

## ***Who Am I? Why Am I Here? and Where Do I Come From? : Responding to Philosophical Picturebooks***

*This article gives a brief overview of reader response theory before sharing the views of some 9 year old children working collaboratively as part of a community of readers. Prior to responding to some philosophical picturebooks the children talked about what they thought philosophy was, they then shared their thoughts on some of the very questions of existence to include: Who am I? Why am I here? Where did I come from? and Where will I go to? Their initial thoughts and responses were followed by detailed reading, thinking and responding to one specific picturebook, Die Schopfung (The Creation) by FW Waechter.*

*Talking about picturebooks is good because when you talk you think and when you think you know what you are going to say.*

*Patrick 9 years*

Patrick is part of a community of reader responders, a group of six children who at the age of 9 are used to reading and thinking about books prior to responding to them in a variety of different ways. His voice is not a sole voice; reading is a social activity and his views and responses to any particular book are listened to and discussed amongst his reading group peers.

Patrick and his reader response group peers have been encouraged, over a period of time to see view talk as “exploratory” rather than “final draft” (Barnes, 1976). He knows that whatever he says will be listened to, accepted and discussed and that there is no right or wrong answer. Quality picturebooks provide opportunities for multiple interpretations and Patrick is an active reader involved in the process of meaning making. He is responding, alongside his peers, with the help of an enabling adult who encourages children to openly share their ideas.

### **Responding to texts: Text based v. reader based theories**

Reader Response Theory in its original form was used to describe the reader’s inevitable involvement in responding to and making sense of a text.

#### ***Text based theories***

When responding to texts, it is now widely accepted that the reader brings meaning to the text through all aspects of the reading process. It was however, only in the 1960’s and 70’s that a real focus on the role of the reader was established as a crucial part of the “*author - text - reader*” cycle. Prior to this, from the 1920’s to the 1960’s, literary criticism was dominated by an approach known as New Criticism, a formalist movement which ignored the author’s intention and the role of the reader and focused on close reading of the text in order to discover the one “correct” meaning to be found within. The New Critics saw the text as fixed, stable, and capable of objective investigation and excluded the author and the reader. As a form of textual analysis, “The text was considered a message, and the reader’s job was to decipher the message.” (Sipe, 2008:46).

#### ***Bridging the gap: Linking the opposing literary theories***

Many text based literary theories are not helpful when trying to help children make sense out of texts. In focusing on younger children’s responses Margaret Meek,

highly respected advocate of child centered learning and of children learning to read by reading, stressed the importance of the quality of the text itself in her highly influential, seminal text, *How Texts Teach what Readers Learn* (1988). This focus on the text is however, where the similarity to the New Critics ends.

In stating that good quality literature has the ability to “teach” children how to read, Meek (1983) proposed a socio cultural approach to using books with young children noting that the role of an expert reader is essential in helping emergent readers to read, respond to, and make sense of a text. In considering how this reading and responding takes place, Meek noted that successful readers learn to read because they become involved in what they read often sharing with friends and other people. She reinforces the link between *the author, the text, and the reader* in saying, “*To learn to read a book, as distinct from simply recognising the words on the page, a young reader has to become both the teller (picking up the author’s view and voice) and the told (the recipient of the story, the interpreter).*” Meek (1988:10). Clearly, although the text itself is doing much of the teaching, the author and the reader must also be in place for meaning to take place.

### ***Reader based theories: reader response***

We read in different ways, as different people, at different times in our life and many researchers have described how readers respond to texts. Some theories are better known than others but all reader-based theories emphasise, to a greater or lesser extent, the inextricable links between the author, the text and the reader.

Two of the most influential researchers are Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser. Rosenblatt, whose views were influenced by John Dewey, explored the relationship between the reader and the text and noted that; “*A novel or poem or play remains merely ink spots on paper until the reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols.*” (1938:25). She stated that it is the reader who brings background information, previous experience and a whole range of socio cultural issues to the text; these interact with the words to make them come alive. Rosenblatt called this type of interaction a “transaction” and the term “reader response theory” was used to describe these interactions between the reader and the text.

