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► **To cite this version:**

Edwige Chirouter. The enlightenment of fiction: Literature to learn to philosophise. Journal of philosophy in schools, 2024, 11 (2), pp.28-42. 10.46707/jps.v11i2.236 . hal-04839806

HAL Id: hal-04839806

<https://hal.science/hal-04839806v1>

Submitted on 16 Dec 2024

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The enlightenment of fiction: Literature to learn to philosophise

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Abstract

This article summarises nearly 20 years of academic research into the links between children, literature and philosophy. The democratisation of philosophy teaching is critical today in a world characterised by complexity and by crises on many fronts. For Martha Nussbaum, the trend in the global education system is to sideline the humanities in favour of a dehumanised, purely technological approach to knowledge, thereby paving the way for a serious crisis of democracy. Yet the humanities offer the only way for future citizens to develop their reasoning skills, sensitivity, critical faculties, and empathy. The challenge facing this alliance between philosophy (with children) and literature (for young people) is, therefore, profoundly political: to train enlightened citizens informed by fiction. Stories (picturebooks and novels) embody the potential for a multitude of exemplary and meaningful experiences of the truth(s) of the world, and as such constitute an autonomous space for thinking. Literature is, therefore, an authentic experience, both specific and universal, through which readers can grasp reality. It is an immense laboratory in which we can, at any age, rework the situations, dilemmas and problems that affect humanity. Free from the constraints of empirical reality, the laws of physics, and the laws of morality, fiction allows us to experience by proxy what we will never actually experience in the real world. Fiction creates a healthy emotional distance, making it easier to think deeply and rigorously. The article summarises the conclusions reached about the principles and role of (children's) literature in early learning about philosophy.

Keywords

children's literature, citizenship, humanities, interpretation, philosophy with children

1. Introduction

Experiments with philosophy workshops for children have been taking place worldwide for over 50 years now. In France, National Education Inspector Germaine Tortel was the first in the 1930s to officially advocate and experiment with the first philosophical practices in classes with very young children (five years old) (see Pettier

& Clad 2012). On the face of it, this encounter between the world of philosophy—a discipline often considered difficult and typically reserved for adolescents in high schools or young adults in universities—and the world of childhood could appear to be a clash between two seemingly irreconcilable cultures. However, the past 50 years of experimentation and research in this field have shown not only that rigorous study of philosophy is possible from a very young age, but also that a profound connection exists between childhood and philosophy.

Addressing children's metaphysical questionings also seems to reflect a major parallel trend in contemporary 'youth literature'. Since the 1960s, our societies, notably through the critical contributions of psychology and psychoanalysis, have recognised very young children as subjects in their own right, who need guidance on their existential and intellectual journey. In 1976, the popularity of *The Uses of Enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim meant that many educators became convinced that children are capable of unconsciously interpreting the latent message of a story in such a way as to make better sense of their world and existence (Bettelheim 1976). Today, numerous authors, such as Maurice Sendak, Tomi Ungerer and Shel Silverstein, offer their young readers, implicitly, poetically, and never in a saccharine or moralising way, the opportunity for an initiatory encounter with themselves and others.

In addition to the publication of these narratives (picturebooks, novels, comic books) that intricately address complex questions, there has emerged in the youth publishing market in recent years a series of what could be termed 'philosophy lessons for children' (in France, *Goûters philo* published by Milan, *Chouette penser!* by Gallimard, and books by the publishing house Les Petits Platons, some of which are widely translated). This marks the appearance of an innovative publishing genre that heralds a new age for youth literature which seeks more than ever to distance itself from its reputation for the moralising, edifying, or purely instructive content that has always, rightly or wrongly, seemed to characterise it.

