Premier’s Early Childhood Education Council Early Childhood Scholarship

Investigating Introducing Philosophy in NSW Early Childhood Centres

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What I’d Been Thinking About

My scholarship was to research, observe and evaluate the best practices of philosophy in the early childhood environments with a view to introducing the practice of philosophical inquiry to early childhood teachers in New South Wales.

So, just what is philosophical inquiry, and why introduce it to Early Childhood (EC) teachers.

Philosophy for children (P4C) has been widely practiced in primary schools for more than 60 years and within Australia for 25 years. P4C is not a subject, but a practice of nurturing and developing critical thinking in children through dialogue conducted within a community of inquiry (COI). It involves exploring abstract concepts and is supported by practicing using a number of explicit thinking skills such as:

* + listening and talking
  + questioning
  + giving reasons
  + examining hypothetical scenarios
  + making choices
  + reasoning
  + making suggestions
  + testing criteria
  + making distinctions
  + agreeing and disagreeing to a proposition
  + using examples and counter examples to support a premise
  + reflection
  + self correction.

Extensive research over the past two decades has consistently demonstrated remarkable results both academically and socially where young children have been exposed to philosophy.

My experience in a Sydney primary school as the dedicated philosophy teacher for all students from K–6 supports this research. However, I noted comments from early stage one teachers and my own observations with those students that class teachers had to spend a considerable amount of time developing social and thinking skills before they could commence their more formal work. These were such basic skills as:

* + taking turns within a group
  + listening (as opposed to hearing) to other students and the ability comment on ideas other students’ ideas
  + being able to generate substantial questions from stories
  + reflecting and commenting on other students’ ideas or ideas within a text
  + giving reasons that were more substantial than ‘because it’s my favourite’
  + being able to agree or disagree with respect and giving reasons
  + being able to present ideas to the group with confidence.

It seemed that many of these skills that form part of P4C practice could be introduced earlier, and I set out to find examples of that and to find what obstacles there might be to introducing this practice into early childhood centres in New South Wales.

Many of the skills listed are embedded throughout the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), yet these skills and the ability for children to have a shared dialogue were not apparent to my professional colleagues or to me when children started school. What was the missing link between the expectations of the EYLF and what is practiced in the centres?

Prior to commencing this scholarship I was invited to a half-day observation in an inner Sydney early years school where critical thinking and questioning were part of the program. The teacher read a story to a group of eight 4-year-olds and I documented the conversation after a story had been read:

T: I liked that story, did you?

C: (various one word group responses)

T: (to the group) I noticed in the story that (describes part of the story).   
Did you notice anything?

C: The kangaroo was naughty.

T: I agree. The kangaroo shouldn’t do that.

T: Can you see this bird? (pointing to the picture)

C: Yes I can see a bird in a tree.

T: (no response)

T: I hope you can all sit still while I tell you what we are going to do now.

C: (two children at the back of the class playing up)

T: I will be sad if you don’t sit still. See how clever Adrian is sitting still.

C: (No responses)

T: Okay, let’s go over and see the great painting Anya did yesterday.

I noted how passive the children were. It was not clear what the purpose and the value was of reading this particular story and how the story might be connected to the day’s activities. I wondered why the teacher felt the need to lead the conversation and what she thought and perceived as her role. What I observed that day mirrored what I had seen with many early starters at school.

What I Wanted to Research

I have been a P4C teacher working with Kindergarten and Year One children one period a week for the past five years. I believed what I had been practicing with these five and six year olds could be introduced in the early childhood environment.

My experience as a P4C teacher trainer showed there was no lack of interest or intent by teachers to develop critical thinking in students, the why, but that there was a lack of the how.

So I set out to investigate both good practices of P4C in the early years and to examine teacher-training programs that could support early years teachers in developing a pedagogy that encourages critical and creative thinking in young children.

What I Planned To Do

I visited schools and early childhood centres in Oslo, Stockholm, London, Norwich and Wales. In all of those schools I observed P4C practitioners with children three to five years old.

I noted the following dialogue with four-year-olds in Oslo which is useful to compare with the dialogue given previously. A group of eight children aged around four years were going to have their lunch, and the P4C teacher saw both the opportunity for a dialogue. As lunch was being distributed this conversation began:

C: Hmmm .… this looks good so it must taste good.

T: Can something look good and not taste good?

C: No. Everything looks bad if I’ve not tasted it, but when I know   
what it tastes like then it looks good.

T: Is there a difference between food that looks good and food that looks bad?

C: Yes. Something might look good but taste bad.

T: Can you give me an example?

C: Well, the food the Sami people eat looks bad, like blood pancakes,   
but they taste good. I saw that in a video.

In this dialogue the P4C teacher responded with an open-ended question asking children to make a choice, then asked for a distinction and then for an example. This is an example of a trained P4C teacher using her skills to deepen and develop the children’s thinking, and this type of conversation continued through throughout the day.

I observed an different but equally successful method of doing P4C in a nursery school in Norwich. Sara Stanley pioneered a storytelling curriculum for the early years that has evolved into Philosophical Play. Sara’s work is based on 25 years of listening to children. She has scribed hundreds of conversations overheard when children play and noted the philosophic world that children live in.

