From Pedagogical Experimentation to Institutional Curriculum Design: Integrating Philosophy for Children (P4C) as a Dialogic and Intercultural Framework in Higher Education

Zinaida Chachanidze

Associate Professor

Akaki Tsereteli State University

Kutaisi, Georgia

E-mail: zinaida.chachanidze@atsu.edu.ge

Abstract

This study examines the longitudinal integration of the Philosophy for Children (P4C) methodology into higher education teaching and curriculum development at Akaki Tsereteli State University, Georgia. Initially introduced in 2007 through international collaboration with the University of Newport, P4C evolved from an experimental dialogic practice into a formally structured elective course aimed at enhancing critical thinking, philosophical enquiry, and intercultural competence among university students. Employing a qualitative research design that combines classroom observation, comparative textual analysis, student reflections, and instructor focus group discussions, the study explores how sustained engagement with P4C reshapes students' cognitive, linguistic, and dialogic capacities in a multilingual academic environment. The findings demonstrate that P4C significantly supports the development of higher-order thinking skills, including reasoning, argumentation, and ethical reflection, while simultaneously fostering communicative confidence and academic language proficiency in non-native English speakers. The community of enquiry model proved particularly effective in promoting inclusive participation, mutual respect, and dialogic autonomy among students accustomed to teacher-centred educational traditions. Furthermore, the study highlights the adaptability of P4C across disciplines such as language studies, literature, and methodology, illustrating its capacity to function as both a pedagogical method and a curricular framework. By contextualizing P4C within national higher education regulations and local educational culture, this research contributes empirical evidence to the growing body of scholarship on dialogic pedagogy in higher education. It positions P4C as a viable and transformative approach for cultivating critical, intercultural, and democratic competencies essential for contemporary academic and civic life.

Introduction

This study presents the development of a sustained integration of Philosophy for Children (P4C) into higher education teaching practice at Akaki Tsereteli State University, Kutaisi, Georgia. P4C, first introduced by Matthew Lipman in the 1970s, is an educational approach designed to cultivate critical, creative, and caring thinking through structured philosophical enquiry (Lipman, 2003). Worldwide, P4C stands for "Philosophy for Children" but it can also mean "Philosophy for Colleges" and "Philosophy for Communities". The aim of P4C is to make more of a virtue of reasonableness, both within the educational system and within society at large. The method was aimed at encouraging young people (citizens) to be more reasonable – that is ready to reason and be reasoned with. The main emphasis of the method is on the importance of questioning or enquiry in the development of reasoning.

Our institutional engagement with P4C began in 2007, when colleagues from the University of Newport introduced the method during an international collaboration.

Initially, P4C was implemented experimentally in conversation classes for students majoring in International Relations. The first thematic focus addressed human rights using visual stimuli depicting issues such as child labour and gender inequality. The flexibility of the P4C method—particularly its reliance on diverse stimuli—proved highly engaging. Building entire discussions around a single image was both intellectually stimulating and pedagogically productive.

Encouraged by these results, we initiated a joint project with colleagues from Newport to explore how cultural diversity shapes students' perceptions of fundamental human concepts such as family, friendship, betrayal, and loyalty. Using shared stimuli (*Fox* and *In the Attic*), the project compared responses from Georgian and Welsh students. The findings confirmed the method's potential as a tool for cross-cultural dialogue and reflection.

Following these initial experiments, the P4C approach was systematically integrated across several disciplines, including Methodology and Literature. In Literature classes, the method facilitated deeper engagement with texts and promoted reflection on philosophical and cultural meanings embedded in literature.

A subsequent study, presented at an international conference in Rome, employed P4C methodology to examine how cultural differences between Irish and Georgian societies manifest through readers' philosophical engagement with James Joyce's *Dubliners*. Georgian university students from two academic programs—English Philology and Georgian Philology—read and interpreted the text in its original and translated forms. The analysis of their questions, discussion dynamics, and philosophical insights revealed how cultural and linguistic background shapes interpretation and reasoning.

