

‘The Elephant In The Room’ - Picturebooks, Philosophy for Children and Racism

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Whilst continuing racism is often invoked as evidence of the urgent need for Philosophy for Children, there is little in the current literature that addresses the topic.

Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the related field of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), I argue that racism is deeply ingrained culturally in society, and best understood in the context of ‘whiteness’.

Following a CRT-informed analysis of two picturebooks that have been recommended as starting points for philosophical enquiry into multiculturalism, racism and diversity – ‘Elmer’ and ‘Tusk Tusk’ by David McKee, I argue that whilst the use of stories with animals is commonly regarded as offering children the comfort of distance from emotionally challenging topics, this has the effect of separating racism from its temporal and spatial realities, which limits rather than enhances opportunities for engaging philosophically with it.

I argue in favour of the practice of ‘reading against the text’ and consider the epistemological and practical obstacles to this practice drawing on my own experiences discussing race with P4C practitioners in the UK. I attempt to illustrate how the selection of recommended materials, combined with commonly held principles of P4C, make for a climate where a philosophical engagement with race and racism that considers the discourse of ‘whiteness’ is highly unlikely to occur. This leads me to posit the idea of “The Gated Community of Enquiry”.

Biography

I am currently a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Education, London. My research focuses on Philosophy for Children and ‘race’. My MA dissertation looked at the relationship between P4C and Antiracist Education. I teach in a London primary school, have completed all 3 levels of SAPERE training in P4C and have 17 years’ experience of practising P4C in multiracial, multicultural contexts.