Student and teacher outcomes from participating in a Philosophy for Children program: Volunteer ethics teachers' perspectives

Gianni Zappalà* & Ciara Smyth**

* Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion, University of Technology Sydney

gianni.zappala@uts.edu.au

** Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney

c.smyth@unsw.edu.au

Abstract

Despite the growth of philosophy for/with children (P4C) over the last five decades, its legitimacy remains contested. Key themes within the P4C literature are the potential learning outcomes for children as well as possible personal and professional development benefits for those that teach it. The literature on the former, while extensive, presents a mixed picture and highlights the challenges inherent in determining the impact of P4C on learning outcomes. The literature on the latter, while little explored, may provide valuable insights for teacher professional development. Unlike much of the literature, this paper examines the impact of P4C from the P4C educators' perspective. The paper presents the findings from a pilot study of volunteer teachers with the Primary Ethics program in Sydney, Australia. Two key findings emerged. First, ethics teachers felt they were making a material and positive difference to the children they taught, which included: the development of critical thinking and reasoning skills; increased confidence to express themselves; and enjoyment derived from class discussions. Second, teachers that use a philosophical and a community of inquiry approach with their students may themselves become more reflective and engage in critical thinking and ethical reasoning.

Key words

educational outcomes of philosophical ethics, P4C and professional development, Philosophy for/with Children, teaching philosophical ethics, volunteer ethics teachers

Introduction

Philosophy for/with Children (P4C) has grown in scholarly and practical interest over the last five decades with a presence in over 50 countries (Burgh & Thornton 2016; Goering, Shudak & Wartenberg 2013; Gregory, Haynes & Murris 2017; Yan, Walters, Wang & Wang 2018). Originating with Matthew Lipman and colleagues at the US Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children in the early 1970s, the 'community of inquiry' approach was developed, whereby a group of individuals explore an idea through dialogue by asking questions, discussing responses, substantiating viewpoints and acknowledging consensus or conflict (D'Olimpio 2014). In a classroom setting, the teacher acts as facilitator and discussion occurs between teacher and students and students to students, contributing to reasoning, critical thinking, creative thinking, enquiry and evaluation skills (D'Olimpio 2014).

Despite its international growth, P4C still faces legitimacy challenges and questions about whether it should be part of an already crowded school curriculum (Gregory 2011). With a global emphasis on benchmarking metrics and quantifiable outcomes in education policy, school subjects that do not appear to produce measurable outcomes can often be viewed as less worthy of curriculum space (Lingard, Rezai-Rashti & Martino 2016). Some argue that the skills that children gain through engaging in P4C can be applied to and benefit other areas of learning, such as reasoning, collaboration and critical thinking skills (Cam 2018; Vansieleghem & Kennedy 2011). Others suggest that P4C provides a basis for ethical living and prepares children for dealing with moral and political issues in later life (Burgh 2018; Hand 2018; Hobbs 2018). Conversely, other proponents of P4C emphasise the value of teaching philosophy for philosophy's sake rather than for the transferable skills it is considered to impart (Jasinski & Lewis 2016). Debates concerning the value of teaching philosophy to children highlight the inherent tensions within education between the teaching of knowledge and developing the competencies to deal with that knowledge (Gorard Siddiqui & See 2017).

It has also been argued that P4C has benefits for those who teach it, with some highlighting the positive relationship between the promotion of inquiry-based learning, thinking skills, and inquiry-based teaching as an approach for the professional development of teachers (Baumfield 2006, 2015).

This paper focuses on two relatively unexplored areas in the P4C literature. First, in terms of student outcomes, while the literature is extensive, the methodologies employed in most of the research may only be appropriate for measuring the effects of P4C programs in large-scale longitudinal studies. There is also value, however, in

looking at what the P4C teachers perceive to be the impact of the P4C curriculum on the students they teach. Exploring the meanings and interpretations that teachers give to their subjective experience of introducing children to philosophical issues may provide insights that complement or enhance quantitative-based findings. For instance, can they identify any changes in the students over the course of the lessons? What kinds of engagement or interactions are more effective? Were there any unintended outcomes from participating in the program (Zappalà 2020)? This paper examines the impact of P4C from the teachers' perspective. Second, it contributes to the understanding of whether teaching philosophical ethics may develop the very traits teachers are seeking to cultivate in their students on those that teach the program, the so-called 'mirror effect', which may provide valuable insights for teacher professional development (Baumfield 2015).

The data comes from a pilot study of the experiences of volunteer ethics teachers in the Primary Ethics program in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The focus of the paper is on the type of learning outcomes that volunteer ethics teachers felt their students were achieving as well as whether teaching philosophical ethics led to changes in their own personal growth, thinking and behaviour. Section 2 provides a select review of the key literature. Section 3 summarises the key features of the Primary Ethics program. Section 4 outlines the data and method of investigation, while Section 5 presents the key findings followed by a discussion and conclusion.

P4C and learning outcomes for students and teachers

Studies exploring the relationship between P4C and cognitive, educational or learning outcomes, as well as non-cognitive outcomes, differ in design, sample size, length of intervention, and produce interesting yet mixed results. A focus of this literature has been on the positive benefits P4C has for students, and these studies usually use objective measures of student attainment in several cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, using pre- and post-test results.

In one of the most comprehensive studies, Yan et al. (2018) undertook a meta-analysis of research on the cognitive outcomes of students involved in P4C. After applying strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, their analysis comprised just 10 studies published between 2002 and 2016 and found that P4C showed an overall moderate positive effect on students' cognitive learning outcomes and a significant positive effect on their reasoning skills.

