

## the present and the future of doing philosophy with children

georgios petropoulos<sup>1</sup>  
university college dublin, dublin, ireland  
orcid id: 0000-0003-4382-5064

### abstract

This paper is an introduction to the dossier on “the present and the future of doing philosophy with children”, which itself drew inspiration from a conference on the same topic that was held in University College Dublin on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2022. While the conference aimed at building a case for the importance of engaging pre-college students in philosophical thinking, it also aspired to function as a forum where the participants can critically reflect on the practice of doing philosophy with children. The participants were asked to reflect on 1) the ways in which philosophy prepares children to engage with an increasingly complex world; 2) the future challenges of the P4wC movement; 3) the ways in which and the extent to which P4wC practice contributes to the decolonization of childhood discourses; 4) the ways in which and the extent to which the philosophy with children initiative addresses issues of epistemic injustice and educational and social inequalities. Building on the discussions that took place during and after the conference, the authors in this dossier interrogate the hierarchical opposition between child and adult, and cast a critical gaze on adultist assumptions that prevent Philosophy for/with Children initiatives from achieving their full potential.

**keywords:** childhood; philosophy for children; philosophy with children; adultism; childism.

## o presente e o futuro de fazer filosofia com crianças

### resumo

Este artigo é uma introdução ao dossiê “o presente e o futuro do fazer filosofia com crianças”, cuja inspiração surgiu a partir de uma conferência do mesmo tema que ocorreu na University College Dublin em 24 de junho de 2022. A conferência, que tinha como objetivo defender a importância de envolver estudantes pré-universitários no pensamento filosófico, também funcionou como um fórum onde os participantes podiam refletir criticamente na prática do fazer filosofia com crianças. Os participantes foram convidados a refletir sobre: 1) como a filosofia prepara as crianças para participarem de um mundo cada vez mais complexo; 2) os desafios futuros do movimento FpcC; 3) de quais formas e em que dimensão a prática de FpcC contribui para a descolonização dos discursos sobre a infância; 4) de quais formas e em que dimensão a iniciativa da filosofia com crianças aborda problemas de injustiça epistêmica e de desigualdades educacionais e sociais. Construído a partir de discussões que ocorreram durante e após a conferência, os autores interrogam, neste dossiê, a oposição hierárquica entre crianças e adultos, e lançam um olhar crítico aos pressupostos adultistas que impedem que as iniciativas de Filosofia para/com Crianças alcancem seu potencial completo.

**palavras-chave:** infância; filosofia para crianças; filosofia com crianças; adultismo; infantilismo.

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<sup>1</sup> E-mail: georgios.petropoulos@ucd.ie

### **el presente y el futuro de hacer filosofía con niños y niñas**

El presente artículo es una introducción al dossier sobre "el presente y el futuro de hacer filosofía con niños y niñas", que tomó inspiración en una conferencia sobre el mismo tema que se celebró en el University College de Dublín el 24 de junio de 2022. Si bien la conferencia tenía como objetivo abogar por la importancia de involucrar a los estudiantes preuniversitarios en el pensamiento filosófico, también aspiraba a funcionar como un foro en el que los participantes pudieran reflexionar críticamente sobre la práctica de hacer filosofía con niños y niñas. Se pidió a los participantes que reflexionaran sobre 1) las formas en que la filosofía prepara a niños y niñas para enfrentarse a un mundo cada vez más complejo; 2) los retos futuros del movimiento de FpcN; 3) las formas y el grado en que la práctica de la FpcN contribuye a la descolonización de los discursos sobre la infancia; 4) las formas y el grado en que la iniciativa de la filosofía con niños y niñas aborda cuestiones de injusticia epistémica y desigualdades educativas y sociales. A partir de los debates que tuvieron lugar durante y después de la conferencia, los autores y autoras de este dossier interrogan la oposición jerárquica entre niño y adulto, y echan una mirada crítica sobre los supuestos adultistas que impiden que las iniciativas de Filosofía para/con Niños alcancen todo su potencial.

