

The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew it Was None of His Business, by Werner Holzwarth and Wolf Erlbruch (Illustrator) Pavilion Books.

Ideas for Classroom use

By Sue Lyle

Questions, statements, evidence, assumptions, implications and consequences are important to reasoning. One way we can enhance children's reasoning capacities is to label and emphasise the vocabulary of reasoning and to label 'moves' that are made in a dialogue.

In the book, Mole asks **questions** to try and find out who did a poo on his head. He asks lots of animals if it is their poo or not. All of them make **statements** that it is not. They offer **evidence** to support their statements by showing that their poo is **different** from the one on Mole's head. In the end, some flies identify the poo on Mole's head as coming from a dog.

Mole then makes the **assumption** that the dog in question is Basil, the butcher's dog. The **consequences** are seen when Mole goes to Basil's kennel and does a poo on his head.

Activity

Present children with the following statements and conclusion:

- Statement 1: The poo on Mole's head is dog poo.
- Statement 2: Basil is a dog
- Conclusion: Basil did the poo on Mole's head.

Ask if there is anything wrong with either of the statements or the conclusion? Allow children to discuss in pairs and suggest answers.

Some of the following questions might be helpful depending on how the children respond.

Statement 1: The poo on Mole's head is dog poo.

- *How do we know statement 1 is true?*
Answer: The flies said it was dog poo.
- *Why would we believe the flies?*
The flies had no reason to lie that we know of. Flies are experts on poo. Should we always believe experts? Could they be wrong? Is it just their opinion, or do they have some expertise to back them up? Should we rely on experts?

Statement 2: Basil is a dog

- *Is this true?*
- *How do we know?*
An interesting one this. Try to find a definition on Google. It's very hard. This question will lead to discussions of physical characteristics (mammals, furry, carnivores, domestic pets) and behaviour (lick a lot, chase sticks, love to chew), traits (loyal, intelligent). Basically, we know enough about dogs to recognize one when we see it despite the enormous variations between one dog and another. We are able to recognise 'dogness'. We often have to say what a dog is *not* to get a good definition of a dog, e.g., it has many of the characteristics of a sheep, but it is not a sheep. In what ways are dogs the same as, similar to and different from other animals?

This is also a very good exercise to help children make **distinctions** between two similar but different concepts. The ability to make distinctions is an important aspect of reasoning.

Conclusion: Basil did the poo on Mole's head.

Ask the children: *Is this true? How do we know? What if it was another dog? Is the evidence of the expert flies enough?*

Assumptions

It is important to clarify assumptions. Ask the children:

- *What assumption did Mole make?*
- *Do people sometimes act on assumptions?*
- *Can you give examples?*

After the children have responded to these questions ask them: *What were the consequences of Mole believing that it was Basil?*

Mole thought: 'If this is a dog's poo, then it must be Basil's poo. Sometimes 'if-then' thinking is false and leads to **consequences** which could be serious.'

Were Mole's assumptions the cause of him doing what he did to Basil? What other causes might have contributed?

What can we learn from this?

Formulating a philosophical question

Having carried out this exercise, ask the children to come up with a question for enquiry arising from the story that can pass the 'stranger test'. This means it should be a question that anyone could talk about, even if they haven't heard the story of Mole and Basil. It should also be a question we can't find an answer for on Google.

I recently used this exercise with year 3 children and the question they wanted to discuss was, 'Is revenge silly?'

Summary

In this little discussion plan, we have seen how we can use some of the language of reasoning with children. We have thought about same/similar/different when thinking about how we know something is a dog. We have thought about statements, opinions, evidence, assumptions, consequences and causes.