

Philosophers in the making

Another amazing day with my third graders, full of lovely surprises. We discussed rights.

We started with a comprehension lesson. We read a story set in Tudor times. It was about a little boy with a lame leg whose dream was to work on a famous ship with a wealthy captain, so that he could help his widowed mother and his many siblings. At last, he gets a chance to go on board and leaves with the ship without having had a chance to let his mother know.

To begin with, the kids were thrown by some of the words in the story and said they understood nothing. There were only about a dozen unknown words, but the kids were put off. After some dictionary work we went through the story together, discussing it a paragraph at a time. Suddenly, they couldn't stop talking about the story: what they thought of the characters, disabled people's rights and the way able-bodied people treat the disabled, how the boy's mother would feel when one of her children didn't return home, how their own mothers would feel if they didn't...

During Ethics we talked more about rights. I begin by asking whether jellyfish have the right to stand up, a pig the right to vote, a man the right to give birth. The majority say 'Yes', but Jamie says 'No'. She explains that a jellyfish can't stand up, a pig can't think or talk or hold a pen to vote, and men don't have the right stomach to have a baby in. 'So,' I ask, 'if someone cannot do something does that mean they don't have the right to do it?' 'Yes' she replies.

'OK,' I say, 'now some group work. You know, in some societies couples are allowed to have only one child. Because of this some couples want to stop pregnancies when the mother carries a female baby in her belly because they want a boy.' (I try using 'foetus' instead of talking tendentiously of 'the unborn baby', but the kids don't take to it and revert to talking 'the 'baby in its mummy's tummy'. I don't push it, for now.)

There is sharp intake of breath from the class, but it's more surprise than shock. I ask what they think about this. The parents obviously feel they have the right to choose the sex of their baby. But doesn't the unborn baby have the right to be born? Whose right is stronger? I break the class up into groups and let them discuss the topic. I leave the class for a few minutes and wait outside the door. All I hear is the sound of eager voices.

I re-enter the room and ask them to tell me what they think. They all say that the unborn baby's right is the important one. One of my students shares their personal story. She says that her dad wanted a boy but he ended up with three girls. 'But he never thought of stopping us from coming to life!' she says. We spend some time discussing this.

They are doing well - so well that I decide to challenge a little more. 'But,' I say, 'the unborn child cannot think, cannot decide whether it wants to come to life, cannot express its right to life, so why should it have such a right? Earlier, Jamie said that if someone is not able to claim a right then they don't have it. You all agreed with that. So what's different now? Perhaps the unborn child doesn't have a right to life and so the parents should be free to choose whether or not to stop the pregnancy.' (I consider returning to the point about whether it's right to call a foetus a 'baby', but they don't seem ready for this and I don't want to interrupt the flow of the discussion. I decide to leave it for a separate discussion with some facts about development.)

'Yes,' another student says, 'but the jellyfish could never stand up, and the pig would never be able to vote or the man be able to give birth. But the unborn child will one day be able to choose for itself if it is not stopped from developing in a normal way. And no one has the right to stop it. That's the difference.'

'OK,' I say, 'but now imagine the pregnant mother receives some very bad news. She is told that she has a very serious disease and that being pregnant is making her even more seriously ill. She needs to stop the pregnancy and take some very strong medicine if she is to survive.' The kids gasp again, and spontaneously break up into groups to discuss this scenario. Again, I leave them to talk for a few minutes.

Now they have all decided that the mother should not be allowed to terminate the pregnancy, since if she is so ill she will die anyway. The child would be able to live with its father and have a full and happy life. As one of the class is the child of a single parent father I don't push it, but I admire their consistency and readiness to bite the bullet.

'OK,' I go on, 'now imagine that this is a mother of four other very young children. This mother has no relatives and no partner. What about that?' Again, there is a gasp. They still think that this baby has the right to be born, and they suggest that, if the mother doesn't make it, the newborn baby and its siblings could all go to the same orphanage. I'm tempted to push them further and start talking about the mother's rights, but I decide to leave this for another session. They are getting tired now.

One thing that struck me about the session was that the children seemed clear in the minds that parents (and, I guess, other adults that attend to them, including teachers) are only there for the kids' sake. Do they just see us as means to their ends? Do kids naturally think like that, or are they brought up to believe it? Did I think of my parents like that when I was seven? (I can't really remember, but I don't think I did.) It's an interesting question.

During Discovery of the World we talk more about the Tudors and watch some Horrible Histories videos. We discuss how people were different back then, how the times seemed more cruel, and how people dressed, looked, and behaved differently. A student said that if they Tudor people saw us today they would think we were ugly, poor, and not educated. 'Perhaps rights were different back then,' someone says. 'Did Tudor people ask whether unborn babies had the right to birth?'

These were some of the thoughts of my third graders. I was proud of them. What impressed me was how well they engaged with this difficult topic, and how maturely and seriously they discussed it. A great start, I think, for children so young.