**palabras clave:** infancia; filosofía para niños; filosofía con niños; adultismo; infantilismo.

## the present and the future of doing philosophy with children

In June 2022 a group of philosophers, educationalists and teachers gathered in University College Dublin to discuss the present and the future of doing philosophy with children.<sup>2</sup> The conference served a dual purpose. It sought to promote the idea of engaging school students in philosophical thinking, but it also aspired to serve as a forum where teachers, educators and philosophers can critically reflect on their own practice of doing philosophy with children. In other words, the conference did not simply aim to provide arguments on the benefits of doing philosophy in schools, but it also sought to problematize and interrogate adult assumptions that might constrain the way in which we engage in philosophy with children.

There are many different approaches for doing philosophy with children. However, one can safely claim that the Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach developed by Lipman and Sharp in the '70s is the most influential one, since versions of this approach are currently being practiced in numerous countries around the world. Although P4C was developed with the aim of introducing school students to critical thinking, from its very inception the approach decentred the authority of the teacher, and promoted the idea of an intergenerational dialogue between teachers and students (Lipman, 2003, pp. 25, 50). In developing an approach that sees the student as a valuable interlocutor in philosophical dialogue, Lipman and Sharp shed light on the need to critically examine and evaluate the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship. To give an example, Lipman and Sharp emphasized how important it is for the teacher/facilitator to remain open to the diverse ways in which students express themselves, and to foster a heterogeneous environment where a variety of experiences can be expressed, and diverse styles of thinking can flourish (Lipman & Sharp, 1978, p. 86). In providing an environment in which students can engage in philosophical

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<sup>2</sup> The conference had the generous support of the Royal Institute of Philosophy and was part of a three-day event that involved a conference, workshops with P4C practitioners and teachers, and workshops with school students. I would like to thank all the speakers and participants of this three-day event for their invaluable contributions. I would also like to thank the UCD Centre for Ethics in Public Life and its director Dr. Danielle Petherbridge for their indefatigable support of such initiatives.

dialogue, and in assuming that the role of the facilitator is to listen carefully to their contributions, the P4C pedagogy carries with it an emancipatory potential that can bring children to the forefront as active agents who can raise questions about and transform their environment.

This liberating potential of the P4C approach has been taken onboard and further developed by scholars and practitioners who call their approach Philosophy with Children (PwC), seeking to distance themselves further from educational models that see children as passive receptors of knowledge. These scholars understand the practice of doing philosophy with children as a relational practice that does not leave the adult/teacher unscathed. While it is commonly accepted that the task of P4C is to support students to think for themselves via communal reflection, it is equally important to emphasize how Philosophy with Children makes the adult/teacher part of the process, requiring them to engage in self-reflection and become sensitive to their own assumptions about children (Murris, 2008). In this light, Philosophy with Children is seen as an opportunity to re-evaluate the assumptions about childhood that have historically excluded children from philosophical and political dialogue.

The people invited to participate in the 2022 conference on “the present and future of doing philosophy with children”, are leading scholars and practitioners of what we can schematically call the Philosophy for/with Children (P4wC) movement. This is to say, they are scholars and practitioners, who acknowledge the value of introducing philosophy to school students, but wish to go beyond a strictly instrumentalist view of philosophy as a provider of thinking skills (Vansieleghem & Kennedy, 2011), and emphasize the emancipatory potential of P4wC. The participants were asked to reflect on 1) the ways in which philosophy prepares children to engage with an increasingly complex world; 2) the future challenges of the P4wC movement; 3) the ways in which and the extent to which P4wC practice contributes to the decolonization of childhood discourses; 4) the ways in which and the extent to which the philosophy with children initiative addresses issues of epistemic injustice, educational and social inequalities.

It was expected that a conference seeking to address these topics would unavoidably have to thematize and critically reflect on the assumptions, values and attitudes that prioritize the needs of adults over those of children. Terms such as “adultism”, “adult-centrism” and “childism” are becoming increasingly central in the P4wC community. Adultism and adult-centrism are terms that are used to refer to the tendency to view children and their problems from a biased, adult perspective (Goode, 1986). Adult-centrism is evident when adults fail to question their own assumptions about children and measure children by their own standards (Petr, 1992, p. 408). From an adult-centric perspective children are treated as incomplete, immature beings who need to be driven out of childhood into adulthood (Kennedy, 2006, p. 64; Kohan, 2015, p. 48).

