

WHO TALKS? WHO LISTENS?

Taking 'positionality' seriously in Philosophy for Children

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Introduction

This chapter reflects the following set of philosophical commitments and assumptions. Our respective 'positionalities' influence how we perceive and understand the world, as well as how our efforts to perceive and understand the world are viewed by others. We take the term 'positionality' to refer to one's social location in relation to an existing economic, political, cultural and social network (Martín Alcoff 2008: 148). In accordance with feminist standpoint theory, we view this social network as one of power relations that influence 'both the nature of the world we aim to understand and our efforts to understand it' (Rouse 2009: 202). Standpoint theorists argue that their research can have liberatory effects for oppressed communities and researchers (Harding & Norberg 2005; Collins 2009). A standpoint-grounded examination of Philosophy for Children (P4C) programs presents possibilities for exploring their potentially liberatory, and potentially marginalizing, effects. We submit, following Linda Martín Alcoff, that one's positionality 'is a place from within which meaning can be discovered and values interpreted' (Martín Alcoff 2006: 148). It is correlated to 'kinds of perceptual practices and bodily knowledges that, as such, may fall beneath the cracks of the sort of beliefs that can be assessed in rational debate (ibid.: 92). This working understanding of 'positionality' has clear connections to Positioning Theory in social psychology, which explores how context, particularly in the realm of 'rights and duties' in a given local, both shapes and gives meaning to our linguistic interactions (see Harré 1999).

Let us proceed, then, with these philosophical assumptions: (1) one's positionality, or one's social location, is relevant to how we interpret values and discover meaning; (2) this is a process that often falls beneath the cracks of rational debate; and (3) one's positionality influences how others perceive one's efforts to understand and make claims about the world. With these assumptions in mind, we shall argue that concerns of positionality ought to be taken seriously in the research, scholarship and practice of Philosophy for Children (P4C).

Why should positionality matter to P4C? Philosophy for Children classes are often organized in accordance with Matthew Lipman's and Ann Margaret Sharp's prominent Community of Inquiry (COI) pedagogical technique. In a COI the facilitator often begins by reading a philosophically inviting text to her or his students. Then, the students are asked to raise a range of philosophical questions that the starting point has inspired for them. The facilitator

writes these questions on the board and the students then vote on which question they would like to begin to explore. Throughout the questioning and voting process, Matthew Lipman argued, 'some points are emphasized much more than others, suggesting that the comments of the group reveal what it thinks is important. In short, the emerging agenda for the discussion suggests both a variety of perspectives and a sense of proportion' (Lipman 1998: 278). In cultivating philosophical thinking through a COI, Lipman argues, P4C facilitators are promoting a 'higher-order democracy' by teaching their students how to 'think reasonably.'

We support the venerable democratic goals of P4C (on this point, see also Sharp 1991). However, drawing upon several important recent critiques of prominent Philosophy for Children methodologies, we argue that while these techniques are a definite improvement on the 'banking education' they aim to replace, they nevertheless underserve, and perhaps even marginalize, children who suffer epistemic injustice. Children and youth who are positioned such that their lived experiences and philosophical questions are socially under-valued and unrecognized, and thus under-represented in class, may struggle to articulate the questions that are most meaningful to them in the P4C classroom. Furthermore, they may not perceive any relevance to their lives of those classroom discussions in which their interests are not represented. This may leave them feeling silenced, and therefore less likely to participate in the COI; on this point see also Karin Murrin (2013), who argues that children may be silenced through the ways in which adults in authority hear and interpret their contributions. Because of this, a COI that does not take positionality seriously may reinforce the epistemic authority of dominant social groups whose perspectives will be normative in the P4C classroom—thereby undermining P4C as a truly democratic process.

This chapter is primarily concerned with children in P4C classes who are positioned as racial and ethnic minorities. This is because, while there has been a considerable amount of important scholarship on gender, feminism and P4C (see, for instance, Sharp 1989; Turgeon 1997; Bleazby 2009), the dynamics of race and ethnicity in the P4C classroom remain relatively unexplored. It is important to note that while there is a limited amount of scholarship exploring economic class and sexuality in the P4C classroom (see D'Angelo 1979; Gregory 2004), these are also areas that deserve significantly more philosophical attention. For considerations of space, however, we shall not be exploring these aspects of positionality and P4C in depth, but we highlight them as important avenues of future research.

This chapter argues for greater attentiveness to considerations of positionality in the research and practice of P4C, particularly with regard to race and ethnicity. Our analysis is informed by insights of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado 1989; Ladson-Billings 1998; Howard 2010) and multicultural education scholarship, as well as the attentiveness to 'the positionality of the child' (qua child) in P4C. We end by providing four concrete recommendations for research avenues on the subject of race/ethnicity and P4C.

