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Enquiry-based Religious Education; 'Philosophy for Children' in practice: Smannell and Enham Church of England Aided Primary School

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Brief description

Smannell and Enham Primary School has effectively integrated 'Philosophy for Children' (P4C) within RE, in the context of implementing an innovative cycle of learning which lies at the heart of the syllabus. As a result, RE has been a catalyst for wider developments in teaching and learning across the school.

Overview – the school's message

'We are on a learning journey in our school. Having identified the values for life and learning that we considered important, we set about re-evaluating the curriculum and our pedagogy. We wanted to maximise the opportunities for the children to develop the key skills and



attributes associated with our core values. "Philosophy for Children" ticked a number of boxes for us and so we decided to trial it first through RE.

"Learning for life" isn't just about acquiring the essential basic skills of English and Maths, as important as they are. It is also about developing the ability to reflect and question; to be able to justify an opinion; to formulate an argument and communicate effectively; to appreciate the views of others and be prepared to re-evaluate and change your opinion; and, to be able to work collaboratively and independently. Using "Philosophy for Children" in RE provided an authentic vehicle for developing such skills - skills that even after a short time the children are transferring to other areas of the curriculum and wider aspects of school life.'

Julie Winning, Headteacher and Rhiannon Love, RE Coordinator

The good practice in detail

Religious education was an existing strength of the school and, as such, was a natural context for introducing 'Philosophy for Children' (P4C) with the intention of developing new approaches to learning. P4C was seen as an important step in developing the 'learning journey' within the school. Having established the core aims, beliefs and values underpinning the curriculum, the focus of the journey shifted to developing an approach to learning which would embrace and implement those values within the classroom. P4C with its emphasis on the 4Cs of Caring, Critical, Creative and Collaborative learning was seen as a key link between the values and pedagogy of the school. The school used the information at www.thephilosophyman.com and www.sapere.org.uk to help to develop their practice.

The Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton agreed syllabus acknowledges that developing the skills of enquiry is of central importance in RE. *'Living Difference Revised'* (2011) says clearly that: 'Enquiry lies at the heart of the Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton agreed syllabus. Developing the skills of enquiry in children and young people is an important part of the work of a teacher of religious education.'

The syllabus also sets out a cycle of learning to guide the process of enquiry. The methodology as illustrated in the elements of the cycle of learning - **communicate, apply, enquire, contextualize** and **evaluate** - offers a secure process by which to enable pupils to progress in their ability to interpret religion in relation to human experience.



Rhiannon Love, the RE coordinator at the school and a member of one of Hampshire's RE Development Groups explained how she went about introducing P4C into RE: 'I attended a SAPERE course to become an accredited P4C facilitator. It was run as a joint venture by the History and Religious Education teams for Hampshire, with the express aim of not only introducing P4C into the primary curriculum, but also to integrate it wherever possible, and specifically within RE.'

Her initial reason for introducing P4C was to raise the level of questioning in her Year 3/4 class, from the typical 'teacher-led' question/answer to genuine discussion, led and progressed by the children, with the teacher as a facilitator. However, during the training, she realised that the gains of encouraging a philosophical approach in the classroom were so much greater than just better discussions.

The three aims of P4C are to develop thinking skills, philosophical conceptualisation and values. Each session centres on a concept, introduced by a stimulus such as a story or a video clip, which then prompts questions and discussion – the only rule being the inclusion of the concept. Then a vote is taken to decide which question should be used for the philosophical enquiry. Because the children have formulated the questions themselves, they have a real sense of ownership of the discussion and will engage more readily. 'Most of the children responded immediately with passion and enthusiasm as they tackled some big concepts such as kindness (*Elves and the Shoemaker*: "Why was the shoemaker kind to the elves?"); choice (Anthony Browne's *The Tunnel*: "Why did the girl choose to save her brother?")', says Rhiannon. The stories of Anthony Browne also proved particularly effective as stimulus material.

