

Philosophy for Children

Philosophy for Children (commonly abbreviated P4C) was the name its co-founder, Professor Matthew Lipman, gave to a movement of using Philosophy as a resource to help children become more intellectually engaged, critical, creative, and caring ([The P4C Co-operative, 2013](#_ENREF_15)). He initiated the movement in the late 1960 when he was teaching Philosophy at Columbia University, New York. The escalation of the Vietnam War generated heated debates about the ethics of the war. Lipman became increasingly concerned by the quality of reasoning employed in these debates ([Pritchard, 2013](#_ENREF_13)).

# What are the features of Philosophy for Children (P4C)?

## A pedagogy, not a subject

P4C is not a subject like Mathematics or History, but a pedagogy – or a method of teaching. P4C is a form of Socratic Pedagogy – a collaborative inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning, with its roots in the Socratic method practiced by the 5th Century BCE Greek Philosopher, Socrates. This involves encouraging people to develop independent thinking by questioning claims to knowledge, and to engage in dialogue about life’s big questions – such as “how should we live?”

## Community of Inquiry

P4C is based on a ‘community of inquiry’ (COI) in which students listen to one another with respect, build on one another’s ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another’s assumptions ([Lipman, 2003, p. 20](#_ENREF_11)).

Lipman identifies the following features of a Community of Inquiry. A COI

* Involves learning together
* Aims at producing some kind of settlement or judgement
* Involves a process that moves where the argument takes it
* Is dialogical – so it has a structure – it has procedural rules which are largely logical in nature
* Involves reasonableness, creativity and care ([Lipman, 2003, pp. 83-84](#_ENREF_11))

The characteristics of an inquiring community include listening attentively to others, responding to ideas and not the person, openness to consider alternatives and having ideas challenged, asking questions, exploring disagreements, and making links ([Chesters, 2012, p. 47](#_ENREF_4)) .

An example of such an approach is the 2010 trial of Ethics classes in New South Wales, Australia. Lessons were designed by Phillip Cam from the Philosophy Department of the University of New South Wales for a process of discussion-based inquiry, in which students engaged in discussion of ethical issues, guided both by purpose-built thought provoking teaching resources and questioning from the teacher. The lesson topics were Fairness, Lying, Ethical Principles, Graffiti, The Use and Abuse of Animals, Interfering with Nature, Virtues and Vices, Children’s Rights and The Good Life ([Knight, 2010, p. 47](#_ENREF_10)).

The lessons operate in the following way:

1. Ethical scenarios are transcribed onto cards and distributed, one to each group of two to three students.
2. Students engage in discussion of their scenario within their group and then declare their position, by placing the card on an appropriately marked place on the floor. (Where there is disagreement within the group or where all members of the group are unsure how to judge their scenario, the card is placed separately, at a place marked by a question mark).
3. Groups give reasons for their decisions about the placement of the cards.
4. Members of the class discuss the various placements and explore their disagreements. Discussion rules include the use of a Speaker’s Ball, possession of which confers the right to speak
5. Members discuss general principles underlying their reasons and which principles are more important than others ([Knight, 2010, pp. 9-10](#_ENREF_10))

## Belonging to the reflective tradition in education

P4C belongs to the reflective tradition of education starting with Socrates, running through Montaigne, Locke, and in the early 20th Century, John Dewey ([Cam, 2008, p. 1](#_ENREF_2)). Lipman suggests that P4C is based on an alternative paradigm of knowledge – a reflective paradigm that contrasts with the standard paradigm of normal practice. The following table summarises these contrasts.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Standard paradigm of normal practice |  | Reflective paradigm |
| Education consists of transmission of knowledge from those who know to those who do not know | Nature of education | Education is the outcome of participation in a teacher-guided community of inquiry, among whose goals are achievement of understanding and good judgement |
| Knowledge is about the world, and our knowledge of the world is unambiguous, unequivocal and un-mysterious | Certainty of knowledge | Students are stirred to think about the world when our knowledge of it is revealed to them to be ambiguous, equivocal and mysterious |
| Knowledge is distributed among disciplines that are non-overlapping and together are exhaustive of the world to be known | Disciplinary knowledge | The disciplines in which inquiry occurs are assumed to be neither non-overlapping nor exhaustive; hence their relationships to the subject matters are quite problematic |
| The teacher plays an authoritative role in the educational process, for only if teachers know can students learn what they know | Authority of the teacher | The teacher’s stance is fallibilistic (one that is ready to concede error) rather than authoritative |
| Students acquire knowledge by absorbing information, i.e. data about specifics; an educated mind is a well-stocked mind | Expectations of Students | Students are expected to be thoughtful and reflective, and increasingly reasonable and judiciousThe focus of the educational process is on the grasp of relationships within and among the subject matters under investigation. |

