BRINGING ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING TO PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Community of ethical inquiry report of a school trial, 2014
Preface

All of us, unavoidably, need to be ethical reasoners. We all navigate our way through a world of complex moral dilemmas, conflicting demands, and competing ideas about fairness, justice and goodness. It’s therefore crucial that we equip children with the skills necessary to understand and evaluate ethical claims and respond thoughtfully to the issues they will be confronted with.

As this report demonstrates, the Community of Ethical Inquiry approach stands to make a significant contribution to the ways in which children acquire this sort of ethical literacy. It invites students to do ethics, not simply to learn about ethics, and encourages self-reflection as they do so. It also embodies the intrinsically communal nature of inquiry: we are always ethical reasoners together with others in a shared world. As Victoria considers how to integrate ethical understanding and critical thinking into the curriculum, the time is right to consider what this exciting teaching methodology can contribute.

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Deakin University

Dr Janette Poulton, Academic Coordinator and Lecturer, School of Education and the Arts, Melbourne Institute of Technology, here describes an initiative to address the problem of how to teach ethics in schools using a secular framework.

Ethics In Schools

The Community of Ethical Inquiry (CEI) project initiated by the Humanist Society of Victoria (HSV) aligned well with ideals expressed in many of the Victorian educational policy documents. The Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (2008) recognised that the development of ethical understanding assists students to become ‘confident and creative individuals’. The Declaration acknowledges that ‘the capacity to act with ethical integrity’, contributes to becoming ‘active and informed citizens … who work for the common good.’

Not all public school educators are comfortable with this commitment to ethical education, partly due to a misconception that ethical education can only be delivered through a religious framework – and, of course, the public school system in Victoria is governed by the 1872 Education Act which ensured the secular nature of government schools. Current legislation specifies that curriculum and teaching in government schools will ‘not promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect’. In response to such issues the HSV proposed that ethics be taught using a secular framework. This position is very much in accord with the latest development in the Victoria Education Department curriculum. HSV identified the most significant hurdle to realising this ideal, which is to find a tried and true way to teach ethics in a secular context.

The Victorian context

On 15th September 2015 The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, a statutory authority of the Government of Victoria, responsible for the provision of curriculum and assessment programs for Victorian schools, released a ground breaking new curriculum to be delivered to all Victorian F–10 public school students from 2017. All students are to be assessed in the areas of both ethics, and critical and creative thinking – two capabilities that needs must work hand in hand. As is the policy in Victoria, teachers are free to choose how they achieve this outcome. Today, the choice of appropriate pedagogy is on all thinking Victorian’s minds.

HSV had foreseen the need to support the preparation of the current generation of educators and parents to address this challenge. The fact is that educational providers in Victoria only occasionally offer courses in the teaching of ethics. It was therefore anticipated that schools might be ill-prepared to deliver such a curriculum, given frequently voiced concerns about both “the crowded curriculum” and the unsettled and contestable nature of moral values.

Moral fundamentalism or behaviourist strategies may seem to some to be the easiest way forward, but such approaches are clearly at odds with the inclusive and democratic schooling required by current educational policies. Thus HSV committed to the development of resources and training in the teaching of ethics using inquiry based methods. The aspiration was to support the capacity for ethical inquiry, rather than offering an uncritical training in “good” behaviour. This would call upon the additional capability of critical and creative thinking.

Harry Gardner had constructed an earlier HSV Philosophy Curriculum in 1996, inspired by the Philosophy for Children movement. Building on Gardener’s initiative, the HSV concluded that the desired capabilities are best developed in the safe environment of a ‘community of inquiry’. We celebrate the birth of the HSV Community of Ethical Inquiry project of 2014.

Why Philosophy for Children?

The advent of Philosophy for Children (P4C) coincided with the recognition that emerged in the third quarter of the 20th century that children are capable of thinking critically and creatively, and that a major aim of education should be to help children become more reasonable – the “fourth R”. And as reading and writing are taught to children through the discipline of literature, why not make reasoning and judgment available to them through the discipline of philosophy?

However, these benefits don’t come from learning about the history of philosophy or philosophers. Rather, as with reading, writing and arithmetic, the benefits of philosophy come through the doing-through active engagement in rigorous philosophical inquiry.