In its most extreme manifestation adult-centrism can be linked to *misopedy*, a term that has been used to describe an explicit antipathy toward children who are presented as animalistic, irrational, chaotic and unlawful in contradistinction to the fully fledged humanity of the adult who is characterized by rationality, order and lawfulness. In this scheme, only adults are thought of as fully human whereas children are given a sub-human status (Rollo, 2018). But adult-centrism can also be found in implicit biases that fuel a negative attitude toward children. In her seminal work *Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children*, Young-Bruehl introduces the term “childism” with the aim of alerting us to biases and assumptions about childhood that are ingrained in our social structures and institutions. Just as the term “sexism” brought to the surface a wide range of social phenomena that worked against women (e.g., sexual harassment, unequal pay, etc.), Young-Bruehl claims that the term “childism” can function as a guide for political action, pressurizing adults to “rethink and reform their attitudes toward children” (Young-Bruehl, 2012, p. 9).

Crucially, the term “childism” is currently being used in a completely different way to denote a pro-child attitude. In contrast to Young-Bruehl’s use of the term, the Childism Institute (<https://www.childism.org/>) uses the term to denote a willingness to put children’s experiences at the centre of childhood studies, and to vouch for the need to engage in a systematic critique of social

norms and structures that marginalize children (Biswas & Wall, 2023). In this context, “childism” reflects a positive and emancipatory attitude toward children and has the same connotations with terms such as feminism and anti-racism. In its pro-child application the term describes a critical framework that aims at dismantling the sovereign adult subject in a way that brings childhood agency into the picture (Wall, 2019).

While the term “childism” has been used in these opposing ways, both uses of the term challenge the historical marginalization of children’s experiences and bring to light the child-adult relation in a way that is particularly relevant to the practice of philosophy with children.<sup>3</sup> By bringing the issue of the child-adult relation to the fore, the conference functioned as a venue in which philosophers, p4c practitioners and teachers reflected on discourses and assumptions that deprive children of their agency. Following up on the discussions that took place during and after the conference, the papers in this dossier explicitly or implicitly interrogate the hierarchical opposition between childhood and adulthood, aligning themselves thus, with initiatives that seek to challenge adultism in all of its manifestations.

It is important to note, that in the light of these concerns, the question about the present and the future of practicing philosophy with children, acquires an additional dimension. The invitation to think about this question is not merely an invitation to think about ways to improve our current practices and make plans about the future of philosophy with children. Crucially, the question carries with it an invitation to critically reflect on the temporality of the educational environment. A discussion about the future of philosophy with children requires that we remain mindful of the fact that programmatic announcements about the future of education are often made from an adult’s perspective without taking the needs of children into consideration. As many scholars and educators have noticed, future-focused educational discourses view time through the prism of a programmatic, calculative logic that instrumentalizes the present moment and

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that Biswas and Wall argue that their approach differs from Young-Bruehl’s approach in that it empowers children by treating them as agents, whereas Young-Bruehl’s work takes a deficit-oriented approach and focuses more on the ways that children have fallen victim to adult agency (Biswas & Wall, 2023, p. 2)

puts it in the service of a projected future with predetermined outcomes (Tesar et al., 2016; Duhn, 2016; Kennedy & Kohan, 2017; Weber, 2020; Haynes & Murriss, 2021). Under such a confining future-directedness, one is at risk of reducing the educational present to a transitional moment in a linear time -- a disposition that makes us lose sight of the possibilities that are opened up by children in the “here and now” (Duhn, 2016, p. 379; Weber, 2020; Haynes & Murriss, 2021). Furthermore, such discourses assume the idea of a pre-determined future, and do not take into consideration the difficulty or even the impossibility of exhausting the future in our projections (See Kennedy, 2010, p. 72).

With the above issues in mind, the task of thinking about the future of practicing philosophy with children encompasses the task of keeping the future open and not trying to reach closure with our projections. This dossier, therefore, embraces a paradoxical logic with regard to the question about the future of Philosophy with Children. On the one hand, it seeks to open up a discussion about how philosophy can prepare children to confront the ethical challenges that lie ahead of us. On the other hand, it invites its readers to remain critically aware of the assumptions underlying our projections toward the future. In this paradoxical situation one is asked to balance between two dangers. On the one hand, the danger of engaging in programmatic announcements that seek to engineer the future on the basis of unchecked assumptions about what the future will look like. On the other hand, the danger of going to the other extreme of not being willing to confront the very specific challenges that lie ahead of us. While one must be alert to the dangers inherent in the attempt to engineer the future, one might need to be equally suspicious of proclamations of purity that pretend to be completely free of any programmatic claim. Building on the thought of Jacques Derrida, David Wood warns us that a reluctance to think concretely about the future can lead to an unwanted complacency that can be seen, for example, in the way that humans deal (or rather fail to deal) with the environmental crisis (Wood, 2006). While we have a responsibility to allow the future to remain open by holding in check our tendency to project a pre-determined future for children, it is equally important to

