Is There More Future Than Past?

Using Philosophy for Children (P4C) as a Key Tool in School Improvement

SIM KHERA-LYE (P4C CONSULTANT AT BOW SCHOOL), CATH SMITH (EXECUTIVE HEAD TEACHER, BOW SCHOOL) AND JOHN O'SHEA (SENIOR DEPUTY HEAD TEACHER, BOW SCHOOL)

In this article we will introduce Bow School, giving you the social and educational context of this large inner-city secondary school. We will then explain the pedagogy of Philosophy for Children and an overview of how it has been practiced since its inception by Mathew Lipman. We will explore the link between Philosophy for Children and the development of language and consider the impact on our students. Finally, we will share practical examples of how it has been implemented and embedded within our setting.

Bow School is a rapidly expanding and improving secondary school (11–18-year-olds) in the East End of London. Over the past five years, the school has been exploring innovative ways to improve the outcomes for students and, in researching effective teaching tools, has decided to run a Philosophy for Children programme within the curriculum for our younger students (11–13-year-olds).

Once we heard about the Philosophy for Children (P4C) programme, we decided to find a way to implement it in the school. Whilst a number of local primary schools were already working with P4C and noting its significant impact on the development of language, few secondary schools had adopted P4C – probably a reflection of the huge demands on the secondary curriculum from other more traditional subjects and the high accountability framework of schools in England these days.

With a huge diversity within the school and a high level of English being spoken as a second or even third language, we knew that not only did we need to truly focus on developing key skills with the youngsters to support them in articulating their ideas, we also had an exciting cultural diversity that would bring a richness to any debate. P4C gives our young people a structure and framework within which to explore ideas, express views and opinions and ask those questions that might otherwise remain unasked. At a time when we in education wrestle with the ideas of extremism and post-Brexit values, the skill of asking the right questions and arguing what you believe is an important one to have. Not only do young people in our English schools have to achieve year-on-year improvements in national exams taken at age 16, before students go on to college or follow vocational qualifications, and at age 18, when students go on to university or enter the world of work. They also need to be prepared for an increasingly complex and perplexing world of terror, changing politics and long-term uncertainty.

Background to P4C

Philosophy for Children is a method of teaching which is long in history and deep in pedagogy, building on the work of philosophers and educationalists. Although it has been practiced in many schools in the United Kingdom (UK) since the

1990s, it was originally conceived by Professor Mathew Lipman in the USA. Lipman worked at the University of Columbia in the 1960s, teaching undergraduate philosophy students, where he was surprised at their lack of ability to philosophise for themselves. What started as a programme to support the development of critical thinking and reasoning skills in his students resulted in a process which children as young as three and four years can take part in.

Over the last four decades, Lipman and his colleagues have developed the original idea of developing philosophical enquiry in children and young adults into a process which has become known as P4C and implemented in schools around the world, from Western countries to China and Brunei.

The entire process is student-led, with the teacher facilitating the enquiry by asking questions which develop critical thinking and push students towards deeper philosophical thinking.

The procedure of Philosophy for Children

In the UK, teachers are trained in the P4C process by the educational charity SAPERE. The process of a P4C enquiry involves a number of stages, all of which develop language skills and, ultimately, literacy. In the first stage students are presented with a stimulus, which may be a picture book, short story, film clip or object. In fact, almost anything can be used as a stimulus, just as long as it can stimulate student thinking. Students then discuss philosophical concepts, or 'big ideas', eventually choosing one or two concepts to focus on. Working in small groups or pairs, the students create a philosophical question about the concepts, which is put to a group vote. One question is chosen for the enquiry, with students evaluating their caring, critical, collaborative and creative thinking skills at the end.

The entire process is student-led, with the teacher facilitating the enquiry by asking questions which develop critical thinking and push students towards deeper philosophical thinking. The facilitator can support students by summarising what has been said and asking who agrees or disagrees with the point. They might play devil's advocate, by challenging the point that has been made, and the Community of Enquiry could consolidate the viewpoint by searching for stronger evidence or change their position. The facilitator should challenge assumptions, perhaps asking if a point is 'always true, sometimes true or never true'. The Community of Enquiry will be encouraged to explore concepts by constructing definitions, for example 'friendship', comparing concepts such as 'alone' and 'loneliness', and search for the examples of the concept in action that conflict, such as the positive and negative aspects of selfishness. As the enquiry involves, the question may change shape, as underlying assumptions are exposed and different questions emerge. The enquiry ends with each person sharing their final thoughts about the question, with some students feeling they have reached a conclusion and others recognising that the question needs further thought and discussion. The Community of Enquiry also evaluates how well they have developed their Caring, Collborative, Creative and Critical thinking skills, setting goals for the next session.