Moving forward with Rosenblatt’s ideas, Roland Barthes, in his influential article, “The Death of the Author” stated that the meaning of the text is in the reader and not in the author and “*the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.*” (Barthes, 1977:70). Once an author has written a text s/he must give it to the readers, as it is they who interpret the work in their own way depending on what they bring to the text. Many author /illustrators agree with this and when asked how people interpreted his picturebooks, Anthony Browne, creator of numerous award winning picturebooks and winner of the Hans Christian Andersen award for illustration in 2000, replied, “*Once a book is finished I have to let it go, like a child. What happens next is out of my control.*” (Browne, 1998:195)

Like Rosenblatt, who in her later work noted, “*The relation between reader and text is not linear. It is a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other.*” (1978 :16), Wolfgang Iser saw reading as an interaction between the text and the active reader. However, one different aspect of Iser’s work was the notion of an “implied” reader, also “indeterminacies” or “gaps” in

a text. No text can describe all details and authors frequently leave things unsaid - often deliberately in many picturebooks. Iser felt that it was a reader's job to fill these gaps and he stated, "*The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves.*" (1978:169). Jack Thompson, in working with teenage readers described these "gaps" as "spaces between sentences, chapters, events, details, characters, narrative viewpoints, textual perspectives and so on" (1987:123). Gaps get the reader thinking and pondering what the meaning might be; they draw the reader, as an active participant, into the meaning making progress process.

David McKee, creator of many hugely successful challenging picturebooks is an expert on the use of "gap" and most of his picturebooks employ this strategy. In his celebrated picturebook *Not Now Bernard* (1980) it is the gap that "makes the book" and readers have to close the gap to understand the text. Stephens and Watson (1994) in their research looking at how picturebooks can be used with older readers used *Not Now Bernard* for its use of "textual gap". They stated that to reach an understanding of a text it is essential that readers make inferences and that in addition to drawing on existing cultural and personal knowledge and experiences, readers "*also use such facts or knowledge in conjunction with their knowledge of how texts work to fill in the gaps or indeterminacies in a particular text.*" (1994:10)

In looking at the way readers respond to picturebooks Evans (1998) depicted the relationship between the author, the reader and the text (Figure 1).

*Figure 1* The relationship between the author, the reader and the text (Evans, 1998:xv)

### **Reader Response in the classroom**

In stating that the quality of the text was crucial Meek (1983,1988) provided many examples of children learning to read with and through texts. Other researchers writing about classroom based reader response considered different ways in which the reader responds to the text but the willingness of the child to respond to texts must never be underestimated. As Evans stated, "*The maturity shown by children as they read, think about and respond to challenging texts is often quite amazing; they can cope with and respond to both real life and picturebook problems in a manner that adults frequently have found almost unbelievable.*" (2015:7)

### ***The importance of the adult***

Reader response necessitates that the adult/educator allows the children to do the thinking, the talking, the shared communicating and the overall responding. In short it is the responding that moves our thoughts on after reading and thinking about a book. Children get better at responding to texts the more they do it hence, if a group of children has been involved in reader response throughout school they will feel at ease giving and sharing their views, and listening and responding to the views of others.

When children first begin to respond to texts, help from an expert reader is crucial. However, Sipe noted, the issue is, "*...not whether teachers should assist children in developing literary understanding, but rather how explicit that assistance should be.*" (2008:73)

Not all educators feel at ease doing reader response with children and allowing them "free rein" with their thoughts and responses however, as Haynes & Murriss state,

*“The role of the teacher is to assist children to take the enquiry wherever it may lead, while resisting the temptation to unnecessarily return to the text, or to turn to the ideas, scenes, of morals that the adult finds important.”* (2011:51). Conversely some educators are very expert at eliciting children’s responses and research shows that these responses can take a variety of different forms in addition to talk. These include: written responses (Hornsby and Wing Jan, 2001, Evans, 2001); drawings and illustrations (Anning and Ring, 2004; Arizpe and Styles, 2015); role-play, dance, drama, and Readers’ Theatre (Dixon et al, 1996). Readers also display non-verbal responses to include gestures, eye movements and touch (Mackey, 2002 and Styles and Noble, 2009).