Lipman sees the two paradigms as “sharply contrasting”. However practice in schools would likely be a hybrid of the two paradigms. The two paradigms represent poles of a continuum. Thinking is improved by education being informed increasingly by the reflective paradigm.

As Lipman himself notes “It is not that the lecture is an inferior or obsolete mode of pedagogy. It can be brilliant; it can be a work of art; it can often penetrate deeper into its subject matter from its single point of view than can a discussion from its multiple points of view. But to the extent that it is fascinating and charismatic, it turns listeners into passive admirers rather than active inquirers. Too often it inhibits rather than encourages creativity and the same is even true of critical thinking. It appropriates the means of intellectual production instead of turning them over to the students so as to enable them to become productive themselves.” ([Lipman, 2003, p. 57](#_ENREF_11)).

## Critical, Creative and Caring Thinking

A feature of P4C is that it aims to cultivate critical, creative and caring thinking. Creative thinking involves generating and building ideas. Critical thinking involves exploring concepts, reasoning, evaluating and concluding. Caring thinking involves cultivating capabilities required for being a member of the learning community and the process of inquiry ([Chesters, 2012, p. 89](#_ENREF_4)). Caring thinking allows us to focus on that which we respect, appreciate its worth, to value its value – so caring thinking is connective thinking.

Chesters suggests that creative thinking involves the construction or production – or generation - of ideas, Creative thinking is tied to the notion of divergent thinking ([Chesters, 2012, p. 100](#_ENREF_4)) – the generation of multiple and unusual possibilities when faced with a task or problem. Generative thinking is comprised of four inter-related components: Wonder; Production; Synectics, that is making the familiar strange – to see the familiar in new ways; and Fluency – the ease with which we use stored information when we need it.

Chesters argues that generative thinking does not exist in a vacuum and relies on evaluation to give it focus. New ideas must go through a process of evaluation and judgement. Evaluative thinking involves the development, application and evaluation of criteria – the use of information to make judgement.

Caring thinking is the connections between individuals and thought in the communal dialogue. Cam ([2012](#_ENREF_3)) notes that collaborative inquiry is itself a kind of moral practice. It involves learning to hear someone out when you disagree with them; learning to explore the source of your disagreement rather than engaging in personal attacks; developing the habit of giving reasons for what you say and expecting the same of others; being disposed to take others’ interests into account; generally becoming more communicative and inclusive ([Cam, 2012](#_ENREF_3)).

# What is its rationale?

P4C aims to cultivate critical thinking – and also creative and caring thinking. Thus the rationale for P4C is the same as that for cultivating critical, creative and caring thinking.

## Democratic

Lipman argues that one rationale for schools cultivating critical thinking in its students is that “the schooling of future citizens in democracy entailed getting them to be reasonable and this can be done by fostering children’s reasoning and judgement” ([Lipman, 2003, p. 1](#_ENREF_11)).

