Thinking Skills – An evaluation of Philosophy for Children

Introduction

The idea of teaching ‘thinking skills’ is a contested notion, with some taking the stance that there is no such universal set of strategies that are transferable (Johnson, Siegel and Winch, 2010), and others suggesting there are significant cognitive gains to be made across the curriculum (Lyle, 2008). Despite this, thinking skills programmes have been recommended for inclusion in primary school curriculums as: discrete lessons; infused throughout the curriculum or in subject specific domains (McGuiness, 1999). Fisher (2005, p. 6) explains why thinking is important – ‘Thinking involves critical and creative aspects of the mind, both the use of reason and generation of ideas’. He emphasises that thought is a child’s way of making meaning out of everything in life, and cites Piaget’s (1936) theories in that human intellect is greatly influenced by the ability to reason. Furthermore, the emergence of metacognition, meaning reflecting on how we learn and how we know things (Fisher, 2005), forms an integral aspect of thinking skills programmes, with studies showing significant gains across the curriculum (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018). One such thinking skills programme, with a considerable body of evidence behind it, is Philosophy for Children (P4C). This essay explores the programme, including the underpinning theories, before critically evaluating a lesson undertaken by the author.

Philosophy for Children

P4C has been in existence for over 30 years (SAPRE, 2015), making use of both whole class and small group interaction. It seeks to develop pupils’ cognitive abilities by encouraging meaning making through dialogue between them (Lyle, 2008). Pupils are taught to think logically, voice their opinion, actively listen and respond to others. Lipman (1988), an innovator in this field, took inspiration from the philosophical stance of John Dewey (1955), who believed children could think freely and creatively about problems, if the environment was right. Lipman concluded the social environment of the school to be the perfect place to bring about the child’s ‘urgent need to find meaning in life’ (Lipman & Sharp, 1978, p. 13). Fisher (2005) highlights that dialogic interaction is supported by Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory, in which language is a key tool to cognitive development. Importantly, Vygotsky emphasised language as influencing the way pupils think. Furthermore, higher
mental capacities, like evaluating and decision-making, emerge from a social context (Vygotsky, 1978). Growth occurs when different forms of mediation, which may be a more knowledgeable other (MKO), create a change in mental functioning. In order to advance, a learner has to experience a shift in perspective.

Waterburg (2014) contends that teachers are often initially perplexed at the idea of teaching philosophy. However, he explains that once a teacher can identify philosophical questions (which are essentially big questions, common to all, with no definitive answer), the programme is highly accessible, with no technical philosophical skills required. Lyle (2008) adds that the practitioner’s role is to ‘enable the learners to share ideas and insights and support and challenge each other’s ideas and thinking’ (p. 235). In this way, the power dynamic is shifted from a teacher centric one to pupil. The power balance is evident from the start of sessions, with pupils selecting their own ‘big question’ to debate from a stimulus provided. From this, the teacher cultivates a ‘community of inquiry’, which is democratic in nature. Waterburg (2014) links these ideas to the theories of Paulo Freire (1972). Freire’s ideal of education was that of a collective process in an accessible forum with a shared control over the curriculum rather than a ‘banking’ model, where learners are passive empty vessels waiting to be filled (Freire, 1972).

In addition to critical and creative thinking, Lipman (1988) also stressed ‘caring’, distinguishing it from other programmes. From this, emotional development is seen as important as the cultivation of thinking. Lyle (2008) explains, ‘it helps pupils understand what it means to be human and to learn to be an ethical human’. Ideas are brought about by Socratic questioning (Lipman, 2003), which encourages pupils to go deeper with their ideas by perusing lines of inquiry with further open questions (Intel Teach Program, 2007). Interestingly, this openly challenges the Piagetian (1986) view that it is not until children have reached the formal operational stage (12-14) that they are able to think in an abstract way (Lyle, 2008).

Objectives and Planning
The session was planned as a one hour stand-alone lesson with six year 5 pupils. These pupils were selected as they are part of my guided reading group and working on exploring ideas...
from the text verbally. I felt they would benefit from the thinking skills described in P4C. This provided the time, without disrupting regular learning commitments, and meant the group were comfortable with each other. The pupils had no specific experience of P4C, but skills such as active listening and providing rational answers are often embedded into the daily reading group.

