

Philosophy for Children in ethnoculturally diverse schools: Some opportunities and risks of learning about diversity through philosophical dialogue

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Abstract

First- and second-generation immigrant students make up a significant proportion of the primary and secondary school population on the island of Montreal (Quebec, Canada). The Quebec Ministry of Education's *Policy Statement on Educational Integration and Intercultural Education* highlights the importance of teaching students about diversity; Philosophy for Children (P4C) could be a promising approach in this regard. However, some scholars have raised concerns about P4C's lack of sensitivity regarding racism and marginalisation. This article, drawing on empirical data collected during a larger study, explores some ways in which P4C can help students learn about diversity, as well as some of the risks and limitations of using philosophical dialogue to explore ethnocultural diversity, racism, or immigration. The study, conducted in an ethnoculturally diverse grade four classroom in Montreal between January and June 2023, involved a series of philosophical dialogues with the participating students, as well as semi-structured interviews with the students and with their teacher. The results of the study suggest that P4C can help students gain greater awareness of diversity, explore diversity from a theoretical perspective, and question certain stereotypes through collective reflection. However, they also point to certain risks inherent in using P4C to discuss diversity, highlighting the importance of careful facilitation and increased sensitivity training for P4C facilitators around the experiences of immigrant and racialised students. I conclude by proposing some reflections both for facilitators and for future academic research in the field.

Key words

diversity and inclusion, immigration, philosophical dialogue, Philosophy for Children, racism

Introduction

Recent immigrant-origin students make up a significant proportion of primary and secondary students on the island of Montreal (Quebec, Canada). It is therefore important to adopt pedagogical approaches that can help students develop the skills

and attitudes necessary to live well together in ethnoculturally diverse spaces. Some scholars have pointed to the potential merits of using Philosophy for Children (P4C) in multicultural schools and with marginalised students. However, there is growing concern that P4C is not sufficiently sensitive to the experiences of these students and can, in fact, contribute to their oppression. To what degree, then, might P4C be a useful approach to facilitate conversations about ethnocultural diversity and immigration in multicultural schools?

This article explores some of the potential strengths and limitations of P4C as a pedagogical approach to help children learn about diversity, both ethnocultural and otherwise. After describing the context of this study, I provide an overview of the academic literature related to P4C, racism, and marginalisation. I then present a portion of the data collected during a larger study conducted in an ethnoculturally diverse grade four classroom in Montreal. I focus primarily on one dialogue on the topic of difference, and the ways in which this dialogue both contributed to students' exploration of diversity and highlighted potential risks of using P4C to discuss ethnocultural diversity, racism, and immigration. Based on my findings, I argue that philosophical dialogue can allow students to gain greater awareness of the diversity present in their class, explore diversity from a theoretical perspective, and work together to question certain stereotypes. However, my findings also highlight various risks and limitations of P4C as a vehicle to discuss diversity with students, suggesting that while P4C may be a promising pedagogy for diversity education, significant facilitator training is required in order for P4C to be helpful rather than harmful in ethnoculturally diverse spaces.

Context

Immigration and ethnocultural diversity in the Montreal school system

In 2022, 68.64% of primary and secondary school students on the island of Montreal were recent immigrant-origin students; 25.38% were first-generation immigrants (born outside of Canada) and 43.26% were second-generation immigrants (born in Canada with at least one parent born outside of Canada) (CGTSIM 2023). Despite first- and second-generation immigrants making up a significant proportion of Montreal's school population (and of the province's population in general), Quebec has a very particular relationship with immigration and ethnocultural diversity. Quebec sees itself as culturally and linguistically distinct from the rest of Canada (Béland et al. 2021), and while its identity has historically been defined in opposition to the anglophone majority in the rest of Canada, Quebec nationalism has more recently

begun to define itself in contrast with immigrant ‘outsiders’ (Béland et al. 2021; Rocher 2023). As a result, discourse around immigration in Quebec frequently references the perceived need to protect the integrity of Quebecois national identity (Rocher 2023), an identity often defined along racialised and linguistic lines; as an illustration, the expression ‘*Québécois de souche*’ (literally, ‘Quebecois from the stump [of a tree trunk]’) is (widely criticised) shorthand sometimes used to indicate who should be considered ‘truly Quebecois’: white, francophone Quebecois people of European descent. Appeals to ‘Quebecois values’ such as gender equality and secularism are often used to justify exclusionary attitudes towards immigrants, particularly Muslims (Bilge 2010), or official policies banning the wearing of religious symbols (such as the hijab) by certain public service workers (including teachers) (DesRoches 2014; Rocher 2023).

