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Between Uncertainty and Resilience
Cultivating Imaginative Thinking Through Philosophical Storytelling

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Abstract

The article seeks to answer two questions: a) what happens when adults create stories for children? and b) How is philosophical storytelling experienced by both tellers and listeners?

Schlagwörter: Uncertainty, Resilience, Philosophical Storytelling

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Introduction

What happens when adults create stories for children? To what extent is it an opportunity to revisit to their own childhoods, with its anxieties and its hopes; to raise questions to which there are no easy answers; to include the emotional dimension to philosophical questions; and to believe that agency is possible?

How is storytelling experienced by both audiences and tellers? To what extent is it possible for the exchange to generate a resonance in which audiences become tellers, and tellers audiences; for art to be a space to articulate ambivalence; and for playing with imaginary uncertainty as being perhaps a way to strengthen ability in dealing with real uncertainty?

In March 2023 a workshop for practitioners was held on the Madaba Campus of the German-Jordanian University. Over two days they created illustrated children's stories, which were at the end presented in a storytelling event with children from a nearby public school. In seeking to gain some insight into its impact on both children and adults, there is a range of available data: observations, recordings, interviews, and the stories themselves. Even so, there is just so much that is possible to identify and much will probably remain elusive.

Fortunately, the broad issues have already to some extent been addressed by a range researchers. Richard Rorty is an example of a philosopher who was convinced that of the interrelationship between storytelling and philosophizing (Rorty 1989; cf. Schreier 1993). It is the dilemmas of human existence, which are at the heart of story which engages with its audience Ambiguity in roles, plots which play with uncertainty, devious narrators, storyline gaps and unfinished endings – all offer a venue for reflection.

On the side of the storytellers, there is Tove Jansson, creator of the Moomins. In a lecture delivered at Uppsala University in 1961, entitled "The deceitful writer of children's books" (Jansson 1961), she begins by raising the question about what it is that might motivate an adult to write stories for children. She observes that authors are usually irritated and confused by the question, because they themselves are sometimes not altogether sure why they do it. She admits that for her it is something of a mystery; but then considers some possibilities. Maybe it is to make

money, maybe it is entertaining, or maybe one wants to educate children. Maybe there is something of the child that has survived, or maybe the author still needs to work through some unresolved issues. There are feelings associated with the childhood one has lost, or the feeling that one does not oneself fit into society so well. Storytelling opens up a horrible self-centredness. Maybe there is an infantile underdevelopment for which storytelling is therapy, a handy mask, an escape? The storyteller hides the deepest of these motives. So little of it is about the young reader! Nevertheless, the young reader is fascinated by questions of human existence, by precisely that which is hidden. Children are themselves secretive and thrive on meanings that are unclear and mysterious. An appealing story talks to the naughty, the nasty and the idealistic sides of children. It is difficult to get through that small door that leads to childhood. It is a place where the very small are protected from peering eyes. The symbols and the characters gain their appeal through ambivalence, just like any quality art. Jannson believes that children are irritated and bored when there are no gaps to be filled. They want to develop thoughts and feelings in relation to this ambivalence. The real and the fantasy worlds can be juxtaposed. Everything is possible and not possible. She maintains that children are fascinated by the macabre, the dangerous, and the nasty. They seem to be better able to balance the mystery of good and bad in themselves. The story functions like the colour of mist, in which much is hidden, a place of fantasy where it is difficult to say where the author stops, and the child continues. She concludes with the observation that one can get very muddled up trying to explain these things.

Before getting on to any explaining, there needs to be some discussion of the kind of pedagogy most likely to encourage such processes.

Pedagogy

The starting point for the development of the stories in our workshop were two different didactic approaches that were brought together: Philosophizing with children, based on Lipman and Sharp (cf. Lipman/Sharp/Oscanyan 1980) and working with Japanese storytelling theatre (Kamisihbai). While classic Kamishibai storytelling based on the Japanese model tends to take a monologue form, the approach has been further developed for working with children and is also used in day-care centres and primary schools in Germany to promote the language and storytelling skills of the children themselves.

Both didactic approaches are united by the idea of engaging in dialogue with children through stories. The focus of philosophizing with children is on dealing with open questions whose answers are uncertain and therefore the children‘s own reflection, imagination, speculation and argumentation. The approach of working with the Kamishibai focuses on narrative, i.e. monological skills.

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Following the Japanese model, a story is freely told to the children via the kamishibai box with the aim of supporting their literary education, awakening their interest in stories and allowing them to experience narrative role models. In the practical implementation in educational institutions today, more participatory approaches are now being developed that empower the children themselves to retell stories as well as to develop their own stories and thus embark on a self-determined search for their own possible answers.