Preschool children use abstract concepts naturally from the time they have language. I noted the following conversation around play equipment in Norwich that supports that observation:

* + it’s my turn (fairness)
  + you’re not my friend any more (friendship)
  + not now (time)
  + no that toy is mine (ownership)
  + you’re the baddy and i’ll be the goodie (good/bad)
  + you’re not sharing (sharing)
  + don’t scream at me. that’s not what friend do (friendship)
  + the fairy is here but she’s invisible (proof)
  + that’s going to be impossible (possibilities)
  + the dragon is going to get you back (revenge)
  + only girls can play this game (gender)

From observations such as this, Sara developed sets of concept cards children could use to identify philosophic concepts within their own and others’ stories. She then created a method that connects the children’s imagination and love of story into a philosophical inquiry. Sara Stanley’s method, detailed in her two publications (Stanley, 2004; 2012), is replicable. Full details of my visit with Sara are on my blog post [A Universe of Learning](https://kinderphilosophy.wordpress.com/2015/06/11/a-universe-of-learning/)

Reflecting on those practices, I investigated how we might implement this in New South Wales.

* + I talked at length with expert curriculum advisers and trainers and particularly, Dr. Sue Lyle in Wales and Dr. Beate Borensen in Norway.
  + I met with the leading non-profit training institution SAPERE in Oxford to view their training programs for both in-service and pre-service teachers.
  + I examined the preschool programs in Oslo and Norway noting the absence of any formal curriculum or testing until a child is seven.
  + I attended a number of workshops at two conferences on P4C, in Vancouver and Seattle. The standout sessions were:
  + Dr. Kieran Egan, who was promoting the LID program (Learning in Depth) in which children up to the end of primary school build their own curriculum around a passion/interest
  + Dr. Susan Gardner regarding her paper, ‘Philosophy with children is no mere conversation’
  + Dr. Jonathan Kozal, who reminded us that the big questions are already there in the hearts of our children and the care we must take care not to squash their enthusiasm
  + Dr. Sara Goering on the dangers of making assumptions when listening to children.

What I Learnt

While observing classroom practice and talking with teachers, my focus was to look for the best practices of critical, creative and caring inquiry within a collaborative environment that could be adapted to and adopted in New South Wales. Looking beyond the prism of my own bias, I saw over and over again that the three Rs that were the dominant and critical keys to change are relationships, respect and reflection.

*Relationships*

A number of significant relationships are present within the early childhood environment, including the centre and the family, the teacher and the child and the teacher and the family. But my research focused on what went on within the preschool day, noting three significant relationships: child to child, child to teacher and teacher to child.

In the traditional centres, the dominant relationship is the teacher-to-child relationship. The child sees the teacher as the authority figure, the knower of all and the person in charge. It may be subtle, but it is evident in language used to the child. ‘I don’t think that is a good thing to do.’ ‘You will make me disappointed.’ ‘I think we should do this now.’

P4C focuses on the child-to-child relationship as the most significant. Within that world of childhood children learn from each other, observing and gathering skills to understand not just the me but also the we. They do this by working collaboratively, whether in the sandpit or in a structured chat (COI).

The teacher’s ego is not part of the P4C world. In P4C, the teacher’s role is not one of authority figure or playmate. Rather it is to listen to the dialogue and be ready to extend and respond, not just by keeping the conversation going, but also by employing meaningful and strategic moves to deepen the children’s thinking.

While many sweet words are spoken about listening to and nurturing children’s conversations, including helping children to build resilience, but that is not the aim of P4C. P4C aims to develop in children the self-confidence and self-esteem to express what they think, to have that considered by others, and to listen and comment on what others think. P4C is not a talkfest but a successful methodology for engaging children in skilled social and intellectual dialogue done within the rigor of the COI. My observations demonstrated clearly that children as young as three can participate in this practice.

Children who engage in philosophic dialogue have been observed to be highly engaged within their community. In Stockholm, Suzanne Axelsson noted that at first her three-year-old class initially engaged in a focused chat for about five minutes, but that increased to 25 minutes daily. The reason was obvious. The children’s interests, questions and stories were the stimulus for discussions. I also observed that with Sara Stanley in Norwich with three to four year olds. Sara generates the stories by observing the children in philosophical play and then retells their stories to the group, which in turn generates more questions and conversations. Nothing was imposed, like naughty kangaroos; everything generated from andby the children. Eliciting questions is at the heart of critical inquiry and P4C practice.

*Respect*

There is much talk about developing respect for others as a quality for children to acquire. But have the right to be respected by the teacher. As adults, we need to respect that we are entering the world of the child. We need to respect the child’s right to speak, to make decisions, to think in a certain way and to express their feelings. Within P4C practice, children gain back their power within the environment of the inquiry. A child can and is encouraged to have an opposing view with another (child or teacher) and can respectfully voice a disagreement if it is supported by reason.