### ***The importance of talk***

Responding to texts in differing ways is important but talk is the foremost mode of communication – the mode that supports all the other forms. In research looking at the importance of talk when responding to picturebooks, Evans stated, *“It isn’t enough to just read a book, one must talk about it as well.”* (2009:3). Evans went on to say, *“.. just reading the book itself is hardly ever enough! It is the shared oral responses and the ensuing discussions that allow fuller and maybe different understandings to take place.”* (2009:5).

In an attempt to elicit personal and honest responses to texts it is essential to ask open questions ... or maybe not to ask questions at all. Aidan Chambers (1993) says the way teachers encourage responses is crucial. In a desire to encourage open and personal responses Chambers advocated that closed questions should not be used; hence, “w” questions such as, “*why*”, “*what*”, “*who*”, “*when*”, and “*where*”, which imply that there is a particular “right” answer to be given, should be replaced by “tell me”, open type questions. Chambers suggested that children should also be asked what they liked and disliked about books and if there were things that puzzled them or patterns that made them make connections with other texts.

In agreement with Chambers and in order to move away from asking closed questions which would result in very narrow answers, Evans (2009) shared a series of “speculative ponderings” with the children ... letting them know that there weren’t any right or wrong answers – they were simply sharing our thoughts and ideas. These speculative ponderings took the form of “I wonder” type comments, such as, “*I wonder what this means..*” or “*I am really unsure how this could have happened ... have you any ideas?*” “Wonderings” such as these allow the children to feel at ease knowing there is no right or wrong answer in relation to what a text might mean.

In looking at children’s literary understanding of texts, Sipe identified five categories to include: analytical; intertextual; personal; transparent; and performative. He noted that, *“The children analysed the text; linked the text with other texts and cultural products; formed relationships between the text and their own lives; entered the world of the text and allowed it (momentarily) to become their world; and used the text as a platform for their own creativity.”*(2008:87). Sipe supported his theoretical research with examples of children’s responses making his research both accessible and applicable at the same time. Sipe was influenced by Judith Langer’s research (1990, 1995). Langer described the relationship between readers and texts as constantly changing as the authors, the texts and the readers change. Sipe was also

influenced by McGee (1992) who like Langer, considered the different types of talk used by children as they were discussing their responses to books.

Many other researchers have advocated ways of responding to books through talk: Eeds & Wells (1989) developed “grand conversations”; Short & Pierce (1990) conducted detailed research into literature circles, which was further developed by Harvey Daniels (1994). More recent research includes Pantaleo’s (2008) exploration of responses to picturebooks employing radical change characteristics, Evans’ (2015) work with challenging and controversial picturebooks, and Arizpe & Styles’ (2015) research into visual texts.

### **Philosophy, Teaching and Learning**

Philosophy is about thinking, reasoning and the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality. It has long been debated exactly what children should learn and how they should be taught. Finding consensus is not easy, however, the links between language and thought and between thinking and learning are inextricable; if children are encouraged to think and reason we can presume that some kind of learning will take place. In an article promoting the teaching of philosophical thinking in schools, Peter Worsley, CEO of “The Philosophy Foundation” commented, “*Philosophy isn’t just another subject – not just “an add on” but it deals with the very fundamental building blocks of all knowledge, namely reasoning and concepts.*” (2012:21).

