The Key to Transformation: How the Introduction of Philosophy for Children (P4C) Encouraged Empathy in Grade 9 Boys

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THE ACTION:
THE SEQUENCE OF A P4C LESSON

At the heart of P4C and any community of inquiry are four competencies known as the 4Cs.

The 4Cs are CREATIVITY, CRITICAL THINKING, CARING and COLLABORATION. These are referred to throughout an inquiry.

1. SHARE THE STIMULUS
   This could be in the form of a short story, an extract from a novel, a picture, a photograph, a song or short video.

2. THINK TIME
   I found that “think time” was imperative. It allowed the boys an opportunity to truly engage with the stimulus.

3. QUESTION/STATEMENT CREATION
   Initially the techniques bit; getting the boys to come up with philosophical statements or questions individually. After a couple of inquiries, however, they were brilliant at this.

4. SHARING QUESTION/STATEMENT
   This part of the inquiry gives the boys an opportunity to use their ability to reason and think critically. As the groups were no bigger than 4, it was a relatively safe space and I noticed the growth in confidence during this small group discussion.

5. VOTING
   The boys did a linked vote at this point. They were encouraged to vote for a statement that they think will really challenge the group, if applicable to the boys as they get to choose which topics they talk about and they have a sense of ownership of it.

6. DISCUSSION
   The bulk of the lesson should be spent here. The boys discuss their chosen philosophical question and use it as a springboard to discussing a pattern of ideas.

7. REFLECTION
   This is arguably the most important part of an inquiry. This is an ideal opportunity for the boys to engage with the 4Cs and reflect on their collaborative contribution to the contribution of their peers as well as the discussion they will have just engaged in.

What the boys had to say

Student O intimated in his interview that he felt it (P4C) was something we needed to focus on more at school, and that “we strengthen our relationships with people - even those that are not our friends.”

As a result of “our youth and our privilege we don’t tend to empathise with people around us - it (P4C and the community of inquiry) has almost brought out more empathy in us.”

Key Findings

There were a number of emergent themes as a result of this project, these included, but were not limited to an increased:
- sense of confidence, especially in those deemed “quiet” or “introverted”
- level of questioning, both of their peers and themselves;
- ability to collaborate; and
- interest and sensitivity to others’ experiences.

Conclusion

P4C is something that I have always had an interest in, but immersing myself in this action research project has made me realise what a beneficial tool it is in education. It is a pedagogy that has the ability to be used across the curriculum, and is as effective as an academic pedagogy as it is a pastoral one.

P4C offers children the opportunity to “reflect upon and question their existence and its value” (Nidopiferi, 2011), in the South African context, where transformation is one of the greatest challenges in education, it is an effective channel of transforming the boys in our care into reflective, adaptable and responsible citizens. As such, P4C has an undeniably important role to play in our whole-school curriculum.