respond here and now to the concrete urgencies posed by the not so indeterminate future (See Wood, 2006, p. 282; See Derrida, 2008).

The first two papers of this dossier manage to skillfully dwell in the above-mentioned tension. In “the present and future of doing philosophy with children: practical philosophy and addressing children and young people’s status in a complex world”, Claire Cassidy critically reflects on the future-directedness of school programs and how this future-directedness often excludes children from the possibility of discussing their own future. Cassidy suggests that Philosophy with Children (PwC) can be practiced in a way that enables children to imagine their future through their philosophical endeavors, but also to shape it through philosophical dialogue. To do this successfully, Cassidy suggests that we should be ready to challenge adultist assumptions that diminish the agency of children, but that we should be equally cautious of educational narratives that imagine children as our future saviors. In fact, the latter approach to education perpetuates the adult/child binary and burdens children with adult priorities: it is the adult who projects a specific vision of the future that the children are supposed to bring about. Instead of seeing the adult-child relation in terms of a ‘them’ and ‘us’ distinction, Cassidy argues that we should understand our own existence and the existence of children as networked. A networked account of the adult-child relation, Cassidy argues, has the merit of challenging the hierarchy between adult and child, and allows us to think about children as agents with which adults can share power and collaboratively imagine and shape the future.

In “in the end, it’s our future that’s going to be changed: enquiring about the environment with freedom and responsibility”, Grace Lockrobin takes on board the problematization of the idea that we can securely predict the future and prepare our children accordingly. However, Lockrobin argues that in the midst of an ensuing environmental crisis, philosophy educators might need to roll up their sleeves and accept a more active role. This brings about a discussion of how philosophical inquiry with children can touch on timely issues like the environmental crisis in ways that are educationally robust, but also aligned to the P4C ideal of non-directive inquiry. Lockrobin argues that the community of



philosophical inquiry can balance itself between these two imperatives by promoting the freedom to form your own beliefs about what is right or wrong, but also the responsibility to reflect on the real-life consequences of your beliefs and what kind of action is required on the basis of these beliefs. Lock Robin makes it clear that a philosophical inquiry about the environmental crisis should not aim at debating the reality of such a crisis. Empirical sciences provide us with enough evidence about this. What philosophical inquiry allows us to discuss, rather, is the ways we might respond to such a crisis. Crucially, Lock Robin's paper provides practical insights and deals with the challenges that a facilitator of an inquiry into environmental issues.

The third and fourth paper of this dossier focus on the topic of receptivity – specifically on the receptivity of the philosophy facilitator. In “existential urgency: a provocation to thinking ‘different’”, Arthur Wolf and Barbara Weber attempt to develop a notion of thinking that extends Lipman and Sharp's approach in a direction that shows sensitivity to the unique utterances of the child, the difference-abled and the ‘stranger’. They do so by drawing on the thought of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. With Heidegger, they problematize a kind of thinking that is goal-oriented, fast-paced, and superficial, and propose instead a modality of thinking that is existentially affected by philosophical questioning. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, they focus on our embodied relation to the world, and argue that thinking emerges in the tension between our familiar way of comporting ourselves to the world and moments where we come face to face with an “otherness” that resists easy assimilation to our projects and intentions. By highlighting the existential dimension of thinking, they carve out a dual task for the philosophy facilitator. The facilitator must first promote a kind of thinking that “provokes” and urges children to move away from ready-made formulations and commonsensical remarks, and second must remain alert and open to the alterity of the child's voice. The facilitator is called upon to remain thoughtful throughout the process of inquiry by remaining aware of the embodied and affective dimension of thinking, and by allowing the philosophical inquiry to call their own existence into question.