In a consideration of the importance of encouraging philosophical thinking in children, the UNESCO publication, “*Philosophy: A School of Freedom*” (2007) poses the ethical question: is philosophical thinking desirable in children, or are they being “robbed of their childhood” and encouraged to think “too deeply, too soon”? Could it be psychologically dangerous to make them aware of life’s hardships, tragedies and horrors too soon? Philosophy equips children with invaluable thinking skills, allowing them to have a better understanding of their relationship with the world, with others and with themselves and in this same publication, UNESCO says, “*By developing the intellectual tools to analyse and understand key concepts such as justice, dignity and freedom, by building capacities for independent thought and judgement, by enhancing the critical skills to understand and question the world and its challenges, and by fostering reflection on values and principles, philosophy is a “school of freedom”.*” (2007)

### **Responding to Philosophical Picturebooks**

Many picturebooks deal with philosophical issues in both direct and indirect ways however, “*It is the way in which picturebooks are read, considered and discussed that often open up their potential for philosophical consideration and responses. This however, means that any picturebook being considered must provide a rich, complex playground for the discussion of philosophical thoughts and ideas hence, the quality of such books must be unquestionable.*” Evans (2012). Many quality picturebooks which engage, change, and provoke intense responses in readers, have the potential for philosophical responses. and as previously noted, good texts teach what readers learn (Meek, 1988)

In their book, “*Picturebooks, Pedagogy and Philosophy*” Haynes and Murriss (2011) view picturebooks as complex philosophical texts that can be used to promote philosophical enquiries. They suggest that, “*philosophy with children can be a natural*

*home for collaborative interrogation of texts and pictures because the discipline of philosophy is the art of critical questioning and complex, meta-cognitive thinking.” (2011:40). Writing on similar lines Costello (2012), also advocates the use of picturebooks as a way of promoting philosophical discussion about “big” issues.*

## **Linking Theory with practice: Reader Response in Action**

### ***Working with the children***

The children in the study attended a school with a mixed socio-economic catchment area in the northwest of England. All 30 children in the class were used to reading and responding to picturebooks as well as other types of literature; the children in the small group, all 9 years old, were chosen by the class teacher for their willingness to talk and share responses openly and without reservation. Working collaboratively as part of a community of learners over a period of four days, the children talked about what they thought philosophy was. They shared their thoughts on some of the very questions of existence to include: Who am I? Why am I here? Where did I come from? and Where will I go to? They were exposed to a text set of philosophical picturebooks prior to detailed reading, thinking and responding to *Die Schopfung (The Creation)* by F.W.Waechter (2002) translated from German to allow the children to read, think about and respond to the issues raised by the book.

### ***What is philosophy?***

Prior to discussion, the children wrote what they thought philosophy was. Their responses drew on their **personal** experiences as could be seen in Charlotte’s response where she linked philosophy with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (Rowling, 1997): (**Figure 2**)

#### **Figure 2** What is philosophy? Charlotte’s writing

*Philosophy is in Harry Potter. There is a philosopher’s stone. I think philosophy means that you think a lot. It is hard to explain what it means. A philosopher’s stone makes you brainy. You have to make your mind go blank. It is also about chatting and discussing what you have thought about. You can argue respectfully like in a debate.*

Edward admitted he did not know what philosophy was but his response showed his willingness to listen to his peers’ viewpoints.

*“I don’t have the slightest idea of what philosophy might be... it might be something to do with books. However, listening to other people’s ideas has taught me that philosophy is to do with when something puts you into a deep train of thought.”*

Emily’s response clearly showed a previous awareness of what philosophy might be, *“Philosophy is deep thinking about something, it is quite hard to explain but easy to understand. It is about sharing ideas and listening to other people. You explain what you feel and mean then you can argue respectfully like in a debate.”*

### ***Questioning our existence***

In their first group discussion after individual responses, the children mentioned that they had already been exposed to philosophy:

Megan: *“We talked about Philosophy for Children (P4C) with Mr. Nash, we used the book about a girl and a gorilla to talk about what happens in life.”*

Patrick: *“We used the book to talk about life.”*

Edward: *“If you are a philosopher you don’t always have to talk about life.”*

Megan: *“Doing a book is a way of making philosophy easier for us....to talk about the meaning of life.”*

These pre-book reading discussions showed that the children already had the idea that philosophy was about thinking, talking, asking questions, arguing and debating and that they were *“ready to play with the limits and boundaries of thought and language.”* Haynes & Murriss (2011:49). In accordance with UNESCO’s desire to promote philosophy as a “School of Freedom”, the children thought about and responded to four questions of existence:

1. *Who am I?*
2. *Why am I here?*
3. *Where did I come from?*
4. *Where will I go to?*

Prior to discussion they jotted down their personal responses which were wide-ranging and showed awareness and depth of thought. Patrick had clear but unanswered views (Figure 3)

**Figure 3** *Who am I? Patrick*

*I am a person, I am alive but who am I? It's very hard; there might not even be an answer. So the question remains, who am I? I am yet to know who I am.*

Edward’s response was particularly reflective:

*Why me? Why wasn’t I my best friend? Or my arch nemesis?*

*Why human? Why wasn’t I born a fox, or a crow, or a cow?*

*Why this family? Why was I born into my family and not next door’s?*

*These are questions that keep me thinking at night.*

*These questions will never have a matching answer.*

*These are questions, which for which people are frantically searching for an answer.*

*It is futile.*

*There is much I don’t know about myself.*

**Philosophical enquiry ... links with picturebooks**

To make links between the children’s thoughts and views, and those of author/illustrators, the children looked at a text set of picturebooks to include *Stormy Night* by Michele Lemieux (1999). This book introduces the reader to a little girl who finds it very difficult to sleep one particularly, stormy night. She attempts to find answers to some of life’s “big”, thought provoking issues, many of which question the very existence of life on earth for example: *Who am I?; Is there only one of me in the world?; Will I know when it is time to die?* The questions are left unanswered for the reader/viewer to think about and discuss.

After discussing Lemieux’s book, the children were invited to consider the next “big” question of existence, *Why am I here?* using Wolf Erlbruch’s picturebook, *The Big Question* as a stimulus. Erlbruch, Hans Christian Andersen Award winner for illustration in 2006, has written and illustrated many philosophical picturebooks, which encourage and invite, indeed almost force, young readers to respond in a variety of different ways. It is however, his Bologna Ragazzi award winning picturebook, *The Big Question* which provides a series of responses to the “big”

question, *Why am I here?* First published in France in 2003 as *La Grande Question*, this book is easily one of the quintessential philosophical picturebooks, dealing as it does with the seemingly simple question, *Why am I here?* This question could have been aimed at religious scholars to include Buddhists, Christians, Islamists or even existentialists. Instead, Erlbruch chose to ask the question of ordinary people, animals and even inanimate objects that children would know from their everyday life. The responses show that people see real reasons for their existence; reasons that bring humour, love, sometimes despair, but overall, meaning to life. (Figure 4 & 5)

**Figure 4** Cover of Wolf Erlbruch's *The Big Question*

**Figure 5** "Death says: *You are here to love life*" from Wolf Erlbruch's *The Big Question*

The children's responses showed their ability to think about and respond to the issues raised by Erlbruch's book and once again Edward was particularly thoughtful: *Why am I here? Why not on a star in space or on a piece of rock on Saturn's ring? Why am I English, not African, Cuban or Jamaican? Why do I live on my street and not on another one? Why?*

In thinking about "Where do I come from?" Edward continued, *I come from atoms. I have passed through several stars and several people. But apart from that I have no idea. Who was I before I was me? What stars did I pass through? I know I have passed through generations of Greens and Arrowsmiths.*

The children were particularly intrigued by the fourth question, discussing at length where they might go to when they died. Once again, Edward had an interesting response: *Where do I go to? How or what will I be next? Will I be a busy bee or a massive moose? Where will my soul go to? What will happen to my body? Will it be cremated, will it be buried? Will it be scattered?*

### **Responding to *The Creation (Die Schopfung)* by FW Waechter**

Having considered some of the basic questions of existence and responded to them in both class and group discussion prior to giving individual responses, the children were introduced to *Die Schopfung (The Creation)* by FK Waechter. (Figure 6)