Why positionality matters in P4C

The positionality of the child in P4C scholarship

Interestingly, Philosophy for Children was itself born of a concern for positionality—that of children and youth, broadly understood. Indeed, in arguing that children are capable of doing philosophy, pioneering Philosophy for Children practioners also argued that children's philosophical capabilities are systematically ignored, under-served and marginalized in our existing social order. In doing so, they articulated childhood and the very act of doing philosophy as a child in terms of the economic, political, cultural and social network that often surrounds it.

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For instance, Matthew Lipman (1980) was clearly reflecting on the positionality of children (qua children) when we explained that 'since children do not have full formed frames of reference in which to place each experience as it happens, each such experience takes on a puzzling, enigmatic quality. No wonder, then, that children wonder at the world' (Lipman 1980: 33). Here, Lipman acknowledges that children are (comparatively) 'new to the world' and thus approach it with a robust sense of philosophical wonderment that does not always occur for adults. With this understanding of childhood in mind, other P4C scholars have explored the distinctive philosophical 'style' of children, as well as the relationship between childhood and play (see, for instance, Guarda 1986; Weinstein & Cannon 1986; Gils 1995; Stanley 2012). This literature acknowledges the positionality of children (qua children) through exploring how the philosophical process that children engage in often differs from that of many adults. It renders clear that we cannot understand the philosophical capabilities of children strictly in terms of 'adult methods' of doing philosophy.

There are other important ways in which P4C scholars have reflected upon the social networks surrounding childhood. A number of P4C scholars have written specifically on the issue of children's rights (see, for instance, Matthews 1994). This literature shows that in understanding children as philosophical we come to understand them as rights-bearers. Conversely, in seeing how children are systematically denied rights we come to understand more fully the pressures that thwart children who strive to do philosophy.

As we can see, P4C scholarship is remarkably sensitive to the positionality of children qua children. More recently, however, a few P4C scholars have begun to explore how other features of many children's positionalities—particularly race and ethnicity—tend to be neglected in P4C practice and scholarship. We now turn to this small but important literature.

P4C and race/ethnicity

In the small amount of existing literature on P4C and race and ethnicity one finds two prominent, interrelated strands of concern. First, several authors have argued that COI and 'picture book philosophy' not only under-serve, but perhaps even marginalize, the philosophical questions and perspectives of racial and ethnic minority students. Second, several authors have pointed to limitations in popular P4C literature and lesson plans for the purpose of serving racial and ethnic minority students. Both of these concerns are attributed to the fact that P4C methodologies are employed in the absence of any explicit acknowledgement on the part of the P4C facilitator of the racial dynamics that may influence and surround the P4C classroom.

An important illustration of how prominent P4C methodologies (particularly COI) can under-serve and perhaps even marginalize children and youth who are racial and ethnic minorities comes from Nell Rainville (2000), who argues in her *Philosophy for Children in Native America: A post-colonial critique* that while Philosophy for Children is often presented as both intrinsically democratic (in its methodology), as well as useful for the purpose of teaching children and youth how to be active democratic citizens, she has 'yet to find a paper in the growing Philosophy for Children literature which acknowledges that ways in which our so-called democratic institutions have arisen out of, and continue to perpetuate, the political, economic and ideological and cultural oppression of Native Americans' (Rainville 2000: 65–66). She further argues that Philosophy for Children instructors, in striving to 'remain philosophically neutral' about socio-political issues, may in fact contribute to the marginalization of Indigenous peoples if Native American students are represented in the classroom.

This is because, she argues, 'a lack of public recognition for Aboriginal peoples and their concerns may make it difficult for students to formulate challenges toward, and to articulate their reasons for wanting to challenge, dominant societal and classroom perspectives' (ibid.: 69). Furthermore, Rainville argues that 'in many cases children may be aware of their own, or others', discomfort [with regard to dominant classroom perspectives about racism and colonialism] but lack familiarity with the concepts or the vocabulary necessary for responding to this awareness'. These are ways in which a lack of explicit concern for the positionality of Native Americans and Native children and youth in the P4C classroom underserves Native American children. But Rainville argues further that failure to attend to how Native children are positioned may in fact marginalize them even further. This is because a 'philosophically neutral' P4C class may contribute to a 'cultivated ignorance of non-Natives' (ibid.: 68) by allowing non-Native students to believe that they are participating in an ideal democratic dialogue without having to engage with the thoroughly undemocratic political context that surrounds them.