In “challenging adult-centrism: speaking speech and the possibility of intergenerational dialogue”, Georgios Petropoulos argues that the community of philosophical inquiry should be understood as a field within which our adult-centric views about education and philosophy are suspended. Such a suspension in turn, opens up the possibility of a genuine dialogue between adulthood and childhood. In the first part of the paper, he explores the way that P4wC initiatives disrupt the future-orientation of the school environment, by opening a space for an intergenerational dialogue between adults and children in the here and now. Furthermore, he discusses how Philosophy for/with Children challenges the narrow understanding of philosophy as an adult preoccupation. In the second part of the paper, Petropoulos uses Merleau-Ponty’s work to explore some requirements for a genuine intergenerational dialogue. Special attention is paid to the expressivity of children’s speech and its potential to enrich philosophical dialogue. Drawing an analogy between children’s speech and children’s drawings, Petropoulos argues that Philosophy for/with children initiatives offer children the opportunity to articulate their unique way of being-in-the-world. It is important, however, for the facilitator to remain alert to the diverse ways in which children dwell in the world and hold in check their tendency to consider a contribution interesting only to the extent that it fits adult standards.

The next two papers focus on the topic of listening. In “attentiveness, qualities of listening and the listener in the community of philosophical inquiry”, Lucy Elvis reflects on the topic of active listening. She suggests that this concept needs to be re-examined as there is a tendency to associate active listening with other conversational practices that do not necessarily align with the ideals of Philosophy for/with Children programmes (e.g., openness to the other, appreciation of the value of alterity in developing one’s thinking). Elvis claims that we should enrich our concept of listening by connecting it to a concept of attentiveness which itself involves a process of unselfing and an openness to the other. Elvis develops her account of attentiveness by focusing on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch. She takes from Gadamer

the idea of hermeneutic openness and argues that such an openness is better served if we think about listening along the lines of Murdoch's notion of attentiveness. Elvis briefly explores the implications of her account of attentiveness for P4wC practice and proposes some ways of cultivating attentiveness in the community of philosophical inquiry.

In their paper "an open-ended story of some hidden sides of listening or (what) are we really (doing) with childhood?", Joanna Haynes and Magda Costa Carvalho model a process of self-questioning that remains constantly alert to the blind spots in our practice of "listening" to children. Inspired by a childlike note found in a hotel room, the authors explore the hidden sides of listening and reflect on how colonizing moves toward children can take place even in environments where the importance of listening to children is well established. Commenting on the Philosophy for/with Children movement, they wonder if we sometimes hastily assume that children think philosophically only in the designated space of the community of philosophical inquiry (which is of course facilitated by an adult). What about other spaces in school where the adult is not intensely present (e.g., toilets, corridors, playgrounds, etc.)? Do we assume that children have something philosophically relevant to say only in a setting facilitated by an adult? Are we ready to listen to what children might be saying outside of this context, in places where an adult is not in charge? Instead of attempting to answer the question about listening to children and giving it a closure, the authors argue for the importance of staying with the question, revealing the transformative potential of this gesture and arguing for the importance of being ready to explore the hidden sides of listening.

In the final paper of this dossier titled "schooling, community of philosophical inquiry and a new sensibility", David Kennedy reflects on the role of school in a world replete with social, political and environmental challenges, and attempts to develop the idea of a "new school" that promotes student-teacher dialogue in a way that encourages a new kind of subjectivity related to what Herbert Marcuse calls the "new sensibility". This new sensibility, Kennedy argues, is not entirely new but is rather inscribed, as a possibility, in human history and

reveals itself in the lives of individuals or societies that promote dialogue, reflection, equity, tolerance of difference, cooperation, negotiation, and non-violence. Kennedy also argues that the potentiality for this new sensibility is inscribed in childhood, but gets betrayed when children are trained into the reproduction of adult habits and the continuation of the status quo. Against adultist projections that tend to treat children as sub-species, Kennedy proposes an empathic child-rearing mode that emphasizes the adult-child relation. The new school that he envisions functions as a site where children and adults engage in an intergenerational dialogue that reconstructs and negotiates power in the interest of democratic participation. Kennedy sees the community of philosophical inquiry as an important aspect of this new school, and gives some examples of how philosophical inquiry can have a prominent role across the curriculum.

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