This recognition of the 'philosopher child' and the 'reading child' is institutionalised in numerous elementary school syllabi in the Francophone world, particularly in 'moral and civic education' lessons. In 2015, new syllabi in France emphasised the reflective and democratic dimensions of pedagogical practices and advocated the implementation of 'philosophical discussions' based on literature. In Belgium, a course on 'philosophy and citizenship' is introduced from the age of six. These philosophy syllabi encourage teachers to take students' voices as a starting point for

learning to think and reflect together. They also explicitly encourage the implementation of discussions of this type drawing on literary materials:

- Practice of philosophical discussions around situations involving personal and collective values, choices, or imaginary scenarios.
- Reflection on topics of general and specific interest based on stories featuring heroes from literature, history, or mythology.¹

This article summarises over 20 years of academic research on the connections between children, literature and philosophy (see especially Chirouter 2015; also Chirouter forthcoming 2025). These conclusions are drawn from my doctorate (2008) and from all my academic research as the holder of the UNESCO Chair *Philosophical Practices with Children: An Educational Basis for Intercultural Dialogue and Social Transformation*.² This UNESCO Chair—the first and only one dedicated to philosophy with children—aims to disseminate this practice through research, public engagement, and the training of educators, cultural actors, and community organisations. Our work within UNESCO has led to the official inclusion of philosophy with children in the UN’s educational recommendations for 2030 (Chirouter 2020). I also specify here that the theoretical framework on which my research is based is primarily Francophone (as most of the texts from the English-speaking community on philosophy with children have not been, or have barely been, translated, except for those of Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp).

Furthermore, this research falls under either action research (I experiment with and analyse workshops that I have personally led in classrooms) or collaborative research, where the educational team is fully involved in the research process (preparing sessions, analysing them, and communicating the results). These experiments took place in 15 French-speaking countries, about 60 classes, mainly in France (metropolitan and overseas) and West Africa (Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast). This article is a synthesis of that work, which has not been previously translated into English. Therefore, this can be seen as an opportunity to share our work and findings with the Anglophone world.

¹ See French Moral and Civic Education syllabus for children (aged 6 to 10).
<http://eduscol.education.fr/cid92403/1-emc-principes-et-objectifs.html>

² See <https://chaireunescofiloenfants.univ-nantes.fr>

In the context of my own research initiatives and collaborative activity in over fifty classrooms worldwide, I have always applied the following premise: early learning of philosophy cannot occur without cultural mediations, or without texts that facilitate distancing and problematisation of the topic. Since classical texts and authors from the history of philosophy (Hegel, Spinoza, Kant, etc.) are too difficult and complex for very young students, we can use literature to enable them to engage with this way of thinking. My research focused on narratives that were not initially written to 'do philosophy' with children such as the novels by Lipman and Sharp designed to develop a didactic approach to philosophy. Instead, I have focused on works (especially illustrated books) written by authors who offer subtle and complex insights into the world. As such, like any literary work, they can provide an opportunity to engage children with the adventure of thought. The writers who serve as the corpus for my research are often authors of children's picturebook classics, such as Maurice Sendak, Tomi Ungerer, Claude Ponti, and Kitty Crowther, for example, or of traditional oral tale.

Childhood could well hold the key to rediscovering the original affiliation between literature and philosophy. Childhood has the potential to serve as a bridge, allowing us to rediscover the close association between these two discourses, which should certainly not be conflated, but whose common foundation should not be forgotten either: literature and philosophy are both discourses that give meaning and intelligibility to our existence.

