

Review of

Philosophical Inquiry with Children: The Development of an Inquiring Society in Australia

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Introduction

When a novel educational method is introduced, it soon travels to other countries. Certain methods fail to fit into some educational systems, administrations, and cultures, but others are welcomed by many educational practitioners and scholars to support existing educational needs and expectations. Philosophy for Children (P4C), originally developed in the U.S., can be located somewhere between these two trends. It has received great attention from scholars and practitioners alike as an innovative educational method to promote students' critical and creative thinking. However, it has presented contextualized obstacles, which philosophers, teachers, and practitioners have made considerable efforts to deal with when they have attempted to introduce P4C into their own environments.

There are some important books describing P4C in specific contexts, but their attention is usually paid to the way in which P4C creates a change in educational method and content and fits into a specific curriculum (e.g., Lewis & Chandley 2012). On the other hand, the book *Philosophical Inquiry with Children: The Development of an Inquiring Society in Australia* (Gilbert Burgh and Simone Thornton, 2018) describes how P4C has presented both opportunities and challenges for Australian society and how practitioners and researchers have jointly re-designed their own P4C practices. The book is not just a history book. Nor is it a book claiming a success story. Rather, what makes the book pathbreaking is that it shows how P4C has created an educational movement in Australia. Over the past 30 years, Australian P4C advocates have collaboratively dealt with countless educational, institutional, cultural, and political challenges. In doing so they have co-designed various strategies and approaches to innovate and renovate their own P4C style: the so-called Philosophy in Schools. Against this backdrop, this review aims to illustrate how P4C has created an educational movement in the Australian context.

History: From the U.S. to Australia

Philosophy for Children, widely known as P4C, which was pioneered by Matthew Lipman and a group of philosophers in the 1970s in the U.S., is known as a dialogue-based pedagogical practice in which students sit in a circle with their teacher (or a facilitator) and engage in collaborative inquiry based on open-ended philosophical questions (e.g., What is freedom?). Philosophical inquiry is different from

conversation and debate because it focuses on collaborative and cooperative reason–exchange, including presenting reasons, assisting each other in drawing inferences from unsupported opinions and from what has been said, and seeking to identify one another’s assumptions.

The overarching theme of the book is the way in which P4C created an educational movement in Australia. To illustrate this, the book is divided into 3 parts. Part 1 of the book (Chapter 1 to 5), “The Development of Philosophy for Children in Australia,” illustrates how P4C arrived in Australia from the U.S., drawing on key contributors’ experiences. Although they faced a series of obstacles (and even objections), their grassroots efforts subsequently enabled researchers, practitioners, philosophers, and teachers to deal with the challenges through collective and collaborative means.

Inspired by Lipman, some philosophers, particularly Laurance Splitter and Jennifer Glaser, started to expand the reach of P4C in Australia. Their attempts, which are recalled in Chapter 1, have created the foundation of today’s Philosophy in Schools movement across Australia. Non-profit organisations were established (e.g., the Australian Institute of Philosophy for Children [IAPC]), teacher-trainer workshops were organised, and P4C was introduced into Australian schools and universities. More importantly, Splitter and Glaser discuss some of the problems they faced at the infant stage of Australian P4C. These included, for example, the controversy between P4C advocates and “academic” philosophers on what counts as philosophy (Is this philosophy?); limited support for teachers (Can I practice P4C in my classroom despite my lack of formal philosophy training?); and limited opportunities for the creation of academic networks (How to research P4C?). Also, Glaser (with Anita Bass) notes in Chapter 2 that a huge effort was required of teachers to incorporate the P4C curriculum developed by Lipman and the IAPC into Australian classrooms.

