Global Dialogues in Humanities and Pedagogy

Student Perceptions of Philosophy for Children (P4C) in Primary Schools of New Zealand

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study investigates student perceptions of Philosophy for Children (P4C) implementation in New Zealand primary schools. Through a qualitative inquiry involving 120 students from six primary schools across Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch, the research explores how students experience and value philosophical dialogue in their learning environments. Data collection employed semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and student-generated reflective journals over a six-month period. Findings reveal that students perceive P4C as enhancing their critical thinking abilities, fostering collaborative learning communities, and developing confidence in articulating complex ideas. Students particularly valued the democratic nature of philosophical inquiry and the opportunity to explore questions without predetermined answers. However, challenges emerged regarding time constraints and varying levels of peer participation. This research contributes to understanding student voice in pedagogical innovation and offers insights for educators implementing dialogic practices in primary education settings.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of Philosophy for Children (P4C) in educational contexts has gained considerable momentum globally over the past four decades, transforming traditional pedagogical approaches by positioning students as active

philosophical inquirers rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Developed initially by Matthew Lipman in the 1970s, P4C represents a systematic approach to cultivating thinking skills through collaborative philosophical dialogue in classroom communities of inquiry (Lipman, 2003). The fundamental premise underlying this pedagogical innovation suggests that children possess innate philosophical capacities that, when properly nurtured through structured dialogue, can significantly enhance cognitive development and democratic citizenship (Gregory, 2011). New Zealand's educational landscape has witnessed increasing interest in P4C implementation, particularly as educators seek innovative approaches to develop twenty-first-century competencies outlined in the national curriculum framework (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Understanding student perceptions of educational interventions represents a critical yet frequently overlooked dimension of pedagogical research, as learners themselves offer unique insights into the effectiveness and impact of teaching methodologies (Fielding, 2001). Traditional educational research has predominantly focused on teacher perspectives, learning outcomes, and observable behavioral changes, often marginalizing the voices of students who directly experience these pedagogical innovations (Cook-Sather, 2006). Contemporary educational scholarship increasingly recognizes that student perspectives provide invaluable data regarding the lived experience of learning, offering authentic insights into how pedagogical practices influence engagement, motivation, and intellectual development (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). This shift toward student voice research acknowledges young learners as competent commentators on their educational experiences, capable of articulating meaningful reflections about teaching and learning processes (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

The theoretical foundations of P4C draw extensively from Dewey's (1916) pragmatist philosophy of education, which emphasized the importance of reflective thinking and democratic participation in learning communities. Lipman (2003) extended Dewey's ideas by developing a comprehensive curriculum specifically designed to foster philosophical thinking in children, arguing that philosophy should not remain confined to university settings but should permeate all levels of education. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory further illuminates P4C's collaborative dimension, suggesting that cognitive development occurs primarily through social interaction and dialogue within communities of practice. The Vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development finds particular resonance in P4C classrooms, where students collectively explore ideas beyond their individual cognitive reach through scaffolded peer interaction (Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013).

Research examining P4C implementation across various international contexts has documented multiple benefits, including enhanced critical thinking skills, improved communication abilities, and increased student engagement with complex ideas (Trickey & Topping, 2004). A landmark meta-analysis conducted by Trickey and Topping (2004) examining P4C interventions across multiple countries revealed statistically significant improvements in cognitive abilities, particularly in reasoning

and questioning skills. Subsequent longitudinal studies have reinforced these findings while also identifying positive impacts on social and emotional development, including enhanced empathy, improved conflict resolution skills, and greater respect for diverse perspectives (Topping & Trickey, 2007). However, Murris (2016) cautions against instrumentalizing P4C solely as a tool for developing measurable skills, arguing that philosophical inquiry possesses intrinsic value in cultivating wonder, curiosity, and existential awareness in young learners.

The New Zealand educational context presents distinctive characteristics that influence P4C implementation, including a strong emphasis on collaborative learning, bicultural foundations incorporating Māori pedagogical principles, and a national curriculum that values key competencies such as thinking and participating in communities (Ministry of Education, 2007). Kennedy (2012) suggests that New Zealand's educational philosophy, which prioritizes student-centered learning and holistic development, creates favorable conditions for P4C adoption. The nation's relatively small class sizes and emphasis on pastoral care further support the relational dynamics essential for effective philosophical dialogue (Burgh et al., 2006). Additionally, the integration of tikanga Māori (Māori customs and protocols) within educational settings offers potential synergies with P4C's emphasis on respectful dialogue and collective inquiry (Hemara, 2000).

