

why am i here? the challenges of exploring children's existential questions in the community of inquiry

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abstract

Children ask existential questions--that is, questions about death, the meaning of existence, free will, God, the origin of everything, and kindred questions. P4/wC has aspires to give to children the occasion to discover and explore such questions in a safe environment, the community of inquiry (COI). However, it is unclear whether the pedagogy of the community of inquiry can accommodate existential questioning. The chief trouble is that existential questioning might be a cause of suffering: children might be unable to contain the emotional intensity that is experienced when we inquire about topics like death and the meaning of existence. In this paper I highlight some of the main challenges that we need to face if we want to make room for existential questioning in a COI. First, I discuss the view that existential questioning should be avoided in education because it is a cause of suffering. This view is rejected on the ground that existential questioning is unavoidable and that evading the issue might cause more harm than good. Then I argue that existential questions are poorly represented in the original Lipman-Sharp curriculum, and that as a result facilitators lack resources to encourage and sustain existential questioning. Finally, by highlighting some difficulties we might encounter in facilitating existential questioning in a COI, I argue that there is a tension between two key aspirations of P4/wC--namely the aim of fostering inquiry and the aim of taking care of the emotional safety of the children.

keywords: existential questions; taboo topics; community of inquiry; the meaning of life; death.

por que estou aqui? os desafios de explorar as questões existenciais das crianças na comunidade de investigação

resumo

As crianças fazem perguntas existenciais, isto é, perguntas sobre a morte, o significado da existência, livre arbítrio, Deus, a origem de tudo e questões afins. Filosofia para/com crianças tem o desejo de dar às crianças a oportunidade de descobrir e explorar suas perguntas em um ambiente seguro, a comunidade de inquérito. Assim, o questionamento existencial deve ser possível em uma comunidade de investigação. No entanto, não está claro se a pedagogia da comunidade de investigação pode acomodar questionamentos existenciais. O principal problema é que o questionamento existencial pode ser uma causa de sofrimento: as crianças podem não ser capazes de conter a intensidade emocional que é experimentada quando perguntamos sobre tópicos como a morte e o significado da existência. Neste artigo, destaco alguns dos principais desafios que precisamos enfrentar, se queremos abrir espaço para questionamentos existenciais

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na comunidade de investigação. Primeiro, discuto a visão de que o questionamento existencial deve ser evitado na educação, porque é uma causa de sofrimento. Essa visão é rejeitada com o argumento de que o questionamento existencial é inevitável e que fugir do problema pode causar mais mal do que bem. Argumento então que as questões existenciais estão mal representadas no currículo original de Lipman-Sharp e que, como resultado, os facilitadores estão carecendo de recursos para incentivar e sustentar o questionamento existencial. Por fim, destacando algumas dificuldades que podemos encontrar para facilitar o questionamento existencial na comunidade de investigação, argumento que há uma tensão entre duas aspirações-chave em P4/wC, a saber, o objetivo de promover a investigação e o objetivo de cuidar do emocional. segurança das crianças.

palavras-chave: questões existenciais; tópicos tabu; comunidade de inquérito; o significado da vida; morte.

¿por qué estoy acá? los desafíos de explorar las cuestiones existenciales de los niños en la comunidad de investigación

resumen

Los niños hacen preguntas existenciales, es decir, preguntas sobre la muerte, el significado de la existencia, el libre albedrío, Dios, el origen de todo, y preguntas afines. P4/wC aspira a brindar a los niños la oportunidad de descubrir y explorar sus preguntas en un entorno seguro, la comunidad de investigación. Por lo tanto, el cuestionamiento existencial debería ser posible en una comunidad de investigación. Sin embargo, no está claro si la pedagogía de la comunidad de investigación puede dar lugar al cuestionamiento existencial. El principal problema es que el cuestionamiento existencial puede ser una causa de sufrimiento: los niños pueden ser incapaces de contener la intensidad emocional que se experimenta cuando indagamos sobre temas como la muerte y el significado de la existencia. En este artículo destaco algunos de los principales desafíos que debemos enfrentar si queremos hacer espacio para el cuestionamiento existencial en la comunidad de investigación. Primero, discuto la opinión de que el cuestionamiento existencial debe evitarse en la educación porque es una causa de sufrimiento. Esta opinión es rechazada porque las preguntas existenciales son inevitables y evadir el problema puede causar más daño que bien. Luego sostengo que las preguntas existenciales están pobremente representadas en el curriculum original de Lipman-Sharp y que, como resultado, los facilitadores carecen de recursos para alentar y sostener el cuestionamiento existencial. Finalmente, al resaltar algunas dificultades que podríamos encontrar para facilitar el cuestionamiento existencial en la comunidad de investigación, sostengo que existe una tensión entre dos aspiraciones clave en P4/wC, a saber, el objetivo de fomentar la investigación y el objetivo de cuidar la seguridad emocional de los niños.

palabras clave: preguntas existenciales; temas tabú; comunidad de investigación;



significado de la vida; muerte.

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§1 introduction

In this paper I wish to reflect on philosophy for/with children (hereafter P4/wC²) by exploring how it relates to children's existential questions³.

Existential questions are of various kinds, but they are immediately recognizable as those questions that concern the most profound and troubling mysteries of existence, e.g., 'Why do I exist?', 'Why should I die?', 'Does life have any meaning at all?', 'Am I real or just a dream?', 'Who am I?', and kindred questions.

Existential questions are likely to emerge in the community of inquiry⁴. However, there is little discussion in the P4/wC community on how to deal with children's existential questioning in the community of inquiry⁵. In fact, I shall argue that it is unclear whether the pedagogy developed within the Lipman-Sharp tradition has the resources to make room for existential questioning in the community of inquiry.

