The Application of Philosophy for Children Pedagogy in American English Classroom

Chad Miller
University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, USA

Lu Leng
Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

[Abstract] This research provides educators the theory and practice of the philosophy for children Hawai'i (p4cHI) approach to education and explores its application within a high school English classroom in order to create opportunities in which p4cHI flourishes in an English or subject-specific classroom. The study applies a qualitative constructivist grounded theory study to examine thirteen former students' experiences with the p4cHI integrated English Language Arts course. The analysis of their intensive interview responses details an experience where students can be themselves, they learn from each other, their teacher is an active participant in the learning process. In a p4cHI English classroom, the definition of knowledge moves beyond the acquisition of English language knowledge and information and becomes an increased depth of understanding of themselves, their experiences, and the world. In the classroom, English texts became a medium to initiate meaningful thoughts, connections, and questions from the students, and English language became a communicative tool to facilitate student critical thinking and collaboration.

[Keywords] philosophy for children Hawai'i; teaching English; community of inquiry; thinking pedagogy; communicative language teaching

Introduction – Philosophy for Children Hawai'i

Philosophy for Children Hawai'i (p4cHI) is an outgrowth and unique expression of Matthew Lipman's (1988, 2003) original Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement. p4cHI is an innovative approach to education that transforms the schooling experience by engaging students in intellectually safe communities of inquiry (Makaiau, Wang, Ragoonaden, & Leng, 2017) in order to promote a more thoughtful and just society. p4cHI now has become the namesake of the educational movement associated with doing philosophical inquiry with K-12 and university students in the Hawaiian islands (Miller, 2013). p4cHI aids students and teachers in converting traditional classrooms into intellectually safe communities of inquiry. Together, participants develop their ability to think for themselves in responsible ways by exploring meaningful questions that arise from their interests, experiences and concerns based on their texts, readings or learning context. p4cHawai'i.org is their official website (Jackson, 2012; 2013).

Significance of the Study

Over 30 years of U.S. and international research, including recent studies done in Hawai'i, indicate that the use of philosophical inquiry with a group of students, within an intellectually safe classroom community, sharpens students' abilities to "think for themselves" (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980, p.53). This activity also positively affects students' cognitive and social-affective abilities, engagement, moral dispositions, and self-confidence (Makaiau, 2013; Splitter & Sharp, 1995; Leng, 2015). Even so, there has been very little written about the intersection between

students' learning experiences and p4cHI in the education of adolescents in an English class.

This study is a synthesis of the findings from Miller's (2013) dissertation research. The study aims to provide educators a better understanding of the practice and experience of Philosophy for Children approach to teaching within a subject-specific classroom (in this research, an English Language Arts course), which offers the avenue for p4cHI, and its educational, cognitive, and social-affective benefits to spread across the English curriculum or other subject-specific curriculum integrating community of inquiry approach to teaching and to cultivate student thinking abilities in a specific classroom.

Research Design: Constructivist Grounded Theory

A constructivist grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) will be generated by the data that is grounded in participants' perspectives concerning p4cHI when it is used as an approach to teaching high school English.

Description of Participants

The participants of this study took the p4cHI integrated English class twice during their high school experience, and graduated no earlier than 2009 in Hawai'i. They are almost evenly balanced between male and female ex-students between the ages eighteen and twenty-two. Students who fit these criteria have been exposed to the p4cHI for roughly 220 hours of instructional time.

Data Collection: Participant Interviews

The purpose of this study was to determine respondents' perceptions of p4cHI and their attitudes towards it. The main source of data arose as the result of interviews with thirteen former students. Although an interview guide was used, a conversational interview strategy (Patton, 2002) was utilized to naturally explore the participants' experiences, ideas, memories, and feelings of the class when it came to the use of p4cHI as an approach to teaching.

Data Analysis

Analysis of qualitative data occurred in three phases. The process consisted of: a) Initial open codes were developed to highlight major themes occurring in each individual interview transcripts; b) Using the method of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), similarities, differences, and complementarities across and within participants were examined. The most salient conceptual categories and sub-categories from the initial codes were developed; and c) Rich theoretical categories were constructed concerning the participants' experience with the p4cHI teaching pedagogy.

