

## Philosophy, Pedagogy and Personal Identity: Listening to the Teachers in P4C

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### INTRODUCTION

Philosophy for Children (P4C) has enabled schools to engage with what is typically thought of as an ‘academic’ discipline and has provided the opportunity to unlock a rich educational experience for children from a diverse range of backgrounds (Madrid, 2008; Topping and Trickey, 2007; Douglas, 2003). A wide range of qualitative and quantitative studies have emerged looking at P4C in terms of the development of students at the social, academic and emotional level (Topping and Trickey, 2004; Hand and Winstanley, 2009; Lane and Lane, 1986; Williams, 1993; Trickey, 2006; Lone, 2001; Reed, 1987; Murphy et al., 2009). However, while there have been many P4C papers that have ‘teacher’ in the title, these are often about teacher training – including ‘hints and tips’ (e.g. Lipman, 1987; Marie-France, 1988; Popen, 1996; Burgh and O’Brien, 2002; Johnson and Pines, 1979) and curriculum development (e.g. Malanga, 1988; Weinstein, 1986; Cam, 2006; Stan, 1996; Wilks, 1993). Relatively few studies have looked at the effect of teaching P4C on teachers themselves (notable among these are Splitter, 2000a and 2000b; Yeazell, 1979). This paper considers how P4C affects teachers, in particular whether teaching P4C has led teachers to develop new pedagogical approaches, different ways of thinking critically and whether it has changed how they engage with their students, colleagues and their school.

The paper centred on a case study of one group of teachers at a large primary academy in the UK that has been delivering P4C for the last two years at all levels from Reception through to Year 6. The school is situated in an economically deprived coastal area of the UK. Nearly two thirds of students at the school are eligible for the Pupil Premium, a key indicator of economic deprivation, which is significantly above the national average. The number of students with a statement of special educational needs and the number of students for whom English is not their first language are both above average.

Students in the school have a weekly P4C class that lasts for 45 minutes and is structured around a particular stimulus that the teacher locates for each lesson. The senior leadership team has been particularly supportive of this approach and consequently all staff members have received Level 1 training from the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education, an organisation that aims to promote P4C in the UK. The authors of this paper completed three in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of staff from the school: the Vice Principal, the P4C curriculum leader and a class teacher, all three of whom taught regular P4C sessions for an entire academic year. The three participants volunteered to take part as they all had particular interests in P4C. Each interview lasted for around thirty minutes and a series of common questions were put to the interviewees, with particular areas explored with supplementary questions where appropriate. The interviews were then transcribed and themes drawn out by each of the interviewers, coding the scripts independently and then comparing their notes. Four key themes were identified and they form the structure for this paper, being the link between P4C and approaches to teaching; approaches to students; links within the professional community and approaches to the purposes of education.

As a case study the generalisability of the conclusions is limited, offering only an investigation into how the teachers in this particular setting experienced teaching P4C. However, aspects of transferability can be drawn out through ‘particularisation’ as the conclusions of the case study are compared with the findings of broader research (Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2010).

### **P4C and Approaches to Teaching**

In the interviews the teachers conceived of P4C as an ‘approach’ to teaching, rather than a particular subject to be taught. They saw the purpose of teaching P4C as ‘moulding’ and ‘modelling’ a ‘mindset’ in students. These are very involved and active ways of describing teaching. This was notably seen in one comment that ‘Philosophy is more of an approach. It is training them in a different mindset’. The teachers were clear that the ‘mind-set’ that they were trying to ‘mould’ and ‘model’ involved ‘independence’ in the students – the ability to think for oneself: ‘I’ve learnt that ... in P4C they do it all ... I’ve learnt that if you take a step back and you let the children they almost teach themselves ... rather than me at the front saying “do this”, “do that”.’ This is not too surprising as the research on P4C regularly alludes to the importance of promoting independence, deep thinking and reflectiveness in the students (Lipman, 1987; Cam, 2006).

