A critical reflection on implementing a thinking skills programme

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a high level of interest in thinking skills within psychology, education, industry and politics (Dewey and Bento, 2009; Times Educational Supplement (TES) 2002). This has prompted research regarding incorporating thinking skills into the National Curriculum (Mosley et al. 2005) and the teaching of thinking is now recognized as a key aim for education, evidenced by the range of thinking skills packages now available for schools (McGregor, 2007). In 1916 Dewey stated ‘All which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their minds are concerned...is to develop their ability to think’ with many educationalists agreeing that learning should be about developing children’s thinking, not just telling them what to think (Fisher, 2013). As, if thinking is how children make sense of things then it is possible that developing thinking will support them to get more out of learning and perhaps more out of life (Fisher, 2005). Furthermore, the world is rapidly changing and rather than just imparting knowledge on children it seems useful to teach pupils to think critically and creatively for themselves and at the highest levels (McGregor, 2007). Additionally, research shows that children tend to be better motivated and more engaged in classes that they find intellectually stimulating and they are found to prefer teachers who make them think (Stevenson, 1990). The question is can children be taught to be more effective thinkers and if so, how is this best done? For the purposes of this assignment, one particular approach, Philosophy for Children, will be focused on and a session incorporating this will be planned and carried out with a sample of pupils. The session will be assessed and reflected upon in relation to educational theory as well as regarding the development of thinking skills. The materials and methods of assessment used will also be discussed.

Philosophy for Children

As Sutcliffe (2017) informs, the thinking skills programme, Philosophy for Children (P4C), was devised by Matthew Lipman and his colleagues at Montclair University (USA) in the 1970s and is now used in an increasing number of countries worldwide providing a curriculum intended to nurture philosophical enquiry for learners from nursery through to
higher education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 2007). Lipman’s key argument for the need of the development of a pedagogy of community enquiry, was that the high levels of curiosity and interest, naturally present in younger children seemed to be dulled by the time they reached older childhood, due to the effects of traditional schooling where knowledge was often just ‘banked’ from teacher to student (Fisher, 2013). Lipman therefore advocated experiential learning whereby the teacher’s facilitating skills are key in supporting learners to experience classroom discourse and opportunity to practise skilled reasoning that encourages creativity, collaboration and the ability to question issues and construct arguments (Education Endowment Foundation, EEF, 2015). This involves actively promoting metacognition and therefore learners thinking about their thinking (Flavell, 1976). Via practise of these approaches; it is aimed that skilful, independent thinking can become more entrenched in learners so that they can aim to apply it to all areas of their learning and development (Sutcliffe, 2017). Thus, P4C is advocated as an opportunity to develop critical thinkers for the 21st century, focusing on democracy, autonomy and discourse with some educationalists also championing its ability to promote social and emotional skills, including listening and empathy (Valitalo, Juuso and Sutinen, 2016).

In devising this pedagogy of communal philosophical dialogue, Lipman was influenced by theorists such as Dewey, Mead, Buchler and Vygotsky (Lipman, 2003). Dewey’s (1963; 1966) basic belief suggested the thought that traditional education was too concerned with the delivery of pre-ordained knowledge and not focused enough on learner’s actual learning experiences and therefore, he thought experiential learning that incorporated real-life situations was key in generating more significant learning. Furthermore, social behaviourist Mead’s 1934 book Mind, Self and Society concentrated on thinking in relation to social and cultural contexts and Buchler’s studies related to the nature of human judgement in the education of the child (Mead, 1934; Buchler, 1955). Another great influence in the creation of P4C was Vygotsky, a social constructivist, who proposed that thinking and language are inextricably linked and therefore, cognitive development is directly connected to social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978).

Specifically, P4C is an approach in which students participate in group discussions focused on philosophical issues. Dialogues are prompted by use of some stimuli, for example, a story
or a video, around a concept such as ‘fairness’ or ‘truth’ aiming for children to become more practiced and willing to ask questions, to construct arguments and to engage in reasoned discussion (EEF, 2015). The student generated philosophical enquiry can often relate to the Socratic questioning (Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education, SAPERE, 2015) which can enable the exploration of complex issues. It also seems important to point out that P4C relates to children being philosophers themselves. Therefore, it is not about children learning the work of known philosophers or philosophical concepts.