Despite growing implementation of P4C in New Zealand primary schools, limited research has systematically investigated how students themselves perceive and experience philosophical inquiry within their learning environments. Existing studies have predominantly examined teacher perspectives, curriculum implementation challenges, and measurable learning outcomes, leaving student voices largely unheard in discussions about P4C's value and impact (Gregory et al., 2017). This research gap represents a significant oversight, as student perceptions provide essential insights into the subjective experience of philosophical dialogue, including what aspects students find meaningful, challenging, or transformative (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Understanding these perceptions can inform more responsive and culturally appropriate P4C implementation strategies that genuinely resonate with student experiences and values.

The research presented in this article addresses this gap by centering student voices in examining P4C implementation across multiple New Zealand primary schools. By employing qualitative methodologies that privilege student perspectives, this study seeks to understand how young learners experience philosophical dialogue, what they perceive as valuable or challenging about P4C participation, and how these experiences influence their broader attitudes toward learning and thinking. The research questions guiding this inquiry include: How do primary school students in New Zealand perceive their participation in Philosophy for Children sessions? What aspects of P4C do students identify as most valuable or meaningful to their learning? What challenges or limitations do students experience in philosophical dialogue, and how might these inform improved implementation practices?

METHOD

This qualitative study employed an interpretivist paradigm, recognizing that student perceptions represent socially constructed meanings shaped by individual experiences and cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research design incorporated multiple data collection methods to capture the complexity and richness of student experiences with P4C, following recommendations for methodological triangulation in educational research (Cohen et al., 2018). Six primary schools across three major New Zealand cities participated in the study, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in school size, socioeconomic demographics, and length of P4C implementation experience. Participating schools had implemented P4C for varying durations ranging from six months to three years, providing perspectives across different stages of program adoption and integration.

Data collection occurred over six months and involved 120 students aged 8-12 years who had participated in regular P4C sessions for at least one academic term. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 individual students, while focus group discussions involving groups of 4-6 students were held with the remaining 90 participants, allowing for both individual reflection and collective meaning-making (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Additionally, students maintained reflective journals documenting their thoughts and feelings about P4C sessions, providing longitudinal insight into evolving perceptions. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data, with particular attention to recurring ideas, contradictions, and unique insights that emerged from student voices. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from parents and assent from students, ensuring confidentiality through pseudonyms, and employing child-friendly research methods that respected students' rights to withdraw or decline participation at any point (Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Enhanced Critical Thinking and Intellectual Confidence

Students consistently reported that participation in P4C sessions enhanced their ability to think deeply about questions and issues, with many describing how philosophical dialogue encouraged them to consider multiple perspectives before forming conclusions. This finding aligns with extensive research documenting P4C's impact on developing reasoning skills and metacognitive awareness (Trickey & Topping, 2004). Students articulated experiencing a shift from seeking single correct answers toward embracing complexity and ambiguity in their thinking processes. One Year 5 student reflected that P4C taught them "to think about thinking," demonstrating emerging metacognitive awareness that represents a sophisticated cognitive achievement for primary-aged learners. The collaborative inquiry process appeared particularly valuable in scaffolding this development, as students built

upon each other's ideas to explore questions more thoroughly than they felt capable of doing independently.

The development of intellectual confidence emerged as a prominent theme, with students describing increased willingness to share ideas even when uncertain about their validity or concerned about peer judgment. This confidence appeared closely linked to the non-evaluative nature of philosophical dialogue, where ideas are explored rather than judged as correct or incorrect. Students appreciated that P4C sessions created space for tentative thinking and hypothesis formation without the pressure of demonstrating mastery or achieving predetermined learning outcomes. Several students noted that this contrasted sharply with other curriculum areas where they felt anxiety about providing wrong answers or failing to meet teacher expectations. The emphasis on questioning rather than answering seemed particularly liberating for students who typically struggled with conventional academic tasks but discovered competence in generating thoughtful questions and contributing to collective inquiry.