Gorard et al.'s (2017) analysis of outcomes for over three thousand students in 48 schools in the UK, as part of a randomised control trial, found small positive effect sizes in favour of the P4C children on some cognitive outcome measures, but negligible results with respect to other learning outcomes. In exploring the potential cognitive benefits of P4C, Fair et al. (2015a) found that the duration of philosophy courses for children was important, with longer courses (at least 24 weeks in duration) leading to improvements in students' cognitive abilities in contrast to shorter courses that did not demonstrate any significant changes. In a further study, Fair et al. (2015b) found that the benefits of P4C persisted after completion of courses, and that the cognitive improvements that students gained were still evident three years after their participation.

Studies also suggest that P4C can improve non-cognitive outcomes. An evaluation of a pilot ethics course, taught to primary school aged students in NSW in 2010, found that students participating in the program developed an improved understanding of the nature of ethics and ethical issues, and were more willing to discuss ethical issues (Knight 2010). Using a quasi-experimental design in a study of over 2700 students in 42 schools, Siddiqui, Gorard & See (2019) found that students who participated in P4C had improved results (albeit small) in 'social and communication skills', 'teamwork and resilience', and 'empathy' compared with the control group students.

Overall, these studies highlight some moderate improvements on some cognitive and non-cognitive measures, especially when the P4C lessons are held for a substantive duration (Fair et al. 2015a). These studies highlight the challenges inherent in determining the impact of P4C on learning outcomes and, while the methods employed may be appropriate for measuring the effects of P4C programs in large-scale longitudinal studies, they provide little insight into what the P4C educators perceive to be the impact of the P4C curriculum on their students.

Another area of focus within P4C has been on the skills, training and pedagogical approaches required in order to effectively 'teach' philosophy to children (Mellor & Splitter 1998, 2014). A sub-theme of this literature has been the potential role of P4C for teacher professional development, with some highlighting the positive relationship between the promotion of inquiry-based learning, thinking skills, and inquiry-based teaching as an approach for the professional development of teachers (Baumfield 2006, 2015). Building on Wikeley's (2000) insight of a 'mirror effect' for teachers, namely, that teachers may develop the very traits they are seeking to cultivate in their students, Baumfield (2016) has shown that, when applied to P4C, teachers who use philosophical

inquiry with their students, especially the community of inquiry approach, may themselves become more reflective, curious and experimental.

Although this 'mirror effect' is 'typical in classrooms where P4C is practised', Baumfield (2016, p.120) notes that it has received less attention than the effect of P4C on student learning. Furthermore, the research focus has been on professional school teachers as, in many programs, it is they who deliver the P4C curriculum to their students in addition to their other subjects (Splitter 2014). In some P4C programs, however, specially trained volunteers who are usually parents of the children in the program deliver the curriculum, one such program being Primary Ethics (Knight 2010).

The Primary Ethics program

In state schools in NSW, a period of one class per week is set aside for the teaching of scripture or Special Religious Education (SRE). The State Parliament amended the NSW Education Act on 1 December 2010 to give students who do not attend SRE/Scripture classes in NSW public schools the legal right to attend philosophical ethics classes as an alternative to supervised 'private study'. The NSW Government tasked the Ethics Centre to develop and deliver ethics education classes in primary schools across NSW, which led to the establishment of Primary Ethics Limited, an independent not-for-profit organisation, as the sole approved provider of ethics classes to NSW public schools. Its mission is to 'support children to develop skills in ethical reasoning, critical thinking and respectful discussion' (https://primaryethics.com.au/about/), and it has developed an integrated age-appropriate curriculum for all of the primary school stages (K to Year 6) which is delivered free of charge via a network of specially trained and accredited volunteers.

The overall goal of ethics classes is to help children develop a life-long capacity to identify and make well-reasoned decisions about ethical issues. The kind of outcomes that ethics classes aim to achieve are for children to develop skills in:

- Critical thinking: developing and evaluating arguments, using logic and reason, evaluating evidence, giving reasons and carefully considering views that are different to their own;

- Collaborative inquiry: listening to each other, taking turns to speak, building on others' ideas, respectfully disagreeing, respectfully challenging others' thinking, helping each other express ideas, articulating values and principles, putting a

counter view and asking questions;

- Ethical Reasoning: developing a capacity for ethical understanding through learning to empathise and consider the interests of others as well as their own, thinking about circumstances, intentions, consequences and the common good, and considering what it means to lead a good life.

The Primary Ethics curriculum (developed by Dr Sue Knight, an academic in the field of philosophical education for children) and classes support children to develop their moral reasoning capabilities through skills development rather than the promotion of any particular ethical view. The focus is for children to develop the competencies to identify ethical issues, show a willingness to engage in respectful discussion with their families and friends about ethical issues, and exercise the ability to think widely and critically in exploring reasons and developing arguments.