**Session preparation and objectives**

A P4C session will be carried out with two Year 7 pupils currently attending a mainstream secondary school. They are of average socio-economic background and are obtaining between average and above average results in all academic subjects currently. Relevant permissions have been obtained to include the children in the session and the learners and their school will remain anonymous throughout this assignment.

A ‘stories for thinking’ approach has been selected for the assignment’s P4C session (see text used in appendix a). As asserted by Fisher (2013), stories can provide a natural means of developing thinking, learning and language skills and as it is P4C’s aim to encourage critical thinkers who are flexible and creative in their approach to solving problems, being critical readers seems an excellent basis of approach. To be critical readers, learners need to be exposed to models of critical reading and contexts where higher order thinking is practised and valued. Additionally, pedagogical reasons endorse this approach as studies of more literate children indicate that they have metacognitive competencies that other students are less likely to possess (Garner, 1987). These include:

- Skills and strategies for processing literary knowledge and an ability to question, interrogate and discuss narrative texts.
- Ability to apply and transfer their skills of narrative enquiry to other contexts. (Fisher, 2013, p.73).

Furthermore, aiming to support reading for meaning for learners and to extend literacy skills overall, simultaneously to focusing on thinking skills; resonates highly as a logical pedagogical approach (Fisher, 2001). It also illustrates P4C’s contribution to educational
endeavour as a whole and highlights the programme’s ability to have multidimensional use (Valitalo, Juuso and Sutinen, 2016). Furthermore, within this same theme of infusing P4C across other curriculum areas, the story chosen is Physical, Social, Health Education (PSHE) based (SAPERE, 2015) so, additionally contains a focus towards PSHE. This focus for the thinking skills session was chosen because time for PSHE is often found to be greatly reduced within time-poor schools currently and many advocate a need to find ways to increase its focus amongst today’s busy curriculum timetables (National Union of Teacher, NUT, 2015).

P4C sessions do not generally have a specific learning outcome as this can inhibit the free nature of the discussion and possibly limit the potential scope of outcomes (SAPERE, 2015). However, some learning outcomes have been generated in order to help analyse participant’s contributions to the session’s dialogue, aiming to assess the thinking and learning that occurs (Fisher, 2013). These learning outcomes identify the dialogic skills central to philosophical discussion and fall within five broad related categories: participation, collaboration, enquiry, critical and creative thinking and evaluating (Fisher, 2013).

Assessment and Reflection on the Session

The stimulus used was from SAPERE’s P4C resources and is a story called Good Twin (see appendix a). It is about competitiveness and the difference between ‘being good at’ and ‘being good’ (SAPERE, 2015).

Participation

Both students 1 and 2 contributed highly to the discussion which may have been aided by the fact that it was such a small group and, they are already familiar with the facilitator. They demonstrated understanding of the cumulative progression of the dialogue by offering extended utterances on multiple occasions (Fisher, 2013).

Collaboration

Both students showed evidence of collaboration via the use of active listening and pausing while they thought about what the student or the facilitator was saying however, Pupil 1 more so; with Pupil 2 being more ‘fixed’ in opinion and slightly more reticent in this first
session to explore alternative thinking pathways and viewpoints. This should not necessarily be discouraging, as Pupil 2 did display increased active listening by the end of the session and, in practice, it can take many sessions for students to more actively settle into a collaborative approach during discourse (Meir and McCann, 2017).

Enquiry

The nature of the discourse brought up questions related to epistemology and ethics showing evidence of some extended thinking and reasoning (McCleod, 2017):

Pupil 2: ‘Why is the twin thinking so much about what other people think of him compared to his twin?’

Pupil 1: ‘Do you know how old they are as they seem quite immature?’

Pupil 2: ‘Why does he want to be better than his twin? Why can’t he just accept that they will be better at different things?’

Pupil 1: ‘To be a good person, don’t you have to think about other people’s feelings, not just being the best?’