Existential questions pose specific challenges for education in general and for P4/wC in particular. The general challenge for education can roughly be summarized as follows. There is no place in our education and in our society in general in which children can voice and explore their existential questions. Religious education used to be the place where children's existential questions could receive an answer or at least be listened to. However, the process of secularisation is downplaying the importance and diffusion of religious education. Public education is driven by the transmissive model, where truths are imparted by the teacher to the pupils. But since in a secular age there is no public

² By P4/wC I refer to practices that propose philosophical inquiries with children in the setting of the community of inquiry elaborated by Matthew Lipman, Ann Sharp and collaborators.

³ This paper elaborates some questions and worries that I have formulated on the basis of my own experience as a facilitator of communities of philosophical inquiry with children aged between six and fourteen. This paper crucially relies on the experience and research on children's existential questioning and existential suffering conducted at ASIA Research Centre in Bologna under the supervision of Franco Bertossa. See (Basile 2006), (Ielli 2006), (Ielli & Querci 2006).

⁴ This claim is based on personal observation and reports from other P4/wC practitioners, teachers, parents and educators more generally. When I begin a series of P4/wC sessions in a classroom I start by asking children to reflect for a couple of minutes on what their most important question are. Each of them can individuate at most two questions. Most children turn out to have questions about death and about the meaning of their own existence and of existence as such.

⁵ There is one noteworthy exception. See (Matthews 1980), the chapter entitled *Anxiety*. The chapter is very short, but it contains useful insights which I will discuss throughout the text.

consensus over the true answers to existential questions, as a result there can be no corresponding curricular activity in which existential questions are addressed according to the transmissive model. So public school is not the place where to express and explore one's own existential perplexities⁶. Whether children will be able to express and explore their existential questions depends on their families. However, adults in general are uncomfortable with their own existential questions and rarely know how to deal with children's own existential questions. As a result, children's existential questioning is left unheard.

One might think that this is a fortunate state of affairs. In what follows I shall discuss and reply to the view that we should refrain from creating occasions for existential questioning in children because this thinking is likely to make them suffer.

In so far as we believe that we should make room for children's existential questioning in education, it is natural and tempting to think that P4/wC can provide us with what is needed. The pedagogy of the community of inquiry promises to offer a safe space where children can express their questions and explore them in a collaborative manner. Moreover, there is no need to know the answers to existential questions in order to deal with them in a community of inquiry, as the focus is on the process of inquiry, rather than on the transmission of truths. And in fact, P4/wC's own self-declared aim is, among others, to give children the right to inquire about their own questions. As we find out that these questions have a philosophical and existential nature, it is natural to think that P4/wC can provide an environment that makes room for existential questions.

However, existential questions pose a specific challenge to P4/wC. In a nutshell, the challenge is that discussing existential questions in the community of inquiry is likely to cause more harm than good. In this paper I shall elaborate this challenge and try to distinguish layers of complexity that should be taken into account by P4/wC theorists and practitioners who want to make room for children's existential questioning.

In what follows I shall suggest that a serious answer to this overall challenge requires robust empirical investigation. The question about the effectiveness of the pedagogy of the community of inquiry is largely an empirical question – once we identify the values that we want to promote through engagement in a community of inquiry, the

⁶ Nor is the university. See (Kronman 2007) for the claim that existential questions do not have a place in contemporary (American) higher education – not even in the humanities. It is fair to say that the same applies *mutatis mutandis* in any other academic institution that is modelled on European and American universities.

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question is whether the community of inquiry *actually* promotes these goals and does so in the right way, and this is an empirical question. I do believe – on the basis of my own experience as a P4/wC practitioner – that the verdict is largely positive: discussing existential issues in a community of inquiry is in various ways good for the children. However, this issue is too serious to be dealt with only on the basis of first-personal report and theoretical speculation.

The plan of the paper is as follows. In §2 I will provide a family-resemblance characterization of existential questions by highlighting some of the most significant features we attach to them. In §3 I shall elaborate the challenge according to which we should not discuss existential questions with children as this is likely to cause suffering. I shall respond to this challenge by arguing that we must willy-nilly address children's existential questions and that the question is not so much whether we must do so but rather *how* to do so. I shall suggest that it is natural to think that P4/wC is the right educational approach that can make room for existential questioning in education. However, in §4 I shall argue that existential questions do not feature prominently in the original Lipman-Sharp curriculum. In §5 I shall present the challenge that the community of inquiry in general is not a safe environment for existential questioning. In §6 I shall sum up the whole discussion.

§2 *what are existential questions?*

The category 'existential' is likely to remind the reader of a specific historical intellectual movement, namely French existentialism, or more generally European existentialism. In this paper I wish to use the category 'existential' in a broader sense, in order to qualify questions whose existence and conceptualisation is independent from the existentialist movement or, more generally, from any specific philosophical accounts of existential questions. Existentialists understand these questions in a particular way, and offer particular answers to them, but we need not be existentialists, in this narrow sense, in order to recognize the presence and the importance of these themes in our lives.

Speaking of 'existential questions' – like speaking of 'philosophical questions' – naturally suggests the thought that there is a well-defined class of questions that deserve to be called 'existential'. This is not what I mean. In what follows I provide a family-

resemblance characterization⁷ that highlights the most significant dimensions of variation that allow us to distinguish, group together, and compare different questions that belong to the same rich family. I propose the following three features.

Subject matter. We instinctively recognize that there are topics that raise questions that concern the most fundamental and troubling facts about our human condition and existence as such. Topics like death, the nature of the self, the meaning of existence, the existence of evil, nothingness and being, the possession or lack of free will, God and the origin of everything, religious and spiritual topics in general do typically invite a sort of questioning that we might describe as existential.