The Primary Ethics program draws upon a key assumption among some P4C scholars that exposing and acquainting children to philosophical ideas and inquiry may assist them in gaining skills that can be applied to and benefit other areas of learning, such as reasoning, collaboration and critical thinking (Cam 2018). The program is also consistent with the view that teaching philosophical ethics may provide a foundation for ethical living and dealing with moral and political issues in later life (Burgh 2018; Hand 2018; Hobbs 2018). Indeed, Professor Philip Cam developed the curriculum used in the original pilot for the Primary Ethics program, and the class lessons were developed for use with the Community of Inquiry approach developed by P4C pioneers Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp (Knight 2010).[1] The Primary Ethics program developed by Dr Knight continued to be underpinned by Lipman's philosophical inquiry approach, the 'questioning of underlying assumptions … whose truth or falsity cannot be decided by appeal to experiment and observation' (Knight & Collins 2010, p. 309); appropriate given the ethics focus of the program. As Knight (2010) concluded in her evaluation of the original Primary Ethics pilot program, 'Dialogue-based ethical inquiry has been consistently well evaluated in terms of its effectiveness in developing ethical reasoning skills and much of this research relates to Lipman's methodology…[and]…is well suited to the task of developing students' abilities and dispositions to engage in ethical reflection and to formulate well founded ethical judgements' (p. 49).

The Primary Ethics program is also modeled on a classroom Community of Inquiry approach which Sharp (2014) defined as a 'group of children who inquire together

---

[1] For a valuable review of the development of the Community of Inquiry approach and its application to the classroom and curriculum see Kennedy and Kennedy (2011).

about common problematic issues in such a way that they build on each other's ideas, offer each other counterexamples, question each other's inferences and encourage each other to come up with alternative views and solutions to the problem at hand and follow the inquiry where it leads' (p. 16). In particular, the Community of Inquiry approach practiced by the program is informed by Matthew Lipman's notion of 'caring thinking' expounded in the second edition of *Thinking in Education* (Lipman 2003). Here, Lipman was referring to thinking that is appreciative, affective and active, such as taking care of something, in addition to his original focus on critical and creative thinking. Caring thinking particularly relates to the Primary Ethics' program aims to develop children's skills in collaborative inquiry and ethical reasoning, and using the classroom Community of Inquiry model to explore issues of feelings, emotions, and care (Sharp 2014).

In the Primary Ethics program, ethics teachers are trained to act as facilitators rather than teaching or imparting to students their own personal ethical morals and values, using a Community of Inquiry approach. Topics covered in ethics teacher training include:

- Facilitation skills, e.g. procedural questioning, neutral responses, non-verbal communication, small groups and activities;

- Child protection awareness;

- Behaviour management strategies;

- Philosophical framework overview;

- Community of Inquiry approach to learning;

- Using the Primary Ethics lesson materials.

Volunteers recruited and trained by Primary Ethics deliver the program curriculum in schools using detailed lesson materials. As at 1 June 2019, there were 2,787 volunteers delivering Primary Ethics programs at 474 schools in NSW, with approximately 45,000 children enrolled in ethics classes. Most volunteers are parents of primary school aged children.[2]

According to the last available annual survey of ethics teachers conducted by Primary

---

[2] Once potential volunteers submit an expression of interest via the Primary Ethics website, the Ethics Coordinator (volunteer role) from the respective school makes contact and arranges an interview with them. If the Ethics Coordinator identifies the candidate to be appropriate, Primary Ethics then arranges for the candidate to complete the required training and security checks.

Ethics (2018; N=203), the majority of survey respondents were female (80%) and this proportion has been consistently high across previous surveys. In 2018, almost half of respondents (46%) were aged 35 to 54, with the remainder aged 55 and over. Matching the age distribution of survey respondents, 43% were retired or not looking for work, one third (33%) being employed on a part time basis, with only 11% working full time. Survey respondents were highly educated, with almost four fifths (83%) having a graduate diploma or higher, and 41% having a post-graduate degree. The majority (56%) of volunteer respondents were related (parent or grandparent) to a child at the school where they teach ethics according to the 2018 survey, down from 74% in 2014. Almost three quarters (72%) of survey respondents had been an active volunteer for one or more years, with 42% volunteering for more than three years. Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents stated that they were very or extremely satisfied with their volunteer experience. This is reflected in the results for how likely it is that they would recommend volunteering with Primary Ethics to a friend or colleague, with 87% giving a promoter score of 8-10, and with 51% giving a score of 10 out of 10.

Secondary data analysis

The findings reported in this paper come from a broader qualitative research study that sought to explore the experiences of volunteer ethics teachers in the Primary Ethics program in several schools in the greater Sydney area of NSW, Australia (Zappalà 2019; 2020).[3] As part of the preliminary research, relevant pre-existing qualitative and quantitative data collected by Primary Ethics were analysed using the Meaningful Evaluation framework which acknowledges the importance of focusing on the extent to which participants experience the various activities and outcomes of a program as 'meaningful'. This enables the identification and assessment of the sustainability of any outcomes experienced, captures the inner process of change, as well as any unintended consequences of participation in a program (Zappalà 2020).

A coding frame based on the Meaningful Evaluation framework was developed to analyse responses to relevant open-ended questions from a series of volunteer exit surveys as well as a smaller number of 'story transcripts' written by volunteer ethics teachers. The exit surveys of volunteer ethics teachers that had left Primary Ethics

---

[3] As the study was part of an externally commissioned evaluation, formal ethics approval by the University's internal Ethics Committee was not required. Instead, the research conducted for the evaluation adhered to the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion's internal research ethics protocols and the Australasian Evaluation Society's *Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations* (2013).

consisted primarily of quantitative data although responses to the following open-ended questions were analysed using the coding frame developed:

- What did you enjoy most about volunteering for Primary Ethics

- What did you find the most challenging about your volunteer experience?

- What could Primary Ethics do to improve that rating (promoter score)?