Lipman elaborates on this rationale as follows:

Insofar as the question of knowledge and belief is concerned, I would say that the role of critical thinking is defensive: to protect us from being coerced or brainwashed into believing what others want us to believe without our having an opportunity to inquire for ourselves. There are great and powerful forces ranged against the individual in every society – the political, the military, and the economic are the most obvious examples – and their aim is often to get us to acquiesce without reflection in the views they want us to have. The armour of scepticism that critical thinking can provide is not an impervious one as far as any given individual is concerned, but in a populace so armoured it could be decisive. *I think we are much better off construing critical thinking as nurturing in students a tentative scepticism than as nurturing in them a set of beliefs of dubious long term reliability*. Critical thinking can help us decide what not to believe ([Lipman, 2003, p. 47](#_ENREF_11)).

## Economic

A second rationale for schooling cultivating critical thinking in its students is that educators saw “social systems – particularly the economic, bureaucratic and legal systems – congealing into rationality, and it was by fostering children’s rationality that schools could best prepare children for the world they would face when they grew up.” ([Lipman, 2003, pp. 1-2](#_ENREF_11)).

The ability to think well, for example, to examine, to reflect, to argue and to debate are important in addressing economic challenges relating to work in globalised world. Robert Reich notes that in the American economy two categories of work are growing. (These trends are even more magnified in Australia). The first he calls *symbolic analytic* work that has to do with identifying and solving new problems, and with analysing, manipulating and communicating through abstract symbols – numbers, shapes, words, ideas ([Reich, 2004, p. 128](#_ENREF_14)). The capacities to think well, examine, reflect, argue and debate clearly facilitate this category of work.

The second growing category of work involves personal services, such as nursing, child care, aged care, teaching and other caring services ([Reich, 2004, p. 129](#_ENREF_14)). Increasingly, success in personal service work (and to some extent symbolic analytic work) requires a strong *ethical* understanding of concepts such as duty of care, privacy, autonomy, consent, confidentiality, rights, fairness, wellbeing, occupational health and safety. Developing ethical understanding of the kind required for success as a youth worker, a nurse, an aged care worker, a disability support worker, a child care worker, a teacher – would be strongly facilitated by an ability to think well, examine, reflect, argue and debate – or critical thinking.

## Rights

Lipman argues that it is well established that children have a *right* to physical education, and literacy. He suggests that children also have a right to the development of their thinking capabilities – reasonableness, judiciousness, imaginativeness and appreciativeness, so that they can bring their potentials into closer connection with the requirements of modern communal life.

Just as we have a right to physical strengthening, we have a right to moral strengthening – and creative and emotional strengthening, so that we can think reliably and resourcefully, and so that we can meet the trials of life with stamina and resiliency ([Lipman, 2003, p. 204](#_ENREF_11)).

## Knowing how

Cam ([2012](#_ENREF_3)) distinguishes between ‘teaching how…’ and ‘teaching that…’ He suggests that in teaching children *how* to think critically, creatively and caringly, we need an approach that focuses less on ‘teaching that…’ and more on ‘teaching how…’

Whether we learn to walk, to talk, to read, to write, to ride a bike, to swim, to play (games such as cricket or chess), to perform (drama or music), to think, to drive, to work – we learn to do something by trying it, giving it a go. We refine our ability through regular practice, taking account of the feedback we receive. Similarly, teaching someone to ride a bike involves mainly having them try to ride – learning by doing under guidance.

Cam (2012) argues “If we want students to grow out of the habit of going with their own first thoughts, to be on the lookout for better alternatives, and to become disposed to consider other people’s points of view, then we cannot do better than having them learn by exploring… issues, problems and ideas together. If we want them to become used to giving reasons for what they say, to expect the same of others and to make productive use of criticism, then we cannot go past giving them plenty of practice with their peers.” (Page 30) Socratic Pedagogy, and P4C in particular, is an excellent tool for teaching critical, creative and caring thinking. Socratic Pedagogy engages students in philosophical thinking, in giving reasons for their views, accommodating counter-examples to their definitions and identifying principles underlying their points of view. Philosophical thinking is critical, creative and caring thinking *par excellence*.

