A brief history of p4c, especially in the UK

By Steve Williams

The origins of Philosophy for Children

Philosophy for Children first emerged in the United States in 1972 from the work of Professor Matthew Lipman and his colleagues at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) in Montclair University, New Jersey. The IAPC was part of the Department of Philosophy and Religion (Lipman, 2008, p. 121), and there were contributions from the Department of Education where Lipman's main collaborator, Ann Sharp, was a professor. Initial funding came from the National Endowment for the Humanities and continued from other sources. At that time, as now, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the 'state of education'. There was also a growing interest among educators in 'critical thinking' and 'informal logic' as means of enabling students to 'think for themselves' in preparation for life and further learning.

Following the pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, Lipman believed that education should not only be a preparation for future living but also a process of living:

> '… present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. It conceives of the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future; the child must do these things for the sake of something else he is to do; they are mere preparation. As a result they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative' (Dewey, 1987).

It was inevitable, then, that Lipman envisaged more than limited programmes for the teaching of critical thinking or informal logic. He believed that the practice of philosophising about life and learning should be stimulating and worthwhile. It would cultivate fallibilism and reasonable judgement, both in the present and for the future (see Lipman, 1988, 2003, 2008). To these ends, he made two impressive innovations in the creation of his P4C programme.

Philosophical novels

Lipman wrote 'novels' to bring philosophical topics alive for students. The young characters in these works talked about the same kinds of perplexing questions he hoped student readers might raise if they were sensitive to philosophical dimensions of their experience. Characters exemplify the practice of inquiring together into questions that matter to them; they demonstrate ways to make that inquiry more rewarding by sharing opinions, giving reasons, considering the reasons of others, asking for examples, questioning assumptions and testing hypotheses. Their teachers are depicted as an important source of intellectual encouragement and stimulation. Lipman hoped all of education could be like this: intellectually encouraging, respectful of the concerns of young people and effective in strengthening their powers of judgement.

The novels, like Plato's dialogues, are open-ended and packed with twists and turns of philosophical argument so as to interest readers and prompt them to reconsider their own presuppositions. Children are

invited to engage with the voices in the text as well as with those of their own peers and teachers. Lipman wanted the novels to be:

> ' a challenge to teachers as well as pupils. If both groups were to find them interesting, there would be discussions of the texts, in which both teachers and pupils would participate. Such discussions could revolve around different interpretations' (Lipman, 2008, p. 118).

Thus, from the start, P4C was seen as a practice undertaken jointly by teachers and pupils. The novels mediated two things to both groups: aspects of the discipline of philosophy and the practice of P4C.

Community of Inquiry

What sort of practice did Lipman envisage? He took a phrase from another American Pragmatist philosopher, Charles Peirce, which suggested a direction – 'the community of inquiry'. Lipman wrote: 'what impressed itself upon me . . . was the practice implied by the phrase', that of participants (the model from Peirce being scientists) who 'operated under two sets of requirements, one being the requirements of inquiry itself and the other being the requirements of communal life' (2008, p. 118). There is respect for others as people but also a concern to offer one's ideas up for scrutiny.

Routines, manuals and training

These two central features of the IAPC programme – the novels and the community of inquiry – were supported by classroom routines for questioning and dialogue, extensive manuals for teachers with focused tasks and advice, and training networks bringing together teachers and philosophy graduates.

Lipman and his colleagues took the training of teachers very seriously. They wanted to preserve a respect for the two overlapping and constituent practices of P4C – philosophising and teaching. Lipman was clear on the one hand that he 'knew enough to reject the idea of using children's classrooms as a dumping ground for unemployed and untrained philosophers' who had 'never been exposed to an hour of preparation for teaching' (2008, p. 130).

On the other hand, he saw that most teachers were untrained in philosophising. They needed to become familiar with some of the philosophical ideas behind the novels, see the materials and routines used in schools and access some support when they tried out the programme with their own students. Lipman wanted to work with teachers who were 'disposed to examine ideas, to engage in dialogical inquiry and to respect the humanity of children being taught' (2008, p. 131).

To this end, he engaged people with a strong philosophy background as 'teacher educators' who also acted as school 'philosophers in residence'. Teacher educators took a course at the IAPC to prepare them to work with children and teachers and to become familiar with the course materials.