The same coding frame was used to analyse the self-written 'stories' by Primary Ethics volunteer teachers (N=27) available on the Primary Ethics website in response to an ABC radio *Open Drum* segment titled: 'Does God belong in schools'. Listeners to the program were invited to submit their views following a panel discussion on Radio National in February 2015 which included the then CEO of Primary Ethics and Dr Sue Knight, who developed the Primary Ethics curriculum.[4]

Table 1: Summary of content analysis of existing Primary Ethics teacher sources

Coding theme	Data Source	No. of comments	% of all coded comments
Making a positive difference that matters to the ethics students	Open Drum	9	32
	Exit Surveys	50	43
Moral development and personal growth	Open Drums	11	39
	Exit Surveys	19	17

Notes:

There were a total of 221 exit surveys for the years: 2016 (N=21); 2017 (N=102); 2018 (N=78); 2019 (Jan – March, N=20). Incomplete surveys or respondents who had other volunteer roles were excluded, leaving 125 exit surveys that were coded.

The analysis of the *Open Drum* ethics teacher stories and exit surveys suggested that ethics teachers' belief that they were making a material positive difference to the children was indeed one of the most important aspects of their experience of the Primary Ethics program (see Table 1). Just over two fifths of all coded comments in the

---

[4] https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/encounter/does-god-belong-in-school/6070206

volunteer exit surveys, for instance, and one third of all coded comments in the *Open Drum* volunteer stories related to this theme. Example comments from the coding included:

> *The transformation I have seen with the students in ethics over the semester has surprised me beyond my expectations … I am confident I have helped them learn something. (OD7)*

> *Volunteering to teach ethics …is one of the best things I have done in my adult life …to feel so strongly about God not belonging in school and having the opportunity to make a valued difference is incredible / my experience in instructing ethics lessons was that it was reflective of world views that should encourage inclusion and promote self- thought in children. (OD26)*

> *What I enjoyed most about volunteering for Primary Ethics was challenging children to question what goes on in the world. (ES8)*

> *I felt I was part of something that was enriching children's lives. (ES55)*

> *What I enjoyed most about volunteering for Primary Ethics was seeing the kids start to think more deeply and to understand that everything is not just black and white. (ES62)*

Similarly, the content analysis suggested that ethics teachers believed that they had experienced a degree of self-development from participating in the Primary Ethics program. Almost two-fifths of all coded comments from the *Open Drum* volunteer stories and just under one-fifth of all coded comments in the volunteer exit surveys, for instance, related to this theme (see Table 1). Example comments from the coding included:

> *I wonder if today, perhaps in an unintended way, I have learnt just as much as the kids have (OD5)*

> *I find preparing for the lessons fascinating and personally thought provoking … Teaching ethics makes me think about things as much as it makes the children think. (OD13)*

> *[It's] undeniable that in the role of an ethics teacher the students themselves have something to teach me. (OD7)*

> *It has taught me more than I could have ever envisaged. (OD19)*

> *What I enjoyed the most about volunteering for Primary Ethics was what I learned from the children. (ES6)*

> *What I enjoyed most about volunteering for Primary Ethics was learning skills I can apply with my own children. (ES67)*

> *What I enjoyed most about volunteering for Primary Ethics was teaching the children as well as learning from them. (ES106)*

Primary data analysis

Data collection and method of investigation

The primary research reported in this paper is based on a series of in-depth interviews with a small group of volunteer ethics teachers. A qualitative approach is concerned with how individuals interpret, understand and experience their social world. It explores the meanings and interpretations they give to their subjective experiences. Methodologically, a qualitative approach describes and analyses from the point of view of research participants. It is flexible, responsive and generates rich descriptions of phenomena (Liamputtong 2013; Mason 1996).

In April 2019, Primary Ethics sent email invitations to 21 ethics teachers to gauge their interest in participating in the study. Volunteers were restricted to the wider Sydney geographical region for cost and time reasons, aiming to keep a balance across age, gender, length of service, size of school and Primary Ethics stages taught.

Fifteen volunteers agreed to be involved, of whom 13 participated in face-to-face interviews in May 2019. An important caveat to note is that this study and its findings are subject to self-selection bias, which is inherent in any research where participants opt in. Table 2 provides a summary of the key characteristics of the volunteer teachers interviewed.

Table 2: Characteristics of volunteer ethics teachers interviewed

Characteristic	Number
Sex	
Male	7
Female	6
Age	
Youngest	39
Oldest	68
Mean	51
Median	51
Qualifications	
Tertiary	13
Employment Status	
Full time	4
Part time	5
Retired/not in paid employment	4
Mean	4.7
Minimum	3
Maximum	7
School size	
Small (less than 500)	3
Medium (500-700)	5
Large (over 700)	5
Relationship to children	
Yes	11
No	2

The aim was not to achieve a representative sample but to ensure a relative balance in the views and experiences of volunteer teachers in terms of their backgrounds, length of time they had been volunteering and the size and geographical areas of the schools they teach. The group interviewed had a relatively higher proportion of males and a relatively higher proportion in paid employment when compared to volunteer ethics teachers overall. The age, qualifications and length of time volunteering profile of the group were broadly similar to the ethics teacher population. All of the interviewees were related (parent or grandparent) to a current or former pupils attending the school where they taught Ethics (two continued to teach ethics at the primary school their child had attended, even though their children had moved on to high school).

All interviews were conducted in person at a location convenient to the volunteer, usually the school where they taught ethics, their home or a local café. The interview schedule, also based on the Meaningful Evaluation framework, covered a range of questions regarding ethics teachers' overall experience of the program, including their motivations, whether teaching ethics had led to any moral or personal growth, their sense of connection to others, their ability to be creative in teaching, and the extent to which it provided an opportunity to make a positive difference to the students and society (Zappalà 2020).

