

# Talking about Mole and Basil

Using a picture book to explore the concept of justice with children 8–13

Many schools are introducing Restorative Practices to deal with misbehaviour, rather than a tariff system of punishment. The focus is on finding a way, through negotiation, to put right the harm that has been done to others. A restorative approach involves thinking about fairness; it focuses on the victims who have suffered. Schools moving towards a restorative approach find children need help to understand the principles. Children are very ready to respond punitively to misdemeanours!

The activities included here have been used successfully with children from 8–13. By combining P4C with drama, teachers can help children understand – in an experiential way – the concepts that underpin restorative practices.

To use these activities you will need a copy of the picture book, *The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew it Was None of His Business*, by Werner Holzwarth and Wolf Erlbruch (Illustrator) Pavilion Books.

## Book Synopsis

*A terrible catastrophe befalls mole one morning. It looks a little like a sausage, and the worst thing is that it lands right on his head. Mole sets out to find who has left their 'business' on his head. He asks all the animals and eventually the flies tell him a dog is the culprit. Mole seeks and finds Basil the butcher's dog, climbs on to his kennel and 'pling – a tiny black sausage lands right on top of the dog's head'. Satisfied mole gets on with his day.*

## Read the beginning of the story

Begin by reading the beginning of the story to the children, enough for them to see how Mole is feeling when he wakes up to find a poo on his head. Ask them:

*What were you thinking about when you were listening to that story?*

## Drama: role walk

Next ask the children to imagine they are Mole: *What word would best describe how you think Mole is feeling when he finds the 'sausage' on his head?*

Give children time to think of a word and then ask them to form a circle, ask them to: *Walk around the circle thinking your word.*

Tap children, in turn, on the shoulder and ask them to say their word aloud.

Record all the words the children say and write them on the board.

This activity helps the children physically engage with the feelings of Mole at the beginning of the story. The following words came from a year 5/6 class: *angry, hurt, upset, humiliated, curious, shamed, sad, furious, embarrassed.*

### **Read on and individual reflection**

Ask the children to consider: *How was mole feeling at the end of the story? Think of a word.* Write your word down on a piece of paper – put it in front of you.

### **Discuss in pairs**

*How was mole feeling at the end of the story?*

Ask the children in turn to insert their word at the end of this sentence: *'Mole was right to feel...'* (go round circle and each child says their word). Record their words on the board

Having helped the children engage with the feelings of Mole, give children a chance to consider whether or not he should have acted on his feelings by doing the next activity with them.

### **Agree/disagree line**

Lay a skipping rope or something similar across the room. Read the following statement and ask children to stand on either side of the rope to indicate if they agree or disagree. If they are not sure they can stand on the rope.

*Mole should not have acted on his feelings.*

Ask children to explain their thinking – allow children to change their minds and cross the line if they are convinced by the reasons given by others.

### **Commentary**

In P4C we encourage children to either agree or disagree with each other and give reasons for their opinions. Encourage them to listen to each other and say, 'I agree /disagree with ... because...'; the 'because' is important; we need to give reasons for supporting or challenging the viewpoints of others. Contributions in P4C frequently revolve around agreement and disagreement, so we expect participants to listen and respond to the ideas of others. Encourage the children to consider which reasons they find the most compelling, but also help them to realise that they will not necessarily agree with each other – and that is fine.

So far, the children have had an opportunity to reflect on Mole's feelings at the beginning and end of the story and they've had a chance to think about whether or not Mole's behaviour can be justified. Now they are ready to explore the story in more depth.

### **Individual and paired reflection**

See the questions below. Ask the children to reflect, individually, on them for one or two minutes and then discuss them in pairs for three to five minutes.

- *'What if it wasn't Basil, the butcher's dog?'*
- *'What were the consequences of Mole thinking it was Basil without further thought?'*

Ask pairs of children to share their thoughts with the class.

#### *Commentary*

'What if?' is a very powerful teacher question, it promotes ongoing thoughtful conversation between the children. The question above will help children explore the idea that if Mole had thought further before acting, the outcome might have been different.

Asking children to consider the consequences of Mole rushing to the judgement that it the culprit was Basil the butcher's dog will prompt them to consider whether Mole has acted prematurely. It models stepping back and thinking about the wrong that has been done and provides an opportunity for critical thinking and reflection.