However, topic is neither sufficient to isolate existential questioning – the question 'How does death occur?' might not be perceived as existential if it asks about the processes the body goes through in what we call death – nor necessary – the question 'Does my dog love me?' might have a profound impact on the life of the questioner even if the topic is not typically associated to what we call existential issues.

Emotional intensity and first-personal impact. Existential questions typically affect the person who asks them in radical and fundamental ways. Contrast the philosophical puzzles expressed by the questions 'Where do words come from?' and 'Can two people be friends just for one minute?' with the questions 'Do I deserve to exist?' and 'Why do we exist if we eventually have to die?'. These are all recognizable philosophical questions, but there is a significant *prima facie* difference between the former and the latter ones in the way in which they impact on the emotional and cognitive experience of the questioner.

Existential questioning itself is likely to be accompanied by intense emotions, like wonder, awe, anguish, commotion, pleasure, exaltation, anxiety, terror. This point is highlighted in various ways in many philosophical, religious and mystical traditions. Sticking to philosophy, it is surely a leitmotif of many works in the last two centuries, chief among them, of course, the works of philosophers and writers who are tied more or less closely to the existentialist traditions.

Moreover, existential questions are not easily treated as puzzles to be addressed in a

⁷ See (Wittgenstein 1953) and (Forster 2010).

⁸ See Heidegger's *Angst* in his *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1927) and *What is metaphysics?* (Heidegger 1929), Wittgenstein's *wonder* at the miracle of existence in his *Lecture on Ethics* (Wittgenstein 1929), Otto's "mysterium tremendum et fascinans" in his *The Idea of the Holy* (Otto 1959), Sartre's *angoisse* in *La Nausee* (Sartre 1938), and Pessoa's *horror* in his *Faust*. Many more examples might be cited. Although Twentieth Century philosophy has often highlighted this emotional aspect of philosophical questioning, it is striking how rarely this feature is discussed or even mentioned in the P4/wC literature. (Matthews 1980)'s chapter on *Anxiety* is of course one clear exception.

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playful manner. Whereas it is relatively easy to speculate about the various ways in which we might think of the ships in the puzzles about identity of the Theseus Ship, it is harder to be playful when one considers the issue of one's own identity and its relationship with change and death, say.

Meaning. Existential questions often seem to concern the *meaning* of the fundamental aspects of the human condition or of existence as such. During my experience as facilitator of P4/wC sessions in schools I have met children asking such questions as 'Why do I exist?', 'Why is there anything at all?', 'What's the point of life?', 'Why do we exist if in the end we then have to die?', 'Why things are exactly as they are, and not otherwise?', 'Why do I exist, and not someone else?', 'Why am I me?'. As the inquiry progressed it became clear that these questions concerned the *meaning* of one's own existence as well as the meaning of existence as such.

Sometimes questions that might look like questions about meaning are not about meaning. To illustrate, a child might ask 'Why do I exist?' desiring to receive a scientific story about her birth. Analogously, the question 'Why does everything exist?' might point its finger to a cosmological perplexity that is unrelated to a concern with the meaning of existence of everything⁹.

However, sometimes questions that do not look like questions about meaning are questions about meaning. To illustrate, a child can ask 'What happens when we die?'. In so asking she might have different concerns. The question might only express a scientific or 'factual' curiosity, which can be satisfied by providing some story as to what happens when we die. Other times the question is rooted in a deeper concern about meaning. There is a difference between desiring to know the details of the process of dying and wondering why we have to die, regardless of how death actually happens. The real question behind what appears to be a scientific curiosity about death might in fact be something like 'But why do we I have to die, anyway?'.⁹

During my practice I was once confronted by a 10 years old girl asking 'How can emotions be true if all I do and feel depends on my brain?'. Even if this is not a why-question, still it was clear from the context and subsequent inquiry that she was worried

⁹ It is notoriously hard to characterise what do we mean exactly when we say that a question is about the *meaning* of things. By this we might mean different things – see, for instance, (Nozick 1980, Chapter 6) on *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*. For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to have a precise account of the nature of questions about the meaning of things. However, appreciating how to categorize questions about meaning is useful for P4/wC facilitators in order to properly understand children's questions and facilitate the discussion accordingly.

about the authenticity and meaningfulness of her emotional life. She understood that if emotions are *nothing but* the result or the combination of physical factors and brain activity, then there is a sense in which our emotions are deprived of their real value. If love is nothing but my neurons taking a certain configuration, then one feels she cannot understand her own experience of love as authentic and real.¹⁰

To sum up, existential questions typically concern certain topics – e.g., death and the meaning of existence; they often are questions about the meaning of things – e.g., 'what is the point of being alive?'; inquiry on existential issues is typically accompanied by intense emotions – e.g., anxiety and awe. This is by no means an exhaustive characterization of existential questioning. In what follows, I shall rely on our intuitive understanding of the specificity of existential questioning in order to explore its role in education and in P4/wC.

§3 existential questions and suffering

One important reason why existential questions pose a specific problem in education and in the context of P4/wC is their connection with suffering. It is commonly felt and thought that letting children to focus on existential issues might be a cause of suffering for them. I suggest we can understand this thought as the expression of two worries.

As we have just seen, one of the core features of existential questioning is its emotional intensity. Although the intensity might also be positive – think of Wittgenstein's awe for the miraculous existence of the world, for instance – existential questioning is often associated with emotions like anguish, anxiety, fear, and terror. To think of one's own death and mortality might awaken a profound fear and anguish. So the first worry is that children might be unable to deal with this emotional intensity. As we know, adults themselves are afraid of existential issues and tend to distract themselves from such issues until life reminds them of their importance and inescapability. Since it is hard for an adult to manage the emotional intensity that goes along with existential questions, the worry is that children might be even more defenceless before the overwhelming emotions that existential questions are able to trigger.