## Encourages Exploratory Reasoning rather than justificatory

In his recent book *The Righteous Mind,* Moral Psychologist Jonathan Haidt suggests that it is very hard “to teach students to look on the other side [of an argument], to look for evidence against their favoured view”. He goes further to say “nobody has found a way to do it.” ([Haidt, 2012, pp. 104-105](#_ENREF_8)). This is because reasoning has “evolved not to help us find truth but to help us engage in arguments, persuasion and manipulation in the context of discussions with other people.” ([Haidt, 2012, p. 104](#_ENREF_8)). However, Haidt does make an important caveat to this bleak assessment of our reasoning capabilities. He writes “We should not expect individuals to produce good, open-minded, truth-seeking reasoning… But if you put individuals together in the right way, such that some individuals can use their reasoning powers to disconfirm the claims of other, and all individuals feel some common bond or shared fate that allows them to interact civilly, you can create a group that ends up producing good reasoning as an emergent property of the social system.” Haidt has succinctly described a Community of Inquiry. So truth-seeking reasoning can be taught using Socratic Pedagogy in a Community of Inquiry ([Haidt, 2012, p. 104](#_ENREF_8)).

Haidt also cites research that open-minded, truth seeking reasoning is more likely where subjects were allowed more time (as little as two minutes) to reflect – a condition seldom applied in most recent psychological research on reasoning ([Haidt, 2012, p. 81](#_ENREF_8)).

Haidt discussed research on subjects’ responses to being told stories of “harmless taboo-violations” – such as “A family’s dog was killed by a car in front of their house. They had heard that dog meat was delicious, so they cut up the dog’s body and cooked it and ate it for dinner. Nobody saw them do this.” Haidt reports that respondents told these stories sometimes invent victims. Skilled interviewers would challenge invented-victim claims. Haidt observes “They seemed to be morally dumbfounded – rendered speechless by their inability to explain verbally what they knew intuitively. These subjects were reasoning. They were working quite hard at reasoning. But it was not reasoning in search of truth; it was reasoning in support of their emotional reactions” ([Haidt, 2012, p. 29](#_ENREF_8)). Haidt comments “…it’s obvious that people were making a moral judgement immediately and emotionally.”

However, it is not at all obvious that Haidt’s respondents were reasoning – rather they were “dumbfounded” – unable to think clearly. By categorising the dumbfounded state as reasoning, and by seeing it as an end-point in the reasoning process, rather than as a beginning, Haidt overlooks the possibility that this dumbfounded state could be used as a foundation for open-minded, truth seeking reasoning.

Chesters ([2012](#_ENREF_4)) observes that, like Haidt’s interviewers, the Greek Philosopher, Socrates had the ability to draw his interlocuters into a dialogue and then through his questioning he infects the listeners with his own perplexities, paralysing them with thought – the “dumbfounded” state observed by Haidt ([2012](#_ENREF_8)).

Reich ([2004](#_ENREF_14)) views the Socratic method as consisting essentially of elenchus and aporia. The elenchus is the process of questioning that Socrates engages with to elicit confusion in his fellow inquirers (similar to Haidt’s interviewers). This state of confusion results in aporia – provokes the search for truth or meaningfulness through dialogue.

Curiosity can be a strong driver for exploratory reasoning.

# Should Philosophy for Children be taught as a subject or within disciplines?

Lipman’s answer to this question is “Both”.

“We need both an independent course in critical thinking and infusion and reinforcement of critical thinking in the separate disciplines.” ([Lipman, 2003, p. 70](#_ENREF_11)).

He suggests that “Philosophy is ready to be made a required part of the elementary and secondary curriculum. This happens infrequently at present because the existing curriculum is so bloated as to exclude all “outsiders”. But when the existing curriculum has been suitably slimmed down, philosophy will no longer have to masquerade, as it is often required to do nowadays, as a course in language arts or reading or social studies.

Cam (2012 p 33), by contrast, suggests that it is possible to include collaborative moral inquiry in the curriculum as a stand- alone subject, but that is not wise. It gives the impression that moral concerns are something apart from the rest of the curriculum... the separation would make it impossible for students to deal in any systematic way with the moral dimension of the subjects they are studying. Students need to think about moral values in the various contexts in which questions about those values arise.

