The impact of philosophical enquiry with children on development education

Philosophical enquiry uses clearly identified teacher responses to children's dialogue in order to develop specific thinking skills. It has particular relevance to citizenship education as it teaches children how to handle, and engage with, moral and ethical issues as well as more traditional thinking skills associated with logic and reason. In this article Chris Rowley and Jane Yates aim to place philosophical enquiry with children as central to developing rigorous approaches towards collaborative dialogue in the classroom.

In addition to outlining the key elements of Philosophy for Children this article presents a critique of Michael Storm's article (DEJ, October 2000) arguing that he makes a false distinction between process and content in development education. Furthermore, we build upon Sue Lyle's article (DEJ, Oct 2000) by identifying the specific techniques that teachers can use to ensure that the process of dialogue is as rigorously monitored as the content. We include a section on evaluation of the approach as a result of work done in schools.

Introduction

Working in the fields of both Development Education (DE) and Philosophy for Children (P4C), we both see great potential in the use of the rigorous methods of the latter to achieve some of the aims of the former, particularly those related to global citizenship. We have identified a number of characteristics of the methodology of philosophy for children, but also believe that development education needs to recognise its real potential and ensure that some staff are properly trained in the methodology if it is to take seriously the implications of this type of work. Training is available through SAPERE (see references).

The use of collaborative dialogue is a fundamental aspect of the process of philosophical enquiry for children. Collaborative dialogue is a tool that is used in many DE processes, such as through discussion, where children generate and share ideas on a particular topic; and debate, where children might talk about two or more sides of an argument; or circle time, where the emphasis is on providing all children with the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions. In both discussion and debate, the content is often based on real life issues, which have been selected by the teacher. In circle time, the stimulus usually comes from the concerns and ideas of the children.

Philosophical enquiry for children uses a structure of collaborative dialogue called a 'community of enquiry' (Sharp 1988). In the first instance, children sit in a circle and share in the reading of a narrative, which is usually a fictional story. However, other approaches are increasingly being used such as drama, images, art and news stories. The narrative not only serves as a stimulus for children to suggest a series of philosophical questions, but also acts as a new and common experience that all children (and the teacher) have participated in.

In the discussion and debate of real life issues, the children and teacher will have differing levels of knowledge, understanding and experience of an issue. It could be argued that this will affect their interest and motivation towards participation in the dialogue. In the case of philosophical enquiry for children, the content often comes from the narrative of a story and thus enables the discussion to be distanced from real life, yet in the long run informing those issues through having taught the child to think through them more rigorously. The philosophical questions provide the essential ingredient for stimulating children's thoughts and ideas by tapping into their natural curiosity for asking questions that focus on establishing meaning. The children select one question, usually through a process of voting. With practice the teacher can encourage increasingly philosophical questions which tackle fundamental areas of our life. Help in identifying such questions is found in many of the texts on this approach (for example Cam, 1995).

In this way, the children immediately have ownership of the content of the dialogue that follows. The child that suggested the selected question begins the dialogue, explaining why they chose the question, giving reasons, perhaps relating to the content of the story or to their own personal experiences. The rest of the children are invited to respond to what has been said (rather than adding a new idea, as is often the case in discussion or circle time).

Some features of a community of enquiry
Participants:
- accept corrections by peers willingly
- are able to listen to others attentively
- are able to develop their own ideas without fear of rebuff or humiliation
- show concern for the rights of others to express their views
- show concern for consistency when arguing a point of view
- show respect for persons in the community
- show sensitivity for context when discussing moral conduct
- ask for reasons from their peers
- can discuss issues with impartiality.

Extracts from: "What is a Community of Enquiry?" (Sharp 1988)

The role of the teacher in facilitating the community of enquiry

The main difference between other forms of collaborative dialogue, such as discussion, debate and circle time to a community of enquiry, is the crucial role of the teacher. The teacher is not seen as the carrier of knowledge, but is required to learn alongside the children. Lipman (1991) advises that the teacher must adopt the attitude that any child, at any moment, might say something of deep significance. Although the teacher becomes part of the community of enquiry, with the role of 'instructor' relinquished, their role is far from passive. The teacher must rigorously facilitate the environment and interactions to enhance the children's learning.

This description of a community of enquiry is not a process that 'just happens'. Like circle time, the children are introduced to a process where they are encouraged to listen, value and respect each other's ideas, even if they do not necessarily agree. In a community of enquiry this is generally done by the teacher consistently modelling the behaviour that they would expect the children to adopt. For example, when children first suggest their philosophical questions, the teacher must avoid rephrasing questions. The teacher encourages the children to begin to accept that their first response may not be the best one, as it is okay to be wrong. Fallibility is seen as an essential part of the process in terms of children having the ability to change their ideas.

Using philosophical enquiry to develop ethical reasoning

The teacher can help to give the children the skills of ethical enquiry by means of the following:

The Tools of Ethical Enquiry
- Empathy (How would you feel in this situation?)
- Universalising (What if everyone were to do this?)
- Anticipating consequences (What do you think would happen if?)

How philosophical enquiry for children has influenced my work as a development education schools worker

I was first introduced to P4C whilst working at Cumbria Development Education Centre some seven years ago. My work then involved a project to develop classroom materials for exploring the positive stories behind Oxfam Fair Trade products. This included developing a set of pictures that showed a group of young girls who were making a set of bamboo curtains in Vietnam. The pupils were particularly interested and surprised that the Vietnam girls looked very happy in their work, especially as the only images that the pupils had seen of children in other countries working were very negative, such as bonded labour. The children found out later that the girls went to school in the morning and then worked in the afternoon to help their families. This led to a range of questions and subsequent dialogues that explored the meaning of the word 'work'. The following questions were raised:

- What is work?
- Is there a difference between work and school?
- Can children ever be happy to work?
- Should children be allowed to work?
- Is there ever a time when children shouldn't work?
- Should children in other countries be allowed to work?
- Is working different for children in other countries than where we live?