Perhaps more surprising is how the teachers articulated what seemed to be a direct relationship between the teachers’ own cultivation of philosophical skills in themselves and their ability to create independence in the students. One respondent claimed ‘delivering P4C ... is about developing independence within the staff themselves’, and another that ‘I know for myself, it has made me much more reflective, and think about my questioning skills, and how I can question the children differently’. P4C has helped, in the words of one of the teachers, ‘tune-up’ their own questioning and thinking skills. Teaching P4C develops a reflectivity and independence in teachers, and it is this that seems to set P4C apart from other subjects in the curriculum. This ties in with the conclusions of Lipman et al. (1980) who argue that to teach P4C the teacher ought to become sensitive to philosophical speculation. Likewise, it is supported by qualitative and quantitative studies on ‘modelling’ (for example Yeazell, 1979; Burgh and O’Brien, 2002). Philosophy is more than just a subject and perhaps its ‘signature pedagogy’ is to engage students in a way of thinking – a pedagogy that requires more of an embodiment of the meta-cognitive skills as part of teaching (Chick et al., 2009).

Another theme was that teachers of P4C talked about having to learn again how to ‘feel comfortable’ in the classroom, particularly with letting the children ‘just talk’ and about starting a lesson with no set plans or ‘correct answers’. For example: ‘you have to be more confident in letting things run their course ... it took a little while for teachers to be comfortable teaching it. Because you are encouraged not to force the children to speak – there can be children who sit back and rarely say anything’. This different approach meant that the teachers were more aware of how they were perceived by colleagues, parents and governors. Again, this notion finds wider corroboration in the literature, with Reed (1987: 83) claiming:

The teacher in a Philosophy for Children discussion ... must, to some extent, be ignorant about what is being discussed. There must be something which is really problematic for her, she must be as much of a student and scholar as her students. In a public school classroom, however, the ignorance which is prized in Philosophy for Children is denigrated there.

Although these features of P4C were lauded as positive, the interviewees also recognised that the freedom of students to explore ideas openly – to follow the inquiry where

it leads – depends on the teachers’ management of a rigorous process of inquiry. ‘[P4C sessions are] those sessions – how can I put this without sounding lazy ... it is the sort of thing that you can do off the top of your head. So you don’t sit down and really, really plan it’. Another stated that ‘I need to do some observations to make sure it is done properly. That it hasn’t become wishy washy ... no planning just, you know, just stick something on from a YouTube video and see what the kids say’. Thus, while the P4C teacher should maintain ignorance and curiosity about the outcome of the inquiry, at the same time she or he must exercise expertise in the method of philosophical inquiry. As Wilks (1993) has noted, this approach precludes a certain kind of planning in which every step of the experience is controlled, there is a greater reliance on the philosophical professionalism of the P4C facilitator in order for the students’ inquiries to be rigorous, engaging, productive and meaningful. Indeed, there may well be a hidden effect here. In light of evidence (such as Gordon, 1984) that the attitudes of teachers effect student achievement, the way in which P4C is approached by the teacher themselves may well have a disproportionately significant impact on outcomes. Given that P4C requires a different type of planning as compared to other subjects, schools must ensure that accountability remains rigorous, using methods that are more appropriate than simply checking plans, such as regular learning walks.

Given the nature of the group we interviewed – self-selecting staff interested in P4C – it was no surprise that this professionalism was evident. This was seen in the comment of the respondent who noted:

For me [P4C] is something I need to look into [before the lessons] because [if you don’t] that could be why the children aren’t so, you know, engaged with it. And I think that might be a generalised thing around the school [amongst other teachers teaching P4C]. It is not like maths when you have to have the resources there. There is no school theme ... it is literally what you want to do.

This also shows why professional development in P4C is vital. As one interviewee commented: ‘I think [P4C] could be seen as the easy option. But we had really good training on it ... It is essential to have training; otherwise it just becomes circle time’. Not only is good initial training vital, but these interviews made clear that the opportunity for P4C teachers to share resources, collaborate, and take continued professional development were equally important.

Another fascinating idea that emerged was the potential role of P4C in creating ‘outstanding’ teachers. The interviewees cited P4C as an approach that could act as a ‘bridge’ assisting a teacher to move from ‘good’ to ‘outstanding’.

You can force someone to be a good teacher. You can take [anyone] and tell them do this and do that ... but getting them to outstanding is a whole different thing. P4C can be used as a pedagogical bridge to get staff to take that leap in their practice from good – which is simply something about what you do – a tick box.

This sentiment was supported by another respondent, who noted that:

Teachers who are teaching with this whole idea of critical thinking and problem solving are our outstanding teachers who, if the lesson is not going well, will introduce something completely left of field and bring that in. Not on the plan, not anywhere near the plan, but actually that is what they need. And they do that because of their experiences and because they are critical thinkers and because they are not ‘tick box’ teachers. But because they are thinkers – they are I guess philosophers.