Lipman writes “Philosophy prepares students to think in other disciplines. The legend that philosophy is solely for the old is most unfortunate – it is essentially preparatory.” ([Lipman, 2003, p. 70](#_ENREF_11)).

He suggests that one way of reducing content and at the same time to support the cultivation of critical thinking is to give greater emphasis to *essentially contestable concepts*—concepts that lie at the heart of any discipline when it is presented as a living thing rather than simply as a body of established knowledge. This suggests that one way of animating the disciplines with the spirit of inquiry is by attention to the philosophically problematic within them. Lipman writes:

There are times when inquiry begins because what has been encountered – some aberration, some discrepancy, something that defies being taken for granted – captures our interest and demands our reflection and investigation. If, then, thinking in the classroom is considered desirable, the curriculum cannot present itself as clear and settled, for this paralyses thought. The curriculum should bring out aspects of the subject matter that are unsettled and problematic in order to capture the laggard attention of the student and to stimulate them to form a community of inquiry. ([Lipman, 2003, p. 20](#_ENREF_11))

Attending to the philosophically problematic within a discipline is one way of reducing the content in curriculum – making it less crowded, and at the same time generating or cultivating thinking capabilities.

# Evidence for Effectiveness

The OECD 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey found that 70% of 15-74-year-old Australians did not demonstrate the minimum problem-solving abilities required to meet the demands of everyday life and work in knowledge-based economy ([Millett & Tapper, 2012](#_ENREF_12)). A knowledge-based economy relies on *symbolic analytic* work, which is becoming increasingly more common ([Reich, 2004](#_ENREF_14)).

## Cognitive benefits

It is considered that Philosophy for Children plays a role in developing students’ capacities to think independently and mitigates the uncritical adoption of established norms and attitudes ([Cam, 1997](#_ENREF_1)).

## Social benefits

The social benefits of CPI are not considered to be associated with the topics that are raised but the manner in which they are discussed. Millet and Tapper ([2012](#_ENREF_12)) emphasise that the contribution of CPI is to show how values can be promoted through a particular kind of classroom practice. Philosophy for Children is also considered to develop the regard and cooperative intellectual exchange that help to sustain an open community ([Cam, 1997](#_ENREF_1)).

## Evidence

The ability to provide a solid evidence base for the success of Philosophy for Children is made difficult because of three interrelated issues: the wide variety of approaches and designs used by practitioners, the lack of a complete and clear description of methodology and results, and small sample sizes ([García-Moriyón, Rebollo, & Colom, 2004](#_ENREF_6)). These issues make it difficult to draw comparisons between studies, accumulate evidence, and make generalisable conclusions. Despite these limitations, the studies presented below demonstrate the positive effects of Philosophy for Children.

There are a range of standardised tests which are designed to evaluate thinking skills. These tests are considered to be appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of Philosophy for Children. Quantitative tests include the New Jersey Test of Reasoning Skills, the Cognitive Abilities Test, the Culture Fair Intelligence Test, the Raven’s Progressive Matrices Test, the Differential Aptitude Battery, and the Primary Mental Abilities Battery ([see García-Moriyón et al., 2004](#_ENREF_6)).

Such tests have been used to measure the effectiveness of Philosophy for Children. They also have the potential to be used in the classroom as assessment tools.

A Scottish study of 18 primary schools that received 1 hour of Philosophy for Children inquiry each week demonstrated a variety of cognitive and social benefits. This study employed a pre-post quasi-experimental design in which 10-year old students were placed in the intervention group, which carried out the Philosophy for Children program (N=105), or in the control group, which made no change to their regular curriculum (N=72). Students were assessed using the Cognitive Abilities Test.

