

Ginnie & Pinney by Penny Harris; illustrated by Winnie Zhou (2017). Ginnie & Pinney Pty Ltd, Camberwell, Vic. ISBN 978-0-6480660-8-8

Ginnie & Pinney 'Think Smart' materials (G&P) have been written for children aged three to eight, 'to encourage deep thinking and lively discussion between each other, their parents and teachers' and hence we understand why they have already captured the attention of Philosophy for Schools (P4C) practitioners. Matthew Lipman enshrined our aim as helping 'children become more thoughtful, more reflective, more considerate and more reasonable individuals' (Lipman 1980, p. 15) Let us see why you too will find them a valuable addition to your Early Years resources.

The materials include a set of eight books, eight animated videos (accessed via a QR code on the back of each book), a teacher's resource booklet, and a set of nine Fair Trade finger puppets. Open-ended questions in the back of each book may be used as guides by teachers and parents for 'engaging on a deep level' with their students and children.

Each story aligns well with at least one of the dispositions mentioned in the five Principles of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), which guide current educational practice in the early years throughout Australia. The EYLF curriculum promotes Belonging, Being and Becoming as three pillars of early childhood experience which are scaffolded through experiences of inclusiveness, responsibility, respect, and fairness. The G&P characters clearly exhibit 'dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation' and the situations they find themselves in enable them to explore 'confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity' (EYLF 2009).



Furthermore, from an international perspective, Dr Arie Kizel, President of ICPI (International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children) has recognised that 'these books are of great interest to parents of young children, kindergarten teachers and those in the field of teacher education who will find the topics both interesting and philosophically enriching'.

All well and good, you might say, but there are some serious questions that still need be answered.

The first question you may be entertaining is: How realistic is it to target children of such tender age for 'deep' discussions around these morally complex ideas?

Perhaps an underlying assumption behind this question is Kohlberg's popularised stage theory which described young children as essentially 'amoral', with the first stage of an emergent moral sense as being 'obedience' to adult instructions. If this were the case it would make sense to introduce a moral training program involving simple systems of reward and punishments. Contemporary theorists dispute this characterisation of early childhood moral sensibilities. Burroughs and Arda Tuncdemir (2017), for example argues that,

contra Kohlberg, children do not possess only social-conventional-authority based concerns in early childhood (and then advance on to moral concerns as they grow older); rather, children, from the age of 2-3 years, possess basic understandings of and differentiate between social and moral concepts and actions ... (p. 79)

There is much research to support this, and we refer to some findings in brief. Burroughs et al (2017, p. 77), summarising the work of a number of educational researchers, state that by age 3 children are clearly 'capable of making distinct moral and conventional judgements'. That is, young children can not only identify actions which have harmful consequences (such as shoving someone may hurt them), but also distinguish these moral breaches from simple rule breaking (such as not sitting in an assigned chair). Researchers inform us that children appear to consider the former kinds of breaches as much more serious; calling for reparation.

Furthermore, by years 4 and 5, children can 'recognise and distinguish the beliefs, desires and intentions of others from their own' (Burroughs et al 2017, p. 77). In other words, they do not simply consider whether the consequences are harmful or not, but can take into account the intentions of others in judging the seriousness of

the breach. They begin to understand ‘the relationship of beliefs and intentions to outcomes and actions in moral situations’ (Burroughs et al. 2017, pp. 77-78). For example, they will spontaneously distinguish between ‘he meant to hurt him’, from ‘harm was done accidentally’ and are more negative about the former.

Burroughs et al. (2017) also proposed two separate trajectories of development. Firstly, that children develop social concepts ‘from their early and continuing experiences with social interactions, customs and norms’; and secondly, they develop moral concepts ‘from their early and continuing experiences of harm and fairness’ (p. 79). They hypothesised that primary experiences of children concerned ‘issues and discussions relating to *fairness*, *personal welfare* (particularly in regard to issues of harm), and *inclusion and exclusion of peers*’. These issues are embedded in each of the G&P stories.

Why might the emergence of these dispositions interest educationalists, if they do in fact appear spontaneously across social and cultural contexts?

If we accept that children aged 3 to 8 are interested in moral distinctions and questions (without settling the question of the exact aetiology in terms of biological and social influences) a second question is raised concerning appropriate interventions in the life of the child. Narratives (stories) are used throughout recent human history for multiple educational purposes. In this review we discuss Philosophy for Children’s (P4C) vision of cultivating children’s capacities to become reasonable and ethical persons. Laurance Splitter (2001), leading exponent of P4C writes:

The kind of story that is often used can be called ‘story-as-text’ because it strikes a balance between literature and structured text. A story-as-text seeks to problematise the everyday activities and experiences of its characters. It invites the reader to take on, and grapple with, the ideas and puzzles that it contains. (2001, p. 2)

We observe that the G&P stories successfully meet several of Splitter’s guidelines for useful stimulus material for philosophical dialogue, namely: (1) familiar contexts and multiple perspectives, (2) elements of dialogue modelled between characters, (3) and open-ended endings. The programme has been written in consultation with academics including Doctor of Linguistics, Marietta Elliot-Kleerkoper, Doctor of Education, Janette Poulton (the author of this review); and Professor Doreen Rosenthal, Development Psychologist.