Philosophy also includes the discipline of ethics, and Philosophy for Children has proven to be an ideal program for values education. Children’s experience is replete with ethical concerns and issues, though they may be only dimly aware of this. And through television, the Internet and other media, children today are exposed to ideas and images which not so long ago would have been reserved for adults. Like adults, children often perceive the world as a jumble of alternative possibilities. Rather than dictate a set of prescribed values to children, Philosophy for Children seeks to help them strengthen their own capacity to appraise and respond to these beckoning alternatives; to self-correct their habits of thought, feeling and action through sustained ethical inquiry. Moreover, Philosophy for Children’s egalitarian nature, commitment to varying viewpoints and insistence on the inherent value of all participants helps foster empathy and pro-social behavior as an essential basis for values education.

[www.montclair.edu]
‘A Community of Enquiry is a group of people used to thinking together with a view to increasing their understanding and appreciation of the world around them and of each other.’

But inquiry is also a social enterprise, which requires students to share their own perspectives, listen to one another, read faces, challenge and build on one another’s thinking, look for missing perspectives and reconstruct their own ideas.

A year-long study of 1,500 primary pupils in England found that P4C boosted their progress in school (Gorard et al., theconversation.com, 10 July 2015).

What is a Community of Inquiry?

Participating in a community of inquiry engages young people in important cognitive moves, such as

- creating hypotheses,
- clarifying their terms,
- asking for and giving good reasons,
- offering examples and counter-examples,
- questioning each other’s assumptions,
- drawing inferences
- and follows the inquiry where it leads.

What does a typical CEI session look like?

A typical CEI session commences with a warm-up in which a short discussion or game is used to develop a nominated social or inquiry skill. A stimulus (such as a picture book, newspaper article, video clip, photo) is introduced and the children are asked to reflect on the ideas in the stimulus. Classroom discussion determines the component of the topic that the children find interesting and contestable. Activities are utilized to develop concepts in small or classroom groups.
GETTING THE RIGHT TRAINING

HSV proposed that volunteers interested in facilitating CEI in schools should take part in the teacher-training program delivered each term by the Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools (VAPS).

VAPS considers that dialogue and discussion best support ethical exploration in the classroom – a tradition of philosophical inquiry that goes right back to Socrates. This approach has significant social benefits. By beginning to think about ethical matters together and through the give-and-take of reasoned argument, students learn properly to consider other people’s points of view and to be sincere, reasonable and respectful in dealing with their differences.

VAPS Level One training provides participants with the skills and pedagogical foundations to run their own Communities of Inquiry in three important areas:

- Understanding ethical concepts and principles
- The exploration of ethical issues
- Engagement in collaborative deliberation.

In exploring ethical concepts, we examine the meaning of such ideas as fairness, honesty, goodness, rights and responsibilities. Through exploring ethical issues together, we learn to examine reasons for judging conduct to be ethically right or wrong as well as better or worse; and are encouraged to think about the importance of consequences as well as of principles in everyday ethical decision-making.

‘Philosophy helps us learn to recognize the ethical problems and possibilities in our experience, to think through them carefully, to make sound ethical judgments and to take appropriate action.’

– Matthew Lipman

Philosophical Ethics: “Ethics is a branch of Philosophy that examines ethical concepts and issues. It enquires into such things as goodness, right action, and moral responsibility. From an educational point of view, philosophical ethical reflection gives students a deeper understanding of the ethical domain, preventing them from forming unthinking moral opinions. It develops their capacity for considered moral judgment, which will enable them to respond more thoughtfully to many of the problems and issues they will face in their lives” Prof Phil Cam, St James Ethics Centre (2012)

VAPS is an association of teachers and philosophers. Inspired by the Philosophy for Children movement, VAPS promotes critical and creative thinking among young people. They believe that learning philosophy opens students’ minds to big ideas. They support teachers in fostering the intellectual and social skills that enable students to think philosophically – through training, networking and curriculum development.

vaps.vic.edu.au

In addition, we practise habits of mind including considering different points of view, appealing to appropriate criteria in making and defending judgments, and attending to the reasoning used to argue from experience.
**THE CEI PROJECT**

**Recruitment of Volunteers**
Volunteers were recruited via volunteer@vichumanist.org.au. Those who were selected enrolled in the Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools professional development program, to acquire skills in facilitating a Community of Inquiry. Around half of the applicants completed the course and the assessment successfully. Of these, seven chose to participate as facilitators in the pilot program.

Three Victorian government primary schools agreed to participate in the trial program, which occupied Term 4, October to December 2014. One of the schools offered it as an alternative to SRI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Toorak PS</th>
<th>Brunswick NW PS</th>
<th>Canterbury PS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<td>Grade/s</td>
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<td>5/6</td>
<td>5/6</td>
<td>6 &amp; 5/6</td>
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<td>Students (maximum)</td>
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<td>65</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Classroom Teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3 separate classes</td>
<td>1 class per fortnight</td>
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<td>40 minutes × 10 weeks</td>
<td>50 minutes × 5 fortnights</td>
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Table 1. Participants in pilot program

**Preparation for the Classroom**
Volunteers completed the professional development program with VAPS. The course ran for a total of eighteen hours, with several additional hours of practice in the classroom.

