Leadership in a Thinking School

The educator with a democratic vision or posture cannot avoid in his teaching praxis insisting on the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner.
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July, August September 2013

Acknowledgements

<u>Background</u>
Thinking was identified in the revised New Zealand Curriculum as one of the five Key Competencies. Furthermore it states that 'these competencies are more complex than skills, the competencies draw also on knowledge, attitudes, and values in ways that lead to action. They are not separate or stand-alone.'

The NZC defines Thinking as

'using creative, critical, and metacognitive processes to make sense of information, experiences, and ideas. These processes can be applied to purposes such as developing understanding, making decisions, shaping actions, or constructing knowledge. Intellectual curiosity is at the heart of this competency.

Students who are competent thinkers and problem-solvers actively seek, use, and create knowledge. They reflect on their own learning, draw on personal knowledge and intuitions, ask questions, and challenge the basis of assumptions and perceptions. They are the key to learning in every learning area.'

Furthermore it is widely held in Australia and New Zealand that teachers are no longer required to teach rote or the transmission of knowledge but to encourage their students to be reflective critical thinkers (Mergler 2009, p 1). However Curiosity is seen by some researchers as in scarce supply in most schools (Engel 2013, p36).

Teaching Philosophy is seen as one means of encouraging a child's curiosity (P4C).

Philosophy for Children (P4C) was originally developed by philosopher Matthew Lipman in the USA in the 1970s. P4C is not a thinking skills programme but provides opportunities in the wider curriculum to encourage children's natural curiosity, assisting them in their search for meaning. Philosophy develops the qualities that make for good judgment in everyday life. Through the process of philosophical inquiry students are provided with the opportunity to question, explore issues, concepts and ideas that are important and relevant to their lives and as such enables students to develop judgement processes and to be reflective. It enables students to interrogate their own values and beliefs and those of others.

Balmoral School has had thinking as a cornerstone of its curriculum for a number of years. Thinking is seen by the community as essential if our students are going to be lifelong learners and able to participate in a modern democracy. The school had developed a rich

curriculum which was built on New Basics and the NZC. P4C was therefore introduced because the school wanted students to be given the opportunity to think as critical, caring creative members of a community. In the last three years Balmoral School has formed a strong alliance with The University of Auckland's School of Philosophy. In 2012 we hosted the NZ P4C conference and will do so again in 2014.

In our model thinking can be broken into three components

Critical thinking - seen by our school as reasoned and reflective thinking that in some instances has a social action

Creative thinking - seen by our school as interpretive in that students discover a new understanding for themselves or develop an original project (Kaufmann 2013)

Caring thinking - seen by our school as part of thinking, enabling students to understand others things and other people

Purpose for Sabbatical

The purpose for my sabbatical was to explore the role of principal leadership in creating a thinking school. This meant exploring the programmes, processes and school systems, and structures that leaders can use to develop critical thinking across a school and reflecting on the relationship of school leadership which enabled this development. I decided that part of this ongoing review of programmes should include reviewing Philosophy for Children (P4C) in our school in order to further strengthen the pedagogy underpinning our thinking model.

The predominant focus of my inquiry was to consider the key aspects of a successful philosophical learning community. Further questions arising from this inquiry were

i. What needs to be in place in order for a successful philosophical learning community to happen?

ii. What does the principal need to effectively support a successful philosophical learning community?

iii. What are the key components of embedding philosophical thinking in a school's programme?

Activities undertaken (methodology)

I read a number of articles and visited five schools in Australia that were teaching or had taught philosophy. Australia was chosen to visit due to its proximity to New Zealand and because the schools were well known in developing thinking. Heavily influenced by Lipman's teaching, Australia had developed its Philosophy in Schools programme and had at its heart the 'community of inquiry'. This community of inquiry required students to work towards deliberate judgements and democratic decision making (Mergler, 2009 p.2). Australia also has a number of universities that support schools in their professional development in this area.

I interviewed key staff members, including school principals and teachers in charge of philosophy. I observed some Philosophy in School sessions at three schools. I also spoke to Lynne Hinton at Queensland University.

Findings

How does teaching thinking through philosophy manifest itself in the wider curriculum?

Many schools who had had a long tradition of teaching philosophy in schools believed that it had wider implications for the school curriculum. When the skills are taught explicitly the students then use this in other curriculum areas. This included embedding itself in the standard curriculum but also in the hidden curriculum.

"We have seen greater collaboration between students. Class meetings are student organised and run. When we taught analogy we then saw students using analogy in their writing".

In Philosophy participants are also taught to define concepts. This approach can easily be used in other curriculum areas such as mathematics. For example when it is applied to mathematics teachers now consider

"What does the concept to divide actually mean? What is a pattern?"

"In science when studying the universe we explored the concept of infinity. In philosophy the skill of making a generalisation is vitally important. The same can be said in science and the social sciences".

When Philosophy happened the teachers were explicit about the philosophical skills being used. For example generalisation and reflection are seen as a very important skills in philosophy. The teacher explicitly defines these skills in relation to the subject being taught.

"You are making a generalisation in maths. Now use this generalisation to wonder further and reflect what your future thoughts might be?

What happens to school culture?