The *Policy Statement on Educational Integration and Intercultural Education* published by the Quebec Ministry of Education (*Le ministère de l’Éducation du Québec* [French acronym MEQ] 1998) is the province’s official policy regarding the integration of recent immigrant-origin students and the intercultural education of all students. The policy’s aims and its content are somewhat contradictory; while it emphasises that intercultural education should allow all students to gain a greater awareness of and openness to diversity, the majority of its recommendations concern the importance of recent immigrant-origin students learning French and adopting ‘Quebecois values’ (MEQ 1998). Indeed, DesRoches (2014) argues that the MEQ’s approach to intercultural dialogue, a central component of citizen education in Quebec, ‘in theory hails the benefits of diversity while in practice it shapes an intolerant space for minority identities’ (p. 364). Scholars writing about intercultural or multicultural education are quick to point out that intercultural/multicultural education must include efforts to reduce prejudice and combat discrimination (Banks 1993) and to develop students’ critical thinking skills (Michaud 2002). Given P4C’s focus on learning through dialogue and its aim to develop critical thinking, it seems particularly pertinent to explore its potential to help students learn about diversity, particularly given that the MEQ’s policy (1998) does not specify particular pedagogical approaches to do so.

Philosophy for Children in ethnoculturally diverse schools

Although P4C was not initially developed as a tool of intercultural education, some researchers and practitioners have suggested that it could be a promising approach in ethnoculturally diverse schools or with racialised or marginalised students. Reed-Sandoval (2019) argues that P4C, as an approach that aims to value all participants’

contributions equally, could help to promote the agency of epistemically marginalised (e.g. Indigenous, immigrant, or racialised) children. Similarly, Kizel (2017) emphasises that P4C can serve to amplify marginalised voices or narratives by creating spaces in which multiple diverging narratives can coexist. Research has also shown that P4C interventions can help children develop the capacity to see an issue from multiple perspectives and to work with people who disagree with them (Siddiqui et al. 2017). However, some scholars (Chetty 2014, 2018; Kizel 2016; Reed-Sandoval & Sykes 2016) have raised concerns regarding a lack of awareness of racism, discrimination, and marginalisation in P4C practice. The question of P4C's potential in ethnoculturally diverse schools therefore remains complex.

P4C has been practiced in Quebec since the 1980s (Sasseville & Gagnon 2007) and some Quebecois studies have made connections between philosophical dialogue and ethnocultural diversity or immigration. Gagnon, Couture and Yergeau (2013) examine how philosophical dialogue could contribute to attitudes such as tolerance and openness to diversity among Quebec secondary school students, while Landry (2019) and Courtemanche (1991) explore the potential of P4C to support French learning among newcomer students, and Grelier (2022, 2023) offers reflections on her practice of facilitating philosophical dialogues in multilingual and multiethnic environments in Montreal. However, to my knowledge, there are no empirical studies in Quebec that specifically explore the potential of philosophical dialogue to help students in learn about ethnocultural diversity or immigration. This article aims to contribute to the academic conversation around P4C in ethnoculturally diverse spaces by presenting a portion of the data collected during a study which explored more broadly the potential of P4C to contribute to intercultural education and to the integration of recent immigrant-origin students.¹ In this paper, I will examine some of the opportunities and risks associated with the use of P4C to discuss diversity in the classroom.

A note on positionality

Given the subject of this paper, I feel that it is important to acknowledge my positionality as a researcher and its impact on my work. I recognise that my identity affords me enormous privilege: I am a white, cisgender, non-Indigenous Canadian

¹ This article is based on my unpublished master's thesis (Fowler 2024). Many parts of the text are adaptations or direct translations of sections of my thesis (originally in French). Certain sections, such as the context and methods, may also resemble the corresponding sections in other articles based on the same research project. This reproduction was approved by the editors of this journal.

citizen with a university education. Although I have worked with immigrants and refugees throughout my professional life, I am not an immigrant myself, nor do I have any personal experience of racism, which, in some ways, limits my understanding of the topics I discuss here. The students who participated in my research occupy a very different social position from mine and are marginalised in several ways (due to their age, immigration status, and/or racialised identity). I have tried to remain conscious of the unbalanced power dynamics between myself and my participants throughout the research process and to approach my research with humility and an openness to be corrected when I misunderstand or misinterpret elements of the complex topics I am studying.