**Three Resources**
On completing the training program and being situated in a school the CEI volunteers were provided with three newly constructed resources:

A. **Curriculum Guidelines** designed by Dr Marietta Elliott-Kleerkoper. Topics included rights, responsibilities, punishment and reward, reasons, excuses, telling on people, knowing right from wrong, morality and fairness.

B. **Lesson Planners** for Facilitators (designed using Survey Monkey) to record on three templates their preparations for the class, their observations of what actually happened in class, and reflections on what occurred to assist in planning the next sessions.

C. **Thinking Books** for Students to record their ideas. Facilitators were asked to invite students to answer all or any of the five sets of questions outlined below, before, during or after any session.
EVALUATION OF THE CEI PROJECT

Aims
In order to investigate the outcomes of this project three research questions were posed:

a) Was the CEI program feasible?
b) How could the training be improved?
c) Is the CEI project worth promoting?

Methodology
The first question was addressed through analysis of the written materials of students with a view to establishing to what extent primary aged students were capable of engaging in ethical inquiry, in the context of a Community of Inquiry. Two sets of criteria were used: the level of complexity of student assertions and the kinds of questions they asked. The value of the experience to students was also noted.

The second question was addressed through examination of the planners completed by facilitators, including their mode of preparation and reflection on their students’ work as well as a summary of interviews with facilitators.

The third question was answered by predicting how these achievements would fit in with future developments in Victoria.

Data Collection

Thinking Books
85 students answered the questions outlined above.

Lesson Planners
Facilitators completed eighteen surveys regarding their preparation, observations and reflections on their class.

Interviews with Principals and Facilitators
These were conducted informally to ascertain the responses of the school community to the program.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>SUBJECTS</th>
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<th>Brunswick NW PS</th>
<th>Canterbury PS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<td>A. Thinking Books</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>16 + 17</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>85</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Reflections</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>14 + 0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>C. Interviews</td>
<td>Facilitators</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Interviews</td>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Planners</td>
<td>Facilitators</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Kinds of data collected
Data Analysis

A. Thinking Books were analysed for (1) the complexity of questions asked and (2) the assertions made.

(1) Student questions were identified and coded according to the following four criteria derived from the Question Quadrants devised by Professor Philip Cam.

Yellow—observation or comprehension. These questions sought understanding of the stimulus material.

Red—research scientific & social. These questions were interpreted as seeking information from experts.

Green—speculative. These questions were interpreted as imaginative investigations.

Blue—open inquiry. These questions were interpreted as philosophical in natures.

Diagram 1. The question quadrants

Who gets kicked off the island?
What did Robin Hood steal?

(None recorded)

What would I do if one of my pets became really sick or stressed?

What are the good and bad things?
A decision is a decision but is it the right decision?
When you’re making a decision, what is most important; intentions, consequences or evidence?
Do I have to do something when something is wrong?

Diagram 2. Examples of capacity to ask philosophical questions, extracted from Thinking Books
B. Students’ Reflections

[The Students are quoted without correction]

**a) What did you like most?**

The subjects we discussed and how thoroughly we discussed them
Having debates
Relaxing, and more talking than writing
Finding out people’s opinions on things
Talking about how to solve things
Taking runs and talking about different points of view
The fact that it was hour about talking about stuff
Getting your opinion out without holding back
Not getting judged on your thoughts because it was a safe environment
I loved all the work we did and the fun activities.

**b) What did you like least?**

How people always interrupt, it is very annoying when thou art speaketh
Repetitive
It sort of got boring
Have more say in what we talk about because people wont get bored
You did not get enough time to talk
The sitting down
Writing in the book.

**c) What could you improve?**

Paying lots of attention
Come up with new things
By listening
By paying respect and not talking

**d) What do you still think about?**

Whether the stuff we learnt are true and how much I agree
Yes, but not much
Not really (other than having a dream about zombie apocolypse)
I always think about the problems we are trying to solve
Yes I did when I told my Dad about what we did
I thought about everyone else’s opinion and I try to see it from their point of view
What is fair and fairness.
C. Interviews with the Facilitators

The facilitators reported that children progressed during the trial, displaying:

- Improved listening skills
- The ability to generate philosophical question, think through these questions and give reasons for their opinions
- An understanding of examples, counterexamples and generalisations.

The children learnt to build on each other’s ideas and that it was acceptable to change your mind with increased awareness of a topic.