The stimulus (Appendix 2) was a short narrative selected from P4C online resources directed towards Key Stage 2 pupils (Buckley, 2010). The story focused on the subject of ownership and intended to bring about inquiry into the area of natural resources (e.g. rivers and forests) and the possibility of human beings ‘owning’ them (Appendix 2). This linked well with the guided reading book currently in progress with this group, which centres around an ancient tribe being forced out of their forest village to make way for logging. Despite these ideas, as with all P4C inquiries, pupils made the final decision on the question (Fisher, 2005). A full lesson plan is included as Appendix 1.

The aspect of how to assess learning was carefully considered, as no written product would be available. Kelly (2005) highlights that learning objectives not only give the opportunity for pupils to understand the rationale, but also to evaluate their progress. It has been suggested with P4C, one or two clear skills are enough as there is so much happening (Kelly, 2005; SAPRE, 2015). In order to encourage a truly collaborative discussion, the main learning objective was for pupils to connect contributions to what other have said (spontaneously or with prompting) as set out in the lesson plan.

Furthermore, self-assessment, with the skill of metacognition being invoked may be a powerful tool to improve. When reflecting at the end of the session, pupils are asked to respond to show awareness of their own learning with the following questions:

- What went well?
- What could we improve on next time?
- What will we do next time?
Critical Evaluation

It is widely accepted that with P4C, pedagogy is significantly different to that of the traditional ‘banking’ model prevalent in British schools (O’Riordan, 2015). Therefore, in addition to a change in teaching approach, a whole new dynamic in terms of teacher versus pupil power balance was required with this session. Initially, it felt straightforward and refreshing to allow pupils to take the questioning in their own direction. However, instinctively I inadvertently began to steer the discussion and intersperse knowledge - at times letting my opinions be known. Effectively, this put me back into the role of transmitter and meant the equanimity of the relationship was altered. The disadvantage of this is that practitioners may subvert pupil thinking with the agenda becoming no different to Freire’s (1972) banking concept. However, I realized this was occurring and stepped back to the facilitation role. It is accepted that in one session perfection should not be expected, however it highlighted the significant differences this type of teaching requires. This is not an uncommon occurrence, with See, Gorard & Siddiqui (2017) noting similar teacher behaviours in their recent study, where values or bias would influence pupils’ involvement in the inquiry. This did improve as P4C became more embedded into practice.

In terms of pupil engagement, most were excited at the idea of doing a ‘philosophy’ lesson. It was evident from the start this was something different – from the circle of chairs and the introduction of a stimulus. Following an explanation of ideas behind the session, there was a mixed response. One of the quieter members of the group was particularly uncomfortable with the idea of ‘no right answer’ and having to verbalise her ideas to the whole group. To reassure, I emphasised the learning goals and the climate of caring we would establish. Nonetheless, the pupil did not adapt well to lack of a ‘correct’ answers or solid conclusion. She continually looked to me for affirmation. During the reflection stage, the pupil explained, ‘I was trying to understand what the right answer was, it was really hard to start with’. This response appears to correspond with recent research. O’Riordan (2015) found that some more mathematically minded pupils lacked engagement in P4C, preferring a more didactic way of learning where goals are more tangible. It is possibly the result of a new and different approach that may feel more natural with added experience.
Other pupils were more enthusiastic and happy to put their views forward and noted the objective of building views based on other’s responses. Eventually, this led to the big question under debate being ‘what does it mean to be fair?’. This was not the most obvious line of inquiry, but philosophical and therefore valid. The question was arrived at through extended dialogue involving most pupils, showing the group had collaborated meeting the main learning objective. I observed coherent linking of pupil’s ideas. The following dialogue took place:

1st Pupil: I think the farmer is being unkind and they could share the river
2nd Pupil: Yes, the farmer should share...erm...but then he can’t water his field
3rd Pupil: They could vote in the village to see who agrees?
1st Pupil: erm...what if someone disagrees with the vote? Is that fair?
3rd Pupil: But it’s not fair to anyone right now...is it? (Looks around the room)