¹⁰ This concern is a classical one in the history of philosophy, and it is nowadays discussed in debates on debunking arguments against morality. For an overview on debunking arguments see (FitzPatrick 2014, Section 4.1). See also the 'neuroexistentialism' that is discussed in (Caruso & Flanagan 2018).

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It is important to appreciate that those who feel such worries assume that children relates to existential questions pretty much in the same way in which many adults do. This sounds *prima facie* plausible. Children's existential questions are often tied to emotionally intense life events. A child's question about death is often prompted by the experience of death – the death of a parent, of a pet, or even of a doll (think of Sharp's *The Doll Hospital*). Moreover, even when no such event has occurred, it seems that children do have a sense of the importance and seriousness of these questions, as they appreciate the difference between discussing questions about death, say, and questions about reversible sentences.

Sometimes, however, we find other narratives about children's way to relate to existential questions and philosophical questions more generally: children are not afraid to discuss about existential questions because they have an open minded attitude towards these questions and the possible answers. Adults, by contrast, are typically thought of as either having well defined opinions about the fundamental questions of life or at least, as having no answer because they have already discarded some candidate ones and might despair to be able to find certain answers at all. As a result adults are taken to be afraid of existential questioning, the chief reason being either that they are afraid of knowing the answer – because the answer might force them to make radical changes in their lives – or that they take themselves to be confronting troubling mysteries that can never be fully grasped and understood with certainty.

I do not wish to decide the issue here, but I wish to raise it and to suggest that it has to be explored empirically. The question is:

How do children experience existential questioning?

The answer to this question will have to shape our attitude towards children's existential questioning in education in general and in P4/wC sessions in particular. If children have an open-minded attitude towards existential issues, and if this attitude allows them to explore existential issues without fear and anguish, then we might further explore the suggestion that we should take this opportunity to educate children to address existential issues before they build the problematic relationship that makes adults uncomfortable with regard to such questions. However, if children's thinking about such issues is already mixed with fear and anxiety, then we might have to be less optimistic about the prospect of making room for existential questioning in education.

A second worry is an extension of the first one. It is one thing to wonder about existential issues and to deal with the corresponding intensity; it is another thing to make up one's mind on such issues. Now, some answers – like some, but not all, of the answers provided by religion – to existential questions might be able to contain and transform the emotional intensity into relief, hope, and positive feelings more generally. Other answers – which are ubiquitous in the current nihilistic culture we live in – might confirm the fear and anguish that is attached to the questions and boost their intensity. To illustrate, suppose that a child comes to the conclusion that life is meaningless. Coming to such conclusions might – although it need not – be a psychologically disruptive event for human mental health¹¹. The worry is that children might be exposed to such danger. So, the thought goes, children are even more exposed than adults to the suffering that certain answers to existential questions might cause¹².

This worry also suggests two ramifications of the previous question.

What are children's answers to existential questions?

How do children emotionally relate to their own answers?

Again, these are complex questions that will need to be addressed empirically – since socio-cultural factors, age, education and context more generally play a role in the way in which children answer existential questions and relate to them. Obviously, knowing the answer to these questions is important in order to think of an education for existential questioning.

This twofold worry – children are unable to cope with the emotional intensity triggered by existential questioning and children might end up endorsing nihilistic conclusions that undermine their emotional and mental health – might suggest the radical conclusion that existential questions should be removed from the educational agenda. As a matter of fact, they already are: as we have seen above, there is no place in public education and society more generally where existential questions are subject of teaching, inquiry, or dialogue. If someone is persuaded by this twofold worry to embrace a radical

¹¹ If personal experience is not enough, see (Tolstoy 1880) autobiographical report of his own suffering, (Yalom 1980) and (Frankl 1963) for two theoretical works that highlight the connection between meaning and mental health, and (Davies & Hicks 2013) for further references to the psychological literature.

¹² For a more optimistic voice, see (Puolimatka & Solasaari 2006).

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sceptical conclusion, then the current state of affairs might be welcomed.

However, this radical conclusion is mistaken and it is straightforward to see why. First, children are willy nilly going to think about existential issues, whether we do give them a context where they know they can do so or not. To ask existential perplexities is part of our nature – arguably, it is one of its defining features – so even if they are suppressed they are going to reappear later in life, as questions, or as symptoms of unconscious questions that claim to be heard. Moreover, life itself will provide occasions for children to reflect on such issues: loss and failure are unavoidable experiences. It is important to appreciate that even if we try to evade these issues, they will not disappear.

Moreover, evasion is likely to cause more harm than good. By systematically resisting children's desire to discuss existential issues¹³ – think of the parent who changes topics when asked a 'difficult' question, or the teacher who provides a quick dismissive answer or altogether evades the issue – children are made to understand that adults are uncomfortable with such questions and that it is somehow inappropriate to think about them. But this is detrimental for the emotional, moral and spiritual growth of the child. Concluding that these topics are to be avoided is likely to cause suffering, as these topics will surface in the mind of the child and future adult throughout his/her life. For a child to realise that these are taboo topics, or that to have such questions is misplaced is a form of suffering¹⁴. Feeling uncomfortable with one's own questioning, especially when it concerns the most important issues of human existence, is likely to be a cause of suffering and discomfort in one's own emotional, moral and spiritual growth.

Furthermore, if children understand that adults evade such issues because they are afraid of them, then it is an easy step for children to conclude that these issues are fearful – and fear is suffering, especially when it concerns topics one feels she cannot escape and feels so because she recognizes that these are the most important topics of her own life¹⁵.

¹³ On this systematic resistance to children's existential questioning, (Matthews 1980, 86) writes: "Even when one suspects that the comment or question carries considerable emotional freight, addressing the question, rather than treating it merely as an emotional symptom, may be part of showing proper respect for the child as a full-fledged human being". True, it is important to show respect, but the objector would insist that true respect is to evade such issues so as to protect children from unbearable suffering. Appeals to respect won't suffice here. We need a stronger argument to the effect that it is *good*, or anyway at least *unavoidable* to think with children on their existential questions.

