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Philosophy for the Kids

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Forget the stereotype of a bearded philosopher in a toga; this program brings critical thinking to the crayon-age set.

On the carpeted floor of Thalia Stark's classroom at Waikiki Elementary School, nestled at the foot of Diamond Head, 17 first graders sit, cross-legged, in a circle.

Being passed from one child to another is a Community Ball, a multicolored tuft of yarn about the size of a softball. Within this circle, the children know that possession of the ball—a



Who loves Aristotle? Thomas Jackson, Ph.D., leads a classroom discussion.

Photo: Elyse Butler

kinder, gentler
version of the
iconic conch
from *The Lord
of the Flies*—
indicates their
chance to
speak,
unrushed and
uninterrupted.

And so the questions begin: How do you make a rainbow? Why does the Tooth Fairy need teeth? Why do numbers have to go in order?

Also seated with them is the affable Thomas Jackson, Ph.D.—“Dr. J” to everyone at the school—who leads the group in its philosophical circle of inquiry. Jackson, through the Philosophy for Children (P4C) Hawaii program, has spent the past 27 years working on changing the impression of philosophy as an elitist, academic musing into something more accessible by bringing it to public school classrooms.

“Our understanding of philosophy has become much more user friendly,” explains Jackson. “We take issues that we care about and learn the skills to think more deeply, together, about these things. In a group activity, we realize the enormous richness of the people around us and what resources they are for helping us think more deeply.”



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Founded by Columbia University professor Matthew Lipman in 1972 as a way for young students to hone their logic and reasoning skills, P4C has been adopted by academic institutions around the world—beginning with children as young as 5 and extending to the university level. Here in Hawaii, a number of teachers in schools across the state employ P4C, while Waikiki Elementary and Kailua High School use it extensively. Jackson anticipates P4C will even introduce a Philosopher in Residence who will work at the K-12 Kailua Complex for the 2011-2012 school year.

Stark, who holds P4C circles weekly in her classroom, notices growth in her young charges. “This helps kids learn how to use their words and explain themselves,” she says. “It sharpens their thinking skills and gives them a time, aside from math and reading, to talk about anything they want.”

Jackson, too, knows practicing the skills necessary to engage in philosophy will serve students, and their communities, well. “This seemingly innocuous activity—of taking turns, choosing topics, asking questions, taking votes, assessing our progress—is part of learning democracy,” he says.