Building on these insights, we introduced **Philosophy for Children and Critical Thinking** as a stand-alone elective course. It was piloted with forty-five students of varied language proficiency. The syllabus allocated three contact hours per week, divided into one-hour and two-hour sessions. Because timing is crucial in P4C, the two-hour classes followed the complete cycle of enquiry—from introducing the stimulus to feedback and reflection (Fisher, 2013). The shorter sessions employed a modified structure in which students engaged with stimuli (stories, short films, or images) independently and generated questions before class. Discussions then began with the *Airing of Questions* stage.

The course content combined classical P4C materials (Lipman, 2003) with contextually relevant stimuli aligned with other subjects. For instance, during a module on media influence in Language Skills, students viewed a short documentary about a war photographer facing a moral dilemma between capturing a powerful image and saving a life. Similarly, in Literature courses, when students studied Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, they watched its film adaptation and compared the ethical and philosophical implications of both versions.

In accordance with national higher education regulations requiring written examinations, the final assessment consisted of two components:

1. **Analysis of previously covered material (20 points):** Students wrote essays on philosophical themes discussed during the course (e.g., loyalty, betrayal, jealousy, moral decision-making).

2. **Analysis of a new stimulus (20 points):** Students were given an unseen text and asked to formulate three complex, philosophical questions and elaborate on one in essay form, supporting their ideas with arguments and examples.

A focus group of the four instructors implementing the course was conducted and the key findings were analyzed, as well as the post-session reflections of the students. The findings are as follows:

- **Engagement and Language Development**

One of the most significant challenges was the variation in students' English proficiency levels, ranging from lower-intermediate to advanced. Initially, participation was uneven, with more proficient students dominating discussions. However, as the course progressed, engagement expanded across the group. The relevance of the discussion topics and the supportive nature of the community of enquiry encouraged all students to participate. Learners who were initially silent began contributing actively once they gained confidence in expressing themselves in English.

Students from monologic school environments were also initially hesitant to assume dialogic roles, expecting the facilitator to direct the discussion. Over time, they adapted to the collaborative and egalitarian nature of P4C dialogue, learning to interact autonomously. Facilitators had to ensure balance, preventing advanced students from dominating discussions and supporting quieter participants in developing confidence.

- **Cognitive and Academic Growth**

By the end of the course, students demonstrated significant progress:

1. Increased confidence in articulating opinions;

2. Reduction of language barriers through active engagement;

3. Development of *strategic competence* through paraphrasing and reformulation;

4. Improved capacity to follow and sustain a line of reasoning;

5. Decrease in code-switching to the mother tongue;

6. Growth in the complexity and depth of student-generated questions;

7. Strengthened listening skills and interpretive ability;

8. Enhanced respect for differing perspectives.

Student feedback revealed that the sessions fostered greater mutual understanding and a stronger sense of academic community. During the voting process, students began identifying peers who posed particularly insightful questions and sought to emulate their style, thus internalizing philosophical enquiry as a shared intellectual practice.

- **Development of Inquiry Skills**

To measure the development of enquiry skills, three literary texts were given to two groups—one at the beginning and one at the end of the course. Comparative analysis showed clear progression: while early-stage questions were simple and closed, later questions were open-ended, reflective, and philosophically rich. This provided strong evidence that sustained P4C engagement enhances analytical reasoning, conceptual depth, and dialogic competence.

- **Discussion**

Implementing P4C in a non-native English higher education context presented both pedagogical challenges and transformative opportunities. The transition from traditional, teacher-centred instruction to dialogic, community-based enquiry required adjustment from both facilitators and students. However, the results confirmed that P4C is adaptable to multilingual and multicultural academic environments.

The findings also highlight the interdependence between philosophical dialogue and language learning. As students' confidence and linguistic competence improved, so too did their capacity for abstract reasoning, empathy, and reflective judgment. These outcomes align with broader research in dialogic pedagogy (Mercer, 2000; Kennedy, 2012), supporting the idea that P4C promotes cognitive, linguistic, and social growth simultaneously.

