

# Philosophy for Children

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When I was first introduced to p4c Hawai‘i, it made me cringe. I wasn’t sure what it was all about, but it reminded me of a miserable past experience of sitting in a circle. Sitting in circles is the sort of activity that I try to avoid in life. During my junior year at high school, I attended a leadership camp at the recommendation of a teacher. My parents signed me up. Leadership camp involved activities where groups spread out across the library all sitting in circles. The group I was in involved sharing what kind of person we were and how we might change once we went to college. My turn came, and I said I didn’t think I would change that much. It was clear that my response wasn’t creative enough. The senior facilitator, who was a popular girl in our school of more than two thousand students, dismissed my contribution. She explained that going to college was like starting with a clean slate and that we could be a new person—anyone we wanted to be. I wasn’t about to speak up again, but I wanted to yell, “I like who I am. Why should I change?” I felt irritated at not being acknowledged. I wanted to shout out: “This is stupid! Who cares! If we change, we change. Why talk about it?”

I have always felt that conversations like these were a waste of time, and this incident validated it for me. I didn’t see the point. We sat and talked about issues until the cows came home, but when it was over, nothing had changed. The world was exactly the same, after this supposedly “world changing” conversation. Besides being a waste of time, I felt it was a waste of emotions. On the last night of the leadership camp, everyone sat in one big circle. It was an open discussion in which everyone was free to share. Emotions began to pour out as sensitive topics were touched upon. I sat dry-eyed, glancing at the clock, while others wept. It was a painful experience for me to endure.

Now that I am a fifth-grade teacher, I have the same view about group sharing events. When I heard p4c Hawai‘i was about sitting in a circle and sharing thoughts, ideas, and feelings, the excitement it produced in me was about the same as the prospect of doing yard duty. It was not something I wanted to do. However, I am in the minority as most of the teachers at my school are cheerleaders for p4c.

When a p4c Hawai‘i course was first offered to our teachers, I was adamant about not signing up. In the lunchroom, faculty conversation turned to the topic of the course. One teacher told me it was great, and it had changed his life. I told him I liked my life and didn’t want it to change. Leadership camp all over again. I suppose I’m not a huge fan of change. But gradually, the sign-up sheet was getting filled—even by teachers who claimed not to be interested in p4c. But the course did offer three very tempting credits, and it would be taught afterschool, on our campus, which made it very convenient. I was desperately in need of credits and the price was considerably less than other classes I had taken. I began to view the course as an attractive option. I wavered a bit, and then I tried to convince a fellow teacher to sign up with me. She would be just as uncomfortable in the course, and I’d have an empathetic partner while getting my credits. I figured if I could convince her, I could convince myself in the process. We both reluctantly signed up.

I was told that Dr. Thomas Jackson, aka Dr. J, would guide the p4c discussions in my class. If I was going to give this p4c thing a try, I wanted to be sure that when I rejected it, it wasn’t because I didn’t work with the best and most expert teacher of philosophy for children. Dr. J is the best, and he is widely adored by the students at our school. When he walks through the halls, children flock to his side just to hear his Donald Duck impression and to ask when he’d be coming to their class next. He always smiles, and the children see him more as a peer than an adult. He was very genuine and was always excited about something, even if it was just chocolate. I love chocolate; so I could, at least, relate to him on that level. But that didn’t mean I approved of p4c.

A group of “newbies” gathered together in the p4c course. We were newbies, not because we were new to the school, but because we were the p4c holdouts and had never conducted p4c alone in our class. We were the skeptics—the ones who would roll our eyes whenever we heard the words, “Let’s make a big circle.” The p4c sceptics would “pass” when the community ball ended up in our hands. If any one of us shared something, the others felt betrayed. There was

never really any pressure to share, unless, of course, it was the pressure we put on ourselves. Dr. J was always pleased with the outcome of each discussion despite the level of participation.