Although the structured interview schedule was used to guide the interviews, the researcher was responsive to and explored issues raised by the interview participants. Interview duration was between 40 and 70 minutes, with an average interview length of 48 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then coded and analysed thematically using NVivo software. This paper presents the findings related to four key questions asked of all interviewees:

- Do you feel you are truly helping the children in the Primary Ethics program?

- Do you feel you make a difference to the children in your ethics classes?

- Has being an ethics teacher highlighted your own moral values and/or your ability to distinguish right from wrong?

- Have you discovered new aspects of yourself through your role as an ethics teacher?

Findings

Learning outcomes for children

When asked whether they felt they were making a positive material difference to the children they taught, most ethics teachers responded in the affirmative and were very confident that they were making a difference. Many emphasised that they had been volunteering as ethics teachers for several years (with a mean of almost five years), and they would not have continued if they did not think that they were helping the children or making a difference. While self-assessments may be more likely to inflate any positive effects, affirmative responses usually attributed the influence to the Primary Ethics curriculum, rather than the individual teacher.

Some interviewees, however, were less confident, but 'hopeful' that they were making a

difference to student learning outcomes. They stated that they found it a difficult question to answer, particularly as they had no way to measure any influence they might have. Indeed, some volunteer ethics teachers explicitly mentioned that they would like to see evaluative evidence of the program's effectiveness, with some even suggesting introducing a 'test' or annual report for children similar to what is done in other subjects.

Many interviewees felt that the perceived benefits of the curriculum to the students were cumulative and became more apparent over time. They recognised that each stage of the Primary Ethics curriculum builds on the former, so that it is easier to discern the program's impact as children get older and progress through the curriculum:

> *It's hard to say with the younger kids, but I can see the pathway that if they continue this for six years, that the analytical skills and the facilitated type format that's being used, is really valuable … Over a six-year period, I can imagine it to be incredibly helpful for kids. (VolET2)*

> *I think it's tiny steps. Kids aren't going to walk out of the first lesson going, 'My god, my mind has been opened to this new world', but I do feel like over the few years that I've followed that group, there's certainly moments that you can see where I feel like we've contributed there. (VolET8)*

Many volunteer ethics teachers felt that their facilitation of the curriculum was achieving positive outcomes in terms of the children's ability to reason and engage in deliberative discussion, develop reasoning and decision-making skills. Furthermore, they felt that the curriculum's influence on students' thought processes was evident in comments they made in class, sometimes several months later. Their comments suggest that the curriculum content sometimes resonated and that the children had developed a new way of thinking, which may translate to other areas of the school curriculum:

> *When they make a comment, or they say something that we talked about last year that I haven't necessarily brought up again … or the way they structure their response – 'I think this, because', and 'this is my reason', or whatever it is. I'm like, okay, they've somehow remembered that from six months ago, and they're applying what they've learnt. (VolET6)*

> *They come with these words like 'I want to connect to this' or 'what he said', or 'what she said'. I often notice that, basically, they get this way of discussing things and I'm sure they also use it in their other classes … because they learn to*

> *listen in the first place, because they need to listen to what the others are saying in order to connect to what they said. (VolET12)*

Among the perceived benefits of participation in the program, several ethics teachers felt that the program encouraged children to form their own opinions in contrast to much of the directed and instructional learning they experienced in other parts of the school curriculum:

> *I think what they get in Primary Ethics classes is really … to decide their own opinions, and that there's not an answer to the question that is right or wrong. (VolET9)*

> *It's a different way of interacting and teaching children than they're used to … less didactic. (VolET6)*

Many ethics teachers believed that, in addition to developing reasoning and critical thinking skills, the program encouraged children to think more deeply about why they act in a certain way, encouraged greater consideration in their thought process, and encouraged them to see things from other people's perspectives and develop empathy:

> *Reasoning, thinking, listening to the other person and acting upon what has been presented by them. So, coming up with a counter-argument if you really think that or even questions have come out in the past. Have you changed your mind completely from what your opinion of something was? Yes, someone can sway your opinion quite heavily and it's really, really nice that someone might be very opinionated on something, but the fact that a discussion has reversed his mind, settled their mindset, I think that's really fantastic. (VolET1)*

Another ethics teacher said that she felt that the program creates a comfortable space where children can discuss issues that matter to them. Some ethics teachers also felt that they may be influencing the children through their positive engagement and interaction with them. Some were able to identify key moments in the classroom where they felt they really had breakthroughs with particular students, while others spoke more generally about how they felt the program was helping the children:

> *I've had very disruptive students from the start of the year, and then sometimes it took one lesson where they were really engaged and then I really noticed from then onward that they were starting to participate, and that they had become less disruptive, because all of a sudden it wasn't boring anymore. (VolET12)*

> *… the principal enjoyment I get out of it is those moments in the class when there is a spark, when there is a real conversation and you can see the kids engaging, that's the most rewarding. (VolET4)*

Personal growth and development outcomes for teachers

The in-depth interviews were also able to gather insights into the extent and mode of how being an ethics teacher led to self and professional development. Participants were asked whether being an ethics teacher on the Primary Ethics program had led them to question, change or re-evaluate their own moral values or ethical positions. While few of the ethics teachers interviewed felt that the program had made them reconsider their values or contributed to their moral development in any significant way, several felt that it had exerted a more subtle sub-conscious influence on their ethical positions:

> *I can't think of any examples where I've thought, 'I thought about that in ethics, that's an interesting point. How would I respond, right and wrong?' It's there but it's more sort of an osmosis process than anything specific. (VolET4)*

Another ethics teacher, who echoed this perspective, said that while she was not conscious of how the program had influenced her thinking, she thought much more about moral and ethical issues, which was likely a result of teaching ethics. While not necessarily influencing their moral development, two interviewees spoke about how being an ethics teacher had encouraged self-reflection, by making them question their values:

> *It gets you to question them [values] … I think it's been a huge help to me. (VolET1)*

> *I have to do a little soul searching each time and think, well you know, I've always held that. Do I still feel like that? So, kind of revising my own thoughts and opinions and options. (VolET5)*

One ethics teacher reported that she was more inclined to have ethics-related discussions with her own children, contributing to her own moral development together with her children.

> *It's great to see the children coming up with all these responses that they often come up with. They inspire me to…get myself more educated about the ethical problems that we have and try to work out things for myself and how I could grow myself … and how I could grow my children by applying some of the ideas*

in ethics. (VolET12)

Most of the interviewees, however, felt that being an ethics teacher had influenced their thinking. One volunteer provided an example of how she was able to apply what she covered in one lesson to a situation in her life, which prompted her to re-evaluate the situation:

> *There was a particular one [lesson] which was on forgiveness. I read something in the preamble, which was just about the fact that if you don't forgive somebody then actually you're the only one really holding onto that. I thought about an example of a situation where I haven't really forgiven somebody, but I don't talk to them about it. I'm holding it all up, and I'm the one suffering. It made me just completely re-evaluate that situation. I get a bit teary when I talk about that. (VolET9)*

> *… it's changed my thinking. Teaching ethics to primary school kids has changed my thinking. (VolET11)*

Some felt that being an ethics teacher had helped them to understand different points of view and perspectives, with one volunteer recounting how it had helped him understand why he holds the views that he does, and another how it had influenced how she interacts with people who may hold opposing viewpoints:

> *It makes me think about it more when someone has another point of view, I can understand a little bit more about their reasoning and understand that better instead of totally discounting it. Sometimes I think it's also helped me to maybe understand why I have a particular point of view. (VolET3)*

> *It has highlighted to me to be more open with people who perhaps don't have the same opinions or ideas that I have. So, rather than shutting that off, being a little bit more curious and open, and understanding, why do you have that? (VolET6)*

Another ethics teacher described how the program had changed how he thinks, and had enabled him to apply his critical thinking skills to everyday interactions:

> *I find I can contribute stuff about, 'Dude, I'm very sorry but what you just said makes absolutely no sense and here's the reason', and provide some structure that came from teaching ten-year-olds that's equally valid for grown-ups. (VolET11)*

Responses from the ethics teachers suggested that the process of class preparation, as

well as the children's responses to class scenarios and exercises, was a key influence on their moral and personal growth. Class preparation, for instance, requires teachers to read and plan the lesson material for the particular topic. Each topic has background material only for the teachers, which provides a deeper summary and background on the ethical issue for class discussion.

Volunteer ethics teachers were asked if they had discovered any new aspects of themselves through participation in the program. Personal growth usually came in the form of insights into parenting or thinking about ethical or social issues in different ways. The majority indicated undergoing some degree of personal growth and development due to being an ethics teacher. Some reported learning how to manage relationships better, others reported developing greater respect for teachers, while some reported that the ethics curriculum content had influenced how they assessed events. Several found that the experience of teaching had taught them skills in managing a classroom full of students, while another reported that these newly developed people management skills extended beyond the classroom to encompass interactions with the wider school community, including teachers, administrative staff and other volunteer ethics teachers.

One ethics teacher reported that learning to be more patient had translated into other aspects of his life, most notably to the football coaching he undertook:

> *The hardest bit, obviously, of a teaching position is that discipline thing, and I've definitely improved, and that has definitely given me skills in the football coaching and sports coaching. (VolET8)*

Others reported that the experience of teaching the Primary Ethics curriculum had a deeper influence on how they assessed different situations, with some suggesting that this shift in perspective also extended to their parenting:

> *I seem to be able to be forming an opinion based on the moral value of the issue. (VolET1)*

> *it's the... Socratic method of teaching, which is just ask questions and I let my children figure it out for themselves, rather than saying, now this is what the answer is… so it inspires in terms of being a parent, seeing how kids' brains work. (VolET2)*

> *I think it's given me more confidence being able to work with kids and maybe reinforcing that perhaps some of the ways that I relate to my own children, [it]*

> *reinforces that I'm doing an okay parenting job. (VolET10)*

Discussion and implications

The findings provide at least two interesting insights. First, with respect to student learning outcomes, the analysis suggested that teachers believed that they were making a positive and material difference to children's learning outcomes. The volunteer ethics teachers derived high levels of satisfaction from seeing how the children in their classes changed through their engagement with the curriculum content. These changes included the children developing more critical thinking and reasoning skills, developing the confidence to express themselves, and the enjoyment they derived from the class discussions. Many also saw the benefits as longer term and extending to other areas of children's education. As an academic philosopher and volunteer ethics teacher on the program (although not part of this study) stated:

> The reasoning and deliberation skills they learn in ethics classes are transferable to just about every other subject the children will study … I've even heard high school teachers say they can easily identify the students that did ethics in primary school simply by the way they think and talk. (Dean 2018)