In Chapter 5, Megan Laverty details how, in response to the above challenges, some scholars went overseas to learn more about P4C, while others stayed at home to design an Australian version. This enabled people to innovate multiple strategies. For the purpose of expanding the reach of P4C around the country, scholars and practitioners collaboratively evolved a federation of regional associations in response to socio-educational expectations and the requirements of P4C, which Splitter & Leckey describe in Chapter 3. The regional associations have played a significant role in the development of P4C in and beyond Australia by providing financial resources, running workshops and conferences, and, most importantly, developing the public profile of P4C. There was also an attempt to introduce a dedicated academic journal (e.g., *Critical & Creative Thinking*) to establish academic–practitioner networks. As Stephan Millett describes in Chapter 4, the journal project showed promise, but, unfortunately, the challenges proved greater than the opportunities. For example, in Australian academia, more value has been placed on “scientific,” “empirical,” and “evidence-based” research than on philosophy (including P4C).

Resources: Beyond Lipman?

Another challenge many teachers confronted was the lack of suitable curricular and pedagogical materials. In Lipman’s original P4C model, students read philosophical resources (originally a philosophical novel or philosophical stories-as-text) prior to the philosophical inquiry. However, the materials raised many controversies between philosophers, teachers, and P4C practitioners. Part 2 of the book (Chapter 6 to 11), “Ideas into Books,” focuses on the benefits and shortcomings of the Lipman/IAPC curriculum and

then considers the experimental use and development of resources, such as purpose written stories and teacher instruction manuals.

Lipman and his colleagues at the IAPC wrote many philosophical novels and accompanying teacher resource manuals to help students to think more philosophically. Splitter, in Chapter 6, analyses some of the benefits of the purposefully written story books, such as teaching oral communication, reading skills, and critical creative thinking skills. However, some scholars, such as Glaser in Chapter 7, also report that the IAPC curriculum “seemed at odds with the dominant approach to educate for these competencies” (p. 89). Clinton Golding, in Chapter 11 (particularly p. 133), highlights the problems with Lipman’s original resources in the Australian context. His argument can be summarised that: 1) IAPC curriculum were too American and somewhat dated; 2) the Australian educational curriculum was already too crowded, and thus the materials were “an unwelcome addition” (p. 133); 3) many people thought that the materials were not the only way of enabling genuine philosophical inquiry; and 4) busy teachers did not have the time to read them.

Lipman, together with Ann Margaret Sharp and others, wrote instruction manuals for teachers intended in part to mitigate these challenges, yet even these caused controversy. While “professional” philosophers organised teacher training sessions to transfer their philosophy knowledge to “amateur teachers,” Susan Wilks (Chapter 8) indicates that “Australian teachers questioned whether ‘outsiders’ could or should judge their competence at facilitating such a session and whether the IAPC model could ever work in the classrooms” (p. 101).

One solution suggested by Australian teachers, practitioners, and philosophers was to generate their own materials. Some leading practitioners, including Tim Sprod (Chapter 9) and Philip Cam (Chapter 10), recall how and why they developed their original shorter stories (e.g., science and philosophy stories) and instruction manuals for teachers with no background in philosophy. Golding also suggested a “handy” approach to P4C that did not lose sight of the philosophical aspect (Chapter 11, esp. p. 134). These efforts bridged the theory and practice of P4C in the Australian context, enabling more and more teachers to become involved in P4C and to be creative in developing new materials.

Philosophy in and Beyond Schools: Towards an Inquiring Society

Australian P4C advocates regard philosophical inquiry not only as a pedagogical method practised within the confines of the classroom, but also as an overarching project in which students, teachers and advocates from diverse sectors collaborate together in and beyond the school. Part 3 of the book (Chapter 12 to 17), “Philosophy in Schools,” showcases how the Philosophy in Schools movement became more collaborative and connective.

Having said that, Philosophy in Schools was not a straightforward project. Even though new materials are created by P4C advocates, there was still the lack of an environment where teachers with no background in philosophy could learn the practice of P4C to use the materials effectively. In Chapter 13, Janette Paulton summarises the tasks at hand: “how to encourage more formally qualified philosophers to become involved with P4C, how to provide sufficient numbers of highly qualified trainers to serve growth of interest in philosophy in schools, and how to develop and retain the current pool of experienced teacher–educators” (pp. 152–153). This set of questions motivated Australian P4C

scholars and the Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Association to innovate unique teacher training workshops across Australia to allow them to respond to the various needs and expectations of teachers and philosophers.