Given the training that teachers have undertaken and the nature of their work it is likely that most will have some natural 'philosophical ability', which training in P4C can refresh or develop. It could be argued that one of the unintended consequences of teaching P4C is that teachers' own will to become yet more philosophical can also be strengthened in this process.

### **P4C and Approaches to Students**

There was a general consensus amongst the teachers that in contrast to other subjects, P4C was 'fairer' to the students, in two ways: it enabled students to use and demonstrate to teachers and peers a wider range of abilities and personality traits than are typically called on in the classroom, and it enabled students who struggle with certain academic skills to demonstrate their intelligence and thoughtfulness. Interviewees attributed both aspects of 'fairness' to the fact that P4C is based around discussion. Importantly, in order to discuss you do not need great writing skills, reading skills, or great grammar but rather, you need the time and space to consider deep questions, the give-and-take of being questioned and listened to by teachers and peers, and the confidence to share your insights openly and to self-correct as you pursue a line of inquiry. This is seen in the work of Murphy et al. (2009) who argue that P4C is one of the strongest discussion programmes that exist.

Philosophical discussion allowed teachers to discover different aspects of students' personalities and abilities, with respondents noting that they were able to see students exhibit 'different skills they did not know they had' or 'values and principles that showed me they were really thinking about things'. On the other hand, as one teacher made clear, one of the most important things a P4C teacher may discover about students is not something new, but evidence of intelligence and ability the teacher had rightly suspected:

It hasn't changed how capable I think the kids are because I always thought they were capable. It confirmed my beliefs about them ... Because it is a talking subject it doesn't leave out children who can't write or aren't very good at maths. It can include everyone.

It was also noted that 'Because P4C doesn't involve writing, it shows better everyone's potential'. This said, it would present particular issues for students who struggled to speak in a group. Although targeted support could go a long way to engage these students, a consequence of this means that it could be argued that it is not quite the case that discussion levels the field for everyone, but that it changes the field so that some students who struggle in other ways have a chance to excel.

### **P4C and the Professional Community**

An interesting feature of the interviews conducted with staff was the number of occasions participants referred to themselves as 'sharing', 'testing ideas with colleagues' or 'asking [each other] for advice'. Teaching is by its nature a social activity and in all subjects at all levels teachers will be working within a community (Bolam et al., 2005). The nature of P4C, however, seemed to open up more the idea of collaboration. When these issues were probed in the interviews, the interviewees said that this was because they were teaching a new subject, meaning that everyone was in the same position, so there was not the usual pressure of appearing to know what was going on. The fact that P4C moves away from simplistic concepts of correct and incorrect answers was also seen as a factor in encouraging colleagues to share ideas without being afraid of how their ideas would be received. Understanding this, our teachers were eager to ask for, and share ideas about how to practice

this artful pedagogy. Perhaps most significant, though, was that space was set aside to promote collaboration. Interviewees noted that senior leaders felt that P4C would only succeed if people shared their ideas and experiences with colleagues. As such, they went out of their way to do this.

It was also noted that the P4C approach has an 'egalitarian' feel about it. Teachers and TAs worked together, sharing experiences and ideas. As they were trained together there was a sense that a traditional school hierarchy did not function in the same way within this group, and that P4C sat outside the traditional scope of teaching activities. For example, one comment made was that 'It has been quite liberating teaching P4C. I've said to TAs working for me "if there is any question you want to ask, any stimulus you want to use. Just go for it"'. Consequently, with the P4C model there was a sense that there was more opportunity for involvement from those who were not teachers. The interviewees noted that in redefining the scope of a professional community, new ideas and approaches were brought to the table. Therefore, both the approach of P4C and the inclusive training that this particular school adopted meant that the professional community became cohesive and mutually self-supporting. This collaborative way of working together was seen as a particularly positive impact of P4C at the school.

A positive impact noted by our teachers, and related to our observations on P4C, was that their involvement with P4C had prompted teachers at this school to use this approach in other areas of their teaching. Consequently it was felt by the interviewees that they had made significant advances as professionals since delivering P4C as they had cultivated questioning, reasoning, meta-cognition and other philosophical skills, had learnt more from their colleagues and had a chance to have their own views and experiences celebrated. The comments are in line with work on professional learning communities, where the focused collaboration of professionals is viewed as being one of the most important ingredients to bringing about authentic change in a school (Bolam et al., 2005; Louis and Marks, 1998; Stoll et al., 2006).