Nevertheless, volunteer ethics teachers raised the point that they themselves would like to see evaluative evidence of the program's effectiveness, with some suggesting that children following a P4C program should be assessed on their learning and development. Albeit controversial, assessment of student learning in P4C programs can be done in many innovative ways and has been shown to have several benefits (Hinton & Davey Chesters 2013; Trickey & Topping 2013). In this context, it would have at least three benefits. First, it would provide a more objective benchmark of any changes and improvements in the children with respect to their learning in ethics; second, it would be a means to provide feedback to parents and other stakeholders including the teachers themselves; and third, it could potentially provide useful longitudinal data on the impact of the program on children. The desire for having assessment to gauge the progress of the children in Primary Ethics classes was consistent with the view of many volunteer ethics teachers that philosophical ethics is a foundational subject that should be a core part of the school curriculum for all children.

The volunteer ethics teachers that had been teaching ethics for several years and teaching the same cohort of students throughout their time were more confident of the positive impact they were having. This finding is consistent with Fair et al. (2015a), which highlighted the importance of the duration of philosophy lessons for children, with longer courses leading to improvements in students' cognitive abilities in contrast to shorter courses, which did not appear to have an effect.

The second key finding relates to the benefits of teaching philosophical ethics and the existence of a 'mirror effect' in P4C classes, namely, that teachers may develop the very skills and competencies that the P4C curriculum seeks to cultivate among students (Baumfield 2016). While participation in the program had led to some moral development in terms of thinking about ethical issues, it had particularly influenced the thinking, perspectives and skills of ethics teachers in a variety of personal and work contexts and in some cases had the capacity to challenge participants' own norms and worldviews. In particular, volunteering as an ethics teacher enabled participants to:

- Have a better understanding different ethical and or social perspectives;

- Increase their self-awareness;

- Improve their emotional intelligence;

- Improve their critical thinking and reasoning;

- Improve their people management and relationship skills;

- Improve their ability to assess events and situations;

- Improve and change their approach to parenting.

The fact that these outcomes occurred among volunteer teachers is testament to the transformative power of P4C as an educational practice (Lipman 1991, 2003), and supports the view that 'encouraging students to articulate and develop their thinking through inquiry leads teachers to question their own thinking' (Baumfield 2016, p. 121).

Baumfield's (2016) conclusion that P4C can 'radically transform classrooms into places where students teach as they learn and teachers learn as they teach' (p. 121) was in the context of the professional development of teachers. While most of the volunteers in this study were not school teachers, all were tertiary qualified professionals, many in roles that involved the use of training and facilitation skills in the workplace. The benefits of P4C as a vehicle for professional and personal development for those that teach it may extend beyond qualified school teachers, and have benefits for enhancing the personal and professional competencies of people in general.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine the student learning outcomes of the Primary Ethics program from the perspective of the volunteer ethics teachers who deliver the program to children. It also examined the extent to which teaching ethics to children might also benefit those who teach the curriculum. While many of the previous studies that have explored this topic have applied techniques, such as randomised control trials, to large-scale samples of students, the findings present a mixed picture and highlight the challenges inherent in determining the impact of P4C on learning outcomes. While the methodologies employed in this research may be appropriate in some cases, valuable insights can be gained from exploring what P4C educators perceive to be the impact of the P4C curriculum on the students they teach.

While acknowledging the limitations of the present study, namely, that self-assessments may be more likely to inflate any positive effects, the potential bias from the fact that most of the ethics teachers were related to the children, and the relatively small number of teachers interviewed, it contributes at least two interesting insights.

With respect to the relationship between P4C and learning outcomes, the findings suggested that the teachers' believed they were making a positive difference to children's learning outcomes as well as a recognition that the benefits of participating in the program are cumulative and more apparent as children progress through the program. Furthermore, they believed the program had changed how the children considered and evaluated issues by developing reasoning and decision-making skills. These findings support the view P4C is effective in contributing to the overall cognitive skills of students, especially where those students undertake classes over a longer time. With respect to whether P4C may be beneficial to those who teach it, the findings suggest that there is merit in further exploring P4C's potential as a vehicle for professional development, whether for parental volunteers or professional teachers.

Acknowledgements

had no prior knowledge of either his possible involvement in the study nor that he had been a volunteer ethics teacher. His experience as a volunteer ethics teacher was not considered to be a conflict of interest by the relevant stakeholders and all ethical protocols were followed in the conduct of the study as per footnote 3.

References

Australasian Evaluation Society (2013) *Guidelines for the ethical conduct of evaluations*. https://aes.asn.au/ethical-guidelines

Baumfield, VM (2006) Tools for pedagogical inquiry: The impact of teaching thinking skills on teachers. *Oxford Review of Education*, 32(2), pp. 185-196.

Baumfield, VM (2015) What is 'making a difference' in teachers' professional learning and how can we build on it? In C McLaughlin, P Cordingley, R McLellan & V Baumfield (eds) *Making a difference: Turning teacher learning inside out*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, pp. 77-95.

Baumfield, VM (2016) Changing minds: The professional learning of teachers in a classroom community of inquiry. In MR Gregory, J Haynes& K Murris (eds) *The Routledge international handbook of Philosophy for Children*, Routledge, Oxon, UK, pp. 119-126.

Burgh, G (2018) The need for philosophy in promoting democracy: A case for philosophy in the curriculum. *Journal of Philosophy in Schools*, 5(1), pp. 38-58.