The results of this study were published in several articles and are summarised by Sutcliffe ([UNESCO, 2007](#_ENREF_20)). The following summary relates to the intervention condition:

1. Students gained on average 6 standard points on a measure of cognitive abilities after 16 months ([Topping & Trickey, 2007a](#_ENREF_16))

2. Students and teachers perceived significant gains in communication, self-confidence, concentration, participation and social behaviour after six months. They demonstrated improved self-esteem as a learner, reduced dependency and anxiety, and gains in “emotional intelligence” ([Topping & Trickey, 2007c](#_ENREF_18))

3. Students doubled the rate at which they supported their views with reasons over a six-month period increased use of open-ended questions by the teacher, increased participation in classroom dialogue and improved reasoning in justification of opinion ([Topping & Trickey, 2007c](#_ENREF_18))

4. Teachers doubled their use of open-ended questions over a six-month period ([Topping & Trickey, 2007c](#_ENREF_18))

5. Improved cognitive abilities were sustained for two years following the program ([Topping & Trickey, 2007b](#_ENREF_17))

6. Students increased their level of participation in classroom discussion by half as much again following 6 months of weekly enquiry ([Topping & Trickey, 2007c](#_ENREF_18))

Meta-analyses have also found successful outcomes for Philosophy for Children, as summarised by Millet and Tapper ([2012](#_ENREF_12)). A meta-analysis of 10 studies that used controlled experimental designs found a 0.43 effect size on a range of norm-referenced outcome measures. These measures included reading, reasoning, cognitive ability, other curriculum-related abilities, self-esteem and child behaviour ([Trickey & Topping, 2004](#_ENREF_19)).

García-Moriyón, Rebollo, & Colom ([2004](#_ENREF_6)) conducted a meta-analysis of 18 studies that implementing Philosophy for Children for up to one year. The authors concluded that it led to an improvement of students’ reasoning skills of more than half a standard deviation, or 7 IQ points.

A meta-analysis that evaluated “thinking-skills programs” found that CPI in particular and dialogical interactions generally promote an ability for children to transfer argumentation skills to different contexts. A 0.62 effect size was found for curriculum outcomes such as reading, mathematics, and science ([Higgins, Hall, Baumfield, & Moseley, 2005](#_ENREF_9)).

A pre/post intervention for CPI in 5 South Australian schools found a growth in participants’ ability and disposition to consider issues empathetically and to weigh consequences ([in Millett & Tapper, 2012](#_ENREF_12)). In this case, teachers received a three-day training course and taught the weekly ethical enquiry courses for two terms.

Daniel ([2005](#_ENREF_5)) conducted a series of qualitative analyses to investigate whether students increase the degree of sophistication of thinking and explaining as a result of a Philosophy for Children intervention. It is considered that the complexity of language is reflective of the complexity of thinking. Student’s answers before and after the intervention were classified into three categories: simple one or two-word answers, statements implying lower-order thinking, and statements implying complex or higher-order thinking. It was found that student’s language became more complex following the intervention.

## How are gains explained?

The positive findings for CPI are often explained through Vygotskian shared learning, especially the notion of the internalisation of shared thinking whereby participants’ experience at the inter-personal level in group work is internalised by individuals and integrated into their own thinking processes.

Daniel ([2005](#_ENREF_5)) describes the nature of the teacher interactions that resulted in the best results for students. Teachers who narrowed the topic of discussion, encouraged students to seek and provide justifications in addition to questioning and reflecting, did not assume the role of the knowledge-bearer and question-asker were able to teach students to respect divergent points of view, justify their opinions, critically question statements and to value the way in which criticism can contribute to the enriching or modification of perspectives. It is considered that these practices are the reason for improvement.

# What are the barriers to the widespread implementation of Philosophy for Children? How might these be overcome?

Lipman identifies conceptual obstacles to the implementation of P4C including disagreements over:

* the nature of thinking
* the proper psychological approach
* the role of philosophy
* the preferred educational approaches

He identifies six misconceptions regarding teaching for critical thinking:

* Teaching for thinking is equivalent to teaching for critical thinking.
* Reflective teaching will necessarily result in reflective learning
* Teaching about critical thinking is equivalent to teaching for critical thinking
* Teaching for critical thinking requires drill in thinking skills
* Teaching for logical thinking is equivalent to teaching for critical thinking
* Teaching for learning is just as effective as teaching for critical thinking

Gregory ([2011](#_ENREF_7)) notes other objections towards the implementation of Philosophy for Children. These objections may pose challenges to its implementation.