D. Interviews with the Principals

All Principals saw great value in offering CEI in their schools, so that an ethical dimension would enter curriculum and enquiry topics studied by students at their schools. They appreciated the opportunity for the children to develop their thinking skills and abilities and felt that this would, in turn, deepen and enrich their learning.

The Principals had no evidence that involvement in CEI sessions had increased their students’ understanding of ethical issues. None of them had read the student journals or visited or listened to any sessions themselves.

The principals reported that school councils, staff and parents at all schools responded very positively to their children being involved in this CEI program.

Two of the three schools found the program sufficiently rewarding to send a teacher to VAPS training. Each of these schools continued the relationship with HSV facilitators and also ran some ethics classes themselves.

The third school offered CEI classes to those not engaged in SRI. Following the trial the school community decided to discontinue SRI.

E. Lesson Planners

Facilitators’ responses were analysed with a view to improving the training and some observations about additional support for volunteers were inferred.

Pedagogical concepts such as the connection between activity and learning outcome need to be more carefully scaffolded for the volunteer.

Prematurely correcting ‘mistakes’ is to be avoided. An experienced facilitator will work with a student’s ‘mistake’ or confused speech, to reveal underlying conceptual confusions. Such confusions are often remarkable as they reveal the student’s intuitions of conceptual or argumentative complexity, and should not be tidied up for the sake of superficial clarity.

FINDINGS

a) Was the CEI program feasible?

Given the small sample size and the limited time frame we cannot show that students gained in ethical understanding over the course of this trial, but our records of students’ varied and fascinating responses to the program demonstrate that grade 5/6 students are capable of engaging in ethical inquiry in the environment established by the volunteers.

The dedicated work of the volunteers in setting up the classroom for dialogical inquiry was also successful in encouraging students to express their ideas freely, as evidenced by their heart-felt appreciation of the opportunity to talk constructively with one another and learn of different points of view.

One of the most challenging features of working in a school classroom is the time restraints. Forty minute sessions are very difficult for the untrained teacher to manage optimally. Nonetheless we conclude that volunteers were able to produce an environment conducive to ethical inquiry; that you do not need to be a philosopher or a teacher to achieve this, given sufficient training and experience in setting up a community of inquiry.
b) How could the training be improved?

The analysis that we conducted determined that VAPS Level One training could and should be bolstered for non-professional trainees by providing a better understanding of school and its procedures, including classroom management. This could be achieved by having a ½ day workshop and associated manual. More scaffolding needs to be provided to assist volunteers in understanding pedagogical strategies. Volunteers need to be encouraged to commit to using resources such as planners and journals. Not being versed in literacy issues they can underestimate the benefits of including written reflection as a regular activity. For example, the Thinking Books were introduced so as to help students both structure and modify their thoughts, rather than simply to record isolated ideas.

Finally there a number of basic philosophical moves that the volunteer needs to eventually master, such as distinguishing ‘Criteria’ from ‘Essences’.

On-going training also needs to be provided to support the development of facilitators’ reasoning and reflection skills.

c) Is the CEI project worth promoting?

The result of this project is likely to excite parents and the extended school community to become more involved in the development of ethical understandings. Continuing with the project would provide opportunity to support governmental initiatives with regard to ethics.

HSV has demonstrated the feasibility of training volunteers to run CEI, although they may be better placed as assistants than as independent facilitators. Given the work that VAPS is doing to train teachers to address the General Capabilities, there is certainly the possibility of continued work for HSV and like-minded bodies in identifying volunteers amongst families and non-teaching staff in school communities who might assist in this development.

Volunteers can assist the school to get an ethics program started, by identifying suitable resources and by providing classroom support alongside a teacher, such as in organizing stimulus materials, writing the students’ ideas on the board, using concepts maps and other organizational tools, and assisting with small group activities.

VAPS would be honored to support HSV volunteers’ development as participants and facilitators of communities of ethical inquiry. Another possibility would be to support the development of a training team, through the Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Associations (FAPSA) Level Two train-the-trainer course. This is conducted each year in January. HSV may even wish to consider developing their own unique model of training based on the COI.

In conclusion, the CEI project is well worth promoting, and the HSV is to be congratulated on this exciting initiative.

Dr Janette Poulton

Acknowledgements

Thanks to HSV members and especially Harry Gardiner, John Russel and Stephen Stuart; HSV volunteer facilitators; staff and students of the volunteer primary schools; Dr Marietta Elliott-Kleerkoper; VAPS training team; Dr Philip Cam, Dr Patrick Stokes, Ms Sharon Lomas.