2. The lights of fiction: When (youth) literature illuminates reality

One of the essential functions of literature is to help humans think about the world, to cast light on it so that they can navigate it and give meaning to their experience. Echoing the thesis developed by Aristotle, Jacques Rancière (2017), in his essay *Les bords de la fiction*, reminds us that 'what distinguishes fiction from ordinary experience is not a lack of reality but a surfeit of rationality' (p. 7). The major dilemmas and thought experiments proposed by narratives prompt reflection, challenge certainties, open us to otherness, and help us to grow. A detour through fiction therefore facilitates a complex approach to difficult concepts that are both universal and personal (such as death, love, good and evil, happiness, freedom, etc.). Indeed, no civilization exists without narratives that offer precisely this clearer understanding of the world and the human condition. According to Roland Barthes (1966):

Moreover, in these almost infinite forms, narrative begins with the very history of humanity; there is not, and has never been, any people

anywhere without narrative; all classes, all human groups have their narratives and very often these narratives are enjoyed in common, by people of different, or even opposing cultures: narrative is not concerned with good and bad literature: international, transhistorical, transcultural, narrative is there, like life. (p. 1)

Paul Ricœur highlights that just like philosophical discourse—which is however more conceptual, argumentative and rational—narrative allows us to question and contemplate reality. Because it embodies the potential for a multitude of exemplary and meaningful experiences of the truth(s) of the world, it constitutes an autonomous space for thinking. Literature represents an authentic, specific and universal experience through which readers can apprehend reality. It is an immense laboratory where humans can endlessly rework the situations, dilemmas and problems that affect them. ‘The thought experiments we conduct in the great laboratory of the imagination are also explorations carried out in the realm of good and evil,’ writes Ricœur (1990, p. 194). Free from the constraints of empirical reality, the laws of physics, and the rules of morality, fiction allows us to experience vicariously what reality alone will never allow us to experience. As readers, we can commit a crime and suffer the torment of remorse vicariously, we can live out stories of love and friendship, face dilemmas, or become invisible (like the shepherd Gyges in Plato’s myth), and experience the limits of Good and Evil (‘What if I were in Gyges’s place ...’).

Literature therefore proceeds from a Derridean recollection, a return to oneself through the work. It speaks, more or less explicitly, of the anxieties, hopes and desires that constitute the essence of the human condition (the fear of death and of loneliness, redemption through love or creation) and helps to give meaning to our inner experience. The ‘ideal reader’, to cite Alberto Manguel (2005), emerges from their reading a different, quasi-transfigured person (p. 65). Literature therefore goes far beyond mere distraction and entertainment.

For almost fifty years now, so-called ‘youth literature’ has engaged with this heuristic, illuminating function of narratives. It is no longer merely instructive or entertaining, but it is not purely descriptive and functional either. This is a very recent cultural development and is indicative of our cultural representation of childhood. The existence of youth literature is predicated on recognising the child as a subject, a specific reader, something which only occurred very gradually, beginning in the eighteenth century under the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and continuing in

the twentieth century with Freud and the development of child psychology. Once this recognition was achieved, children's books, which for so long were aimed solely at educating or entertaining, were finally acknowledged as literature in their own right.

Long considered a minor genre, or 'para-literature', these works have now established their credentials. This process of recognition can be explained by a multitude of interconnected factors: the recognition of the child as a subject; the establishment of compulsory state education; a decrease in book production costs, and hence book prices; the democratisation of reading as a leisure activity; the development of academic research; popular initiatives by innovative publishers; the publication of works by renowned writers in the field of general literature (e.g. Georges Sand, Marguerite Duras, and Michel Tournier in France); inclusion in school syllabuses; and soaring sales figures. All of these factors have played a part over the past 50 years in making youth literature one of the most flourishing and interesting sectors of the literary marketplace.

The importance of engaging with literature for the emotional and intellectual development of children is now fully recognised by numerous studies in the fields of psychology, philosophy, anthropology and sociology. This recognition owes much historically to the popularity of Bruno Bettelheim's (1976) bestseller, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. In 1976, the psychoanalyst convinced many educators that, for children, literature is not simply a means of escaping reality, but rather a place where they can seek refuge—away from the turmoil of the world and the urgency of daily life—in order to better understand themselves and the world around them. All educators (parents, teachers, etc.) know that when a story resonates with a child's psyche, they will ask for the same story over and over again. For Bettelheim, the fairy tale is the quintessential example of what literature can offer a child: a story that—through alchemy—strikes a very deep chord in them. It truly speaks. An encounter takes place that will help them to develop as a person.

