

Philosophy for Children: Epistemology (Knowledge, Truth, Beliefs)

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Total Time: 30 minutes Ages: 4-5

Materials:

The book “Horton Hears A Who!” by Dr. Seuss

Goal: To encourage students to think about how they develop beliefs, how they justify these beliefs, and how they try to show others that what they believe is true. Students are encouraged to appreciate the difficulties involved in trying to prove beliefs to other people and how these struggles indicate something fundamentally limited about our acquisition of knowledge.

Activity – Students will be asked to stand up (agree) or remain sitting (disagree) for certain yes or no questions during each section, e.g. “If you agree that... then please stand up; if you don’t agree that... then please stay sitting.” This will give us a chance to ask students why they have certain positions.

Part I – Horton develops a belief (10 minutes)

- Read first third of the book (page marked)
- Pause to ask students questions about the reading:
 - How does Horton know that a voice means there is a person on the speck?
 - Why doesn’t the kangaroo believe Horton that there are people on the speck?
 - How does Horton try to convince the kangaroo that there are people on the speck?

Part II – Horton acts on his belief (10 minutes)

- Read second third of the book (page marked)
- Pause to ask students questions about the reading:
 - Why do the Wickersham brothers (monkeys) believe Horton is foolish?
 - Why do the animals hide the speck of dust from Horton so he can’t find it?
 - If Horton can’t find his friends, will that prove that his belief is not true?
 - If Horton can’t find his friends, do his friends not exist anymore?

Part III – Horton proves his belief (10 minutes)

- Read last third of the book (page marked)
- End by asking the students questions about the reading:
 - Why do the animals try to cage Horton?
 - When you know something, how do you prove it to someone else? Do you have to prove to know it’s true?
 - Just because you think you know something, does that mean everyone else has to agree? How do you know if somebody knows what you know?