¹⁴ (Matthews 1980, 86) holds that "evasion might only heighten the anxiety".

¹⁵ "If adults do not talk with children about existential questions, a consequence could be that children develop fear, insecurity and an inability to deal with these questions later on in life". (Pramling & Johansson 1995, 144).

Even more worryingly, children might conclude that they are alone in facing these topics, as even adults are not able to relate positively to them. And again, this loneliness is a likely cause of suffering.

Another simple observation is that existential questions are important. Most of us are prepared to recognize that they are the most important questions of our lives. In so far as we believe that these questions are valuable, and we believe that they are difficult to explore, then it is vital to help children to build an healthy relationship with their own existential questioning.

Finally, even if we try to protect children from existential questioning, children will have the occasion to learn what people think about such issues by watching television programs, movies, cartoons, advertisements, by reading books and by talking to their peers. More generally, children will receive from our contemporary culture a sense of the way in which we should relate – emotionally and cognitively – to existential issues. And our culture is pervaded by nihilistic and relativistic convictions. This atmosphere will inform children's relationship to existential questioning – unless, of course, children's experience is insulated from mainstream culture. Leaving children alone and unprepared to explore and critically relate to our culture and the way in which our culture suggests we relate to existential questioning is not a way to protect them from suffering, but rather a way to escape the responsibility to provide them with the tools which might help them to face this unavoidable and fundamental aspect of our human experience. Given that it is almost impossible to avoid confrontation with existential questioning and with the way in which our current *Zeitgeist* thinks and feels about existential questions, we must think about an education for such questioning.

The question then is not so much *whether* it is fine to make room for existential questioning in education, but rather *how* to do so. The transmissive model is ill suited to make room for existential questioning. One of the chief reasons for this is the same that is often mentioned in the case of religious education. Existential questions, like religious ones – to be contrasted with questions about the *history* of religion – do not meet consensus: there is an intractable disagreement, so that it is impossible to converge over a set of truths like mathematical truths that could then be transmitted to the pupils. As a result, public education cannot relate to children's existential question by *answering* them. The situation is analogous to philosophy more generally, existential questions being a part of philosophical questions: since there is no consensus over the right philosophical view,

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philosophy can at best be taught as history of philosophy or practiced as process of thinking about philosophical questions (as it is proposed in various ways by the P4/wC movement).

It seems that what is missing in education and society at large is a context in which existential questions can be a topic of discussion because of their *intrinsic value* – as opposed to a therapeutic context where these issues are treated instrumentally and with reluctance in order to prevent or remove the suffering that they might provoke in individuals. More specifically, what is missing is a context in which there is a *philosophical – inquiry-driven*, as opposed to therapy-driven – approach to such issues.

It is natural to think that P4/wC might fill this gap by providing a context in which children's existential questioning can be given full value and be explored through inquiry in a collaborative way. For existential questions are among the most fundamental philosophical questions and the aspiration of P4/wC is precisely to give to children the right to philosophize by giving them the opportunity to become aware of their own questions and to explore them collaboratively in a safe environment – the community of inquiry. However, a closer look reveals that a lot of work still has to be done in order to show that P4/wC is well suited to address existential questions.

§4 existential questions in p4c's curriculum

The first question I wish to address is whether existential questions have a place in the original curriculum developed by Lipman, Sharp and collaborators.

Children discover philosophical inquiry through P4C by formulating questions upon having read a text from the curriculum. Then they must reflect on their own questions, select a question or a topic that emerged from their questions, and further discuss and explore the selected question or topic. Now, although children's questions might depart significantly from the topics that the text naturally invites them to discuss, still the text is the trigger for the questioning and has been intentionally written so as to elicit specific philosophical questions as well as a particular attitude and style of thinking in the mind of the children¹⁶. Facilitators are invited to prepare themselves for the philosophical session by reading the part of the corresponding manual that is associated with the text selected for the session. The manuals highlight the philosophical content injected in the texts and they suggest to the facilitator possible paths that the inquiry might take as well as exercises to

¹⁶ See (De Marzio 2011) and (Murriss 2016).



be used in order to develop the philosophical sessions.

Thus, P4C's curriculum represents the core material both for children and for facilitators. This has three important consequences for our purposes: it affects the sort of topics to be discussed during a session; it determines which topics a facilitator will be exposed to and prepared to discuss; it invites both the facilitator and the children to adopt a particular questioning attitude.

As it turns out, existential questions do not have a prominent role in the curriculum. They are not explicitly raised and discussed in the texts themselves and, as a consequence, they are not highlighted in the corresponding manuals. Sometimes existential issues are touched upon in more or less indirect ways. To illustrate, in Sharp's *The Doll Hospital*, the doll is broken and the episode might be an occasion to reflect about loss and death. Another example can be found in Lipman's *Harry Stottelmaire's Discovery* where Ann is shocked at the discovery that Suki has lost her mother, and they both talk about the suffering and death of plants. Of course there are many more passages in the texts that raise or can elicit existential questions. However, a quick look at the index in the manuals will reveal what the preferred topics for discussion in these corresponding texts are. It is relatively rare to find questions about death, the meaning of life, the meaning and origin of existence, the illusion of free will, the existence of God, suicide, and kindred topics. Moreover, there is no explicit recognition of the difference between existential topics and other topics. As a result, it is difficult for a facilitator to use the texts from the curriculum in order to invite inquiries into existential issues, and it is hard for facilitators who wish to explore such topics in the classroom to find practical suggestions in the manual. More worryingly, the curriculum does not seem to offer guidance to a facilitator who *must* willy nilly explore existential questions because children insist to discuss them.