Literature review

Racism, marginalisation, and P4C

Developed in the 1960s by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, P4C aims not only to hone participants' critical thinking skills but also to develop their creativity and interpersonal skills, allowing them to develop the attitudes and behaviours necessary to live well together even when they do not share the same opinions (Lipman 1976; Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980). In Lipman and Sharp's original approach, students begin by reading a philosophical novel out loud before working together to develop a philosophical question they then discuss collaboratively through dialogue (Daniel, Schleifer & Lebouis 1992). Although other approaches to P4C have since been developed, they share the aim of helping young people explore complex ideas and to engage with one another in a spirit of curiosity and respect.

While it has been argued that P4C could be a promising educational approach in ethnoculturally diverse school settings (Kizel 2017; Reed-Sandoval 2019), some scholars have voiced significant criticisms regarding its lack of sensitivity to issues of racism² and marginalisation. Kizel (2016) notes that marginalised students, living in a world that often considers their perspective less valid than those of their peers, have

² While race does not exist from a biological standpoint (it is impossible to neatly divide human beings into distinct categories based on phenotypical characteristics), it does exist sociologically, in the sense that a person's perceived race has a significant impact on their experience of the world (Clair & Denis 2015). In this paper, I use the word 'racialised' to refer to students who are perceived as being non-white; 'marginalised' students, more broadly, are those who have less social power because of their perceived non-belonging to dominant social groups (because of their racialised identity, immigration status, sexual orientation, etc.). 'Racism' refers to the ideology that racialised people are inferior to white people and to the discriminatory interpersonal, social, and institutional processes that are enacted upon racialised people as a result (Clair & Denis 2015).

often internalised the understanding that their ideas are ‘illegitimate or perhaps even forbidden’ and consequently ‘mute their inner voice’ in a dialogue instead of sharing their opinions or asking the questions that interest them (p. 19). This can result in the underrepresentation or even absence of marginalised perspectives unless the P4C facilitator makes an intentional effort to introduce a diversity of viewpoints (Chetty 2018). Marginalised perspectives may also be unintentionally excluded through the process of voting for the central question of the dialogue, which can result in the group only ever choosing questions that represent the interests of students belonging to dominant social groups (Chetty & Suissa 2016). Even when a student shares a divergent perspective, it may be dismissed because it does not align with the dominant narrative and therefore seems ‘unreasonable’ to the facilitator (Chetty 2018). In fact, the very use of P4C as a pedagogical approach with marginalised participants has been called into question, given P4C’s emphasis on democracy (without acknowledging that Western democracies were built on the oppression of Indigenous peoples) and on logic and rationality (arguably Eurocentric ways of viewing the world) (Rainville 2000; Reed-Sandoval 2019). Taken together, these factors can result in reinforcing ‘the epistemic authority of dominant social groups whose perspectives will be normative in the P4C classroom—thereby undermining P4C as a truly democratic process’ (Reed-Sandoval & Sykes 2016, p. 220).

Chetty and Suissa (2016) argue that racism is often avoided as a topic of philosophical dialogue because it creates discomfort for white teachers and students and because teachers often feel they lack the tools necessary to facilitate such sensitive conversations in the classroom. Additionally, as P4C generally encourages an impartial approach to facilitation (wherein facilitators guide the dialogue without sharing personal opinions or unnecessarily influencing the direction of the discussion), racism is not generally discussed unless brought up by participants themselves (Chetty 2014). In the original philosophical novels that Lipman developed as stimuli for P4C dialogues, there is a notable absence of explicitly non-white characters and of the topic of racism itself (Chetty 2014; Chetty, Gregory & Lavery 2022). Even when racism is chosen as the theme of a philosophical dialogue, Chetty (2014) argues that the conversation is often removed from its historical, political, and social context (e.g. by using children’s books that depict animals instead of human characters). As a result, white participants can leave the dialogue feeling that they have participated in a productive conversation about racism without being asked to question their own privilege, to consider how racism impacts the lives of their

racialised classmates, or to genuinely commit to working against racism (Chetty 2014; Reed-Sandoval & Sykes 2016).