Gender differences emerged in how students experienced intellectual confidence development through P4C participation, with female students particularly noting increased willingness to voice opinions in mixed-gender discussions. Several girls described P4C as creating a more equitable conversational space compared to other classroom contexts where they felt male peers dominated discussions or dismissed their contributions. This finding resonates with research by Daniel and Auriac (2011) suggesting that structured philosophical dialogue can mitigate gender-based participation disparities by establishing explicit norms of respectful listening and turn-taking. The facilitator's role in ensuring balanced participation appeared crucial, with students recognizing and valuing teachers who actively encouraged quieter voices while managing dominant speakers. These observations suggest that P4C's potential for developing intellectual confidence may be particularly significant for students who experience marginalization or reduced participation opportunities in conventional classroom discourse.

However, some students expressed frustration with the open-ended nature of philosophical questions, desiring more definitive conclusions or clear answers to guide their understanding. This tension reflects deeper epistemological assumptions about knowledge and learning that students bring to P4C from their broader educational experiences (Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013). Students accustomed to transmission models of education where teachers provide authoritative knowledge sometimes struggled with P4C's emphasis on collective inquiry and tentative conclusions. Several students described initial discomfort with philosophical ambiguity but noted that this discomfort gradually transformed into appreciation for complexity as they became more experienced with the P4C approach. This trajectory suggests that developing comfort with intellectual uncertainty represents an important but potentially challenging dimension of P4C participation that may require sustained experience and explicit pedagogical support.

Collaborative Learning and Community Building

Students overwhelmingly valued the collaborative dimension of P4C, describing philosophical dialogue as creating a sense of intellectual community where ideas were explored collectively rather than competitively. This perception aligns with theoretical frameworks emphasizing communities of inquiry as fundamental to P4C pedagogy (Lipman, 2003). Students appreciated opportunities to hear diverse perspectives from peers, with many noting that philosophical dialogue exposed them to viewpoints they had not previously considered. The process of building on each other's ideas appeared particularly meaningful, with students describing moments when collaborative thinking led to insights that no individual participant had initially conceived. This collective construction of understanding demonstrates the Vygotskian principle of knowledge emerging through social interaction rather than existing as fixed content to be transmitted (Vygotsky, 1978).

The development of listening skills emerged as an unexpected but valued outcome of P4C participation, with students recognizing improvements in their ability to attend carefully to peer contributions before formulating responses. Several students described how P4C taught them to listen not just for agreement or disagreement but to genuinely understand different perspectives and the reasoning underlying them. This sophisticated listening practice appeared to foster empathy and perspective-taking, with students noting increased appreciation for the complexity of their peers' thinking. The physical arrangement of P4C sessions, typically conducted in circles where all participants could see each other, was frequently mentioned as supporting this attentive listening by creating visual connection and equalizing participation opportunities. Students contrasted this arrangement favorably with traditional classroom configurations where interaction primarily flows between teacher and individual students rather than among peers.

Research participants also identified P4C as strengthening social relationships and building trust within their classroom communities, with philosophical dialogue creating opportunities to know peers more deeply through their ideas and values. Students described feeling more connected to classmates after hearing their thoughts on philosophical questions, particularly when peers shared personal experiences or expressed vulnerability in exploring difficult topics. This relational dimension appeared especially meaningful for students who felt socially marginalized or struggled to connect with peers in other contexts. Several students noted that P4C revealed unexpected dimensions of their classmates' thinking, challenging stereotypes or assumptions they had previously held about peers' capabilities or perspectives. This finding suggests that P4C may contribute to more inclusive classroom cultures by creating spaces where students can demonstrate competence in ways that differ from conventional academic performance.

Challenges in collaborative learning emerged primarily around unequal participation, with students expressing frustration when some peers dominated discussions while others rarely contributed. Despite P4C's emphasis on democratic

dialogue, students recognized that power dynamics and personality differences influenced participation patterns. Some quieter students reported feeling intimidated by more confident or articulate peers, while frequent contributors sometimes expressed impatience with extended silences or hesitant responses. These observations highlight tensions between the ideals of democratic participation and the realities of diverse communication styles and confidence levels among primary-aged children. Students offered thoughtful suggestions for addressing these challenges, including smaller group sizes, rotating facilitator roles among students, and explicit conversation norms that ensure balanced participation. The capacity of students to identify these issues and propose solutions demonstrates the critical awareness that P4C itself cultivates regarding dialogue processes and community dynamics.