The state and national curricula presented other obstacles. Monica Bini, Peter Ellerton, Sue Knight, Stephan Millett, and Alan Tapper describe in Chapter 13 what P4C practitioners and teachers have confronted when they incorporate P4C into the school curriculum: a lack of sufficient and sustainable financial, institutional, and political/governmental support. In Chapter 14, Kate Kennedy et al. note that some schools employed a whole-school approach and successfully incorporated P4C into the curriculum. Although different states have different educational and political contexts, wholistic and systemic approaches suggested that P4C was possible in Australian schools. It should be emphasised, however, that the stories described in Chapters 13 and 14 imply that such whole-school P4C practice was possible in Australia because of the presence of highly dedicated individuals (teachers, school principals, and individual practitioners), despite the low national and public profile of P4C.

Against such a background, some practitioners have tried to develop a national and public profile for P4C through practical applications beyond the confines of the school walls. Selena Prior and Susan Wilks provide a number of examples in Chapter 15. These include philosophy clubs and camps, the Philosothon, the Ethics Olympiad, and the Public Philosophy Project. Such events and activities have attracted the interest of teachers and philosophers alike, and this has led to a growth in participation by students and teachers in the Philosophy in Schools movement.

Correspondingly, academics have gradually started research into P4C. As Stephan Millett, Rosie Scholl and Alan Tapper describe in Chapter 16, educational scholars, psychologists, philosophers, and sociologists have used empirical, normative, theoretical, qualitative, and quantitative methods to investigate P4C's educational and philosophical potential impacts. As a result, it is now perceived as a legitimate field of academic research. This is exemplified by the fact that P4C is taught in philosophy and education departments at several universities. However, as Jennifer Bleazby and Christina Slade point out in Chapter 17, in terms of the application of P4C in schools, "most cases were short-lived and faced a range of obstacles including staffing issues, viable student numbers and the perceived value of P4C and educational philosophy" (p. 228). Unfortunately, such problems persist, even though the above cases have apparently contributed to raising the public profile of P4C over the past three decades.

Conclusion

Many P4C-related books and articles tend to romanticise P4C's pedagogical potential. However, this book demonstrates that P4C faces more challenges than opportunities. As we have seen, a number of institutional, cultural, political, methodological, and academic barriers have prevented many advocates from introducing and practising P4C in and beyond schools. Having said that, the book also provides some important lessons. Its principal message is that P4C, just like any other novel educational practice, may lack longevity if we continue to categorise it as an innovation in pedagogical method and content. Australian P4C has survived, despite numerous challenges, because a number of dedicated teachers, philosophers, academics, and students have *movementised* it. By movementisation, the authors refer to a society-wide and wholistic approach, in conjunction with a grassroots meta-inquiry into how P4C ought to be taught/promoted/pursued in Australia. Such a wholistic approach, according to this book, is a key

to enable philosophers and practitioners to collaboratively overcome some of the obstacles P4C has faced, thereby building a healthy, sustainable and inquiring society.

As Gilbert Burgh and Simone Thornton note, “the purpose of this book is open dialogue” (p. 5) in the sense that the book does not draw a specific conclusion about what we should do in the face of contextualised obstacles. However, the theoretical and practical implications that arise from the book are sure to be a must-read in the growing field of P4C studies and practices. This is because this book offers a robust and refined picture of P4C to anyone keen to understand how P4C fits into a specific educational, cultural, and political context. Its contribution is particularly timely and important for some countries that try to employ a wholistic approach to P4C intended to create a more supportive environment for P4C practitioners.¹ This book offers a good starting point to realise not only an inquiring school community but an inquiring society/world.

References

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About the Author

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¹ In Japan, for example, scholars and practitioner have jointly established a researcher-practitioner association (Japanese Association for Philosophical Practice (<http://philosophicalpractice.jp>), non-profit organisation (Ardacoda (<http://ardacoda.com>)) and a practitioners' association (p4c Japan (<http://p4c-japan.com/en/>)) intended to develop a national profile of P4C across Japan.