#### **Drama: Hot-seating**

After children have had a chance for individual reflection and discussion, ask them to work in small groups to devise questions for Mole. Ask for a volunteer to take on the role of Mole and ask the groups to take it in turns to ask 'Mole' their questions.

#### **Philosophical concept: fairness**

P4C practitioners are always looking for the philosophical concept embedded in any story chosen as a starting point for enquiry. Most children who have explored this story with me see that the concept of justice is at the heart of it. They are keen to consider what is a fair and unfair way to act.

Ask the children to reflect on the following question **individually** and then share their thoughts with a partner;

*Was it fair to 'poo' on the mole's head?*

As important aspect of fairness is the fact that what qualifies as fair is disputable. Contestability is at the heart of the philosophical concepts we consider in P4C. We refer to the 4Cs of P4C concepts: a concept must be **central** to our lives; **common** – everyone everywhere would be aware of the importance of the concept; it should be **connectable** to our own experience and be **contestable** – we are unlikely to agree a definition. These four aspects of a philosophical concept are very important. We want the children to get

the chance to explore the contestable aspects of this story. To facilitate this ask them to consider: *Would everyone agree that to poo on mole's head was unfair?*

Mole clearly thought it was unfair and he decided to act on his beliefs. *Did he have the right to decide how to respond and be both judge and jury?*

Who should decide whether or not the original offence – a poo on Mole's head – and his response – to poo on Basil's head – was just? Mole should not be allowed to rest easy with his decision. He felt himself entitled to take his revenge and we're told he feels 'satisfied'. We need to make him think about his response and be prepared to defend his decision and submit to questioning about it. It is not clear what would be fair in this situation, but to avoid unfairness we need to promote ongoing deliberation – a key purpose of P4C.

### **Drama: planning questions for hot-seating**

Put the class in small groups and give them time to come up with questions they would like to ask Mole now. Return to the hot-seating and get different volunteers to take on the role of Mole and 'answer' questions – get one children from each group to be 'Mole' and in turn they can take the hot-seat and field questions from one of the other groups. Then someone else can be 'mole' and another group can ask their questions.

### **What about Basil?**

We now turn to the accused wrongdoer in the story – Basil, the butcher's dog. Ask the children to reflect individually: *Do you think that Basil thinks he has done any harm?*

Ask them to share their thoughts with a partner.

This activity provides an opportunity for children to consider an alternative view – to consider what Basil's interpretation of the event might be. It will help them understand that the involved parties will always interpret any act that is considered unfair differently; it is not until we hear Basil's views that we can properly understand the situation.

Now it is time to put Basil in the hotseat. We can start with a re-statement of the wrongdoing: someone has pooped on Mole's head. We should put the charge to Basil – did you do it?

There are different possibilities here: 'Basil' may deny wrongdoing even when confronted with the evidence of a dog poo on the mole's head. Or he may admit to wrongdoing and plead guilty. Or he may say it was an accident, he didn't know he had done it.

Assuming he has done it, what punishment does Basil think he deserves for his wrongdoing? There are several possibilities:

- If he didn't do it deliberately he may request no punishment.

In this scenario children must consider Mole and the impact on him of the poo. We must also ensure Basil takes responsibility for the harm he did to Mole – whether he meant to do it or not.

- If he did do it deliberately, should the punishment be different?

In fact, Basil has already been punished because Mole took his own action. In restorative practices we want to promote greater thoughtfulness in children about their actions and responses. In order to do this you may like the children to consider one or more of the following questions in small groups or in a class enquiry:

- Why did mole seek revenge?
- Were mole and the dog both guilty?
- Could mole's action start a cycle of resentment and revenge between dog and mole?
- Could mole and dog ever be friends?
- Dog and mole are by nature different – does this make their differences irreconcilable?
- Is what mole did just?
- How can we be sure that justice is done?
- Should mole forgive Basil?
- Should Basil forgive mole?

### **Drama: using improvisation**

Ask the children to work in groups of four. Each will take on one of four roles: Mole, Basil and two flies. They should role-play the discussion between them and try to come to a satisfactory outcome. The role-play will help to orientate the children to the perspectives of both Mole and Basil and help them respond thoughtfully to the problem they are facing. The flies that identified the 'poo' as a dog's poo should aim to mediate between them.