Avenues for a more equitable P4C

How could P4C be transformed to genuinely support the inclusion and empowerment of racialised and marginalised students? Many researchers point to the responsibility of facilitators to make an intentional effort to bring marginalised perspectives into the dialogue (Chetty 2014, 2018; Reed-Sandoval 2019). White facilitators must also resist the tendency to avoid discomfort, which is, according to Chetty and Suissa (2016), a necessary element of a productive conversation about racism. Teachers can also model this attitude for their students (Chetty & Suissa 2016). Reed-Sandoval and Sykes (2016) suggest that facilitators can start by reflecting on their own social position and share with students the ways in which their identity influences their worldview, which may make participants feel more comfortable sharing reflections on their own social position and experiences of discrimination (Reed-Sandoval & Sykes 2016). Kizel (2016) recommends that facilitators highlight the value of hearing a diversity of opinions and underline that participants are not threatened by views that differ from their own. Furthermore, Chetty (2014) suggests that P4C tends to favour a culture of politeness and kindness; however, it is normal for a discussion of racism to engender feelings of anger in students who have experienced racial injustices, and facilitators can intentionally make space for these feelings. In general, there is consensus among these and other scholars (Elicor 2019; Kohan 2018; Makaiau 2017) that, for P4C to be truly inclusive and equitable, facilitators should aim to be politically engaged rather than impartial, questioning the existing structures of power and privilege in society, and inviting students to do the same.

Methods

The academic conversation around racism and marginalisation in P4C informed my approach to the research project upon which this article is based (Fowler 2024). Adopting a qualitative and exploratory approach rooted in social justice (Anadón 2013; Larochelle-Audet & Magnan 2021), I conducted fieldwork between January and June 2023 in a grade four class in a primary school serving a low-income population (MEQ 2022) on the island of Montreal. Ethics approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Student Research Projects Involving Humans (French acronym CERPE) of the Faculty of Education at the *Université du Québec à Montréal* and from the participating school board. Twenty students (six girls and 14 boys, all aged nine or ten) received parental consent and assented to their own participation in the study.

Among these students (each assigned a pseudonym), seven were first-generation immigrants, two were second-generation, and 11 were born in Canada to parents born in Canada, resulting in 45% of the participating students being of recent immigrant origin. Their teacher (pseudonym Madame Chantal), 47 years old, white and born in Canada to Canadian-born parents, also participated.

While Madame Chantal had recently participated in a program introducing teachers to P4C facilitation, she did not yet feel equipped to facilitate the dialogues in this study. I therefore assumed the dual role of researcher-facilitator and conducted six philosophical dialogues (D1-D6) with the students on various topics. Each dialogue began with a stimulus activity (e.g. reading a children's book or drawing pictures), followed by a group dialogue (Lipman 1976). Although I wished to explore the potential of P4C to allow children to learn specifically about diversity in ethnoculturally diverse settings, I did not feel that the duration of the study had allowed me to build sufficient trust with participants in order to facilitate a dialogue explicitly on themes of racism, ethnocultural diversity, or immigration. I therefore chose to facilitate a dialogue on the broader theme of difference and allowed the dialogue to take shape around the topics brought up by students; this dialogue (Dialogue Four) will be examined in detail in this article. The stimulus activity for Dialogue Four (D4) was drawn from a P4C facilitation manual by Gagnon and Mailhot-Paquette (2022) and focused on the theme of difference. The activity invited students to imagine different fictional worlds (e.g. a world where everyone is identical or a world where everyone is the same except for two or three people) and to write a list of advantages and disadvantages for each imaginary world. After students had completed this activity individually, I asked a few students to share the advantages and disadvantages they had written down for each fictional world. We then sat in a circle and used their responses as a starting point for a dialogue about the concept of difference and the consequences of diversity.

In April and June 2023, I conducted a total of eight semi-structured interviews: three group interviews with the students (SGI), six or seven students at a time; individual interviews with four recent immigrant-origin students (SII), chosen based on their level of participation in the dialogues; and one individual interview with the teacher (TII). All dialogues and interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed using NVivo software to identify common themes in participants' comments. Given the relatively open-ended theme of Dialogue Four, my analysis sought to identify not only the topics mentioned by students during the dialogue but also those which were notably absent. I also analysed the ways in which participants' comments and

interactions during Dialogue Four might highlight both the benefits and the potential risks of using P4C to discuss themes more closely related to ethnocultural diversity, racism, or immigration.