The condition that appeared to aid collaboration was active listening, which Kelly (2005, p.34) describes as listening attentively and engaging with an ‘inner dialogue’ to really think about what has been said. Initially there were two problems. Firstly, pupils occasionally spoke over each other. Fisher (2005) points out that pupils often became pre-occupied with their own thoughts and are ‘naturally impatient’ to get their views across (Fisher, p.137). However, with some prompting, modelling, and reminding of rules, this improved. Secondly, certain pupils appeared to agree with their friends’ views and not really listen to anyone else, which affected the flow. See Gorard & Siddiqui and (2017, p.18) suggest this can be a problem with P4C, where, ‘abuse of the system by groups of friends’ was observed in their study. To prevent this, some changes to the implementation of who speaks might be necessary – possibly a blind voting system or more structured turn-taking.

Measuring Impact
Assessment was approached in two stages. There was an overriding learning objective, assessed through my own observation, which indicated pupils were socially constructing responses as in the sample above. In order to assess more long-term goals the same group were observed during subsequent guided reading session (one week later). A fellow TA was asked to join to provide some independent feedback on how pupils were chaining their ideas.
and listening to each other. SAPRE (2015) recommend this as a way of providing some
independent assessment of learning. It was evident following the P4C session that, at least in
the short term, some aspects of linking responses to others had been retained as one pupil
(that had been particularly insightful in the P4C session) perused another child’s response. It
is unclear if this was directly relatable to our single intervention, however research does
suggest Reading as an area that might be enhanced by P4C (Trickey & Topping, 2004).

The second stage of assessment came from the pupils. This was intended to aid
metacognition and emphasize the targeted learning. During this reflection session, all pupils
stated how much they enjoyed the session, giving reasons such as, ‘I felt like people were
listening to my ideas’, and ‘I liked that we got to pick what we could talk about’. In terms of
recognising their response to the LO, all pupils highlighted that the reason the session worked
with a variation of ‘we stopped talking over each other’ or ‘interrupting’. When asked what
could be improved, two pupils felt they would be able to link ideas better if they have been
written down. This was actually a practice I could have implemented with hindsight, and
have noted for the next occasion.

Future Practice
In terms of teaching, there are clear advantages to ‘going deeper’ in thinking that appears to
build up trust between participants. Indeed, O’Riordan found a consistent benefit of P4C, in
the development of enhanced bonds between pupil and teacher. Advantages of this, she
states, may be more engaging and enjoyable learning. I felt this keenly after only one session,
where pupils became willing to share their thoughts. This might have been the small group
environment – regardless, a more balanced power structure undoubtedly helped. It is unlikely
that P4C would be implemented at my setting in the short term, due to costs and curriculum
overcrowding. However, some elements of this approach will be used to enhance guided
reading practice – specifically more facilitative questioning and self-reflection.