This shows that existential questioning has been set aside at the very beginning of P4C's intellectual development. This fact has some evident drawbacks. First, P4C aspires to give children the *right to philosophize* by addressing *children's own* question: yet the curriculum doesn't make enough room for existential questions, and in so far as existential questions are frequent among children, then the curriculum's content is in tension with the core aspiration that characterises P4C.

Second, existential questions are arguably the most important questions in our lives. Whereas few adults genuinely worry about whether different languages create different worlds of meaning, surely everyone has to confront – whether by addressing or by

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escaping them – existential questions about death and the meaning of existence. If children also have existential questions and these are among the most important questions for their lives – at least comparatively, that is, compared to other philosophical questions – then P4C is not only failing to make room for children's own questions, but it is specifically failing in making room for children's most important questions.

Third, the removal of existential questioning from the curriculum might reinforce – both in children and in adults – the negative bias towards existential questions that is conveyed by society at large. The absence of existential questions in the curriculum might reinforce children's expectation that it is somehow improper or embarrassing to raise existential questions. On the one hand, the philosophical session is presented as an occasion of liberation and emancipation where children can freely explore their own philosophical sensibility. But on the other hand, aspects of their sensibility are not positively supported, and this might have the counter-effect of causing children to negatively evaluate them.

This discussion invites two questions. First, why existential questions are not prominent in the curriculum? Second, and more generally, why existential questions are not explicitly discussed – at least not under that name – in P4/wC intellectual development and in current debates? Although I do not wish to answer these answers here, we can make some initial observations that might provide the basis for further research.

First, existential issues are difficult and controversial. It is difficult to convince parents and institutions to promote educational activities that invite children to reflect on issues like death and the (in)existence of God. Arguably, at the beginning of P4C's development the central aim was to promote the practice, and it would have been disingenuous to highlight a feature of the practice that might have slowed down if not inhibited the development and dissemination of the whole educational project. As Peter Shea helpfully points out¹⁷, Lipman wanted to avoid discussing religious opinions – which are likely to emerge when existential questions are discussed – because in this way it could have been easier to introduce philosophy in public schools. Few parents would complain if their children thought about reversible sentences, whereas people might become afraid of the practice and criticise it if it concerned itself with religious views or existential topics more generally.

Second, existential questioning does not fit easily within the overall pragmatist

¹⁷ (Shea 2018, 162).

framework that is adopted by the founders of P4C. Arguably, the overall aim of the pedagogy of the community of inquiry is to educate children to become good citizens of a democratic society¹⁸. Existential questions do not fit easily in this educational agenda. First of all, existential questions are perceived as arising out of *individualistic* concerns and to be topics that isolate the individual rather than invite collaborative thinking. More generally, existentialism is taken to be correlated with an emphasis on the 'individual', whereas P4/wC, given its pragmatist roots, is correlated with an emphasis on the community.

Moreover, the emphasis on education for democracy through the development of multidimensional thinking doesn't give central stage to the content of the questions that may arise in a community of inquiry. Priority is given to the *process* of inquiry, rather than to the *content* of the inquiry, and thus, given the difficulty of inquiring about existential questions, it is natural to prefer other less controversial topics for philosophical discussions.

Finally, pragmatism is not the philosophical tradition where existential questions feature most prominently. Pragmatism's insistence on practicality clashes with the sort of questioning that is to be found in existential questioning. Pragmatists do speak of meaning, and of meaningfulness as being an aim of inquiry. P4/wC theorists also speak of this meaning as being an 'existential meaning'¹⁹. However, this is not the sort of meaning that is at issue in the why-questions considered so far. Meaning for pragmatists is connected to the idea of making sense of one's own condition and of the world in a way that resolves a problem that the person has (this is the notorious feeling of irritation that gives rise to inquiry according to Peirce's account in 'The Fixation of Belief'). With existential questioning as I understand it (and as it is understood in twentieth-century European philosophy) the pragmatist notion of meaningfulness is not the central issue in existential questioning. The latter invites a questioning attitude that does not aim (at least not always) at the resolution of a puzzle or at the production of an answer; rather, existential questioning often involves a kind of contemplative gaze into radical and troubling mysteries²⁰. This gaze is not aptly described within the conceptual repertoire that P4/wC theorists take from pragmatists' works in order to describe the process of thinking and

¹⁸ See (Daniel & Lebouis 1992), (Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan, 1980), (Sharp 1997) and the essays contained in the section entitled *The democratic nature of philosophy for children* in (Gregory, Haynes and Murriss 2016). For a critical voice see (Vansielegem 2005).

¹⁹ See (Gregory 2011).

²⁰ See, for instance, Marcel Gabriel's reflection on the distinction between problems and mysteries. See E.g., (Marcel 1951).

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inquiry that takes place within a community of inquiry²¹.

§5 existential questions in the community of inquiry

One might think that the drawbacks highlighted in the previous paragraph are contingent. True, existential questions don't have a place in the original curriculum and in the corresponding manuals. However, the reply goes, we just have to think of new resources for stimulating existential questions, writing new manuals, and adjust the facilitator's training accordingly.

This reply does not take into full consideration the exceptional nature of existential questions. I shall argue that the problem lies deeper: existential questions threaten the very pedagogy of the community of inquiry. The challenge that they raise is whether the community of inquiry is the right sort of environment where such questions can be discussed. In what follows I shall elaborate this challenge and I will discuss some tentative replies to it. As I said, I do believe that the community of inquiry is a good environment for existential questioning. However, my aim with this paper is to stimulate the community to make explicit why this is a good environment, to provide effective replies to sceptics, and to articulate all the didactic resources that help the educators to cope with children's existential questioning. Therefore, in what follows I shall do my best to present a strong challenge against P4/wC to the effect that the pedagogy of the community of inquiry is not the right sort of environment for discussing existential questions with children.