Religious and social conservatives object to the notion that children will question traditional values or authority. Since Philosophy for Children deals with the issues of self-examination, an ethics of dialogue, communal caring and a focus on how to live, the ideas that might emerge from such practice may counter the ideals promoted by particular established values such as religious values, that are typically presented to children as rules for life and has the potential to corrupt their unassuming acceptance and adherence to those values. Relatedly, the position of the teacher or of another adult with authority has the potential to be questioned as they enter into a more collaborative, communitarian and egalitarian exchange of information and knowledge-building.

There are also some educational psychologists who believe that certain kinds of thinking are out of reach for children of certain ages. However, Philosophy for Children is compatible with social learning theorists, including those associated with Soviet psychologists Vygotsky and Davydov that have more currency today. Furthermore, support has been received from educational researchers that have demonstrated its academic benefits.

Critical theorists think Philosophy for Children is too value neutral and politically compliant. The notion of neutral cultural practices has the tendency to lead to oppression. Education as an institution is therefore suspected for its ability to promote particular ideological frameworks and subvert race-, class-, and gender-based oppression. The argument is that critical thinking that presents itself as neutral is politically suspect and should instead be replaced with an explicit agenda of consciousness-raising, otherwise there is a risk that critical thinking can still be subject to manipulation by oppression because children are blind to the conditions of their existence. The notion of rationality has also been accused as a practice of domination and a liberal contrivance. This criticism is countered with the argument that in order to be aware of the ethical and political meaning of one’s existence, you need the philosophical content in Philosophy for Children, not just the critical thinking in isolation. Additionally, the notion of guiding children towards emancipation requires a foundational definition of human flourishing, which runs against critical theory’s own suspicion of theory as ideology.

Postmodernists worry that Philosophy for Children is imperialistic and hegemonic. Another argument is the mistrust towards the goal of promoting the attainment of objective or foundational truths about knowledge, values and what it means to live well. Postmodernists are against the aim of the ‘reasonable’ or ‘philosophical’ child because they consider it to be one model of human subjectivity and argue against it being presented as normative. The criteria for ‘reasonableness’ conforms with Eurocentric or Anglo-American values which leads to another way of exercising power. Given its origins as a form of American pragmatism, the promotion of American cultural norms, especially through the novels written by Matthew Lipman, is argued to promote the values and forms of thought valued by Anglo-American culture. The counter argument to this is that the categorical mistrust of the collective and normative can serve as a distraction from political struggle and solidarity and actually underlie capitalist sentiment, whereas the process of social inquiry promoted in Philosophy for Children supports these struggles.

* Objections from the political right
* Religious and political beliefs should not be questioned
* This is a philosophical position
* Noting the value of religious tradition and authority there is good reason to ask what this tells us and why
* Questioning and critical thinking does not in itself undermine authority or tradition – in particular legitimacy – but it requires the authority to work harder for it

The thinking skills component of P4C is something that some conservative parents and some professional philosophers have supported: the parents, because it’s content-neutral—it doesn’t impose any particular ideas or values on the children that might compete with what they get at home.

I suspect that P4C’s emphasis on meaning, experience and judgment is one reason that parents and teachers haven’t been afraid of it—because they don’t think of it as ‘Teaching Children Plato’—but then that’s the same reason that philosophers haven’t been enthusiastic about it, until recently. I think it’s significant that the way we practice philosophy with children—with self-examination, a certain ethics of dialogue, communal caring, and a focus on how to live—is in some ways a return to the philosophical practices of some of the ancient schools.

Philosophy for Children prioritises critical, emotional, political and ethical know-how over getting ahead. Such priorities are at odds with the competitive mantra of mainstream Western society and are therefore likely to have their worth questioned.

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