(2,190 Words)
### Appendix 1 – Lesson plan P4C – The Water Catcher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher/Subject</th>
<th>Lesson Aim</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy for Children (P4C)</td>
<td>To conduct an inquiry into a philosophical question that children decide upon.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous learning/BIG picture/</th>
<th>Class details</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 pupils that form a guided reading group.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Learning Objectives</th>
<th>Key Words</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Objectives</strong></td>
<td>Possible questions designed to bring about philosophical inquiry:</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>We are working on collaboration</strong></td>
<td>1. How can someone claim to own a river?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Is it wrong to change what nature has made? Why?</td>
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<td>3. What is sharing?</td>
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<td>4. Are there times when it is on not to share? Why?</td>
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<th>Metacognition</th>
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<td>Pupils should be able to explain how they were able to respond to comments and what might help if they could not.</td>
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<th>Resources</th>
<th>Cross-Curricular opportunities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Goat soft toy (the speaker holds the toy)</td>
<td>The session was linked both the guided reading group book (Moon Bear) and existing Science lessons on the water cycle.</td>
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<td>Stimulus – Story: The Water Catcher</td>
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<td>Circle of chairs</td>
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<td>Timing</td>
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| **Introduction** | 5 minutes | Introduce the rules that have been agreed in a previous session:  
We are always asking questions  
We share our ideas  
We care about other’s ideas  
We support our ideas with reasons (we say… Because)  
We are not scared to disagree  
We speak one at a time  
We encourage speakers by listening and looking at them  
Pupils are not allowed to interrupt a speaker holding Gabby. |
| **Main**  | 15-20 minutes | Read the story to the children and ask them to sit and reflect before answering.  
Begin dialogue. Invite children to say who they agree with - the farmer or the fisherman.  
Model asking ‘why’. Encourage pupils to ask each other why?  
Collect vocabulary and themes to establish a philosophical inquiry and vote on a question.  
Once a central question is established, take a less active role and one of facilitation.  
Introduce some of the extended questions to deepen thinking.  
Contribute to extend logic and model Socratic questioning techniques. |
| **Plenary** | 5-10 minutes | Invite reflection on the session from all pupils to encourage metacognition – teaching assistant will direct the session towards something observed in the session or listening.  
What went well? Why?  
What was challenging? How could you improve next time?  
How will the thinking skills be useful in another session? |
Appendix 2 – Stimulus – The Water Catcher (Buckley, 2010)
The Water Catcher

The quiet fisherman lived in a house on stilts, over a river, in a forest.

There was a small village of houses just like his. Usually, the river was full of fish and life was easy. The villagers would salt and dry some of the fish to keep it so that they did not go hungry when the fish had had enough of being eaten.

Then one day, the river stopped.

It happened quite quickly. In the morning, the river was flowing as it had always done. Then the river grew slower and slower, and the water dropped lower and lower. Lost toys that had been dropped from the houses started to show up on the river banks, and the children argued over them.

By the middle of the afternoon, the only water left sat in a few puddles, full of fish flapping and squirming over each other.

A meeting was held to decide what should be done. The villagers agreed that it was quite impossible for the sea to have sucked all the water out of the river. So they decided to send someone upstream to find out what had happened. The rest would collect as many fish as they could to salt and dry, in case it took a while for the water to come back.

They argued about who to send. Should it be the strongest, the fastest, the best fighter? In the end, they sent the quiet fisherman, because this story is about him, and because he had lived with his wife for many years, and no one had ever heard them argue.

He set off up the bed of the river into the hills. There were so many stranded fish that the birds and beasts of the forest and even the flies had eaten as much as they could. The leftover fish stank in the sunshine.

He walked for many miles, and then made camp for the night. He did the same the next day, and the next. And then he came to the place where the river had been stopped. Right from one bank to the other was what looked to him like a single smooth stone, but would look to you like a concrete dam.

On the other side of the dam, the river piled up on itself and spread out over the fields on either side. Some people were walking around the dam, looking very pleased with themselves. The quiet fisherman asked one, and then another, what was going on. They just stared at him and shrugged their shoulders, until they were able to find somebody that spoke his language.

"Isn’t it amazing!” the man said, beaming. He showed the fisherman how a lake of water was building behind the dam. The water from the lake would flow into channels cut into the fields, and then the crops of farmers like him would grow better than ever. All the people of the town would have plenty to eat, and more left over to sell. "Nobody in our town will ever go hungry again!” he said.

"But you have stolen our water,” said the fisherman, and explained about his village and that once the salted fish had run out, they would have nothing left to eat.

"What nonsense! We haven’t stolen the water, only caught it, the way you catch fish. Anyway, you can come and live with us!” said the farmer. "I used to be a fisherman too, but life here is much easier, especially now that we have water for our crops. I would never want to go back to the life you live again."

"What if the people of my village don’t want to be farmers?”

"That’s their problem. Surely you wouldn’t expect all of us to starve so that a few of you can live miserably in your wooden huts on stilts, instead of here in stone houses that are warm in the winter? I’ve never heard anything so selfish and stupid."

The quiet fisherman turned and walked back towards his village, thinking as he walked.

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Bibliography