### **P4C and Approaches to the Purpose of Education**

On a more fundamental level, the comments from the interviewees revealed that their experience of P4C had forced them to look more broadly at their own approach to education. In the first place, they noted that teaching P4C made them reassess their views about what it was they were actually trying to do when teaching and what they were seeking to engender in their students. In many ways the skills / knowledge debate appears outdated in higher education, with most practitioners holding the view that university level learning is not simply about knowing facts (Harvey, 2000; Knight and Yorke, 2003). However, this debate continues in schools. In recent years, the work of Hirsch (2006) has led to a 'core knowledge' movement, which has stipulated exactly the things that students at different age groups should know. In the UK this has led certain academy chains to unashamedly adopt a more traditional pedagogical approach that focuses on rote learning and memory skills (Christodoulou, 2014).

In contrast, all three of our interviewees noted that P4C requires very little knowledge of things, but a great deal of understanding, high level thinking, and skill in managing an inquiry so that it will go somewhere. As one respondent noted, 'it is a completely different approach to teaching'. When discussing P4C all three spoke about the transferable nature of the qualities it built, such as 'in the outside world we have to act on our own initiative. And if we don't do this, kids won't have this ability'. This point was not drawn out through careful interviewing technique. Rather, the interviewees recognised the

significance of their comments, as expressed by one: 'it has changed my mind about what education is. It shouldn't just be about the knowledge curriculum'.

This changed view of the purposes of education locates P4C teachers in a broader social and academic debate about the ideological and political ramifications of P4C (for a good overview see Gregory, 2011). In particular this has concerned the impact of P4C on the child. For example, a parent may worry, if 'everything' is being questioned in P4C then what about their child's faith in God? Similarly, educators who see themselves as agents of 'the state' may worry about losing absolute control of what is talked about in the classroom, or the judgments students make about philosophical issues (Ghazinejad and Ruitenberg, 2014). The staff we interviewed were aware of how their P4C practice related to some of these social and political controversies in education. Interestingly, our interviewees said P4C has given them a reason to contribute their new insights about education to these debates.

In recent years P4C has gained popularity amongst schools in the UK and visibility in the media, and has a growing amount of empirical evidence supporting its positive benefits. Our interviewees were also aware of these developments, and remarked on how these developments gave them a license to defend P4C and the purposes of education it points to, without seeming to belong to a particular political camp. Teachers often find themselves in a position where they must resist pressure from educational stakeholders with particular agendas (such as 'The campaign for real education' <http://www.cre.org.uk>), or must make a case to governors, or create a bid for funding. In such cases, our interviewees noted, a political language and expertise is not required, so long as they can speak intelligently about P4C's approaches to teaching, students, educational professionalism and the purposes of education. In a very real sense then, P4C has been liberating for these teachers and senior leaders. It has allowed them to advocate a particular outlook on the politics of teaching and education without being painted in a certain political light and without therefore being silenced before they have said anything.

## CONCLUSION

In our discussion and reflection on the experiences of staff involved with P4C a number of themes emerged. P4C affected approaches to teaching. Staff had initially considered the teaching of P4C as a distinct discipline, but in doing so had become more reflective about the nature of teaching in general. The critical spirit that teaching P4C required could not be made up but had to derive from the teacher's own reflexivity and independence of thought. This meant that there emerged the idea that there was a proportionate relationship between the teacher's own philosophical ability and their ability to teach P4C. This was directly linked to the perceived requirement for good quality teacher preparation in P4C and ongoing professional development. Moreover, this needed to take place within a robust professional community where ideas can be tested and shared, and where teachers can ask one another for advice. Such training, accountability and transparency is the best way to prevent a potential 'laziness' which P4C may enable.

P4C was discussed against the backdrop of a more general reflection on the nature of education; teaching something 'different' like P4C meant that teachers were prompted to ask 'why do I teach in the way that I do?'. This in turn meant that they were starting to think through, and position themselves in relation to, certain political and ideological debates – such as the knowledge / skills debate. Finally it was suggested that P4C might be a useful 'bridge' in facilitating the development of skills and professional dialogue that would help a teacher move from 'good' to 'outstanding'.

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