Pupil 1: ‘Why aren’t the parents stepping in about too much competitiveness?’

Critical and Creative Thinking

There was evidence of an interchange of ideas during this part of the session and some self-correction from Pupil 1 when she discounted one explanation for another by thinking about it for longer. Pupil 1 was also able to explain and justify her reasoning when asked whereas Pupil 2 seemed to find this more difficult, with this skill perhaps requiring further practise however, he showed good skills at presenting an argument. Pupil 1 demonstrated good attempts at analysing, especially within her comment denoting a difference between being good at something and being a good person and how deciding whether someone is a good person seems more difficult than judging whether they are good at something (Fisher, 2013).

Pupil 2: ‘Its good to have a bit of competitiveness but not to take it too far’

Pupil 1: ‘Paul, the twin seems quite confused about what good is’.
Pupil 2: ‘I think he needs to stop taking his competitiveness too far’.

Pupil 1: ‘There’s a difference between being good at something and being a good person’.

Pupil 2: ‘I think you should concentrate your efforts on yourself as if you keep thinking about what other people think you will not concentrate on what you are meant to be doing’

Pupil 1: Whether someone is a good person seems more difficult to judge than being good at something.

Pupil 1: Sometimes people get the wrong impression of people and judge too quick’. You shouldn’t judge a book by its cover’.

Evaluating

The students were asked to reflect on the session and what they thought went well. Both students gave some input saying that it was good to have a chance to talk about what they thought about things. Pupil 1 seemed particularly thought provoked and said that the session had got her thinking more about the good and bad sides of competitiveness. Both pupils thought that deciding on what makes someone a good person was perhaps not as simple as they first thought and that often it seems to depend on people’s personal opinions. This seems to illustrate some evidence of the metacognitive process of self-knowledge by the students, particularly Pupil 1 (Flavell, 1976).

Considerations for future practice and conclusion

Overall, the dialogue that ensued after the group jointly read the story stimulus (appendix a) seemed to help the students understand and analyse deeper meanings, dilemmas and assumptions contained within the text and to encourage them to be confident regarding openly discussing and extending their ideas. Thus, the experiential and socially cognitive opportunity created by the P4C session did seem to empower the students towards some higher-level thinking skills and critical and creative discourse regarding a philosophical and meaningful concept. Judgement, reasoning, analysing, argument and reflection were illustrated in the thinking, questioning and discussion by either both or one of the students. It was difficult to discern however, whether they were consciously metacognitive in their thinking therefore, for future practice it may be appropriate to start exploring metacognition further (McGregor, 2007). This would mean introducing vocabulary so that
students can verbalise their cognitive processes which may start to make their thinking more conscious. Finally, it is not just the students who would benefit from more practice of this style of sessions. The facilitator too would be likely to improve with practise and get more proficient and used to student led discussions which is important as this is a key part of the P4C approach (Fisher, 2013).

Word Count 2183
References


Appendix a.

Good Twin

Paul and Stan, who were twins, had always been very competitive. Back in nursery school, each had hit on the idea of being the first to write his name. They had practised separately in secret, filling page after page with scribbles that gradually formed into words. Then on their mother’s birthday, they had each been furious when the other presented their mother with a perfectly signed card.

There had been all sorts of competitions between them since, over sport, school, eating chocolate mints, not saying the word “the” and dozens of other things. Who was the best runner, swimmer, writer, farter, joke-teller, cook. Now, Paul had hit on what he thought was the ultimate competition, and one he was determined to win. He was going to be… the best person.

Not just the best at some particular sport, or subject at school, or at some trivial challenge they had chosen between them. He was going to be best at the biggest challenge of all – not at being good at something, but at being good, full stop. He was going to be the twin people meant when they said, “He’s the one who’s a really good lad. His brother’s nice enough, but he’s not in the same league when it comes to…”

And then his imagining what they would say faded out, because he wasn’t entirely sure what being good would mean. It couldn’t just be a matter of saying, “please” and “thank you”, although those might be part of it. It had to be more difficult and complicated, otherwise it would be too easy for Stan to catch up and be just as good. Paul started pacing about to think…