The subsequent dialogue and activities encouraged pupils to develop a greater awareness of not only the 'concept' of work, but also the issues surrounding work around the world and develop their own moral views on children working. The pupils also made distinctions between different sorts of work, including 'work' that they themselves did at home.

From these small beginnings I realised the potential of P4C for development education. Indeed, in many ways I recognised similarities with development education, particularly the process-based approach. However, P4C has enabled me to add real depth to the children's learning, focussing on specific meaning-building of concepts, as well as the issues. It is often difficult to make development issues meaningful to children, and although there are many practical development education activities, the emphasis is mostly on physical involvement rather than 'mindful' involvement. At times, I have personally found that some development education activities for complex issues can be too simplistic.

P4C has influenced not only the desire to use a community of enquiry as a tool, but it has also influenced my whole approach to talking to children. For example, I try to use the tools of enquiry in talking to children. Following a lesson where the children looked at a range of photos of Africa from development education packs, a child asked "Why don't people in Africa have 'proper' chairs?" This led to a dialogue with the rest of the class on exploring the use of the word proper and what this meant to different people in different situations. The outcome being that they understood they had made an assumption that their definition of 'proper' was only viewed in terms of their own values, rather than others in the world. Such dialogues, I hope, are helping to counteract the sometimes 'negative' attitudes that children have about poverty.

However, it must not be understated that the use of Community of Enquiry is not simply an approach that can be taken off the shelf and used. It does require on-going training. In fact, this is perhaps what holds its interest: you have to persevere with your own learning, as well as how you are helping the children to learn.

Philosophy for Children programmes identify a clear set of skills which P4C wishes to develop in the classroom. These can be seen as a progression, though in practice children access the skills at a variety of different levels. Many Philosophy for Children sessions, however, focus on specific skills identified by the teacher and monitored throughout.

Typical skills to be developed include the ability to ask a question; listen to a response; identify a distinction; connect ideas; recognise an assumption; offer examples and (later) counter-examples; give reasons for a point of view; identify differences of context; consider implications.

Many picture books offer the context in which these skills can be introduced. In addition a number of resources are now published which help the teacher develop them in their class (see list at the end of this article).
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- Taking all circumstances in to account (Would it be different in another situation?)
- Hypothetical thinking (What would you think in another situation?)
- Giving good reasons (Is this reason the best reason?)
- Consistency (Is this always the case?)
- Projecting the ideal self (Do you think this is right for you?)
- Projecting an ideal world (Do you think this is right for everyone?)

Wider implications of the approach

In order to accept the methods of P4C, a teacher has to make a number of decisions regarding the objectives of their work with children.

1. The Process/Content debate as a false distinction

It would be easy to place philosophy for children as a purely skills-based teaching method. In this sense the method would be rejected by Storm (2000) who argues against process approaches to Development education *"...a curriculum defined largely in process terms is particularly difficult to fit into a Procrustean bed of progression."*

We would argue that the process of learning cannot be separated from the content in this way. How we learn has huge implications for what we learn. Take, for example, a recent example of work with early years children (Lewis & Rowley 2001). In this example children listen to a story ('Sanji and the Baker', by Robin Tzannes) and then discuss the issues of ownership that the story raises. Throughout the discussion the teacher is asking for clarification of meaning (What do you mean by 'own'?); identification of distinction (Is owning a park different to owning a toy? How is ownership of air in your lungs different to ownership of air in the classroom?). The teacher is clearly focusing on specific and rigorous discussion skills, but it is only the application of these skills to a real issue (through the fiction of a story) that the skills have implications for how we understand the world. Process and content depend upon, and feed upon each other, a very different model to that proposed by Storm, which is an over-simplistic rejection of the types of skills learning founded in the critique of 1960s and 70s curriculum, where skills were sometimes seen as separate from content.

2. Critical reflection must become the focus of our educational process

Helen Walkington (2000) argued that the critical methodologies of Paulo Friere are only likely to have a diluted effect on the practice of development education in UK schools. She sees development education aims as clearly critical ('*...development education, therefore, is an approach which has the potential to make ideological assumptions explicit through a critical and reflective educational process*'), but clearly recognises that this type of learning is not typical, given the context of most schools today.

We would argue that development education cannot itself achieve this critical perspective because it is already associated with a particular world view, and in that sense is simply a counter-argument to the world view currently embedded in the National Curriculum. Walkington's article fails to recognise that development education lacks a clear learning process.

Philosophy for Children offers a clear rationale for the methods it uses to stimulate thinking processes of all children through whole class dialogue. Those methods have been identified above and can be summarised as:

- Development of a community of enquiry
- Clear democratic structures
- Specific teacher roles
- A progression of skills which are not divorced from content.

We would like to propose that The Development Education Association looks seriously at encouraging a funded programme of training for development education practitioners in the methods of Philosophical Enquiry for Children.

References

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Other useful resources

SAPERE – The Society to Advance Philosophical Enquiry in Education: information on membership and training can be found on the web site at www.sapere.net, or by writing to: The Secretary, Sara Liptai, 7 Cloister Way, Leamington Spa, CV32 6QE.

Thinking Stories – a series of books by Phillip Cam, published by Hale & Iremonger in Australia.

There are a number of books written by Robert Fisher with stories, poems and games for thinking; published by Nash Pollock. These can be ordered online at www.teachingthinking.net.

Bookstall Forum in Derby specialises in books suitable for this approach and they can be contacted at 01332 368039 or at www.bookstallforum.net.

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