Results

I will begin by examining the ways in which the philosophical dialogues conducted during this study allowed participating students to gain greater awareness of the diversity present within their class before demonstrating how Dialogue Four allowed students to explore the concept of diversity from a theoretical standpoint. I will then highlight a key moment from Dialogue Four to demonstrate how the dialogue allowed participants to question certain stereotypes. All quotations from participants have been translated from French.

Gaining awareness of diversity

The philosophical dialogues conducted during the study created many opportunities for students to become aware of various types of diversity present within their class. The dialogues highlighted a wide range of opinions; Samira (age nine) commented that *'it made you think ... when other people said no and you thought the answer was yes'* (SGI) and Xavier (age nine) noticed that the students in his class had *'a lot of different tastes'* (SGI). The dialogues also created moments where students could become aware of the differences between their life experiences, as students often drew on elements from their lives outside the classroom to support their ideas. During Dialogue Five, Amir (age 10), Gabriela (age nine), and Santiago (age nine), all first-generation immigrants, shared ideas about being born in one country and moving to another, and Amir spoke about divorce, which he had experienced in his own family. Madame Chantal observed that, in her opinion, the dialogues most often highlighted differences *'related to socioeconomic status [rather] than to culture'* (TII). According to her, when these differences emerged, students were generally very respectful:

In our area ... there's a real clash between students from privileged backgrounds and others from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some students have never left the neighbourhood, [never taken] the metro [to go downtown], while others travel around the world ... The children were very respectful of each other's experiences. I really liked that. (TII)

However, Madame Chantal noted that the increased awareness of the differences between students was a difficult experience for some, especially those who realised

that some challenges in their lives were not present for others. She gave the example of Liam (age nine), a student from a low-income household, who began to ask questions about his own family situation after hearing his peers speak about their own:

There were students who talked about the time parents spend with [their children] ... it was [Samira] or [Alice] ... who said, 'but I wouldn't want to not have parents. Because the time I spend with my parents is enjoyable, they do activities with me, they take care of me.' And then [Liam] said, 'yeah, but my mom doesn't do that. Does that mean that ... [she] isn't a good [mother]?' And he started thinking ... We said, 'well, no ... not everyone has time to spend with you, she works a lot,' 'yes, but my mom doesn't work.' (TII)

Seeing the differences between his family and those of his peers made Liam question whether there was something wrong with his own family situation. The dialogues may have been an emotionally difficult experience for him as a result.

Madame Chantal's reflections on 'cultural' differences

During her individual interview, Madame Chantal mentioned that, had she been facilitating the dialogues, she would have made a more explicit connection between the differences in students' life experiences and habits at home and the fact that they came from different ethnocultural backgrounds:

Let's say I ask the children about their background ... 'What's ... bedtime like at your house? Here, we do it this way, we have a routine ...' 'Oh, well, it's not at all like that for me.' 'Oh, perfect, what's the difference?' It's to show that ... it can be totally the same thing, or, because you come from somewhere else, there's another way of seeing things ... I would have done it even more. To be able to highlight the differences. So that the people who are, I don't want to say 'de souche' ['true' Quebecois], but who come from elsewhere, first or second generation, could have understood ... not that we expected that from them, but I would have liked to know more. Say, you talk about injustice ... we would say, 'perfect, here we do it this way, does anyone else have [a different answer]? Where are your parents from?' I might have even named it, to be able to make the child reflect on the cultural side of the thing. (TII)

In this excerpt, she suggests doing an activity where students are invited to share elements of their habits at home and to link these differences to their immigration

history. For her, it seems important to emphasise to students that the differences between them are primarily the result of the country where they grew up: *'because you come from somewhere else, there's another way of seeing things.'* She seems to suggest that even differences in opinion—for example, regarding justice—could be explained by ethnocultural diversity and that a philosophical dialogue could be an opportune moment to present students with a 'true Quebecois' perspective on the discussion topic: *'here, we do it this way.'* I will return to Madame Chantal's comments in the discussion.

