proposed that these skills should be taught within the school curriculum and elsewhere, from an early age. Identification with characters in Picture books and novels were seen as tools for children to learn from and thereby understand their own situations and those of others. Themes such as inequality, discrimination and empowerment were explored and powers of critical thinking encouraged, even those these may have been in conflict with the teachings of the church or family. It is understandable that some parents may have been and still are against philosophical thinking being taught to young children and indeed, may have felt threatened by it as being in conflict with their own values. Like some of the Roald Dahl stories, the picture book 'Where The Wild Things Are' by Maurice Sendak was banned in libraries when it was first published, as it was thought to encourage rebellion and the expression of anger and other difficult emotions in young children. Several of Roald Dahl's were also banned in areas of America because they were considered too subversive, dealing with themes such as child abuse, inequality and Capitalism. Philosophy as a subject for young children might be thought of as subversive and dangerous within certain cultures and groups, but does that mean that it should be suppressed?

During an 8 day seminar during May 2008 (New Jersey) in The Institute For the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) the founder, Ann Margaret Sharp who worked closely with Matthew Lipman, explained that P4C has come up against much criticism (since its inception in the 1970's), in the form of articles and research papers. For example, some parents in America, where P4C has been taught for more than 40 years, believe that it goes against certain religious and conservative teachings and feel threatened that their children are being exposed to potentially oppositional ideologies being taught outside of the family. Some Educational Psychologists believe it to be age inappropriate and some Philosophers feel the teaching of Philosophy to



children should not be about ‘ meaning and how to live ‘ but rather the focus should be on ‘ theory and exegis ‘. And Post modernists have described it as ‘ imperialistic and hegemonic ‘. [21]

In the same interview, Joe Oyler expands on the fears that some parents verbalized, in that their own value systems, religious beliefs and codes of morality might be challenged if their children were taught to question systems imposed upon them within the family. He says, ‘ they were afraid it would inoculate their children against their own, parental indoctrination. ‘ [22]



Figure 5: Where The Wild Things Are Maurice Sendak 1963

So, although it would seem that there is much value in teaching young children to formulate their own questions relating to the world they live in, there is some reticence connected with the discussion of certain more controversial themes. Joanna Haynes and Karin Murrin cite Maurice Sendak's illustrated book ‘Where The Wild Things Are ‘ to illustrate the theme of challenging content for children and describe how the author personally felt about censorship of certain topics. Sendak , commenting on the philosophically challenging themes of his book ‘ Where The wild Things Are ‘ ,defended his decision to empower Max , the central character and to allow him to express difficult emotion...’ it is through fantasy that children achieve catharsis. It is the best means they have for taming ‘ Wild Things ‘ .It is my involvement with this inescapable fact of Childhood –the awful vulnerability of children and their struggle to make themselves King Of All Wild Things – that gives my work whatever truth and passion it may have. ‘ [23]

Haynes and Murrin also describe a situation in which a child started crying within the context of a classroom when the theme of death was introduced and a teacher made the decision to discontinue the programme of P4C saying ‘the school isn't ready yet for philosophy ‘. [24]

The theme of Philosophy for young children, therefore, continues as a subject that is still much debated and accepted in some educational systems and families and not supported and indeed, powerfully resisted in others. In a world that is currently moving away politically, from democratic debate and a philosophy of openness, to one which encourages suppression of dissent and of the move towards a more fundamentalist mind set, perhaps it is of even more significance that we teach our children the value of questioning the world they find themselves born into. We must continue to educate children about questioning the truths and injustices of our world and pass on the messages and enlightenment borne by The Sneetches and other picture book characters such as Dahl's Matilda, who developed her superpower in the face of injustice and cruelty.

## Index

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