Set up a role-play in the round – children sit on the floor in a circle. Ask for a volunteer group to move to the middle of the circle and perform their role-play for the class. After they have been given a chance to get into their role-play any one of the other children can move into the middle and tap any one of the characters (children) on the shoulder and swop places with them and continue with the role-play. Carry on swopping places until all children who want to have a go have had one.

### *Commentary*

It is through role-play that the children get an opportunity to connect with the views of

Mole and Basil and the flies as expert witnesses. They can explore 'what if...' scenarios that are important in P4C. They need to critically evaluate possible courses of action in order to decide how to act well.

### **P4C: Community of Enquiry**

The role-play will have enabled the children to explore what should or should not have happened between Mole and Basil. This is not aimed at discovering 'the truth', but to respect the individual perspectives of the two protagonists and see it from each of their points of view. That doesn't mean that one course of action is not better than another, the important thing in the role-play exercise is for children to seek out the assumptions of Mole and the consequences of his actions. In a philosophical dialogue participants always try to seek out assumptions and consider consequences. When children adopt these practices, they consider the roles of victim and wrongdoer and thought about how the harm done to Mole could have been dealt with. They therefore explore a restorative approach to the problem rather than a punitive one (the revenge of Mole).

Following these exercises it is important to conduct a community of enquiry because it is through enquiry that the children get the chance to put their own point of view rather than the view of the character they have been playing. They now get the chance to consider different courses of action in situations of conflict and explore reasons to support or oppose them. Teacher facilitation can help by asking, 'what assumptions are being made here?', 'what are the implications of thinking this?' Through enquiry, the children can exercise critical thinking and come to their own reasoned judgements.

### **Preparing for a Community of Enquiry**

Ask the children to work in pairs to formulate a philosophical question for enquiry inspired by the story and the work they have done. Sometimes they want to put forward a question they have already considered because they want to explore it further. In several classes I have worked with the children have wanted to further explore the question, 'What if it wasn't Basil, the butcher's dog?' I think this question resonates with their concern for fairness in the way they are treated in school and at home and the fear of being punished for something they haven't done and are therefore very pertinent to the children.

Once each pair has decided on a question, put them into groups of four and ask them to share their questions and choose the one they think will generate the best enquiry to put forward to the whole class for voting.

Ask each group of children to read their question choice to the class and say why they would like to discuss this further.

Conduct a secret vote (eyes closed hands up) giving each child two possible votes for different questions as you read each question aloud.

## **Conduct a community of enquiry into the chosen question.**

### *Teacher facilitation*

Consider how you can use procedural questioning to help the children think more deeply during the enquiry. Experienced P4C teachers know that contributions in an enquiry frequently revolve around agreement and disagreement so we expect participants to listen and to actively engage with each other's ideas. Teacher intervention can help this, ask them to clarify their ideas – 'can you explain what you mean by...'; ask them to make distinctions between closely related ideas – 'is what you said the same as or different to ...'; ask them whether or not they agree or disagree with each other's ideas – who disagrees with that? Encourage them to give examples to illustrate their ideas – can you give me an example of that? Does anyone have a counter-example? In modelling these procedural questions we are aiming for children to appropriate them and address them to each other.

The role-play should have helped the children learn how to be sceptical about the position held by Mole or Basil. In the enquiry, we expect them to arrive at their own positions about the best way to live together. The process of exchanging ideas and points of view will reveal different visions of the good life. I have often found that teachers are tempted to intervene and voice the 'moral' view, but this should be resisted. In P4C the teacher does not give their own views and makes no attempt to silence any views put forward in the community. Open-mindedness is valued; being prepared to change your mind in the face of a convincing argument is encouraged. In P4C, we want each child to find their own voice and be responsive to the voices of others. It is through such dialogue that the children discover who they are and what they want to be.

P4C gives each child scope to express their personal values whilst teaching them to honour each other's rights to hold different values. This is not a soft option. We hold children responsible for their own thinking; we expect them to examine their assumptions and consider the implications of holding their particular views.

It is essential that high levels of trust and empathy exist for children if they are to feel safe enough to put their own values and experiences forward for scrutiny. P4C at its best is a shared process of discovery and interpretation in which individuals continually adjust their position in light of what others have said and done. It provides children with life skills and promotes critical, collaborative, creative and caring thinking. It is an invaluable tool for all schools wishing to introduce restorative approaches to wrongdoing.