Exploring diversity from a theoretical perspective

Dialogue Four in particular allowed students explore the concept of diversity from a theoretical perspective. The group discussed 'invisible' differences, such as those related to personality, preferences, feelings, or opinions. They also reflected on differences that one can choose (such as behaviour) and those that are beyond one's control (such as physical appearance). It is worth noting that, when discussing differences between people, the students often gave imaginary examples far removed from their real experiences. For instance, Noah (age nine) said that some differences could make people become superheroes: *'[It might be] not just differences like everyone likes cereal except this person, but it could be like ... maybe they can fly ... [or] they can ... make their arms longer ...'* (D4). Gabriela invented a wide variety of fictional situations in which it would be problematic for everyone to look alike: *'Let's say there's a person who wants to take your place ... they put you in a trunk, and then ... they pretend that [your mother is] their mother, and then, [you die] there and [the person] takes over your life'* (D4). It is possible that the activity itself encouraged this type of response; by encouraging students to imagine different fictional worlds (where everyone is identical, for example), participants were implicitly led to think only of imaginary scenarios. Although this prompt made the discussion less personal and perhaps less uncomfortable, it may have prevented the students from discussing the effects of diversity in the real world.

Nevertheless, the students managed to name several real effects of diversity, especially in relation to differences in perspectives, preferences, or skills. For example, Coralie (age 10) remarked that *'if everyone was the same, we would all vote for the same person ... That might not be a good thing'* (D4). Alice explained that people having different preferences allows resources to be distributed well: *'[If] everyone only wants to eat the same food, the other foods will be useless, and there won't be enough of the food [that everyone likes]'* (D4). Similarly, Amir noted that differences between people's

preferences allow us to divide tasks in society: *'If everyone wanted to be a worker to build houses, no one [would] make food'* (D4). In general, comments on the consequences of difference were related to differences in opinion or preference rather than physical differences. At one point, Xavier brought up the point that physical differences can help us understand what is happening inside a person: *'If [a] person is getting older, but you can't see the difference ... and all of a sudden, they die, well, you'll be sad because you didn't [know] they [were going to die].'* (D4). However, this is one of the few examples of a student mentioning physical difference during the dialogue.

While the group never explicitly talked about racialised differences during the dialogue, it seems that the themes of race and racism were implicitly present. At one point, Noah, reformulating an idea shared by another student, explained a fictional scenario to highlight the consequences of a world in which everyone looks alike: *'Maybe a person who's racist ... they could say [racist things] to a police officer, but they don't know because ... [the officer] doesn't have a badge ... and the officer ... might be able to arrest them'* (D4). While the comment is not technically about the subject of racism, the word 'racism' is mentioned, suggesting that the theme was present in participants' minds even if they did not discuss it directly. There was also a moment later in the dialogue when Coralie seemed to hold back from expressing her thoughts for fear of offending her peers: *'Differences don't matter at all, we're still humans ... A person who ... I don't want to be mean, actually, that's why I don't want to say it ... I don't want to be racist by saying this'* (D4). It seems that she was reflecting on differences related to race but was afraid to talk about it in an insensitive manner and risk hurting her peers.

Challenging stereotypes

The dialogue also provided an example of what can happen when students share views based on stereotypes. While discussing whether or not difference necessarily creates conflict, Carlos (age nine) explained how diversity can be problematic: *'Differences can cause a lot of problems because if, for example, there's a person who's normal, and there's a person who's a bit crazy in their head ... it can cause a lot of problems ... for everyone around'* (D4). As the facilitator, I felt that this comment required an intervention on my part. I invited the students to examine the concepts of 'craziness' and 'normalcy' in more detail. When we use the words 'crazy' or 'normal', what exactly do we mean? During the discussion that followed, some students shared other ideas based on stereotypes; Xavier seemed to suggest that a person could choose to 'go crazy' or to develop a mental illness, while Livia (age 10) suggested that 'crazy' people choose to harm others for pleasure: *'As [Xavier] said, "crazy", is kind of,*

deliberately doing crazy actions ... What I think is the worst thing about being crazy is killing people just for fun' (D4).