*Reflection*

When referring to reflection, the focus is often on the child. But what I gained in this trip was the value of time for the teachers to reflect on the big questions relating to their teaching practice; the concept of the child; the notions of childism and adultism; the role of the teacher in the child’s environment, and assumptions made about child development and actions committed based on theses unexamined perceptions.

What I Now Think

This scholarship provoked me to adjust my thinking conceptually, within practice and within training.

*A conceptual adjustment:*

This journey provoked me to question the role of the preschool centre and the power relationship between the individual child, the children as a group and the teacher. It made me reflect on the top-down power structure and the impact of that particularly in reference to respect for the child. It provided me with a conceptual underpinning for why I believed P4C using a collaborative form of inquiry returns respect back to the child.

To implement P4C will require a paradigm shift for some teachers as they surrender their power and authority and replace it with a less formal facilitation role. It supported my thinking that P4C in the early years is not just a possibility, but a need, for; it is the evidence that we as teachers are listening and respecting children and their conversations.

*A practice adjustment:*

My observations in the UK, Norway and Sweden provided evidence that children as young as two can think abstractly and can engage in philosophical dialogue on abstract concepts: good and bad, right and wrong, bravery and fear, friendship, fairness, justice and rights. Such concepts are deeply embedded within children’s stories and are clearly understood by them. Their play reflects their understanding of these abstract concepts.

Although many programs aim to develop oracy, promote shared thinking and nurture confidence, P4C with its long track record provides a well-trodden path to not just the why we should do it but the howwe can do it. Both the theory and the practice of philosophical inquiry with children are well documented with well-researched academic articles, well-resourced handbooks by practitioners and well-designed pre-service and in-service courses for teachers. A skilled P4C facilitator in a nursery school and an untrained teacher are poles apart.

In the UK I was presented with convincing arguments on how introducing P4C into teacher training can be an effective tool to bring change to the binary conception of adult/child and ultimately to classroom practice. Observations have shown that there is great value in EC centres dedicating a time each day for thinking – a practice in which teachers deliberately offer children an opportunity for collaborative conversation, problem-solving exercises and extended dialogues.

In Sara Stanley’s words: ‘You do not have to be a ‘super teacher’ to do P4C – Philosophy for children. You only have to be prepared to value what children have to say, to respect the questions they ask and to provide them with the opportunities to develop their thinking.’

*A training adjustment:*

P4C offers teachers an opportunity to discover new dimensions within their programs and a new lease of life within their practice.

Visiting preschools both prior and subsequent to this trip and observing students in kindergarten classes in primary schools suggest that EC teachers have not been exposed to the how of critical thinking. P4C is more than just ‘keeping the ball in the air’ and extending conversations with questions from the teacher. Rather it provides teachers with the explicit skills to nurture and extend the conversations that are initiated by the children andto develop explicit activities that model and develop those skills.

Suzanne Axelsson in Stockholm reiterated what I had heard from both Maaike in Oslo and Sara Stanley in Norwich.

*Philosophy is not difficult for young children and need not be difficult for teachers if they are open minded and ready to approach a discussion from child-up rather than adult-down, if they are skilled in asking open-ended questions and if they recognise a philosophy session is not ‘just talk’ but has a clear structure and purpose.*

P4C could be offered as a module in pre-service training to provide EC teachers with the additional skills needed to nurture critical dialogue within their centres. That would develop teachers’ ability to nurture open-ended questions and to provide opportunities for children to think about their thinking. In turn, teachers would discover new dimensions to their practice. For those teachers already trained, a model exists here in New South Wales that provides a two-day course for teachers to become philosophy teachers within their classrooms.

Conclusion

My scholarship helped me to understand the power of P4C to create learning communities that are always emergent, experimental spaces in which a multiplicity of possibilities for thinking and doing coexist (Davies, 2013). In the practices I observed, I found children who were excited by thinking, whose teachers did not think that learning outcomes should be decided in advance, who valued dialogue with children and were able to engage with the children in ways that opened up the capacity for thought so children could contribute to the community of inquiry. Those teachers were open to the child and to the not-yet-known and were willing to be affected by them.

My scholarship gave me new insight into P4C as an ethical practice that has at its heart the desire to listen to children and to make meaning with them, leaving behind developmental psychology’s preconceptions of what children are capable of. The P4C teacher needs to value each child’s thoughts and their emergent differences by showing respect for each child as an active meaning maker who has much to teach us. The teacher who is committed to listening and is open to the children facilitates creative thinking and builds relationships through the growth of a community of philosophical inquiry.

My scholarship has disrupted many of the taken-for-granted understandings of how children develop that weredrawn from research in developmental psychology. Instead, I now understand that children are full human beings who inhabit and create fully meaningful worlds for themselves and who have thoughts and theories that are worth listening to. Teachers who respect the integrity of the child’s world have a different perspective: the child as a being, not a becoming. By listening to children we can improve our understanding of them and accord to them their participatory right to be consulted and heard in matters affecting them as rights-bearing citizens.

Full details of this scholarship trip are available on my [blog](http://www.kinderphilosophy.wordpress.com).

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