Philosophy for children in the service of self-determination, well-being and mental health in elementary schools: Perspectives from clinical child psychology

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Introduction

In Canada, 20% of elementary and high school students suffer from mental health problems that lead to difficulties with academic and psychosocial adjustment (Fédération Canadienne de l'Enseignement, 2012). In Quebec specifically, 12% of high school students have a diagnosis of a mental health disorder, such as anxiety, depression or attention deficit disorder (Pica et al., 2013). Unsurprisingly, these difficulties compromise youth's academic success and amplify problems with social relationships at school (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2014). In light of these challenges, it makes sense to identify interventions with the potential to promote better mental health among youth. Philosophy for Children (P4C), although not developed with mental health in mind, shows encouraging results in terms of its effects on youth's well-being. What's more, it promotes the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of self-determination, competence and affiliation, considered to be a good indicator of an individual's well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory

SDT is a macro-theory of the psychology of motivation and human functioning, within which three basic psychological needs are said to be fundamental or essential to well-being: the needs for self-determination (also known as the need for autonomy; the desire to feel in control of one's own actions, to act in accordance with one's interests and values), competence (having the feeling of having an impact on one's environment) and affiliation (feeling connected to others; having a sense of belonging). The degree of satisfaction of each of these needs is considered a good indicator of an individual's well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Several decades of research in the context of SDT show that satisfaction of these needs, particularly the need for self-determination, is linked to motivation, perseverance and academic success in elementary and high school students (Niemec & Ryan, 2009).

Existential Psychology

The challenges related to self-determination, such as the endeavor to lead a life in accordance with one's beliefs and values, are integral to existential psychology (Jacobsen, 2008; Yalom, 1980), which can be defined as the capacity to shape your own existence in the here and now by recognizing your strengths and weaknesses, comprehending them, and subsequently adjusting your behaviour and way of life (OPQ, 2016). While this approach differs from the self-determination theory mentioned earlier, it's important to recognize that in both cases, individual self-determination remains a core concept, notably through the awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the factors that promote or hinder self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2004). Moreover, self-determination theory enables the empirical study of themes central to existential psychology, such as the satisfaction of the need for self-determination. However, existential psychology was not conceived and developed for use with youth. In this sense, it seems that P4C enables existential psychology to be adapted for use with children.

Philosophy for Children and Existential Psychology

P4C is an approach centered on the practice of dialogue, designed to enable students to develop their ability to think by and for themselves (Lefrançois & Éthier, 2008). The practice of this form of dialogue allows for an informed awareness of one's own thoughts and emotions (Sasseville & Gagnon, 2007; Vansieleghem, & Masschelein, 2010). P4C also aims to foster the process of self-determination in youth through in-depth reflection on moral issues, personal values and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (Lefrançois, 2006; Lefrançois & Ethier, 2006; Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2021; Topping & Trickey, 2007; Vansieleghem & Kennedy, 2011). Thus, considering that the primary aim of P4C is to provide a pedagogical context in which children are encouraged to think independently about subjects that interest them, fostering greater intellectual and affective autonomy, it serves as a means to promote the self-determination of students. Moreover, from an existential psychology perspective, P4C enables us to support children in the questions they ask themselves about human existence, since they too ask existential questions. With this in mind, and in light of the potential impact of P4C on self-determination, our research team looked at the potential of P4C as an intervention for adapting existential psychology to youth, and assessing its impact on their mental health and well-being.

1. Overview of our Research Team's Research

Over the years, our research team has carried out several projects focusing on the impact of P4C on children's mental health, well-being and self-determination. Begun before the COVID-19 pandemic, we initially designed an intervention with themes closely related to psychology (and existential psychology, at that): normalcy; sadness; anger; separation; pride/shame; happiness/unhappiness; death and bereavement; making mistakes; growing up/identity. Our interventions took place once a week, over a period of 8 to 10 weeks, depending on the availability of the classes recruited. Workshops lasted an average of 45 to 60 minutes. Although the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic

considerably hampered our work at the time (by compromising and rendering unusable a large-scale data collection from over 300 primary school students across Quebec), we were nevertheless able to publish the results of two studies, conducted with students in kindergarten for 4-year-olds and students in grades 1 to 3 (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2020; Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2021).

The results of the first study did not show that P4C was more effective than the passage of time in improving the mental health of 4-year-old children (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2020). Additionally, our experience in implementing this project highlighted the difficulties inherent in conducting quantitative research with young children. In fact, since they couldn't read and therefore couldn't complete questionnaires, we asked the teachers to complete questionnaires for each pupil. In this context, it became impossible to measure the impact of the intervention on self-determination (which is too internalized a concept to be evaluated by a third party). Thus, we were unable to obtain data on the impact of P4C workshops on self-determination in this sample.

The results of the second study, for their part, showed that P4C workshops had a significant impact, with large effect sizes, in reducing anxiety and increasing the satisfaction of the need for autonomy in elementary school students from grades 1 to 3 (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2021). Indeed, when compared to the scores of children of the same age placed on a waiting list, students who took part in P4C workshops showed significant improvements in mental health and well-being. Considering that P4C was not developed to have an impact on children's mental health, it was important for us to try and understand why we had obtained such results. We opted to examine these findings within the context of existential psychology research. Indeed, with adults, existential therapy can reduce anxiety and increase the meaning of life (Vos et al., 2015). Structured (or manualized) existential therapy also enables adults to notice, recognize, express and manage psychological distress, including anxiety (Classen et al., 2008; Kissane et al., 2007). Finally, in experiential existential therapy, the focus is on recognizing one's existential thoughts, with similar results in terms of improved mental health (Van Der Pompe et al., 2001). Thus, in light of the results obtained with adults, it is possible to suggest that the results obtained in our own studies of P4C among elementary school students are based on similar mental health mechanisms. It might therefore make sense to consider P4C as a surrogate intervention for carrying out existential psychology-based interventions with children.