Teachers observed the philosophers in residence and took a substantial course in preparation for teaching the programme and working for a community of inquiry. Teachers used the materials with their pupils and received feedback from the teacher educators. Networks of teachers were established in order to facilitate ongoing contact, information and support.

These innovations, in combination, provided the launch pad for P4C world-wide. In some countries, including the United Kingdom, the practice was amended to varying degrees.

Of the original Lipman initiative, we can agree with Alex Kozulin that it 'can be considered content-based because it is grounded in specific content material (a philosophical novel). Its originality is in constructing this material rather than taking ready-made material from classical sources such as Plato's dialogues or Descartes' Method' (Kozulin, 1998, pp. 82–3). As we can see, however, it is much more than only a content-based programme.

P4C starts in the United Kingdom

P4C came to the attention of teachers in the United Kingdom with the screening of the BBC documentary 'Socrates for Six-Year-Olds' in 1990 (BBC, 1990). It presented Lipman and his colleagues – most notably, Catherine McCall – putting their programme into practice in local New Jersey schools. Many viewers were impressed not only with the theory but also with the practice and the outcomes of P4C. Pupils from 6 to 13 seemed to become more willing and able to reason together. Some appeared to enjoy and value their philosophy sessions and many performed better in a range of assessments.

In response to the documentary, at least 2,000 people requested more information. An initial meeting took place for those who could attend and in 1991 an organisation was set up to develop P4C in the United Kingdom. SAPERE (Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education) was, in contrast to the IAPC, a network of individuals rather than a special unit attached to a university. A majority of members were teachers keen to incorporate the practice of P4C into their work with children and teenagers. Some people in the United Kingdom had been doing P4C before SAPERE was formed and they took a leading role in the organisation.

It was set up without outside funding and has continued to survive for 20 years as a self-reliant charitable organisation. In the early 1990s, SAPERE focused on making links with the IAPC and inviting guest speakers and trainers to Britain. As local expertise in the practice of P4C grew, SAPERE organised courses led by UK trainers, developed its own course materials and supported – with conferences and publications – the relatively small network of teachers trying out P4C.

After appropriate training, some secondary teachers in the United Kingdom successfully trialled materials from the IAPC programme (Williams, 1993). However, some drawbacks to using the novels became apparent.

- They were not as engaging for either children or teachers as Lipman had hoped. And if the materials did not inspire interest, then there were no alternatives to draw upon.
- The programme of novels, exercises and discussion plans demanded a great deal of time to get through.
- The materials were not very amendable to fit a range of curriculum designs or topics, nor were they appropriately adaptable to the interests of pupils because most of the available time is taken up working through the given materials.

In the early 1990s P4C had made a tentative beginning in the UK, though the environment was not particularly supportive. Teachers were still coming to terms with the introduction of the National Curriculum after the Education Reform Act of 1988. Timetable space for P4C was understandably hard to achieve. It would be true to say that, for teachers in those early days, commitment to P4C was not a route

to professional advancement. Many reluctantly gave up in order to pursue more traditional channels of career progression. Nonetheless, a core of P4C enthusiasts continued to experiment, educate themselves pedagogically and philosophically, maintain networks and introduce the practice to others via training courses and conferences. They were supported by a handful of academics in philosophy or education departments of universities.

UK developments

Philosophy with Picture Books: Philosopher and educator Karin Murris had been working on using picture books rather than specially written novels as the starting point for philosophising. In 1992 she wrote 'Teaching Philosophy with Picture Books' (Murris, 1992). Following the IAPC, she produced a manual of exercises and teacher guidance, with recommendations about books to use. She argued that picture books were appealing to children, familiar to teachers, had potential to stimulate philosophical dialogue and could fit easily into the primary school curriculum. Teachers and children often talked together about picture books; now they could add a valuable philosophical dimension to their dialogues. All the rest of Lipman's innovations were maintained: the community of enquiry, the manuals, the regular routines, the training and networks.

Teachers who tried out 'Teaching Philosophy with Picture Books' in primary schools were impressed with the results. They reported that children seemed to become more able to reason, more curious, more confident in expressing their views and more willing to listen to others. In 1994 a research project sponsored by Dyfed County Council in South Wales found that children involved in the approach gained in thinking, listening and language skills and also self-confidence, particularly when discussing ideas (Dyfed, 1994).