Findings

Three categorical themes emerged from the Miller's qualitative analysis.

1. A Safe and Supportive Social Cultural Learning Context

The first theme to emerge from the data was that students gained an appreciation of being in a safe and supportive learning environment. The circular seating format, the use of the community ball, the establishment of an intellectually safe environment provided a foundation for trust, understanding, deep inquiry and transformative learning.

A circular seating structure encouraged participation. The circle promoted a new type of power structure. It removed the barriers and restrictions of the typical classroom. The interchange

between Miller (the teacher) and Taryn illustrated this importance.

  Miller: What are the significant ingredients or elements to teaching a class this way? So if you had to make a recipe, what are the things that need to be in there?

  Taryn: I think we *need* a circle.

  Miller: Okay, what's the importance of the circle?

  Taryn: You get to see everybody and your surroundings. Because if you're just in the rows or columns, you're kind of restricted to seeing people talk. (Taryn, 2011, p. 22)

  Circular seating facilitates cooperation and collaboration among the students and teacher. Kevin pointed out the drawbacks of traditional seating format: If you see the back of someone's head then you feel like you're not getting their attention, and if you're going to talk then they may not listen. Even if they're right in front of you they may not be listening. (Kevin, 2011, p. 9)

  The community ball built up relationships. Twelve of the thirteen participants specifically referred to the use of the "community ball" in the class, while the thirteenth participant did not refer to it by name, but alluded to it on several occasions. According to students' remarks, the "community ball" plays an important role in building relationships within the classroom. The circular seating sets the context, but the community ball is instrumental in facilitating collaboration among the students, largely because it helped students attentively listen to each other and encouraged students to participate into the inquiry process.

  According to Alyse, the community ball gave the students a set of rules and expectations, which, in turn, provided each student a chance to have their ideas heard by their peers.

  "That is what I really, really liked about the community ball because it kept everything in order and organized. Because we weren't having people yelling all across the room, but then at the same time, everyone had their say. Everyone threw it to everyone that wanted, felt like they needed to say something, and everyone was able to do that." (Alyse, 2011, p. 11)

  Intellectual safety created an atmosphere free from fear. The construction of an intellectually safe environment allowed participants to be themselves. The sense of safety and comfort made participants freely share their ideas, comments, opinions, and experiences with the class.

2. The Open Inquiry Allowed Students to Shine and Grow

  Once the intellectual and emotional safe community is built, students' inquiry could be very deep. Based on the reading text of the English class, students raised personally relevant questions and discussed controversial issues and critical events connecting to their lives. The questions were intellectually explored without individual biased arising to make people defensive or embarrassed. It seemed the religious people wouldn't be upset about it, but they were kind of open to it... when they would address it, they wouldn't take it in an angry offense. They wouldn't fire back at you; they would just be like 'well we thought about it from this angle.' (Holden, 2011, p. 15)

  Readings became an avenue to initiate student thinking. Since this English class integrated p4cHI into its everyday teaching and learning, English texts became a medium to initiate meaningful thoughts, connections, and questions from the students. Students used text to launch exploration into questions and ideas. For instance, several of the participants said the power and function of the English texts rest in how effective they are in sparking thought and arousing wonder in the students. As a matter of fact, Alana said this is the aim of the course:

  "In this class, you forget about stupid stuff like that and I think that's what this class is about.

It's about expanding your brain and being more open-minded and giving yourself an opportunity to think, and to actually think deeply about things." (Alana, 2011, p. 12)

Malia said in other classes "we are encouraged to ask questions, but only questions that pertain to what's happening [in the text] and questions that have answers that we can all find" (Malia, 2011, p. 4). The p4cHI English class allowed students to explore things that matter most to their lives instead of "address[ing] what's being pushed away from us" (Holden, 2011, p. 14). The class encouraged them to question and discuss what they really wonder about.

Students co-constructed learning with their peers and the teacher. The p4cHI approach to education created a new dynamic in the English classroom. The teacher's role dramatically shifted from the sage of the platform to a facilitator and teacher-student in the learning activities with and alongside of the students. The teaching changed from the transmission of content knowledge to the inquiry and integrated understanding of the students. Alberto's response illustrates this change in the role of the teacher: "on some days you just might be sitting there, talking, being one of the students. Other days you might have more of a teacher role. You know, being more disciplinary...you're pushing the discussion along" (Alberto, 2011, p. 35).