However, other students brought more nuanced points to the discussion. Samira, for example, suggested that if someone has *'a disease and they make bad choices, well, it's not really their fault'* (D4). James (age 10) took this idea further, suggesting that one should consider the life circumstances that have shaped a person before judging them:

Sometimes, you're mentally not capable. Maybe your parents are mean, and they taught you to be like that. Maybe also you have something mentally, so you're not able to work. Like, for example, poor people. There are poor people who say, 'okay, I don't have to work that much,' but there are others who mentally aren't able to work. (D4)

Here, he argues that a person may be violent because they experienced violence in their childhood, that someone who is unemployed may have a mental health problem that prevents them from working. Like Samira, he invites his peers to nuance their opinions on a complex issue, adding nuance to Carlos' assertion about 'crazy' people being dangerous. Although it is impossible to determine the impact these more nuanced perspectives had on the other students, they were shared out loud in a circle in which we had already established the importance of being open to contradictory opinions, and they may therefore have helped other students re-examine and perhaps nuance their own perspectives on these complex topics.

Discussion

Learning about diversity through dialogue: Some potential benefits of P4C

My findings suggest that P4C has the potential to be a promising approach to help students learn about diversity. While the themes of racism, ethnocultural diversity, and immigration were not frequently mentioned by participants, various aspects of the dialogues suggest that P4C may indeed be a useful tool to discuss these topics with students. The dialogues conducted in the study allowed students to become aware of diversity in a broad sense by highlighting differences between their viewpoints and life experiences. Dialogue Four, on the topic of difference, allowed students to explore the concept of diversity from a theoretical standpoint. The highlighted moment from Dialogue Four also demonstrates how P4C can allow students to discuss sensitive topics and question stereotypes. Thinking in community allows participants to critique an *idea* rather than the individual who proposed it, and enables students to

hear a variety of viewpoints on the subject, which may lead them to nuance their opinions or even to change their minds. Seemingly problematic comments can therefore create potential entryways to important conversations around sensitive topics (Fletcher 2020), providing that P4C facilitators receive adequate training in this regard (discussed in more detail below). Although Carlos' comments were related to issues of mental health rather than race or immigration, one can easily imagine a similar process—one student sharing an opinion based on stereotypes, other students questioning this viewpoint or sharing more nuanced ideas—occurring in a dialogue focused on other themes. The sharing and critiquing of ideas aloud as a group, along with an emphasis on cognitive flexibility and the coexistence of diverging opinions (Kizel 2017), are features of P4C dialogues that could contribute to their effectiveness when discussing diversity with students.

The risk of essentialisation and assimilationism

However, this study also highlights the risk of inviting teachers to use philosophical dialogue as a tool to discuss ethnocultural diversity without having been provided with sufficient training related to the experiences of immigrant and racialised students. Madame Chantal's comments are highly illuminating in this regard. While Madame Chantal clearly sees the potential for philosophical dialogue to lead students to reflect on the differences between them, she seems to suggest that students should be taught that these differences are the result of their ethnocultural origins. However, all families are different, and these differences result from a plethora of factors. Suggesting that all differences are the product of 'culture' reinforces stereotypes and essentialises immigrant students and families (Schwarzenenthal et al. 2019). If a student shares an aspect of their experience and is immediately asked where their parents are from, this could be interpreted as a way of delegitimising the student's experience and reducing them to their ethnocultural identity (Potvin, Magnan & Low 2021).

Madame Chantal's remarks also seem to suggest that philosophical dialogue could be used to show students 'what is expected of them' in Quebec, to promote so-called 'Quebecois' ways of life. There is clearly an undertone of assimilationism in this suggestion; Madame Chantal seems to wish to discourage habits or beliefs that seem 'foreign' (un-Quebecois and therefore 'unreasonable', Chetty 2018) to her because they fall outside of her personal experience of the world. However, my intention is not to criticise Madame Chantal herself. Her comments merely reflect the tone of the MEQ's policy, which, while noting the importance of diversity in Quebec society, largely emphasises that immigrant students should learn and adopt the cultural norms and

‘values’ of Quebec (MEQ 1998). It is therefore not surprising that a teacher might believe that their role is to teach recent immigrant-origin students the ‘correct’ way of living in Quebec. Indeed, as DesRoches (2014) argues, the intercultural model in Quebec schools invites teachers to promote the idea of a unified set of values and culture in Quebec, professing a commitment to diversity while effectively promoting intolerance of ‘Otherness’. For P4C to have a positive impact on recent immigrant-origin students, particularly in Quebec, it is crucial that philosophical dialogues not be seen as a vehicle for promoting Quebec’s ‘national identity’. Training for those wishing to facilitate P4C dialogues in this context should emphasise the importance of valuing a diversity of perspectives (Kizel 2017), not reducing students to their ethnocultural identity, and not suggesting that there is only one ‘correct’ way of living. However, politically-engaged P4C facilitation (Chetty 2014; Chetty & Suissa 2016; Kizel 2016; Reed-Sandoval & Sykes 2016) may be particularly challenging for teachers constrained by the recommendations of the MEQ.

