Philosophical Enquiry in Multiracial Classrooms

Darren Chetty
Institute of Education, UCL
dmchetty@hotmail.com

Dr Judith Suissa
Institute of Education, UCL
This workshop will invite participants to explore some key issues to do with race, multiculturalism and pluralism in the context of Philosophy for Children (P4C) theory and practice in particular and philosophical dialogue more generally. We will argue that racism remains an under-explored field within P4C literature despite, as Chetty (2014) notes, sometimes being invoked as a reason for the urgent need for more philosophical inquiry/P4C in schools.

The two workshop presenters are racialised and gendered differently to one another. Both have experience of teaching philosophy – one in primary schools, and the other at graduate level. We offer for critical discussion, the notion that teachers of philosophy with children are informed by the philosophical, the pedagogical and the personal and suggest that reflection on the relationship between these three dimensions should form part of the education of P4C practitioners.

The following personal narrative serves as a way in to an exploration of these ideas:

10 years ago, I first began to talk about my concerns about ‘doing’ P4C with children in racially diverse classrooms with other P4C practitioners, all of whom were racialised as white. People responded in their individual ways, but over time I came to notice two broad categories for responses. The first response was a re-statement of P4C principles, including often the ones I had referred to as potentially problematic in my examples (for example voting for a question, the facilitator as neutral, the idea of a safe space, the lack of materials written from a racially minoritised viewpoint, the assumption that people regarded as ‘reasonable’ do not perpetuate racism). These responses resulted in me feeling increasingly frustrated as they tended not to connect directly with my voiced concerns but rather seemed to use a P4C orthodoxy as a ‘barrier’ from having to engage with them. Looking back, the respondents may have assumed that my concerns were merely due to a lack of understanding on my part, although I sometimes thought that my interlocutor was aware that I already was aware of many of the things they were telling me. The second response was very different. It was simply an invitation for me to continue to talk along the line of “Tell me more...”. Whilst this response is more in keeping with P4C, it was not clear to me that the choice of response was due to familiarity or experience in P4C. How might we account for it?

In exploring the pedagogical implications of these issues, we will draw on the field of ‘Gatekeeping theory’ in order to suggest that teachers can contribute toward a ‘gated community of inquiry’ without intending to do so. In the context of teaching philosophy, it is particularly important to consider how philosophy, despite its focus on the identification of assumptions, has historically contributed to racialised assumptions that persist today and thus form part of the mechanism of gatekeeping.

In our discussion we wish to explore possibilities for conceptualising the alternative to such “gatekeeping” - an alternative reflected in the second type of response mentioned in the narrative above - and its connection with important pedagogical and ethical principles that can be found in P4C literature. In doing so, we will explore the ways in which the ability to respond in this way can be rooted in personal and philosophical dispositions, and whether nurturing these dispositions can and should form part of the training of P4C teachers and possibly other philosophy teachers. Some of the dispositions or attitudes we hope to explore include: curiosity, fallibility, humility, lack of complacency, and a willingness to feel discomfort.
We wish to focus in particular on the notion of discomfort, and suggest that an ability, or even a willingness, to feel and to work with discomfort is perhaps one of the key dispositions required for teaching philosophy in a racially diverse setting (and indeed elsewhere). However, we will argue that, in situations where a white teacher is working with a racially diverse group of students, such a disposition is not sufficient for it does not carry with it a commitment on behalf of the teacher to actually address what Charles Mills terms “White Ignorance”. Common in the P4C literature, and the literature around progressive/child-centred learning is the idea that the teacher learns from the students. We are sympathetic to this idea and believe in working to remain open to learning from those with relatively less power than us in a classroom/pedagogical setting. However we question a situation where teachers see their students as the solution to their own ignorance. Recognising that teachers cannot know everything, nor should they pretend to or be expected to, we argue that they can and should take responsibility for their own ignorance.

We will invite the workshop participants to consider, with us, what it means to be in a school, in a community, where people are racialised? What does the experience of and awareness of oneself as an agent within such a community contribute to one’s role and responsibility as an educator? Could such an awareness lead to a significant reframing of the pedagogical relationship so that one thinks of it not in terms of what insights we can gain together into a tricky philosophical question, but in terms of how one’s own racialised identity is affecting the way one frames the question in the first place? What kind of knowledge of racism is required for white P4C practitioners to be equipped to facilitate philosophical enquiry in multiracial classrooms?

We will draw on philosophical work on critical race theory, epistemic injustice, social justice pedagogy and dialogue in considering the important role of philosophy in the preparation/training of P4C practitioners, but also in highlighting the ways in which the tools and conceptual frameworks offered by philosophy themselves need to be constantly challenged and questioned in light of personal experience and perception. The interweaving of the personal, the social and the philosophical is a common theme in the critical work that we discuss, and in the methodological approach that we adopt in suggesting ways in which the practice of teaching and doing philosophy can be enriched as part of a critical and ethical pedagogy.

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