Learning and language

The link between learning and language plays an incredibly important role within the educational context of the East End of London, a melting pot of cultures living cheek by jowl in one of the poorest wards in the UK. Many students start school with little or no English, while others have no English speakers within their families. Many of our English-heritage children come from families where there are very weak literacy skills. Some students join school at secondary level completely illiterate in their mother tongue. It is no wonder that P4C is one of the educational techniques which have taken hold in a number of primary and secondary schools. P4C supports the development of thinking, which in turn supports learning and language development. Within a P4C enquiry the EAL student is able to listen to others articulating their

thoughts and then show their own learning by sharing their own thoughts. It is a completely immersive environment, where the language they are learning is being used all around them by students to discuss the concepts and questions. Schools use language to assess learning.

We should be encouraging children to think philosophically about the things which they are curious about, as this in turn will develop the foundation skills of reasoning, reading and language.

In *Philosophy Goes to School* Lipman (1988) proposes that the development of reasoning, language and reading in young children is supported by the development of thinking skills. Therefore, we should be encouraging children to think philosophically about the things which they are curious about, as this in turn will develop the foundation skills of reasoning, reading and language. This would also hold true for an EAL (English as an additional language) student of any age. P4C can become the tool that supports young people in developing their thinking and language skills, which in turn develops their learning. Lipman suggests that conversation is the natural mode of communication for a child, an essential precursor to reading and writing, and it should be established in the early years. At this stage education should also prioritise meaning over grammar and begin at the child's level, linking experience to literature in order to stimulate thinking. Again, this is true for an EAL student of any age.

Exploring the ambiguity of language

Ann Margaret Sharp and Lawrence Splitter (1995) in *Common, Central and Contestable* suggest that it is useful for learners to explore common philosophical concepts such as 'good', because they are not only common and central but also contestable and problematic. Lipman also believes that we should explore the ambiguity of language with children, such as the use of the term 'good', as well as helping them to make better use of familiar words, such as 'if', 'but', and 'all'. We too believe that exploring the ambiguity of common wordsis essential to the development of thinking skills and reasoning in children. Even in 'conversational' discussions learners can appreciate how a term such as 'good' can provoke many philosophical questions.

When participating in a P4C enquiry students may wonder why it is that we do not simply refer to a dictionary when we are defining concepts in a Community of Enquiry. Their understanding may be that concepts, and language, have certain and objective definitions, which we should/could simply look up in a dictionary. Wittgenstein's (1958) proposition that words do not have definite meanings and, consequently, language is a tool humans have invented that is continually modified, gives us good grounds to steer clear of this rigid understanding in a Community of Enquiry. It is the consensus of the group's ideas that gives a word definition. It is important that each Community of Enquiry works together to come to a working definition of a term such as 'freedom', a definition that contains the experiences and beliefs of everyone within the community and is not imposed by a dictionary, which could never take into account the nuances in the perceptions of the individuals concerned. The process of arriving at a working definition can be a demonstration of critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinking.

Philosophy for Children is a political activity

It is hard to see Philosophy for Children as anything other than a political activity, as the choices we make as teachers are not value neutral. The choice to follow a P4C programme, whether made by the teacher or the school, is itself a political choice that reflects the values of the institution or individual. The UK is a liberal democracy, and the P4C classroom reflects this (Gregory 2014). Within a Community of Enquiry students are encouraged to think for themselves, to challenge assumptions and to reflect on the beliefs of others. In particular, the question-making and question-choosing activities are democratic processes

in themselves. A liberal democracy values free-thinking citizens, and P4C *can* support students in becoming autonomous individuals who are able to exercise their own moral judgment.

