

The 2016 Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Associations (FAPSA) conference report

The theme of the 2016 FAPSA Conference, held in Wellington, New Zealand, was 'Philosophy throughout the school years'.¹ When we at P4CNZ chose this theme, we were hoping to attract, as presenters and participants, educators working with students from the first to the last years of school. Such a range, we hoped, would demonstrate the broad relevance of philosophical inquiry, and provide wonderful professional development opportunities for all of our P4C colleagues in New Zealand, and for our visitors from Australia and further afield.

A quick look at just some of the presentations and workshops at the conference confirms the fulfilment of these hopes, and much more. At one end of the age range, Nicky Crawford, from the tiny rural school at Lake Rotoiti, offered us a delightful array of 'pre philosophy' empathy and community building activities to use with students just beginning school. One example was creating connections between children by creating a web of coloured yarn that tracked the things they had in common. Unsurprisingly, many participants thought these techniques were just as valuable for older students. At the other end of the age spectrum, Peter Ellerton shared his work in critical thinking for secondary school students, talking about both the skills and the values of inquiry. One thing Peter said particularly struck and challenged me: if the teacher is working harder than the students, it's not inquiry!

For those working with primary and secondary school students there was a range of practical workshops, including ones on questioning, and interpreting texts (Peter Worley), basic operations in reasoning (Philip Cam), mathematical thinking (Kate Kennedy White), deepening thinking (Jen Glaser), and assessing thinking (Clinton Golding). There were also reports on research and projects taking place in different parts of the world; initiatives in Brisbane to implement philosophical inquiry from Prep to Year 12 (Desley Alexion, Rosie Scholl and Karen Hollands), the Australian Philosothon (Matthew Wills), a local Wellington school's journey to a whole school P4C approach (Crofton Downs), guerrilla philosophy on the streets of Wellington with 11 year olds (Karen Shuker and Sondra

¹ The dates of the conference were Monday 18 April and Tuesday 19 April 2016, with the Philosophy in Action Day held on Wednesday 20 April 2016.

Bacharach), and training secondary students to facilitate inquiry in primary schools (Emma Worley). Participants at the conference were delighted by the wealth of practical ideas they could take back to their classrooms.

But no movement thrives on practice alone and reporting, reflecting on, and theorising about philosophical inquiry with young people was another important part of this conference. We heard about the place of philosophy in science teaching (Tim Sprod), the art of being outspoken (Pieter Mostert), and the relationship between philosophy and inquiry (Laurance Splitter). Cathy Legg took us back to the pragmatist origins of P4C as she explored Peirce's concept of truth. Michael Hand argued for the inclusion of philosophy as a compulsory secondary school subject – not on the usual grounds of philosophy's emphasis on critical thinking and intellectual virtues, but because studying moral and political philosophy is essential for dealing with the problems and responsibilities of everyday life, and justifying the control we exercise over ourselves, each other, and the world. Laura D'Olimpio examined how aesthetic education can be used to supplement P4C pedagogy and the exploration of philosophical and aesthetic concepts; and Christoph Teschers introduced the idea of an art of living and how this could be applied to early childhood education, supported and supplemented by the community of inquiry and P4C praxis in the classroom.

This leaves us with some things to consider. It is important to get the right balance between practical, theoretical and research sessions in FAPSA conferences and, as far as possible, to serve the different interests of a range of participants. One thing that served us all very well was the chance to see and hear about different ways of conducting philosophical inquiry. This began with Philip Cam's introduction to the classic Philosophy for Children approach of Matthew Lipman, which provided a context for those conference participants with no previous experience of philosophical inquiry, and affirmed again for the old hands the value of what they do. Phil's keynote talk highlighted for us the ideal of inquiry that is based on students' questions, is supported by thinking tools and philosophically rich activities, and which creates reflective inquirers and caring communities.

A number of approaches to philosophical inquiry then unfolded as the conference progressed, including The Philosophy Foundation's many techniques, such as the 'If-ing, Anchoring and Opening up' strategies, Jen Glaser's combining of P4C with Design Thinking, Pieter Mostert's bringing meditation into philosophical inquiry, Sondra Bacharach's proposal to use a variant of the community of inquiry for direct education of

the emotions and the very structured approach in Peter Ellerton's work in secondary school critical thinking. A few disagreements about methods and aims emerged, usually focussed on the degree of departure from what is taken to be Lipman's canonical approach, but the overall result was an exciting demonstration of richness and vitality in the evolving tradition of philosophical inquiry in schools.

Philosophical inquiry in different cultural contexts was another theme explored at the conference. How marvellous it was to hear of Jen Glaser's work with Arabic girls in Jerusalem, and see the potential for the community of inquiry to prepare disparate cultures to peacefully connect. Participants who went to Walter Kohan's session were captivated by the extraordinary gentleness, attentiveness and responsiveness of the Brazilian approach that he described, which he then expertly and authentically embodied when working with students at the Action Day.

The Action Day, immediately following the two-day conference, was a successful innovation for a FAPSA Conference. Around 120 students of all ages, from the Wellington area, were invited to a Crofton Downs School to participate in communities of inquiry with conference presenters. Some students had previous experience with philosophical inquiry, and some had not. This was an opportunity for conference participants to see experienced facilitators in action, and also for theory to be tested against practice. It was a fairly rare opportunity for leaders in the philosophy in schools movement to see each other in action with students, and to reflect on their own and each other's practice. A session many reported as a standout involved The Philosophy Foundation's Peter Worley getting eight year olds to act out issues of fairness versus welfare in the fable of the ant and the grasshopper, which lead to a wonderfully lively, thoughtful and engaged inquiry. Seeing in action the power of philosophical inquiry with young people is the best possible affirmation of what we believe in, and work so hard for.

Dr Vanya Kovach

2016 FAPSA Conference Convenor