Storytelling has a very long tradition in Jordan, but the Kamishibai is still little known in educational institutions. The idea for the workshop at the campus in Madaba was to introduce the potential of storytelling with the Kamishibai to the participants in order to then develop their own ideas for stories with the participants and thus develop new approaches for working with children.

Process

The fifteen workshop participants were divided into three groups to work on the stories they were going to present to their audience of 28 second graders the next day. Half-way through the first day, a presentation on the basics of philosophizing with children was given to help them frame their storytelling strategy.

The participants were given the option to either recreate a story from a picture book, or to create their own original story. A short introduction was also given about the Kamishibai box to make sure the participants were familiar with the dimensions their stories were being told through. They had available to them some paint with it's equipment, cardboard paper sheets to use on the Kamishibai, stationary, pencil colors, Kamishibai boxes, and a set of picture books they could recreate into the philosophical method. On the second, some participants from the same group, opted to bring their own puppets and dolls to illustrate their story with.

On the second day, 28 second graders from the local school of Umaimah bint abi Al-Aas were invited to the showing market of the prepared stories. The children were separated into three groups of 9-10 students and led to the different stations, each group starting at a different station and rotating after around 15 minutes. To mitigate the difference in the length and delivery of the stories, each group of workshop participants had an additional practise or activity, to get into dialogue with the children and to let them participate with their own ideas before the time to rotate came. These included singing songs, pledging to be inclusive or retelling switching places, and becoming the storytellers themselves.

What created an interesting outcome, was that all three stories told were developed around similar themes of raising awareness for inclusion, bullying, and tolerance for difference.

One story used puppets to bring its characters to life, another worked on activation by having the children take a pledge to be inclusive to everyone, even those different than them. The last station started a story and had supplies for the kids to finish the story and present it to the rest of the group.

Products

In a unique and vibrant station, characters come to life from the pages, becoming three-dimensional. Two sisters, initially depicted as puppets on a picnic, are interrupted by a singing crow. Despite the crow‘s attempts to impress them, the sisters reject him, leading the crow to seek a transformation to win their approval. Appealing to a painter, the crow insists on changing his color. Despite the painter‘s disagreement, the crow undergoes a transformation, but the sisters still reject him. Disheartened, the crow seeks solace with his crow friends, only to discover that he has changed beyond recognition for them. Faced with loneliness and despair, the crow closes the doors of the Kamishibai box, crying and alone.

The children sat attentive to the story. Their eyes followed every new detail as it made it onto the scene. One smiled and looked at his friend in excitement. As new characters made it to the stage, bigger smiles were incited. A few of the children reacted with their entire bodies, exclaiming, smiling, wringing their hands in anticipation. When asked questions like “how do you think the crow felt?” or “what would you do if you were the crow?” or “should the crow change its colour? What do you think it would happen if it did?” the children seemed a little stumped and tended to either completely misunderstand the question, replying, “I would feed it“ or seemed to just agree with the crow’s wishes to change its colour or go to the extreme solutions presented by the storytellers.

As this was the first group on the first station, the participants noticed and shared in their reflections that the children grew more accustomed to their line of questioning, and the answers of the groups of children improved as they moved from one station to another, as did the storytellers, adjusting their storytelling to the level exhibited by the children and changing the story according to the reactions they received from the kids.

In the reflection round, the workshop participants reflected on the purpose of telling a story, some agreeing with the philosophizing method, others insisting that stories are told to deliver certain messages or instill certain values.

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Discussion / Conclusions

A habit of thinking is what educators try to promote through structuring challenging learning situations. On the basis of the data, there are glimpses offered but there is much that remains hidden about precisely how the storytelling event stimulated the thought processes of children. In the case of the adults, there is considerably more that is communicated, particularly from the group discussion at the end.

In the development of themes and storylines, elements from life experience are used. As they begin to identify with a fragile child, there are emotions of indignation, anger and disappointment that such fragility can be exposed to hate, neglect or loss. Often the small characters that emerge, fight with all their hearts against great odds. The creators really do hope that there will be a happy end, but wrestle with the fact that their audience of small children might be better served, if it is not so simple. Artistic literary creation offers a place to think, to feel, to imagine - to explore issues from multiple perspectives. Artists exercise courage and endurance. At its best, a work of art leaves gaps, and thereby challenges its audiences to become co-creators of knowledge.

At the same time as producing a story for children, these adults were articulating their own engagement with issues. Such indirect approaches are sometimes 'collateral learning' (Dewey 1938: 29). In other words, the task is to produce a picture or an illustrated children's book, but the process is generating significant thought and communication.

The workshop structure is also an example of 'post-age pedagogy', in its cycles of teller-audience interaction, in which children and adults inspire each other (cf. Shi 2022).

Lessons learned about conducting similar events:

- space the stories further apart during the story market
- work with smaller groups of children/audience at a time if possible
- Kamishibai was a new technique that got the participants just as excited as the children and well suited to initiate a philosophical dialog.

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