Another powerful critique of the lack of dialogue about race and ethnicity in the P4C classroom comes from P4C teacher and scholar Darren Chetty (2014), who argues, following Rainville and Kohan (1995), that 'it is not neutral to ignore the foundations of systematic discrimination and the ways institutions have arisen out of and continue to perpetuate the oppression of minoritised groups' (Chetty 2014: 15). Indeed, Chetty argues that P4C picture books like *Elmer* and *Tusk Tusk* by David McKee, both of which were recommended to Chetty for the purpose of facilitating P4C dialogues about race, are problematic for this purpose because they do not reflect the way that racism actually operates in our world. *Elmer*, for instance, tells the story of an elephant who is multicolored like a patchwork quilt and thus does not resemble the other elephants. He gets laughed at and feels ostracized. He therefore rolls around in berries so that an 'elephant color' rubs off on him. Over the course of this experience, however, Elmer realizes that he should learn to accept himself as he is—as a multicolored elephant—and the other elephants swiftly learn to accept Elmer, too.

While it is easy to see why one might recommend *Elmer* for the purpose of inspiring P4C dialogue about race, not to mention a range of other philosophical questions, Chetty discusses several key ways in which the text is not suitable for this purpose. First, Elmer is presented as 'one of a kind' and thus not a member of a larger group. Chetty argues that 'as such this is not analogous to multiculturalism or to the lone child of color in a classroom who will most likely have a family' (Chetty 2014: 19). Thus, the story of Elmer does not reflect the way racism tends to operate in our actual social world, in which whites are a dominant social group, and social groups of people of color are often oppressed along racial lines. Chetty further argues that 'whilst no discrimination or prejudice is featured in *Elmer*, Elmer is shown as being so unhappy with his superficial color difference that he attempts to remove the difference. Thus, the problem of being different is not given a social context but seen as a psychological problem' (ibid.: 20).

Chetty argues, again following Rainville, that it is problematic to expect a child of color in a Philosophy for Children classroom, particularly when the child is in a white-majority class with a white teacher, to raise the sorts of questions that will inspire fruitful dialogue about racism in our society. If P4C practitioners do not engage more directly and purposefully with racism as it actually operates in our social world (and thus the P4C classroom), Chetty argues, Whiteness will continue to be normalized. He explains that 'selecting stories that do not trouble the status quo while espousing a commitment to open-ended discussion and the questioning of assumptions invites accusations of 'doing ideology', albeit in a subtle form' (p. 26). Chetty, Rainville and a number of other P4C scholars have pointed to a general lack of adequate P4C picture books dealing with racism in way that parallels our actual social world (Reed-Sandoval 2014; Monteros 2015).

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As we have seen, Chetty's article makes clear the importance of taking positionality seriously in the P4C classroom, with regard to race and ethnicity. Given the realities of our social world it is unsurprising that when P4C facilitators in Western liberal democracies seek to develop a liberal 'democratic' and 'neutral' COI, even with the very best of intentions, such systemic factors can interfere with this goal. For instance, in a 2010 survey in the United States in which 250 Black and Latino male students were asked about the influence of race on their educations, over 80 percent reported feeling that their race caused teachers to have a negative opinion of them (Howard 2010: 103). This 'feeling' is supported by evidence: the US National Center for Education Statistics indicate that Black males and females are almost twice as likely as any other group to be suspended (NCES 2006, cited in Howard 2010). Additionally, Steele's (1997) research on stereotype threat indicates that students are likely to underperform in situations in which their identity is negatively stereotyped. In educational contexts in which structural racism is present, as demonstrated by differential achievement and discipline rates, we posit that students of color may be less likely to fully participate in P4C programs that are reliant on verbal participation. Blackwell (2010) states that intended anti-racist conversations can marginalize students of color by positioning them as 'the cultural expert', 'the teacher's aide' or 'the witness'. Providing a situation in which students are exposed to philosophical questions and invited to speak is not sufficient to provide an open inquiry. Students of color must also feel safe and empowered to speak.

Avenues for future research on race/ethnicity and P4C

We argued in the previous section that positionality should be taken seriously in P4C. Focusing in particular on race and ethnicity, we have aimed to show that P4C classes that do not explicitly acknowledge real, contextualized structural racism in society (and, consequently, in the P4C classroom) may marginalize students of color whose experiences and philosophical perspectives are marginalized in White-normative society. This is because purportedly 'neutral' P4C classes may normalize Whiteness and give students the impression that they can engage in the democratic enterprise without reflecting upon systemic injustices that surround them and impact the P4C classroom. In our final section, we provide four recommendations for future research on the subject of race/ethnicity and P4C.