Once confidence in the approach and the value of P4C is established, the approach can be embedded more formally within the RE curriculum. Rhiannon chose a Year 3/4 RE unit on 'Myth'. P4C was used at three key points in the unit:

- in the initial 'enquiry' phase where the children focused on stories and myths, exploring whether they were the same or different
- later in the 'evaluation' phase of the cycle when the children agreed as a class to focus on the key philosophical enquiry: 'Do myths still have a value?' – thinking particularly about religious myths such as Noah, Adam and Eve, Moses and the Ten Commandments, and Krishna and the serpent.
- finally, in the 'communication' phase of the cycle where the children again used P4C approaches to consider their own response to myth.



Rhiannon says: 'It has been interesting to watch the progress of the class. We have been engaging in P4C since the beginning of the spring term 2011, and have undertaken eight or nine philosophical enquiries. Although clearly still at the beginning of our journey with P4C, the children are already much more confident in progressing the debate, with little input from me. Although not every child participates in every session - indeed one of the ground rules is that no one **has** to speak - each week more children join in.'

And feedback from the children has been fascinating: 'We communicate and start to know each other better...what I like is hearing other people's ideas and it is fun!...I find it hard because sometimes I don't know what to say...I like the bit when it is a tricky question and your brain suddenly halts...you can say your own opinion and you can learn from someone else.'

Introducing the concept of 'ritual' with children in Years 3 and 4 was a challenge which proved to be very effective. The children began by coming to an agreement about a class definition which they revisited throughout the unit of work: A ritual is a ceremonial action that is done regularly with meaning. It has an emotional response and can be traditional.

At the 'evaluation' stage of the cycle the pupils focused on the question: What is the value of the ritual of lighting the paschal candle? Jessica says: 'It is special because the meaning of it brings an emotional response this is sometimes overjoyed (sic) and also depressing. I think the bit of the ritual which is most important is when we light the candle because it reminds Christians of Jesus rising from the dead with all the joy and singing.'

As the children gained in confidence, they were asking more and more sophisticated questions such as: Would it matter if you missed a ritual? What is the difference between a ritual and a routine? What rituals are important to me? Are there any bad rituals? How would I feel if my ritual was taken away from me?



Rhiannon reflected on the learning: 'It is exciting to watch the children as they grapple with "big ideas" and I certainly hope that we will be introducing it into the other classes in the school. P4C is a fantastic foundation for our children, which should have a lasting impact on their lives.'

What have the children achieved?

Their success is evident at a number of levels:

- The children develop a much deeper understanding of RE – getting beyond simply learning facts to handling ideas and questions more effectively.
- Much more sustained learning is achieved rather than the fragmented pattern of work often seen in RE. The children were able to follow through their enquiries building on their thinking across a number of sessions.
- They become more confident as learners; discussion is no longer so teacher-led.
- The children develop a more sophisticated understanding of the process of learning itself. They were, for example, able to explain the stages of the cycle of learning underpinning RE in the school. They were also able to reflect on the value of a P4C approach.
- There has been an impact at a much wider level on attitudes and relationship relating to the core values of the school; for example, the children are transferring the skills of P4C to help to resolve playground disputes more effectively.

Where next?

The school has considered where to take the initiative next:

- They aim to run some sessions for parents and carers to help them to understand the process and become more actively involved in their children's learning.
- The intention is to build on the RE work and extend P4C more widely across the curriculum and classes through a process of modelling good practice and staff training.
- The impact of the use of P4C on pupils' progress both in RE and their wider learning in, for example, speaking and listening, will be more systematically evaluated.

The school's background

Smannell and Enham Church of England (Aided) Primary School is a popular, small, village primary school situated in a rural location on the outskirts of Andover in Hampshire. Half of the pupils come from the surrounding small villages, and half from Andover. The proportion of pupils receiving free school meals is below average. The majority of pupils are white British and only a few speak English as an additional language. The number of children with special educational needs is in line with the national average.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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