Ultimately, children have the same need for fiction as adults; whatever our age, we need stories and imagination to escape reality, to 'clear our minds', and to forget our worries. Fiction here serves to distract us, in the sense used by the French philosopher Pascal in his *Pensées* (1670/2023); for him, entertainment is an essential and universal need, to forget both the tragic nature of the human condition and the small troubles of everyday life. We all need it—children, adolescents and adults alike, until the very end of our lives. We read or watch something 'silly' knowing full well that it is 'silly',

but it serves as an essential release mechanism for the inevitable tensions of existence. But imagination, literature, fiction and narratives have another function which is equally universal and timeless, but definitely more fundamental and profound. We do not dive into this great laboratory of the imagination in order to forget reality, but rather to grasp it, apprehend it, understand it, and navigate it more successfully.

By stepping out of the comfortable cave of our certainties and thought habits, we are disrupted and transformed. These hermeneutic and reflexive functions of literature—what Nathalie Prince and I have called ‘the lights of fiction’ (Chirouter & Prince 2019)—are now accessible to younger readers who are at last being recognised as fully-fledged subjects. While children have always had access to characters like *Noddy* or *The Famous Five*, they now also have Maurice Sendak, Anthony Browne, Tomi Ungerer, Kitty Crowther, and Emily Gravett, to name but a few, to accompany them. This is a game changer. Now children have the opportunity to experience reading with their whole being, in all their own depth and uniqueness. Danielle Sallenave asserts that the authentic literary experience has no equivalent other than love. It is like an illumination that overwhelms the subject. Initially, it removes the reader from the world and isolates them from reality, but then restores them to it better equipped to revisit it and make it more legible:

A child who reads is like a sick child: they lie down, they stop moving, and do not hear the bright call of July outside ... Reading tears you away from the world only to return it to you in a different form, revised, illuminated: if reading is an escape, as ordinary readers say, if it is a flight, then it is that of the prisoner who escapes from his cell by breaking the bars. Better still, literature completes the (meaning of the) world, it fulfils it because the world is revisited through it. (Sallenave 1991, p. 98)

Operating in the mode of magical thinking, childhood is the golden age of belief in the imaginary. Fortunately, ‘this euphoric consent to fiction’, to cite Vincent Jouve (1993, p. 87), never completely disappears, and it is what operates whenever we read a story. As Jouve also beautifully puts it, ‘reading is first and foremost a reassertion of childhood’ (p. 87). Our inner child resurfaces every time we open a book. There is, therefore, an essential proximity between childhood, fiction and literature. But this magnificent, naive and total surrender to the world of fiction is not undertaken out of a carefree desire to escape reality, or for simple amusement or distraction. A child also seeks in the act of reading answers to their fundamental questions. They surrender in

the profound hope of discovering meaning in their experience. Reading is also a quest for oneself and others.

For a long time, philosophy adopted a somewhat disdainful attitude towards literature (e.g. Plato on poets, Kant reproaching Rousseau for the beauty of his style, etc.), but it has in fact always employed literary techniques. Philosophers have often used stylistic devices, figures of speech, or writing techniques typical of literature. While Plato establishes a distinction between the two disciplines through a historically decisive denunciation of poetry and poets, he simultaneously resorts to metaphor and, of course, allegory in his own writings. With Nietzsche, and then philosophers in France such as Paul Ricœur, philosophy finally acknowledged the full reflective power of metaphor and the power of literary narratives.