Burgh, G & Thornton, S (2016) Philosophy goes to school in Australia: A history 1982-2016. *Journal of Philosophy in Schools,* 3(1), pp. 59-83.

Cam, P (2018) The Generic Argument for teaching philosophy. *Journal of Philosophy in Schools*, 5(1), pp. 59-75.

Dean, T (2018) Big tick for move to take ethics out of shadows. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June. Fairfax, Sydney. https://www.smh.com.au/politics/nsw/big-tick-for-move-to-take-ethics-out-of-shadows-20180620-p4zmlh.html

D'Olimpio, L (2014) Why children should study philosophy. *The Conversation*, 19 March. https://theconversation.com/why-children-should-study-philosophy-23404

Fair, F, Haas, L, Gardosik, C, Johnson, D, Price, D & Leipnik, O (2015a) Socrates in the schools from Scotland to Texas: Replicating a study on the effects of a Philosophy for Children program. *Journal of Philosophy in Schools*, 2(1), pp. 18-37.

Fair, F, Haas, L, Gardosik, C, Johnson, D, Price, D & Leipnik, O (2015b) Socrates in the schools: Gains at three-year follow-up. *Journal of Philosophy in Schools,* 2(2), pp. 5-16.

Goering, S, Shudak, N & Wartenberg, T (eds) (2013) *Philosophy in schools: An introduction for philosophers and teachers.* Taylor & Francis, New York, NY.

Gorard, S, Siddiqui, N & See, BH (2017) Can 'Philosophy for Children' improve primary school attainment? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 51(1), pp. 5-22.

Gregory, M (2011) Philosophy for Children and its critics: A Mendham dialogue. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 45(2), pp. 199-219.

Gregory, M, Haynes, J & Murris, K (eds) (2017) *The Routledge international handbook of Philosophy for Children*. Routledge, Oxon, UK.

Hand, M (2018) On the distinctive educational value of philosophy. *Journal of Philosophy in Schools*, 5(1), pp. 4-19.

Hinton, L & Davey Chesters, S (2013) A whole school approach to philosophy in schools - outcomes and observations. In S Goering, NJ Shudak & T Wartenberg (eds) *Philosophy in schools: An introduction for philosophers and teachers.* Taylor & Francis, New York, NY, pp. 266-276.

Hobbs, A (2018) Philosophy and the good life. *Journal of Philosophy in Schools*, 5(1), pp. 20-37.

Jasinski, I & Lewis, TE (2016) Community of Infancy: Suspending the sovereignty of the teacher's voice. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 50(4), pp. 538-553.

Kennedy, N & Kennedy, D (2011) Community of Philosophical Inquiry as a discursive structure, and its role in school curriculum design. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 45(2), pp. 265-283.

Knight, S (2010) *NSW Ethics course trial. Final report*. NSW Department of Education & Training, Sydney.

Knight, S & Collins, C (2010) Enlivening the curriculum: The power of philosophical inquiry. *Theory and Research in Education*, 8(3), pp. 305-318.

Liamputtong, P (2013) *Qualitative research methods.* Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand, South Melbourne, Vic.

Lingard, B, Rezai-Rashti, G & Martino, W (2016) Introduction – Testing regimes, accountabilities and education policy: Commensurate global and national developments. In B Lingard, W Martino & G Rezai-Rashti (eds) *Testing regimes, accountabilities and education policy*. Routledge, London, pp. 11-28.

Lipman, M (1991) *Thinking in education*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Lipman, M (2003) *Thinking in education.* 2nd edn. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Lips-Wiersma, M & Morris, L (2011) *The map of meaning: A guide to sustaining our humanity in the world of work.* Routledge, London.

Mason, J (1996) *Qualitative researching.* SAGE, London.

Mellor, S & Splitter, L (1998) *Thinking, inquiry and community: Teacher perspectives on philosophy for children: A report on Philosophy for children in Australia*. ACER, Camberwell, Vic.

Sharp, AM (2014) The other dimension of caring thinking (reprint). *Journal of Philosophy in Schools*, 1(1), pp. 15-21.

Siddiqui, N, Gorard, S & See, BH (2019) Can programmes like Philosophy for Children help schools to look beyond academic attainment? *Educational Review*, 71(2), pp. 146-165.

Splitter, LJ (2014) Preparing teachers to 'teach' philosophy for children. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 1(1), pp. 89-106.

Trickey, S & Topping, K (2013) Assessing the outcomes of philosophical thinking with children. In S Goering, NJ Shudak & T Wartenberg (eds) *Philosophy in schools: An introduction for philosophers and teachers.* Taylor & Francis, New York, NY, pp. 288-298.

Vansieleghem, N & Kennedy, D (2011) What is Philosophy *for* Children, What is Philosophy *with* Children—After Matthew Lipman? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 45(2), pp. 171-182.

Wikeley, F (2000) Learning from research. In S Askew (ed) *Feedback for learning*. Routledge/Falmer, London, pp. 97-109.

Yan, SL, Walters, LM, Wang, Z & Wang, C-C (2018) Meta-analysis of the effectiveness of Philosophy for Children programs on students' cognitive outcomes. *Analytic Teaching and Philosophical Praxis*, 39(1), pp. 13-33.

Zappalà, G (2019) *Primary Ethics volunteer teachers pilot evaluation: A meaningful evaluation approach*. Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion, University of Technology, Sydney, NSW.

Zappalà, G (2020) Meaningful evaluation: A holistic and systemic approach to understanding and assessing outcomes. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 12(2-3), pp. 125-143.