The first problem concerns the way in which democratic values and educational aims shape the structure of a session of community of inquiry: children are invited and encouraged to formulate their own questions; children can then select the question that will drive their inquiry; each child has equal right to participate to the dialogue and so each

²¹ In another unpublished paper (Zanetti ms) entitled 'Contemplative Thinking in Philosophical Inquiry with Children' I explore this issue further. Relying on Heidegger's distinction between calculative thinking and meditative thinking (Heidegger 1966) and Marcel's distinction between problems and mysteries (Marcel 1951) I argue that there is a mode of thinking (that often occurs in connection with existential questioning) which should be added to the 4c-multidimensional thinking (critical, creative, caring, collaborative) that is promoted by P4/wC. There is one lineage in the P4/wC movement that offers some initial insights to elaborate a reflection on such modality of thinking. Ann Sharp made remarks to the effect that a CoI is the right place where engaging with one's own most profound existential questions: she says that religious metaphors should be a topic of investigation with a community of inquiry – and religious metaphors are likely to occur in the attempt to grapple with one's own existential questions; moreover, she argues that we the community of inquiry might be a home for spirituality for those people for whom 'God is dead' and to whom religious practices are no longer relevant (Sharp 2012); in (Sharp 1996) she recognizes the importance and existence of what I have called contemplative thinking by discussing silence in the community of inquiry.



child has a voice in the community; the facilitator should not answer children's questions but rather facilitate the inquiry. These features might generate the following problems (some of which I have witnessed during my facilitations).

Children might formulate existential questions when invited to come up with their questions after the stimulus. Now, suppose that the facilitator does not want to discuss existential questions but easier ones. She might explicitly ask the community to put these questions on a side. Or she might facilitate the community's reflections on their own questions by surreptitiously driving them to prefer questions that are not existential. Either way, the facilitator incurs the risk of letting children understand that it is not okay to discuss existential questions – or, even worse, that the facilitator herself is afraid of such questions²². This, as we saw before, might have a negative effect on children's relation with their own existential questions and as a result it is a potential cause of suffering.

Suppose instead that the facilitator accepts children's choice to discuss existential questions. Children are likely to receive with enthusiasm (or so I have often experienced as facilitator) the opportunity to discuss such questions, for they understand that they are important and that they rarely have the occasion to express and investigate them. However, and this is the second problem, *some* children might be uncomfortable with the question chosen²³. The majority of children might be happy to discuss a question about death, say, but some children might not be. This always happens during P4/wC sessions. A divergence of preferences is not problematic if the choice is between questions about reversible sentences and questions about the nature of thought. The reason is that we expect both families of questions to be harmless for the children: at worst, some children will be bored. But with existential questions things are different. Some children might suffer during the session – because, say, they have just experienced a loss, or because for any other reason they are unable to deal with the intensity that the discussion might involve.

Third, suppose that a dialogue on some existential question begins. To make things vivid, suppose that the question chosen is whether life has a meaning given the fact that we are all going to die one day (I discussed this question with a community formed by 10-years children). The problem I have just raised is that some children might be uncomfortable with this question. But there is a family of more specific problems. One

²² As (Matthews 1980, 87) aptly notes: "In all of us there is, no doubt, an undercurrent existential anguish. Sometimes our effort to protect children from thinking about death simply masks an effort to protect ourselves".

²³ This problem is also mentioned by (Turgeon 2015, 289).

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concerns, as we saw before, the *answers* that children might eventually discuss or even embrace during a session. Suppose (as it happened to me) that a child forcefully and angrily says that life is horrible since we are all going to die one day. As we saw, coming to such conclusion might be harmful for the development of children. Moreover, and this is a separate problem, while we might intervene in some way when a child explicitly speaks her mind, it is much harder to intervene and help children who might be troubled by the discussion but do not openly display their inner struggle. As we know, many children cultivate an inner dialogue during the session that we are not able to follow and guide²⁴.

Another issue concerns the length of a P4/wC session. A session normally lasts between 45 minutes and two hours. This time might not be sufficient to discuss existential issues with proper care. Time constraints might require facilitators to end up sessions abruptly, and we should wonder whether this might cause damage to children if they are discussing troubling existential questions. To make this point vivid, suppose children are discussing whether suicide is a sound option, and suppose some children are arguing that in some circumstances suicide is fine²⁵ and some children are disturbed by the discussion. If the session must end, the facilitator might lose sight of the emotional need of some children and might leave them alone in their process of understanding and integration of the ideas that they have considered^{26,27}.

The question is then how can/should a facilitator in a community of inquiry deal with such situations?²⁸ Some bad options easily come to mind. The facilitator might end

²⁴ See (Sharp 1996). (Matthews 1980, 85) is aware of the problem I am raising. He says that sometimes children might not be "emotionally health and secure". "Even a child who is usually confident and secure may have anxious moments and express these anxieties in a philosophical comment or question". As a result, he suggests, sometimes the discussion should also feature "assurances of loving concern". "Sometimes the adult should forget about the philosophy and concentrate on the child's emotional problems". (Matthews 1980, 86). This is true, the question is however how to do so in a community of inquiry. For one thing, children's emotional needs might not be explicit. Moreover, the facilitator must be trained to know *how* to care for the emotional needs rather than the inquiry. The problem is that it is unclear exactly how this should be done and whether the community of inquiry is the right sort of context where this can take place.

²⁵ In a session I facilitated in a public school in Italy, some children (10 years old) argued that suicide is fine if there is reincarnation. Others argued that suicide is fine regardless of what is next, provided that the present life is no longer attractive.

²⁶ See (Shea 2017) on this problem as it relates to discussions about religion.