Karin Murris and Joanna Haynes have continued to develop P4C with picture books both in practice (see Murris and Haynes, 2002) and in theory (Haynes and Murris, 2011).

A wider circle of primary schools took up this initiative and, again, achieved good results. Other materials, such as folk tales, poems, short stories, news items and philosophical dialogues, became available. Once the link with the novels was broken, teachers began to experiment with their own choices of story, with short films, images, objects, role-play and drama. Educationalist Robert Fisher produced a popular series of books for primary schools using folk tales and poems (see Fisher, 1996, 1997). He also wrote a popular introduction to the field (Fisher, 2003).

P4C in the United Kingdom became not so much a content-based programme presenting philosophy to children via a set text but rather a practice involving teachers and pupils exploring the philosophical dimensions in their shared experiences – not only of shared stories and films but also going beyond those to questions arising from other subject areas and their lives, beliefs and interests beyond school, unmediated by any set text.

In secondary schools, teachers used the community of inquiry ideal and the routines for dialogue. They built on ideas they had encountered on P4C training courses to find philosophical dimensions in their own subject areas and also to improve the reasoning of their students. They, too, were impressed with the results. They often found P4C to be complementary to their own disciplines.

The practice of P4C is now undertaken in many schools in the United Kingdom to varying degrees. In some, the most basic elements are used simply to enhance speaking and listening and encourage reasoning. In others, where teachers are disposed to examine ideas with young people in a philosophical way and work towards a community of enquiry, P4C has a greater impact. However, is also the case that although some schools take up the training, teachers do not go on to implement P4C because of they are under multiple pressures. It is certainly true that teachers are often expected to implement many new initiatives. It is not surprising if some fall by the wayside.

P4C.COM as part of the tradition

Matthew Lipman has been very generous in his support for and engagement with all those people who have shared his vision of making the resources of philosophy available to children and young people. Neither he, nor the IAPC, have tried to restrict development of p4c by insisting that it is an exclusive commercial brand name. On this site we differentiate the IAPC program and other developments by the use of capitals: Philosophy for Children (P4C) for the IAPC materials and philosophy for children (p4c) for the tradition in general and in all its variety.

We see p4c.com as part of the p4c tradition and as a support for people who want to experiment and collaborate with a range of materials and ideas, including those of the IAPC.

Other approaches in the United Kingdom

Community of Philosophical Inquiry: Dr Catherine McCall is a Scottish philosopher who worked with Matthew Lipman on the P4C programme at Montclair University in the 1980s and appeared in 'Socrates for Six-Year-Olds' showcasing Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI), her own methodology (see McCall, 2009). As with the IAPC programme, CoPI uses specially written novels to stimulate philosophical dialogue, particularly in the early stages of work with participants. Later, other stimuli are introduced including works of literature and the visual arts.

Dr McCall works not only with children but also with businesses and community groups. In 1990, she set up the European Philosophical Enquiry Centre (EPIC) to implement CoPI in schools and in the community, and the Postgraduate Centre for Philosophical Inquiry at Glasgow University to teach and to supervise Ph.D. research in CoPI. Postgraduate education in CoPI is now continuing at Strathclyde University under the leadership of Dr Claire Cassidy. Dr McCall now travels throughout the world introducing CoPI to new constituencies.

The Philosophy Foundation: The Philosophy Foundation is a charity that trains philosophy graduates to do philosophy in schools and facilitates their visits.

The Philosophy Foundation develops its own materials, often in the form of stories, to stimulate dialogue with young people. Many of the themes covered in the stories are taken from well-known philosophical puzzles and paradoxes. The foundation's aim is to develop children's 'autonomous learning skills and higher-order thinking skills' with a view to them applying those skills elsewhere.

Further resources

A comparison of approaches to P4C in the United Kingdom: 'Get 'em while they're young', in the Philosophers' Magazine: www.philosophypress.co.uk/?p=1186

SAPERE website: www.sapere.org.uk

Epic website: www.epic-original.com

Philosophy Foundation Website: www.thephilosophyshop.co.uk

IAPC website: http://cehs.montclair.edu/academic/iap

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