**Figure 6** cover of *Die Schopfung (The Creation)* by FK Waechter. [to go here](#)

This is a picturebook of great quality, dealing with one of life's big "unknowns" in a very thought provoking, humorous and at times irreverent manner. At first glance this large size picturebook appears simple and child-like with dreamy, naïve illustrations executed in soft, earthy colours – pinks, browns, blues and sepia juxtaposed with the characters, depicted in a cartoon like style. All the ingredients needed to create the world are in place – chaotically - and need to be brought together to make a cohesive whole. However, the appearance of simplicity is deceptive; the German title, *Die Schopfung* has a double meaning – it is a play on words – meaning "to create" but also "to ladle" or "to scoop". This is reflected in the images and the storyline that Waechter has created, especially at the beginning of the book, where the first huge double page spread depicts a young girl in pigtails ladling some kind of liquid, we presume soup, into a wide, open soup bowl. (Figure 7)



### *Figure 7 Girl ladling liquid into bowl*

*Die Schopfung* is an ironic, somewhat mocking book, certainly in terms of religion. It shows and tells the bible's story of God's creation of the earth in an unorthodox, rather eccentric way. And yet, at the end of the book, FW Waechter leaves the reader in no doubt that this book *is* about the creation. After the first single recto page depicting the face of a boy-man character squeezing his face in anger, torment and frustration, we are shown a double page of chaos and the four words "Am Anfang war Tohuwabohu" (At the beginning there was chaos). This word from the bible – *tohuwabohu* – means chaos - it also means confusion, desert / empty.

#### ***Before reading - individual predictions***

Before reading the book the children looked at the front and back cover and predicted what they thought it might be about. Charlotte's prediction drew on the information to be gained from a book's cover: *I think the story will be about two people who meet up. The story is a love story. The man is really poor and the woman is rich and the man likes the rich woman. The swirly pattern is important because it means love. The man is having a bath in chocolate. He looks very sad. The woman looks like she has a very happy life. The man looks like he is having a very rubbish time. They get married and build a zoo and bring in lots of animals.*

Initially there is absolutely nothing but two seemingly unrelated characters and chaos, so boy-man wees and makes the sea. Then he farts and makes the wind. Then he poos and makes the earth/land. Finally, he picks up a piece of earth and creates a female likeness of himself. He proceeds to breathe life into "it" and "it" comes alive becoming female. "She" is beautiful. Hand in hand boy and girl see the world in all its glory. Boy wonders how it can have gone from nothingness and chaos to such beauty and as girl whispers the answers to boy they kiss and fall in love. Adam and Eve have been created in the likeness of God!

Questions proliferated. How can God be female? Who was boy-man related to? How was the "created" girl at the end able to explain to boy-man how all the air, sea and land creatures were created? It would seem that Waechter controversially portrayed God as female in the huge, first double page spread (the children spotted this link). Female God then created boy-man, the central character, and used him as her ambassador to create a likeness of herself in the form of the girl human, thereby connecting female God on the first double page, with the "created" girl human being at the end.

Megan summed this up: *The girl at the front provided the bowl of soup and the man ate it and then poo-ed the soup out to make the continents. If she hadn't put the bowl there he couldn't have made his own world. I think she is God – a girl God.*

#### ***After reading - whole class responses***

Much discussion followed the whole class book reading. Many comments were made and rhetorical questions asked. It was remarkable to see how after just one read, the children had picked up the gist of the story and were already responding to its meaning. It was even more remarkable to listen to the depth of understanding shown in the children's responses, which showed their readiness to listen and react to their peers. It also showed an awareness of God and who s/he might be, leading to the

statement concerning Adam and Eve, tentatively proffered almost as a solution to the whole creation story.