Perhaps our aim in P4C should be to develop young people into being 'reasonable' human beings, as opposed to individuals who make their own choices about what is moral. A young person who is 'reasonable' could reflect on, and even challenge, predominant beliefs if they were 'unreasonable'. In the article 'On Becoming Reasonable' Pritchard (1995) explores the meaning of the term 'reasonableness' and its link to P4C. He believes that reasonableness links moral values and critical thinking, which should be at the heart of what schools are aiming to develop in young people. As a society, in Pritchard's view, we want our children to grow into reasonable adults, and this is a capacity we can improve through P4C. Pritchard does not equate reasonableness with rationality, although he does view reasonableness as incorporating rationality, because it is about supporting beliefs and actions with reasons.

Students who usually struggle to engage with written or highly structured activities were often leading this enquiry and introducing new ideas and examples.

Teaching P4C at Bow School

We have deliberately placed P4C firmly within the curriculum plans for English and Humanities. We did not want it to be a 'stand-alone' activity in a busy secondary school curriculum. We wanted our young people to see it as a tool through which they could explore ideas and thoughts that had a link to their study programmes as well as, at times, to key current affairs. We have been rewarded by a dramatic improvement in the literacy levels, for example the number of Year 7 students making expected progress in their English assessments has increased each year, based on their data from primary school. In the year before introducing P4C, 66% of students made expected progress and this figure is now over 85%.

A recent P4C enquiry with Year 7 students, who are aged 11–12 years and in their first year of secondary school, explored the question 'Can you love someone that you don't trust?'. Students had listened to the song *Where is the Love* by the Black Eyed Peas and generated a list of concepts. Working in small groups, students then decided which concepts they were most interested in before creating a philosophical question that would be put to the class vote. This question led to an extremely wide-ranging and deeply philosophical enquiry. Students who usually struggle to engage with written or highly structured activities were often leading this enquiry and introducing new ideas and examples. Students considered the meanings of trust and love before examining evidence that supported one side or the other, with an emphasis on working collaboratively to answer the question. Some of the arguments the students suggested and evaluated were, Does a parent have to love their child regardless of what they do? Is love meaningless without trust? Can you trust without love? In what situations might you find yourself loving someone who you don't trust? Is love ever really unconditional? Can you truly love someone, even if you say you love them, if you don't trust them?

Our P4C transition partnership with three local feeder primary schools has enabled us to work closely with the teachers in those schools, allowing young people to participate in mixed-age enquiries and enabling staff from all schools to learn from each other. The close links with the primary schools have ensured a smooth transition from one phase of education to another, both in terms of the ways in which the young people have quickly settled into secondary school and in the curriculum continuity and understanding between the two phases. The teachers in the primary schools and those at Bow are now talking to each other and sharing good practice to the benefit of the young people and their learning journeys. When introducing P4C it is important to remember that there is a hugely important cycle of planning, reflection and evaluation which both the facilitator and the students (as a community of enquiry) take part in. The facilitator should review and reflect on each

session, evaluating student progress in developing thinking skills as well as their own progress as a facilitator. For example, a Community of Enquiry may reflect that they need to develop their creative thinking skills by searching for a wider range of examples, and the facilitator could then plan a warm-up activity that asks students to search for examples as well as planning specific questions, such as 'Can you give an example to back up that point? Can anyone think of an alternative example to back up this point? Can anyone think of a counter-example which proves that this point isn't always true?'.

P4C staff training and ongoing professional development are now established elements of our annual calendar of training, and we see its continued presence in our curriculum as a key component in the growth and ongoing improvement of the school.

It is a delight to be in a school where children are posing questions such as:

- Who decides what is good and bad?
- If you had a different name would you be a different person?
- Is keeping a secret the same as telling a lie?
- Is there more future than past?
- Can courage be bad for you?

We are, through the P4C programme, shaping the deep thinkers of the future and hope that many of them will be instrumental in shaping the futures of the population of this country in years to come!

References

Gregory, M. (2014). *Philosophical Inquiry, Democracy and Education.* Keynote presentation at Winchester P4C Advanced Seminar.

Lipman, M. (1988). *Philosophy Goes to School*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Pritchard, M.S. (1995). On becoming reasonable. *Critical and Creative Thinking, 3*(2).

Splitter, L., & Sharp, A.M. (1995). *Teaching for Better Thinking*. Melbourne: ACER.

Wittgenstein, L. (1958). *Philosophical Investigations.* Oxford: Blackwell.