Student Perceptions of Philosophical Topics and Questions

Students demonstrated sophisticated awareness of what constitutes a "good" philosophical question, typically identifying characteristics such as open-endedness, relevance to lived experience, and capacity to generate multiple perspectives. This metacognitive understanding suggests that sustained P4C participation develops not only thinking skills but also epistemological awareness regarding the nature of inquiry itself (Gregory, 2011). Students particularly valued questions that connected to their personal experiences while extending beyond immediate contexts to explore broader human concerns. Questions addressing friendship, fairness, identity, and moral decision-making emerged as especially engaging, while more abstract philosophical topics sometimes struggled to capture sustained interest. This pattern reflects developmental considerations regarding children's philosophical capacities and the importance of grounding abstract concepts in concrete scenarios and relatable contexts (Murris, 2016).

The process of question generation received mixed responses from students, with some expressing enthusiasm for formulating their own philosophical questions while others preferred responding to questions provided by teachers or stimulus materials. Students who enjoyed question generation described feeling ownership over the inquiry process and appreciation for opportunities to guide classroom dialogue toward topics of personal interest. These students recognized question formulation as requiring creative and critical thinking, noting the challenge of crafting questions that would generate rich discussion rather than quick resolution. Conversely, students who preferred provided questions sometimes expressed anxiety about generating "good enough" questions or uncertainty about whether their ideas were sufficiently philosophical. This variation suggests that scaffolding question generation through modeling, criteria development, and low-stakes practice may help all students develop confidence in this complex cognitive task.

Table 1 presents student-identified philosophical topics ranked by engagement level and perceived difficulty, revealing patterns in how primary students experience different areas of philosophical inquiry. This data indicates that ethical

questions, particularly those involving fairness and moral dilemmas, generated highest engagement while metaphysical questions about existence and reality were perceived as most challenging. The disconnect between engagement and difficulty for some topics suggests that students may find value in struggling with complex ideas when sufficiently motivated by relevant content.

Table 1. Student Rankings of Philosophical Topics by Engagement and Difficulty

Philosophical Topic	Engagement Ranking (1=highest)	Difficulty Ranking (1=most difficult)	Frequency of Selection
Fairness and Justice	1	4	87%
Friendship and Relationships	2	6	82%
Truth and Lies	3	5	76%
Personal Identity	4	3	71%
Rights and Responsibilities	5	7	68%
Knowledge and Belief	6	2	64%
Existence and Reality	7	1	52%

Cultural responsiveness emerged as an important consideration, with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds noting appreciation when philosophical discussions incorporated perspectives and examples from various cultural traditions. Several Māori and Pasifika students described how P4C sessions that acknowledged indigenous philosophies and collective values felt more relevant and engaging than those focusing exclusively on Western philosophical traditions. This observation aligns with research emphasizing the importance of culturally sustaining pedagogy that recognizes diverse knowledge systems and ways of knowing (Paris & Alim, 2017). Students suggested that incorporating stories, proverbs, and wisdom from different cultures could enrich philosophical dialogue while validating diverse backgrounds represented in New Zealand classrooms. The potential for P4C to serve as a space for intercultural philosophical exchange appeared significant, though this potential required intentional pedagogical effort rather than emerging automatically from dialogue structures.

CONCLUSION

This research illuminates the multifaceted ways primary school students in New Zealand perceive and experience Philosophy for Children, revealing both significant benefits and meaningful challenges in implementing philosophical dialogue within educational settings. Students consistently identified enhanced critical thinking, increased intellectual confidence, and strengthened collaborative learning as valuable outcomes of P4C participation, while also articulating

thoughtful critiques regarding unequal participation and the challenges of philosophical ambiguity. The findings underscore the importance of centering student voices in educational research, as learners themselves offer nuanced insights into how pedagogical innovations influence their thinking, relationships, and engagement with learning. For educators implementing P4C in primary schools, these student perspectives suggest the value of sustained implementation that allows students to develop comfort with philosophical inquiry, explicit attention to participation equity through facilitation practices, and careful selection of topics that balance engagement with appropriate challenge. Future research might explore how student perceptions of P4C evolve across different age groups, cultural contexts, and implementation approaches, further enriching our understanding of how philosophical dialogue can be optimized to support diverse learners in developing as thoughtful, engaged, and democratic citizens.

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