In spring 2020, during the first wave of containment of the COVID-19 pandemic, our school partners (principals and teachers) asked our team to rethink our P4C intervention to now include themes relevant to the pandemic context. As a result, we designed a short intervention covering the following themes: Why we go to school; Freedom and rules; What it means to be old; Death and mourning; Fear. Given the health context, we delivered the intervention online, remotely, via a telecommunications platform, in real time. Ten elementary school classes from kindergarten to grade 6 in two different schools took part in the study, in which we compared the P4C intervention with a mindfulness intervention. The results of this cluster-randomized trial showed that the P4C intervention had a significantly different and greater impact than the mindfulness intervention in improving students' mental health (including anxiety, depression and inattention), while conversely, the mindfulness

intervention had a significantly different and greater impact than the P4C intervention in improving the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. These results therefore suggest the complementarity of P4C and attentive presence, and the potential value of combining the approaches to have a greater impact on children's mental health and well-being (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2020).

2. Current Projects and Future Research

As we move resolutely into a post-pandemic context, our themes of study are bound to evolve and transform. As we maintain our commitment to children's mental health and self-determination, our research team is currently exploring the effects of arts-based interventions, both in isolation and in conjunction with P4C, on youth.

2.1. P4C, Arts and Eco-Anxiety

Exploring the theme of eco-anxiety and children's experiences in relation to the climate crisis is now an important part of our current research incorporating P4C. Indeed, children seem particularly vulnerable to the distress engendered by eco-anxiety, which refers to the emotions that can be felt by a person when they see the effects of human action on the environment or anticipate future upheavals (Pikhala, 2020). Our studies indicate that children experience sadness, anger and fear in response to climate change, and that their perception of the future includes destruction and negative changes (Léger-Goodes et al., 2021). In addition, their parents tend to avoid discussing climate change with them and mistakenly believe that their children are not concerned about it, whereas they clearly express the need to talk about it at school. These results therefore support the need to create safe spaces to recognize and talk about these emotions, and to offer psychological interventions, adapted to elementary school children, that address their concerns about eco-anxiety, while giving them tools to manage it in the context of climate change. It would appear that the space for dialogue inherent in the P4C can meet this need.

Work with adults suggests that it is crucial to create a space for the expression of emotions related to climate change, and that interventions are all the more beneficial when they take place in a group (Baudon & Jachens, 2021). Similarly, work on art therapy suggests the potential benefits of using such a practice to encourage the expression of emotions felt in connection with climate change. It is therefore possible to hypothesize that children might also respond positively to group interventions rooted in both art therapy and emotional expression as promoted by P4C.

2.2. Why use P4C to Talk to Youth about Climate Change?

As mentioned above, like adults, children seek to make sense of their lives and the world around them (Demers & Sinclair, 2015). Thus, P4C workshops focused on climate change could have similar benefits to those we previously observed on well-being, by getting youth to question themselves about issues related to the climate crisis and to face, straightforwardly, their existential questioning on this subject. Indeed, our previous research work, presented above, allows us to conclude that P4C activities confront children with existential questioning, lead them to reflect and formulate their own

thoughts in relation to these, improving their well-being and fostering their self-determination. Furthermore, findings from the literature on the mental health impacts of art therapy, as well as our own prevention research into the evaluation of interventions to promote children's well-being, tend to indicate that it is when several modalities are combined that the beneficial impact on children is greatest (Van Lith, 2016; Wang & Xiao, 2021 & Malboeuf- Hurtubise et al., 2021).

2.3. Using P4C in Art Therapy Research

More recently, our team has also become interested in the intersection of art therapy and P4C, particularly in relation to the incorporation of P4C within the creative process inherent in art therapy (Abel, 2012). Firstly, we are now working to incorporate P4C within our studies of the arts in school contexts to use P4C prior to the creative process, with the aim of stimulating youth's thinking and creativity. Secondly, we also wish to incorporate P4C into arts-based interventions during the creative process, in order to enrich youth's introspection into their creative process and their reflexive process during the creation of works. Although we're still in the early stages of this new research angle, we hypothesize that the introspection generated by the practice of P4C will enable an enriched creative and artistic process in the youth taking part in our studies. This, in turn, has the potential to multiply the potential impact of the interventions deployed on their mental health, self-determination and well-being.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to unveil P4C's potential as a valuable clinical intervention for children. Our exploration of P4C within the context of clinical child psychology has provided compelling insights into the intricate interplay between philosophical dialogue, self-determination theory, and existential psychology. To illustrate how P4C enables existential psychology to be adapted to youth, we presented a comprehensive overview of several studies conducted by our research team from 2019 to the present day. P4C emerges as a beacon of enlightenment, engaging young minds in profound contemplation of their existence, values, and the world around them. Our research has consistently demonstrated its beneficial impact on children's well-being by increasing the satisfaction of their need for self-determination while reducing their anxiety levels. This reaffirms P4C's significance as a meaningful tool within the realm of clinical child psychology. Furthermore, the fusion of art therapy and P4C introduces a novel approach to deepen children's introspection during the creative process, amplifying its beneficial effects on children's mental health (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2021). In closing, as we unveil the beneficial impact of P4C on children's well-being, it becomes clear that we've merely scratched the surface of its potential in clinical child psychology. In the world of philosophy and psychology, as in life, let us conclude not with an ending, but with an exciting beginning.

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