Moreover, the study underscores the potential of P4C to contribute to a more democratic and participatory classroom culture. By emphasizing respect for others' perspectives, collaborative reasoning, and shared inquiry, P4C helps cultivate dispositions essential to lifelong learning and active citizenship (Splitter & Sharp, 1995).

Conclusion

The integration of P4C into Georgian higher education represents a significant shift from experimental practice to a formal curricular framework. The method has proven effective in promoting critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and communicative competence. Students not only enhanced their linguistic and analytical abilities but also developed greater confidence, empathy, and reflective judgment.

By situating P4C within local educational traditions and aligning it with institutional standards, this initiative demonstrates how an internationally recognized pedagogy can be successfully localized. Future research should

extend these findings through longitudinal studies, exploring the long-term impact of P4C on students' reasoning, intercultural awareness, and academic success.

Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive research design** to examine the pedagogical and curricular impact of Philosophy for Children (P4C) within a higher education context. Data were collected over multiple academic cycles during the implementation of P4C as both an instructional approach and a stand-alone elective course.

The primary methodological components included:

1. **Classroom Observation:**
Systematic observations were conducted during P4C sessions across different disciplines to document interaction patterns, question formation, dialogic engagement, and student participation dynamics.

2. **Comparative Textual Analysis:**
Students' philosophical questions and written reflections generated at the beginning and end of the course were compared to assess the development of enquiry skills, conceptual depth, and reasoning complexity.

3. **Student Reflective Feedback:**
Post-session reflections and informal feedback were collected to capture students' perceptions of learning, confidence development, and intercultural dialogue.

4. **Instructor Focus Group:**
A structured focus group involving four instructors implementing the P4C methodology was conducted to identify pedagogical challenges, adaptive strategies, and observed learning outcomes.

The triangulation of these qualitative data sources ensured analytical validity and enabled a holistic understanding of P4C's cognitive, linguistic, and social effects within a multilingual university environment.

Findings

The analysis yielded four major categories of findings:

1. Enhanced Dialogic and Linguistic Engagement

Despite initial disparities in English proficiency, sustained participation in the community of enquiry led to increased verbal confidence, reduced language anxiety, and improved strategic communication skills, including paraphrasing and reformulation.

2. Growth in Philosophical and Critical Thinking

Students demonstrated measurable progress in generating open-ended, conceptually rich, and ethically grounded questions. Argumentation became more coherent, reflective, and responsive to peer perspectives.

3. Transformation of Classroom Culture

The transition from monologic, instructor-led learning to dialogic enquiry fostered greater learner autonomy, mutual respect, and shared intellectual responsibility. Students increasingly recognized peers as co-constructors of knowledge.

4. Intercultural and Interpretive Development

Comparative engagement with literary and visual stimuli revealed how cultural and linguistic backgrounds shape interpretation. P4C enabled students to articulate differences without conflict, promoting intercultural sensitivity and philosophical openness.

Novelty and Original Contribution

This study offers several original contributions to the field:

- It documents a **long-term institutional transition** from experimental P4C practice to formal curricular integration in higher education.

- It provides **empirical evidence** of P4C's effectiveness in a **non-native English, post-Soviet educational context**, an area underrepresented in existing literature.

- It demonstrates the **dual pedagogical function** of P4C as both a philosophy-based enquiry method and a language development tool.

- It bridges **philosophical pedagogy and intercultural education**, positioning P4C as a framework for democratic academic practice.

Ethical Considerations

All stages of the study adhered to ethical principles of educational research. Student participation in discussions, reflections, and assessments formed part of standard academic practice and did not involve sensitive or personal data. Anonymity was maintained in reporting qualitative observations and feedback. Participation in focus group discussions was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all instructors involved.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares **no conflict of interest**.

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