- *What's he standing in?*
- *The kid's in the middle of creating the world.*
- *He's making things that aren't chaos – he's making the world.*
- *Is he the Creator?*
- *The kid is God, God as a kid.*
- *If he's God, that links to the creation bit.*
  
- *He deliberately trumped/farted to make wind.*
- *The wind is blowing the chaos away.*
- *He's made sea from wee.*
- *Is the sea still wee or has the wee changed into sea?*
- *How did he know it was called the sea?*
- *If he is God maybe he knows the name of things.*
- *If he is God, who made him?*
  
- *He's made the girl, something like him but different – still human – something he can relate to.*
- *When he breathed life into the girl, he breathed life into the whole world.*
- *When he made the girl the background colours got brighter, it's going happier and the chaos is disappearing.*
- *He's gone brighter and he's happier now. He was unhappy before.*
- *She is Eve. He's made Eve.*
- *They are Adam and Eve at the end, they talk and then snog (kiss).*
- *Mr. Waechter must think that is really how the earth was made.*

### **Summarizing the story and empathizing with the characters**

After reading the book the children reconsidered their initial predictions and summarised the story. Their written summaries were detailed and precise and included their reasons for liking or disliking the book Charlotte injected a touch of humour:

*After reading The Creation I found that the story is about a boy who lives in a world full of chaos and soup. The boy eats the soup so there is nothing left in the world except chaos. The boy does a big wee into the bowl and it becomes sea so now there is chaos and sea. The boy looks at his reflection in the sea and his reflection says "keep going!" So the boy farts and the farts become wind. So now there is chaos, wind and the sea. The boy then has a big poo and creates the continents like Africa and Australia. Then the boy gets a big piece of earth and creates a girl (he doesn't know it is a girl) just like him. The boy becomes happier so then he realises that there are more things in life than chaos and soup. He breathes life into her and they go under the sea and they see all the fish. Then they go and see the rest of the earth. Lots of unusual things are on the earth. The boy asks the girl, "How is that possible? Just before everything was formless and empty?" The girl answered, "Shall I tell you?" "Yes, tell me." The girl tells the boy, "Kiss me now." The boy pulls the hat over their heads and they snog each other for ages and ages.*

Charlotte went on to say: *I like the book because it was humorous, especially the parts with the big wee and the farting and the big poop and the kissing. It was rude and wasn't suitable for children under 8 or 9 years old but I enjoyed this book a lot.*

Whilst discussing the story the children focused on the boy-man character and tried to empathise with how he might initially have felt. Their responses showed they were more than capable of empathizing with boy-man and the way he might have felt. Emily commented, *He looks like he's tired, sad and lonely with something in his eye. He's distressed, wiping tears away because he is stuck in chaos and no wants to talk to him and he can only eat soup. Maybe the soup is chaos.* Whilst Charlotte said, *He's having a bad workday, his work is wee-ing, trump-ing and poo-ing so his work is creating the earth.*

They “stepped into his shoes” and asked, “Who am I?” as if they were him. Charlotte drew the boy-man and wrote some of his thoughts from his point of view (Figure 8&9

*Figure 8 Who am I? Stepping into boy-man's shoes* Charlotte's image

*Figure 9 Who am I? Some of boy-man's thoughts* Charlotte's writing

### **Thoughts, considerations and conclusions**

Using *Die Schopfung* as a stimulus to promote philosophical responses to life and existence shows how very powerful picturebooks can be; they can stimulate rich discussion and release previously untapped thoughts and emotions allowing the reader to reflect on life and its vagaries (Evans, 2011). The children were grappling with “big” issues as they read differently and questioned the text (Paul, 1998).

*Die Schopfung* allowed them to respond to issues emanating from the text but, using a philosophical approach also allowed certain questions to be asked, questions which create enquiries that can be both intellectually liberating as well as emotionally disruptive. The children's philosophical responses showed they were thinking about their own existence and where they came from, they were able to:

- think about and respond to a particular visual text
  - summarise the book orally, in written format, and in drawings
  - empathise with the characters
  - philosophise about “big” questions in life, in particular where they came from and how the world came to be
  - work collaboratively as part of a community of learners offering and sharing points of view
- and finally:
- to really enjoy reading and responding to an amusing and yet thought-provoking picturebook

Doing reader response with children is not an isolated, intellectual exercise, it entails a strong commitment to reflective thinking whereby children and their teachers may experience bewilderment, inquisitiveness and a spirit of enquiry on the road to learning.

(5860 words)

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