Championing the idea of literature as a fully-fledged thought experiment, the work of Paul Ricœur indeed represents a seminal moment in contemporary philosophy and has influenced an entire generation of thinkers. Ricœur's thinking remains faithful to the original purpose of metaphor, which means 'transfer'. For Ricœur, in *Soi-même comme un autre*, metaphors, to which he adds narrative, are much more than a technical linguistic tool (Seuil 1990). They are a means of capturing the deep truth of reality. Literary fiction is not just about the imaginary; it also has a 'referential function' that reveals hitherto unsuspected dimensions of reality. In this respect, it constitutes a living, authentic, specific and universal experience through which humans can apprehend reality.

As such, literature can go beyond philosophical speculation and articulate what philosophy leaves unthought. It can succeed where metaphysics has failed, notably in respect of time. Fiction allows readers to explore new relationships with temporality and duration, providing fresh perspectives that sometimes far exceed the capabilities of philosophical investigations. When Paul Ricœur analyses *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, he is at pains to avoid considering the novel as a mere illustration of philosophical theses external to it, but rather respects Virginia Woolf's specific thought and recognises its singularity. The novel does not illustrate a pre-existing philosophical thesis, but constitutes a strand of thinking in its own right.

It is precisely this value of exemplariness in literature, considered as a fully-fledged thought experiment, that underpins the hypotheses of my research. A certain type of so-called 'youth literature' also contains this heuristic exemplariness, and for this reason it is one of the richest forms for supporting young children in learning about philosophy.

3. The lights of fiction: When literature helps children to philosophise

Why is literature a particularly fruitful form for philosophising with very young children? How can children also venture into the great laboratory of the imagination and experience the lights of fiction? This section synthesises over twenty years of research on the connection between children, literature and philosophy. I will only provide some particularly significant examples from many years of research and from the conclusions I have drawn from my analysis of hundreds of sessions conducted in schools at all levels in Francophone Western countries (France, Quebec, Luxembourg, Monaco), in West Africa (Benin, Senegal, Mauritania), and also in some fifteen schools belonging to the Agency for French Education Abroad network (Toronto, Mexico, Bucharest, Auckland, Istanbul, etc).

The three main conclusions are as follows:

1. Literature facilitates the exploration of possibilities, opens readers to otherness, and thus brings complexity to philosophical reflection

Because fiction is free from the constraints of speculative discourse and empirical reality, it offers boundless potential for experimenting with the human condition and relationships. In terms of our personal and sensory experience of the world alone, our knowledge of reality is, by definition, very limited: we are born into a specific space and time, and we have only explored a fraction of all the possibilities of existence. Fiction creates endless possible worlds where the truths of the world are expressed. Therein lies its ability to illuminate, and its hermeneutic power. It infinitely expands representations of reality and human existence by transfiguring them.

For children, whose capacity for abstraction is still developing, fiction plays a critical mediating role and embodies ethical or existential issues that are rather unclear. The younger we are, the more limited our experience of the world; we only know what we experience in our family, neighbourhood, era and culture. Literature opens readers to otherness and to a multitude of possibilities. Even if they have never been in the same situation as Antigone or the young African in the famous French picturebook *Yakouba* by Thierry Dedieu (1994),³ for example, they can wonder what they would have done

³ This picturebook, which is constructed like a traditional African folktale, depicts a profound moral dilemma. To join the tribe of warriors (the noblest class in their society), the young men of the tribe must venture into the savannah, kill a lion, and thus publicly prove their courage. But young Yakouba only comes across a wounded dying lion, who presents him with a dilemma: should he kill it (to return to the village in glory and fulfil his dream) or spare its life (becoming honorable in his own eyes for this act of mercy, but being banished forever from the community of men)?

in that situation, make moral judgements about characters' decisions, reflect on what advice they would give to the hero as a best friend in order to help them resolve their dilemma, and thereby reveal an implicit worldview and value system (what is meant by a fair and good act, and by Justice, Duty, etc.). Stories offer children, in this great laboratory of the imagination, a plurality of human experiences that foster a more complex understanding of philosophical issues.