James described "a typical day" in the p4cHI English classroom: "we kind of learned off, like based from each other, we learned from each other. It wasn't your typical teacher teaches a student" (James, 2011, p. 1). In the class, students were given opportunities to speak and express. "We got to speak and we were shown that we can teach as well as learn" (Alyse, 2011, p. 10).

3. Knowledge is Self-understanding and A Way to Think

In the p4cHI English class, participants understood that knowledge is more than a list of facts and formulas that students are typically asked to learn. Rather, knowing had become directly related to their questions and inquiries, which made the learning process deeply personal and authentically motivational.

The discovery of self-knowledge helped students develop. The interview data shows that students were concerned with a deeper understanding of themselves and the life they are living. The class helped "to kind of grow in our own knowledge and our own person to help us with our lives and lead us into different directions, and lead our actions with certain situations" (Alyse, 2011, p. 9). The cognitive changes were very popular in participants' learning experiences.

I'd say this is the only real – probably the biggest learning experience of my life so far. Not even. I wouldn't confine that just to when we were in the classroom. It's completely changed my whole thinking. It carries on throughout when I leave this room. I try to bring what happens in this classroom out there. (Holden, 2011, p. 11)

The focus of the class was not on large amount of information or asking students to memorize and retain information. When asked what did you learn in here, one student shared:

It wasn't learning material; I didn't gain an absolute knowledge. I didn't gain like knowledge from chemistry...I didn't gain a list of facts, or I didn't remember a bunch of equations that I don't need to know. I learned a new way to think. I learned how to put things into perspective. (Kevin, 2011, p. 27)

Discussion and Conclusion

In the philosophy for children Hawai'i English class, students and their teacher co-created a social-cultural learning context that ensured a deep community of inquiry could occur. Prior to the

course, students and the teacher co-constructed a definition of intellectual safety and made a community ball to facilitate their turn taking. While making the community ball, they began to know each other personally. After engaging in a number of reflective activities and readings that reiterated the importance of intellectual safety and community building, the students began to build up a strong community and a good relationship with their teacher. They respected each other's ideas, interests, and needs. They listened attentively to what others had to say, and shared their thoughts genuinely. This social context of learning sets a psychological foundation for students' further learning in the text-based and question-stimulated inquiry.

Maintaining a safe and positive classroom environment is a fundamental condition for learning. The collaborative community of inquiry solves the contradiction between students and teachers (Freire, 1970), teachers become co-learners with their students instead of a source of authority merely conveying information. When teachers give students autonomy to direct their inquiry, they learn to value their own thinking as equal to the teacher. In this context, knowledge is created and discovered by the community of inquiry. The role of a teacher changes into a facilitator that coves the community of inquiry forward within a broad range of parameters that stress critical thinking, reflection, clarity, open-mindedness, and good judgment. The facilitator keeps philosophical inquiry on track, respects the natural flow of inquiry, enriches and bridges the discussion, and gently direct the discussion, but without imposing his or her ideas and agenda. By emphasizing dialogue as a way to create a community and improve thinking, students share insights, clarifications, questions, and experiences, cooperatively, so that each participant learns how to listen as well as how to speak respectfully and empathetically (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2011).

Students' curiosity, their natural sense of wonder, their eagerness for inquiry, and their desire to make their voices heard were realized and flourished (Dewey, 1997). Philosophical readings of texts raised questions that open up an exploration of important questions about life that students can relate to in their own lives. The class put "the spotlight on thinking…not especially on the memorization of concepts, but on the greater, grander concept of thinking itself" (Lipman, 2008, p. 109).

The study concludes by generating a grounded theory of teaching English that overturns traditional models of teaching and learning, such as the transmission approach to teaching. The p4cHI subject specific class a) firstly constructed an intellectually and emotionally safe environment that foster learning process; b) once the learning context is shaped, students and their teacher become co-participant in the community of inquiry; c) values student perspectives and voices and treats it as essential content of teaching; and d) requires students and their teacher to engage in a more deliberate, reflective, caring, critical, creative, collaborative thinking and learning in order to promote student English communication.

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