The first avenue for future research that we recommend pertains to the racial/ethnic positionality of the P4C teacher/facilitator. Under this rubric we have identified two core themes that warrant future research (note that this list is of course not exhaustive).

First, more research should be done on ways to increase racial and ethnic diversity in the P4C community and amongst P4C teachers. In the book *Change(d) agents: new teachers of color in urban schools*, Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) indicate that the presence of teachers of color has a positive correlation with increased academic performance, particularly amongst students of color (while increased academic performance is not always a goal of P4C teachers, it is often a goal of the systems within which they are situated). It decreases school absences and increases enrollment in advanced coursework and college attendance (McIntyre & Pernell 1983; England & Meier 1986; Fraga, Meier & England 1986; Meier, Stuart & England 1989, cited in Achinstein & Ogawa 2011; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan & Shaun 1990; Hess & Leal 1997; Klopfenstein 2005). We submit that increasing representation of teachers of color in P4C may have a positive impact on the comfort-level and ease of philosophical questioning of students of color in the P4C classroom. In addition, it can increase the range of topics and approaches to philosophizing featured in the P4C classroom. Thus, further research should be conducted on how to increase racial and ethnic diversity amongst P4C teachers themselves.

Second, we recommend that additional research be done on strategies that teachers—including White teachers—can employ to navigate their own racial positionalities in the P4C classroom. Parmar and Steinberg (2008) write convincingly about the value of discussing one's racial, ethnic, and religious identity with students. By deserting a 'color and identity-blind ideology,' these educators—one of whom identifies as White and Jewish, the other of whom identifies as Asian Indian—found that they were able to connect more effectively with Black and Hispanic students in a class that uses hip-hop to explore music and art.

Howard (2010) and Nieto (2010) emphasize that educators should explore personal identity prior to engaging with students. This is particularly significant in the United States, where the numbers of students of color are rapidly increasing, but over 80 per cent of the teaching force is White and female. Indeed, because of the history of structural and institutional racism in the United States, it is important that educators closely consider how they may be perceived by students. We submit that P4C scholars should explore the role of the teacher not only as the seer of the students, but also as seen by them. The P4C teacher is engaged in a dynamic relationship in which 'teacher' and 'students' are affected by their positionalities.

A third recommended avenue of future research pertains to the potential power of silence in P4C students. We suggest that silence should be re-conceptualized as a valuable form of philosophical participation. It is obvious that speech is a highly valued form of participation in Philosophy for Children programs. As this chapter has suggested, however, this can be problematic for children who feel marginalized in the class and thus do not feel safe expressing their ideas verbally. We believe that taking positionality seriously in P4C requires that P4C practitioners be attentive to and philosophically curious about student silences. To support this, further research needs to be done on non-verbal forms of participation in Philosophy for Children programs. We should pursue the question of how silences, facial expressions, tears and physical motion can be rendered philosophically meaningful and how these forms of participation can be integrated into lessons.

Our fourth recommendation pertains to the implications of P4C teaching (at its most successful) for racial and ethnic minority students who are navigating an educational system that is mired in racism. To be clear, we certainly do not deny the value of providing to students of all backgrounds the opportunity to engage in philosophical exploration. However, given the fact of racism in so many schools and institutions around the world, we should be concerned about how young people of color will be perceived by authority figures when they think critically and openly question authority after learning these skills in their P4C class.

As previously discussed, African American and Hispanic students experience much higher rates of disciplinary action than White or Asian students in the United States. If a Black or Hispanic student questions White-normative epistemic authority outside of P4C using the discourse skills that she has been practicing in her philosophy class, will she be disciplined for insolence while a White child is applauded for her critical thinking skills and anti-authoritarian stance? Again, this is not an argument for denying P4C to racial and ethnic minority students. Rather, we are suggesting that additional research about the broader implications of P4C training for children and youth of color is required if we are to take positionality seriously in the P4C classroom.

Conclusion

The term 'positionality' refers to one's social location in relation to an existing economic, political, cultural and social network. This chapter maintains that one's positionality is relevant

to how we interpret values and discover meaning. This is a process that often falls beneath the cracks of rational debate. One's positionality influences how others perceive one's efforts to understand and make claims about the world. We have seen that there is, in fact, a well-established precedent for considering positionality in P4C—in terms of 'the positionality of the child' (qua child) as a situated yet ever-shifting identity.

Clearly, positionality is highly relevant to the enterprise of Philosophy for Children, given the emphasis that P4C places on discovering meaning and interpreting values through COI and 'picture book philosophy'. Race and ethnicity, however, remain relatively under-explored in P4C scholarship, but this is, fortunately, starting to change. We have suggested four different avenues for future research through which this lacuna can begin to be addressed.

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