Children have no difficulty in comprehending the exemplary value of literature. They grasp very clearly that fiction refers to reality, that stories, however fantastical, relate to their experience of the world. A significant example of children's understanding of the referential function of literature occurred in a classroom of 10-year-old children at a school in Le Mans (France). The students were working on the concept of 'Growing up' (What does it mean to be a grown-up? When do we become grown up? What are the differences between 'growing up' and 'growing old'?). When I asked the students whether growing up is a good thing, the vast majority responded in unison that 'growing up is good because you can do whatever you want when you're grown up', but one student, Florian, timidly asked to speak and added complexity to the philosophical community's thinking:

Florian: There are also some people who don't want to grow up. Because ... Like Peter Pan—he doesn't want to grow up. Some people don't want to grow up because they say you take on too many responsibilities when you're grown up.

Florian spontaneously invoked the character of Peter Pan to introduce a new idea during the discussion. This universal representation of the fear of growing up allowed him to take collective thinking forward. The imaginary nature of the example does not diminish the value of the idea expressed. No one intervened at this point in the discussion to tell Florian, 'Your example is nonsense, Peter Pan doesn't exist.' On the contrary, other students endorsed this example and indeed acknowledged that it opened up a new aspect of the issue being discussed. The reference to this emblematic figure, who embodies a fundamental desire in the universal human condition, holds truth value. Florian seems to embrace the formula attributed to Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau that 'art is a lie that tells the truth.' Whatever the case may be, Ricœur's reflections on literature as an experience of truth find a remarkable resonance with

Which course of action will enable Yakouba to become a man? Literature syllabuses for students in 'Cycle 3' of the French education system (aged 9 to 12 years) encourage a philosophical exploration of the picturebook.

students' reliance on literary references to support their thinking in an accurate and coherent manner.

2. Literary references help to uphold the rigorous standards of philosophical thinking

Philosophy is not an informal discussion where different opinions and views are exchanged without rigour. On the contrary, it fights against relativism. The aim of these workshops is to develop critical thinking and lead students to think increasingly rigorously in order to achieve autonomy of judgement and clarity of thought. Teachers uphold this requirement, and their prompts during discussions should enable children to acquire these reasoning habits. Michel Tozzi, in his work following on in the Francophone world from the research carried out by Lipman and Sharp, has identified three main criteria characterising a discussion that can be termed philosophical (Tozzi 2001). The three key requirements are:

- Argumentation: in philosophy, we do not just state what we think (putting our beliefs, opinions, convictions on the table), we think about what we say (revealing the reasons behind our ideas). Therefore, the teacher should ask students to give examples, justify their position, demonstrate, and explain (Why do you think that?);
- Problematisation: raising the level of complexity (the issues, the implicit aspect, and the consequences) of a question or statement;
- Conceptualisation: attempting to define a concept, e.g. what we mean by Freedom, Love, Equality, Good/Evil, Truth, etc.

If we take Florian's response as an example, we can see that all three processes required in philosophy are present in his contribution: '*There are also some people who don't want to grow up*' (a problematisation process: it is not true that everyone wants to grow up. It's more complicated than that). '*Because ... Like Peter Pan, he doesn't want to grow up*' (he argues using a literary reference that has universality and therefore truth value). '*Some people don't want to grow up because they say that you take on too many responsibilities when you're grown up*' (he attributes a characteristic to the concept 'grown up': being grown up means having responsibilities).

In this instance, literature facilitates the philosophical rigour of the exchanges. This is not about claiming that literature enables children to philosophise better. For that, a comparative analysis of sessions with the same type of students on the same theme, with and without literary resources, would be required. But since no one ever steps in

the same river twice, the conclusions drawn from such a comparison would be quite speculative. However, we assert that literature is a particularly relevant resource, that literary works undoubtedly provide aids for the development of reflective thinking, allowing the subject to engage in questioning, problematisation (by serving as counterexamples), argumentation (through their exemplary value), and also offering opportunities to progress in the conceptualisation of the notion.