At the beginning of the course, our newbie group all received articles about p4c printed on lovely purple paper. We all agreed to read them by the time we were to meet again. I started to read one of the articles, but then something distracted me. I don't remember what it was. It might have been the dishes or fatigue or boredom, but I never did finish it. And apparently none of the other newbies finished their readings, either. Philosophy for children was a world we were unfamiliar with. I still wasn't on board when it was time for my fifth graders first p4c session, but then I was only there to observe Dr. J at work.

My fifth grade class that year was an interesting group, to say the least. They were a class of extremes—academic as well as athletic. The personalities of the students were also quite different. Some liked to speak up in class; others did not. We even had extremes when it came to physical height. I was curious to see how p4c would work for this diverse class.

At our first p4c session, Dr. J and his college student “groupies” introduced themselves to the students. Dr. J always travels with two or three students from the university who are just as excited about p4c as he is. The students seem very typical college students—young, wide-eyed, inquisitive, and perhaps a little nervous. My students loved having these cool visitors. If they couldn't sit beside Dr. J, they wanted to sit next to one of these young philosophers. After the introductions, Dr. J started the process of making a community ball. It started with a ball of yarn and the end was slowly wrapped around a paper towel core as each child shared a little about themselves. The yarn wrapping, I realized, kept the children from being nervous and by the time everyone had shared, the ball had been made with every student in the class contributing. The end result was a community ball, which was to be used for future sessions. The rule is that if you have the community ball, you have the floor. Sharing always starts out with something simple. Students could share their name and maybe their favorite thing to do. As I observed the students, they didn't seem too nervous with this task. If a student was nervous or had nothing to say they simply said “pass” and that was acceptable. No big deal was made and, towards the end of the session, the students

who had passed were given another chance to share if they wanted to.

It all seemed harmless enough, but there was something that I found very frustrating about p4c. I love talking with friends and sharing my life and thoughts when I feel comfortable. But, when I feel put on the spot and all eyes are on me, I can't think clearly. At times like these I don't want to share, but, at the same time, I don't not want to share. I want to be able to say something that makes everyone nod and agree or laugh or even say, “Wow! What a profound thought!” But, when I get nervous, all that's in my head is, “Crap! It's my turn.” Heck! It was hard enough raising my hand in a group. I had to raise it at just the right time so I could get the community ball passed to me before my thought became irrelevant to the discussion but not so early that I was interrupting the speaker's thoughts. And here I was putting my students in this same frustrating situation, and instead of being sympathetic, I was irritated that they weren't all participating. It's twisted, I know. I'm the sort of teacher who wants my students to raise their hands to answer a question. But, I'm the type of student who would rather sit back and let others do the answering. I suppose I'm afraid I'll say something stupid. And yet, as a teacher, I encourage my students to speak up and try to give an answer or express an opinion. Maybe those high school circles left me more scarred than I realized. In p4c, I had to learn to put aside my own fears about participation and give the students the patience and acceptance that I would have wanted.

As we progressed with p4c in our class, we moved on to discuss more specific topics. The students volunteered ideas and voted on them. Eventually, after some debate, a topic would be chosen. Choosing the topic gave the students ownership over the conversation. The students became the advocates and the experts. I began to notice that the students' communication skills were improving and that I didn't have to referee as often. Students were becoming better at waiting patiently for the community ball instead of interrupting, and some of the reluctant speakers began raising their hands to share. I appreciated this positive growth in the students. The same behaviors were also occurring beyond p4c, at other times of the day. But I still harbored some doubts about the value of what was being discussed. Yet, after each session, Dr. J was always so positive. He would say, “Wow! You have an amazing group of children!” Or he would be in awe of the topic the students had chosen, and I would be think-

ing to myself, “Why did we just spend forty-five minutes discussing whether a tomato is a vegetable or a fruit?”