²⁷ These are just *some* problems. If we focus on the role of facilitator and on facilitation techniques, the problems and open questions are thousands.

²⁸ Notice that I am discussing problems that mostly affect facilitators who let students choose their own questions for the inquiry. There are methods – such as Worley's and McCall's as exemplified respectively in (Worley 2011) and (McCall 2009) – where the question is chosen by the facilitator. In that case the facilitator might simply omit to discuss existential questions. The problem remains,

the discussion as soon as she perceives that the discussion is “going too far”. But, again, this might cause more harm than good. The facilitator might try to counter all those conclusions that she deems as inappropriate, harmful, or false – but this is problematic in many ways: it goes against the spirit of the practice; there is no shared consensus about what the right answer to these questions is (and thus there is a risk of indoctrination); the child wants to be persuaded that her view is wrong, not merely to be opposed in her views (an attitude which, again, might cause more harm than good when we deal with existential issues). Moreover, if the child experiences that the facilitator has a different attitude when she is confronted with existential topics than when she deals with other philosophical issues, then the child might spot that there is something problematic about such issues.

An optimistic reply to these problems says that the best way to react to such circumstances is just to stick to the methodology and to be confident that the community itself will resolve the emotional tensions and troubles. Consider again the case of a child arguing that life is meaningless and that as a result life is horrible. One can invite children to explore this position even further, hoping that exploration will reduce the harshness of this argument and will open up the children’s minds to the possibility that this view is mistaken. We know that sometimes deepening the inquiry on a topic is a way to weaken belief – the more you know about a question, the more you appreciate how difficult it is to be confident about the right answer. However, it is not clear whether this is a responsible attitude in the case of existential questioning. For, deepening the issue might have several negative effects: first, it might reinforce in some children the view that life is indeed horrible; it might prolongate the intensity and the potential suffering; it might bring more children to be *prima facie* persuaded by this conclusion. On the other hand, behaving as if the view was not be held – either by changing topic, or by downplaying its importance – is not an easy way out either, as this might induce in the child and the community the feeling that it is bad to think about such issues – or even more worryingly, that life is indeed horrible, as evinced by the fact that the facilitator is not even able to confront the question, implicitly knowing that there is no way to show that things are otherwise.

Although it is easy to say how one ought *not* to react to such circumstances, it is hard to find a positive account. My aim in this paper is not to solve these problems and reply to the overall challenge, but rather to clearly highlight them and show that they need

however, if the facilitator is willing to give to children the opportunity to discuss issues related to death, meaning and kindred issues. Worley has a story on the meaning of life, for instance.

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to be treated seriously by the community of educators in general and P4/wC practitioners in particular. I therefore suggest to highlight this question:

How should a facilitator deal with existential questioning in a community of inquiry?

The upshot of the discussion so far is that facilitators should appreciate the difference between different kinds of questions and also appreciate how these affect children's mental life and the process of facilitation. Again, there is a significant difference between wondering whether all sentences are reversible and whether suicide could be the right solution to the problem that life is meaningless²⁹. The overall question is whether the same method and pedagogy is suitable for both kinds of questioning. In this paper I have focused on challenges that invite us to make it explicit how and why the pedagogy of the community of inquiry makes room for existential questioning in a way that is safe and promote children's well being and right to philosophize. We might sum up the overall challenge as an invitation to solve a *prima facie* tension, if not conflict, between two aspirations that are at the core of P4/wC: on the one hand, we have the aim of fostering inquiry; on the other, we have the aim of taking care for the emotional safety of the children³⁰. In the case of existential questioning, it is unclear how we can simultaneously promote both aims.

§6 conclusion

To sum up, in this paper I have argued that existential questions pose specific challenges to education in general and to the pedagogy of the community of inquiry in particular. I have argued that existential questions are problematic because they seem to lead to suffering. Then I have pointed out that we can't simply ignore children's existential questions and leave them alone in the unavoidable task to tackle such issues. I have also suggested that it is natural and tempting to think that the pedagogy of the community of inquiry provides the resources to make room for children's existential questioning. However, this suggestion faces several problems. First of all, I have noticed that existential questions are not frequent in the original Lipman-Sharp's curriculum. Then I have

²⁹ This is Camus's question in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus 1942). We know that these questions might resonate in our lives at various times, especially during adolescence.

³⁰ (Turgeon 2015) also highlights this tension.

suggested that there is a tension between two key aspirations at the core of P4/wC: on the one hand, the aim of promoting inquiry about children's own questions and on the other hand the aim of providing a safe environment for children's reflections. Crucially, I have pointed out some difficulties that facilitators face when they deal with existential questioning.

The aim of this paper was to invite the community of P4/wC practitioners to take up the challenges I have raised. We need to articulate how to deal with children's existential questions in a way that promotes collaborative inquiry and at the same time preserves children's well being. In this connection, I also suggest that we need empirical research to understand whether and how children's relation with their own existential questions is affected by participating in the community of inquiry.

One of the challenges suggested in this paper is that there is little discussion in the P4/wC literature openly focused on existential questions. This point is reflected in the fact that existential questions are poorly represented in the original Lipman-Sharp curriculum. I take this challenge as an invitation to articulate philosophical and pedagogical views that allow us to think of the relevance of existential questions in education in general and in the community of inquiry in particular. As I have suggested above³¹, Sharp's reflections on the role of religion and spirituality in the community of inquiry is a good place to start to think of this issue while remaining within the lineage that connects us to the very beginning of P4/wC. However, I also suggest to explore ways of thinking about P4/wC with the help of authors who have stressed the importance of existential questions in human experience. Conversing with authors such as, among others, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, and Jaspers is I think a promising way to promote the intellectual and practical development of P4/wC in a direction that allows us to appreciate its ability to provide a suitable space for existential questioning in education.

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³¹ See footnote 20.

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