

Royaume-Uni : Report for UNESCO on Philosophy in Primary Schools in UK

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Prior to 1990 no primary school in UK was offering philosophy as part of their curriculum. A few individual teachers had done some philosophical work with their classes, but this would have been regarded as rather eccentric. After all, hardly any philosophy was offered at secondary schools at this time. (Nowadays many high schools do offer philosophy courses, often in combination with Religious Studies, and these are steadily gaining in popularity.)

There was, however, a small group of educators, including Robert Fisher, then director of the Thinking Skills centre at Brunel University, who were experimenting with P4C (Philosophy for Children), and they received a considerable boost in 1990 when the BBC produced an hour-long documentary about P4C, called 'Socrates for 6 year olds', which was seen by a wide audience. Over 2000 people wrote to the BBC after the programme enquiring whether P4C was practised in the UK, and this led to the founding in 1991 of a national charity called SAPERE (Society for Advancing Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education) to promote the practice.

At about the same time a centre for philosophical inquiry was established in Glasgow, where Dr. Catherine McCall, who featured in the BBC programme, had begun work with Scottish children and parents. Her work was remarkably successful, but unfortunately she had a serious car accident, and this hindered progress for several years in Scotland. Recently, however, she has found new energy and opportunity to promote P4C, both in running courses for primary teachers and in creating a new resource for Personal and Social education in secondary schools which is being widely distributed.

In England, within three years of the founding of SAPERE, a 3-level training structure for teachers was established, based on the model developed by Professor Matthew Lipman, originator of the P4C programme. This training encourages the approach to teaching and learning philosophy that Lipman called 'communities of enquiry', but it does not insist that teachers use the Lipman materials. Instead, they are encouraged to select materials themselves - often stories, but sometimes films, pictures or works of art - that will stimulate philosophical questions and discussions.

This training structure has proved both popular and robust. In the 12 years or so of its existence, over 10,000 teachers have passed through the basic, 2 day, training and gone on to practise effectively in their schools. About 1 in 10 of these have proceeded to the 4 day, Level 2, training, which is followed by action research and a written assignment, evaluating their own practice. The quality of this professional development is indicated by the fact that the Level 2 course is validate as a module at Masters level by Oxford Brookes University, which is where SAPERE is now based.

The value of P4C, moreover, is increasingly being recognised by head teachers and educational advisers up and down the country, and SAPERE is continuing to expand its number of registered trainers (now 40+) and provision of courses. Educators are seeing its value in different aspects of the curriculum.

Primarily, P4C is still seen as a leading approach to the development of 'thinking skills'. Its capacity to stimulate creative as well as critical thinking in young minds was well shown in 'Socrates for 6 year olds', but is continually being revealed in observations of practice. When OFSTED, the national schools inspectorate, observes P4C it unfailingly commends the teachers and the schools for incorporating P4C into its curriculum, even though it is still not officially required.

Secondly, it is now seen that philosophical enquiries not only extend children's thinking, but also encourage them to express that thinking in speech. Children who would otherwise hesitate for fear of getting 'the wrong answer', are encouraged and gain confidence when they realise that they can talk of their experience and perspective without those being 'marked down'. So, P4C is sometimes adopted specifically to develop children's listening and speaking skills.

A third attraction of the process is that, through collaborating in a community of enquiry, - learning to respect others' perspectives and feelings - children develop both socially and emotionally at a faster rate. They become more patient with others, and more able to reflect upon their own feelings and behaviour.

A fourth value of the process is precisely that it enables and encourages children to develop a personal value base, through hearing different values expressed and reasoned about. The reasoning ensures that the values are thought through and not simply adopted out of fashion or simplicity. The steady scrutiny of values by the community contributes to the rigour of the process, but also to an appreciation of how a larger community, such as a democracy, needs to accommodate different values and perspectives. In short, many schools espouse P4C for its democratic credentials.

How many schools exactly? It has not been possible to audit practice very accurately, but it is estimated that 2,000 - 3,000 schools in England, Scotland and Wales have P4C in their curriculum, and there is every reason to suppose that this number will continue to grow significantly as the various national curricula move further in the direction of skills-based learning and teaching.

And what is the hard evidence that P4C accelerates children's learning of skills? Perhaps the best came from a study of 18 primary schools in Clackmannanshire, Scotland in 2002 / 3. In an evaluation conducted by a senior psychologist and the department of education, Dundee University, some of the findings were:

- A whole population of children gained on average 6 standard points on a measure of cognitive abilities after 16 months of weekly enquiry (1hr per week).

- Pupils and teachers perceived significant gains in communication, confidence, concentration, participation and social behaviour following 6 months of enquiry.
- Pupils doubled their occurrence of supporting their views with reasons over a 6 month period.
- Teachers doubled their use of open-ended questions over a six month period.
- When pupils left primary school they did not have any further enquiry opportunities yet their improved cognitive abilities were still sustained two years into secondary school.
- Pupils increased their level of participation in classroom discussion by half as much again following six months of weekly enquiry.

These and other such results have been presented to the UK government, via the Innovations Unit at the Department for Education and Skills, and the response has been encouraging. SAPERE is not currently seeking for philosophical inquiry to be mandatory within the primary curriculum, but it is hopeful of increasing support for teachers in their initial training, as well as in continuing professional development, to be introduced to the skills of facilitating enquiry; and perhaps within 5 years there would be enough teachers with the skills themselves to justify a strong recommendation, if not requirement, that all school make provision for the philosophical education of the country's youngest citizens.