As we continued with p4c, in spite of my doubts, I observed a shift in the discussions. I could see the students beginning to feel more safe and free to share their ideas. I had held myself back from taking over and controlling the conversation, unless a student was making others feel unsafe by interrupting or verbally attacking them. But as the students became aware of what was acceptable and not acceptable, they began to feel secure in sharing and commenting, even the quiet ones. I enjoyed seeing this transformation, because I identified with the quiet students. I knew if they were sharing, it was because they wanted to and not because they were being forced. They were genuinely comfortable, as if they were talking to a friend or a family member. They weren't being put on the spot. And as they grew more confident, the topics gradually became deeper and more searching. We went from “What if ants ruled the world?” to “Why do people get drunk?” Some people might say both topics aren't very philosophical. But, the real change wasn't just in the topic; it was how the students talked about the topic. They began to share personal life experiences. They became less inhibited and showed respect for what each person said. They realized they could learn from each other even if they had different thoughts, ideas, and experiences. The students were well aware of the fact that anything shared in p4c was never to be used as ammunition against each other. I was pleasantly surprised to see this rule respected. Perhaps the first few sessions were learning experiences in which the students could observe how their teacher and peers would react to what was being shared. When the p4c circle proved to be a safe place to talk about difficult themes, they began to open up. Soon the sessions became more about life. And I learned more and more about who the students really were and about their personal issues and interests. I began to empathize with them. It helped to guide me in my teaching so that I could target my instruction more individually.

I also noticed they were becoming good critical thinkers by using the thinkers toolkit, and I found myself learning from my students. One student might ask, “Why can't people think for themselves?” and another student might respond with “Would you explain your question?” or “Can you give us an example of when someone didn't think for themselves?” They wanted to know exactly what the other was asking, not what they thought she was asking. I assumed

I knew what the student was asking based on my perceptions and soon found I was wrong. The students would not only ask for clarification of questions, but of comments and even words. One discussion topic was about whether or not testing was a good idea. The word “smart” came up and someone asked, “What do we mean by ‘smart’?” I began to see why so many teachers had incorporated p4c into their weekly routine. As the students gained more opportunities to use and practice critical thinking in p4c, they began to apply it outside the p4c sessions in other lessons.

I can see now why these college students were an asset to have around. They were still very inquisitive and creative in their thinking. I remember college being the time of life when I asked the most questions, when I wondered the most, and when I was the most creative and daring in my thinking. And here were my fifth graders practicing college level thinking. Dr. J and the college students were in the same intellectual place and so they could relate to the students. I was still trying to find a balance between being a disciplinarian, a facilitator, and a participant open to sharing my thoughts and questions with my students. I found myself a little nervous even in our own little p4c circle. It was like I was in college all over again, except that I was the biggest students. With each p4c session, the discussions, questions, and comments resembled more and more a college classroom rather than an elementary one.

I can no longer call p4c Hawai'i a waste of time. I could see that there was a huge difference between the discussion circles of my past and p4c circles. There was safety in p4c and there was continuity. It wasn't meant for one warm and fuzzy experience. It was there to assist in building a community of inquiry. With each conversation, genuine bonds were being developed, not at a rapid pace, but at a slow enough pace so the bonds were strong.

It soon became clear that the students weren't the only ones benefiting from p4c. I was beginning to think about things in a deeper way and ask questions about what was really being said. The other day I was reading a book and the author was trying to help me understand that there was no clear and universally accepted definition of “good.” I was with him on that, but as I continued to read I thought, “He's making a lot of assumptions.” I was aware of this only because p4c asks students not to take questions at their face value, but to ask what they assume. So, being a participant in p4c has also helped me become a better thinker.

Philosophy for children doesn't change the world, but it has the potential to change individual worlds and assist in creating world changers. I'm learning all of this slowly but surely. I have come to a new place where I feel that I'll soon be able to facilitate sessions without the help of Dr. J or one of his college groupies. I may even remove the "newbie" label I've enjoyed for so long. But, like Dr. J always says, "We're not in a rush." I'm just settling into the idea that this p4c thing has its perks, and that's something I'd like to share at our next staff p4c session.