(1) Familiar contexts and multiple perspectives

Splitter (2001, p. 1) first advises that stimulus materials should ‘Be *interesting* and *accessible* to students and *connected*, in some way, to their experience (so, not too general or remote)’. Accordingly, each G&P story is set in the familiar world of the child—the home, the playground, the garden. But this is not about providing comfort food, but about exploring the complexities of these settings. Splitter continues: ‘Be intriguing by focusing on situations, concepts or ideas which are problematic, unclear or puzzling, and so need further discussion and investigation’ (p. 1). How is this achieved at this early stage of development? By presenting multiple perspectives on a situation. And this means ‘do not impose one specific view or position “from above” (e.g. using the power of the all-knowing narrator)’ (p. 1.) Mimicking real life, the nine characters with their different personalities demonstrate various ways of dealing with each other and the emotional themes of selflessness, responsibility, persistence, sharing, self-identity, inclusiveness, empathy and accepting differences. *Flight of the Kite* provides particular opportunity to explore ‘persistence’:

When Pinney suggests making kites on a windy day, Ginnie is a bit worried about being blown about. Everyone else thinks it is a great idea. Whilst Pinney’s enthusiasm convinces Ginnie to make a kite and not be left out, it is also the cause of many kite-making problems for Pinney. After many failures Pinney finally makes a kite that flies. Or does he?

(2) Dialogue modelled between characters

Splitter advises that the story-texts ‘Model processes of inquiry (e.g. fictional characters engaging in dialogue) which real students can transfer to their own practice in different subject areas’ Talk and think bubbles reflect what one might think and what one might say, an intended device to focus children on the difference between the two. Dr Arie Kizel also observes that ‘These books [G&P] represent a dialogical approach towards children and their ability to cultivate open discussion and philosophical inquiry’. A good example is found in the story *Movie Mayhem*. Tao Tiger is watching his favourite movie in peace and quiet when his friends barge in to join him, each explaining their own view on the merits of viewing together. Ginnie,

who often does not express her thoughts (except in thought bubbles), lets it be known it is a bad idea. Others are all for it, for various reasons providing opportunity for the readers to respond to each position dialogically.

Further investigations may take you into the realm of developmental psychology and cognitive science. For example Rottman and Young 2015 outline social domain theory and the hypothesis of ‘a universal moral grammar’ choosing to adopt the ‘taste bud’ metaphor ‘because its proponents have emphasized a plurality of moral foundations (beyond harm and fairness) and an explicit focus on social communication as a mechanism of moral development’ (p. 124).. Thus, whilst recognising biological foundations for moral choices, there is still much being learnt about how social communication modifies these decisions.

(3) Open-ended ending

There is a tendency to think that being philosophical involves the hermeneutic task of uncovering the hidden meaning of a text. We refer to a cross-cultural study by Cheung and colleagues (2017) that investigates this question through analysis of dozens of storybooks from a list recommended by the education agencies of China, the United States and Mexico. Discussing the research, Cheung (2018) observes that typical of the Chinese collection is one titled *The Cat That Eats Letters*:

Ostensibly it’s about a cat that has an appetite for sloppy letters—written too large or too small, or if the letter is missing a stroke ...

The hidden meaning is clear to the researchers: Cheung declares that

So the only way children can stop their letters from being eaten is to write really carefully and practice every day. This is really instilling the idea of effort—that children have to learn to consistently practice in order to achieve at a certain level.

And that idea, she says, ‘is a core tenet of Chinese culture’ and of their approach to moral education.

Thus, if we think of hidden meaning as the author’s intended moral we might presume our task, and the task of the child, is to search for clues within the text of the values the author intended the child to embrace. Let’s say, persistence, honesty

and love are the values that concern an author. Indeed, it is understandable that in a perfect world, when you persist obstacles will disappear, and you will achieve your goals. And when you tell the truth clarity will open all eyes to reality. However, it may be better to NOT persist where the effort is not worthwhile, to NOT tell the truth when it endangers oneself, or to NOT love those who will only abuse you. This is why we might choose to help children develop ethical judgement, through focused dialogue on values within familiar contexts—in preference to simply being blindly moved to action by values such as persistence, honesty and love.

In summary, Ginnie & Pinney ‘Think Smart’ stories have a depth to them that will support the development of open-minded and reasonable moral judgment as a tool in the hands of capable P4C practitioners. Let a teacher have the last word: Karen Friede, Head of Primary Education at Bialik College, Melbourne writes:

Ginnie and Pinney was introduced to our Year 2 students to enhance the SEL program at Bialik College. The stories supported their learning in relation to the personal and social capabilities and provided opportunities for the students learn to about their own emotions, values, and strengths. Our aim is to develop resilience and a sense of self-worth, resolve conflict, engage in teamwork and feel positive about themselves and the interactive nature of the books provided for self and teacher directed discussions to support our goal.

About the author

Author Penny Harris has been working on various educative and edutainment projects over a number of years, including working with the Australian Children’s Television Foundation, University of Melbourne and Monash and La Trobe Universities to name a few. She has won four Australian Teachers of Media Awards and four Interactive Media Awards of America. Her films have screened at numerous festivals across the world. Adding to her extensive body of work, Ms Harris has published with Rigby Heinemann as author and illustrator of four children’s books, and with Pearson as author.

Ms Harris was inspired to develop this series based on the mounting evidence she found supporting P4C which encourages ethical thinking and empathy in young children. This, coupled with her ability to intuit these concepts, enabled her to write the Ginnie & Pinney stories with a light and sensitive touch. Her partnership with

illustrator and ex-student Winnie Zhou blossomed through their mutual commitment to creating stories and characters that mimic real life scenarios in a gentle and humorous way.

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