In schools where there is an emphasis on the teaching of philosophy it becomes habitual to question each other. Quite often you see teachers and children willing to stand up against those who may have more power than them. Often they use the words I don't agree with you and would state a reason. Therefore it became OK to disagree.

One teacher spoke about seeing students disagree with a visiting speaker who said it was wrong to steal. Children were seen to openly disagree and provide valid reasons for stealing such as *"What if you stole food to feed someone who would die without it?"*

School leaders spoke of the increased collaboration between staff in their school as a result of implementing Philosophy and of a willingness to raise the difficult issues.

The schools began to live the ideal of developing a culture of creative, critical and caring thinking. Their curriculum was broad based and although there is a national testing regime these schools programmes were not governed by this and some were quite blatant in their opposition to testing. Interestingly, despite this opposition, these schools all scored higher in the national tests than schools that were similar in composition and socio-economic area to them.

What common themes were seen where a philosophy programme is running effectively?

There was always someone who was a champion for philosophy and this was clearly articulated in the school organisation. This was not necessarily the principal but the principal supported it whole heartedly. This support from the principal was manifested both in a belief

in the benefits of critical, caring and creative thinking on school culture and student learning as well as in the financial resourcing of staffing, professional development, time and physical resources (such as books and resource sheets).

One school even encouraged teachers to attend in-class philosophy sessions so they learnt the skills with the children and what it was like to be a learner. The principal also attended these sessions and as such was seen as a learner in this context.

The most successful model saw a teacher who was released to teach philosophy not only to children but to staff. This model saw this teacher available to model and give feedback on other staff lessons. This ensured that the school was building staff capability and developing people. Another school had a number of staff trained at Level 2 Philosophy in Schools which meant that these staff were authorised to conduct teacher PD in Australia. However some schools were in a rebuilding mode as they had lost key staff and as such this had impacted on their school programmes.

Most schools stated that philosophy had to be taught one hour a week and this was not negotiable. The most effective way that this was monitored was that the champion or someone from the senior leadership team would visit and participate in a philosophical discussion as a learner.

Successful schools also had philosophy skills used in the everyday working, from how they ran staff meeting to school council meetings. These schools also had a very clear idea of the progression of skills in philosophy and the years that these skills should be mastered.

One school had developed a set of resources that were well catalogued. In each resource was a set of skills on A4 card that teachers could use based on the appropriate year level. This encouraged teachers to use this 'pick up and go' resource, and this allowed the school to be explicitly managing the teaching and learning occurring in the classrooms.

Some schools were building strong links with their community and philosophical thought. One school in particular ran a parent session on philosophy once a year, the parents would participate in a lesson. At the end of the lesson the parent's reflection would be shared alongside students' reflection of the lessons. Invariably the parent would be amazed at the level of thought the children had expressed.

How are these schools charting success and achievement in Philosophical Thinking?
Most schools did not formally rate or assess children in philosophical thought. One school who had been teaching philosophy for a substantial time and whose champion was a very experienced teacher was attempting to give students an achievement rating. Based on the philosophy of John Dewey (1933) "We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience" (p 222), this evaluation was closely related to the reflective thinking that the students engaged in at the end of each session in that students were encouraged to think and talk about their ideas.
 These students also set goals in P4C that was related to the established skills set at each level across the school.

Discussion of the findings

The teaching of thinking is an integral part of the NZC. Philosophy for Children should not be seen as a programme but a way of enacting school culture where everyone becomes a critical, caring and creative thinker. Embedding Philosophy through teaching philosophical skills explicitly had wider implications for the standard and hidden curriculum. More particularly, explicitly teaching philosophical skills such as defining concepts, generalisation and reflection impacted on student learning. This was reflected in higher achievement in national testing.

Collaboration between students and teachers was encouraged. In order for this to happen a culture where schools are happy for students and staff to question what and how they do things was established. This learning community was supported by experts leading the philosophy programmes and involved all learners, whether they be students, teachers, school leaders or parents. Philosophy was also supported by the provision of financial, professional development, physical and time resourcing.

Conclusions

Teaching thinking in a school is one of the central components of the New Zealand Curriculum.

In order to implement a successful programme, school leaders need to ensure the following happens:

1. The principal fully supports the implementation of a thinking curriculum and supports the building of this vision
2. The principal is aware that in such a school all ideas will be challenged
3. The principal participates in the Philosophy learning programme and models this learning in his/her own practices
4. There is a champion employed at the school who is also an expert teacher of philosophy and this is clearly outlined in the school organisation.
5. The champion has the opportunity to observe others teach and provide teachers constructive feedback as well as be prepared for others to observe them, creating a collective responsibility for the on-going development of a professional learning community (Dufour, 2013).
6. The staff are provided with high quality appropriate PD and the principal participates so that the school is seen as a learning community. A number of staff are trained to a high level in the teaching of philosophy.
7. Schools develop a set of progressive skills across their school curriculum and at each year level. Older students set goals against these progressions that reflect the identified areas of essential learning for students.
8. Sufficient resources are allocated to this curriculum area.
9. The school mandates an amount of time per week for philosophy to happen.
10. Parent information evenings are held at least once a year so that the community is engaged and informed. Students should contribute to these sessions. These session should follow the P4C model.
11. The school will continue to make links with universities who support this programme.

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