3. Literature establishes a healthy emotional distance between personal experience and the concept

Fiction effects an *epoché*, a suspension of reality, which allows it to become visible by setting it at a distance. It establishes a bridge between personal experience which, due to its intimate and affect-laden nature, inhibits detachment and analysis, and the concept which, at the other end of the spectrum, can hinder the personal involvement necessary for any philosophical initiation by its coldness. Narrative allows for a fruitful to-and-fro motion between the personal and the general, between the 'I' and the 'we.' Because great narratives are both close to our inner concerns and distant enough not to force us to confront them directly, they are a critical mediation for daring to think.

In the sessions conducted in all classes, I observed that students use what I have called the 'character's screen' to engage authentically in philosophical reflection: I do not speak of myself in the first person because I would never dare to expose myself so intimately in front of my classmates (and teachers) on such personal and profound subjects, but I 'use' the character from the story—Cosette, Robinson, Cyrano, Peter Pan, etc.—to think and authentically appropriate and publicly engage with major universal questions such as loneliness, love, fear of growing up, and the tragedy of the human condition. Thus, in a session on the topic of Love in a middle school class with 14 year old adolescents at Kennedy College in Allonnes (France), one of the students shifted arbitrarily (and unconsciously, as if by a slip of the tongue) from the character (in this instance, Cyrano de Bergerac⁴) to the first-person singular.

⁴ Cyrano, a famous character from the French literary pantheon, is a great poet, but he is insecure about his physical ugliness. He offers to help his rival, the handsome but dim-witted Christian, to seduce the beautiful Roxane (whom Cyrano himself claims to love) by ghostwriting letters and poems for him.

Lucas: Cyrano shouldn't write for Christian ... He's crazy. He loves Roxane and he's helping Christian. That's lame. I wouldn't let her go to someone else. It's stupid of him to do that.

Literary mediation therefore helps Lucas to express himself publicly on personal and profound subjects. This space for dialogue helps to build self-esteem because the student is recognised within and by the school community as a thinking individual, connected to the human condition, capable of speaking up and pondering these personal, delicate and complex questions. We could also revisit the example of Florian and Peter Pan and hypothesise that if Florian, as a young boy, is afraid of growing up, he may prefer to provide an example of a literary character rather than put himself at risk by revealing his personal anxieties in front of his classmates. The character becomes the *mask* of all our flaws, strengths, hopes, defeats, victories, weaknesses and greatness as mortal beings.

Literature can therefore facilitate the embodiment of an intellectual exercise that is still all too often perceived as impersonal and disconnected from real human concerns. We do not claim that practicing philosophy with children is only possible and legitimate by relying on literary resources—there are other approaches that stem primarily from students' personal experiences, topical events, or other cultural materials—but literature, by virtue of its symbolic and reflective nature, and its universality, facilitates, with sensitivity and beauty, the acquisition of critical thinking skills. It gives meaning to issues, while allowing for rigour of thought. Thus, imagination is indeed an immense laboratory for children where they can begin to contemplate their human condition and their relationship to others and the world.

4. Conclusion

We posit that the democratisation of philosophy education is a necessity in a world characterised by complexity and crises (such as crises of values, democratic crises, and economic crises). In this regard, we are aligned with the concerns of philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2011) in *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, in which a chapter is devoted to philosophy with children. According to Nussbaum, the global education system tends to sideline the humanities in favour of a dehumanised and purely technological approach to knowledge, thereby paving the way for a serious crisis of democracy:

Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty

for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance. (Nussbaum 2011, p. 10)

However, only literature, philosophy, history and the arts allow future citizens to develop their reasoning skills, sensitivity, critical faculties, and empathy simultaneously. The aim of this alliance between philosophy (with children) and literature (for young people) is not merely didactic but profoundly political, in the noblest sense of the term: to cultivate enlightened citizens, enlightened by the lights of fiction.

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