Supporting students and building trust

Furthermore, my results also indirectly highlight several risks associated with using P4C to discuss ethnocultural diversity, racism, or immigration. Firstly, Liam’s case illustrates how awareness of diversity can create discomfort for students who come to realise they do not share the same privileges as their peers. One can imagine that frank discussions of discrimination based on race would have a similar effect as children consider the forces of systemic inequality that shape their lives. Teachers must be prepared to support these students through difficult realisations related to privilege and injustice, to welcome the anger and sadness of these students (Chetty 2014), and to accompany them through their reflections. Students also risk being hurt by insensitive or poorly-worded comments from their peers if the class is not sufficiently prepared for a discussion of sensitive topics. In Dialogue Four, Coralie’s unwillingness to share her thoughts for fear of being racist shows her awareness that she did not have the appropriate vocabulary to articulate her thoughts without causing harm to her peers.

While Dialogue Four explicitly invited participants to reflect on the concept of difference, this conversation was limited in several ways: our conversation never touched on themes of power, privilege, or discrimination, and the discussion mostly stayed in the realm of the imaginary. Students imagined people with superpowers and doppelgängers trying to ‘steal [the] lives’ of their counterparts; the group did not discuss the real impacts of inequalities between people, or the injustice that exists in

society, or question their own privilege or social position (Reed-Sandoval & Sykes 2016). However, given the limited duration of this study, this activity's focus on 'invisible' differences and imaginary scenarios may have been appropriate, allowing students to feel more comfortable during a discussion of a sensitive topic and lowering the risk that they would share biased perspectives that might hurt their peers. Had I had the opportunity to conduct a longer study, during which I could have developed the level of trust necessary to broach more sensitive subjects, many aspects of Dialogue Four could have provided a point of departure for further dialogues more directly related to themes of racism, ethnocultural diversity, or immigration (for example, the concept of 'visible' versus 'invisible' differences, the question of whether one can say that someone is 'not normal' because of something they did not choose, and stereotyped views that particular groups of people are violent or dangerous). The results of this study suggest that future studies hoping to directly address racism, ethnocultural diversity, and immigration through philosophical dialogue would require more time in order to build trust with students and to practice engaging with discomfort before engaging directly with these topics.

Recommendations for facilitators: Questioning stereotypes, sitting with discomfort, navigating sensitive topics

Even with sufficient trust, there is no denying that facilitating such a discussion is a significant challenge and has the potential to do more damage than good if not handled thoughtfully; both Fletcher (2020) and Reed-Sandoval and Sykes (2016) highlight that philosophical dialogue can unintentionally reinforce dominant or stereotyped viewpoints without careful facilitation. Facilitators must therefore learn to be attuned to the presence of stereotyped views in a dialogue and be prepared to intervene by complexifying the discussion, inviting participants to consider alternative viewpoints, and modeling the epistemic flexibility needed to deconstruct stereotypes (Fletcher, 2020). My own response as a facilitator when Carlos shared his views on the dangers of 'crazy' people was to intervene by asking questions, inviting participants to define and problematise their understanding of the terms 'crazy' and 'normal' and to collectively nuance the stereotyped ideas which had been shared aloud.

The experience of challenging stereotypes or acknowledging one's own experience of privilege or oppression is a necessarily uncomfortable one. Indeed, Chetty and Suissa (2016) argue that some level of discomfort (particularly for students belonging to dominant social groups) is necessary if conversations about discrimination and racism

are to be productive. Arao and Clemens (2013) therefore recommend ‘emphasiz[ing] the need for courage rather than the illusion of safety’ (p. 141); rather than attempting to create a ‘safe space’ in which participants expect not to feel challenged or uncomfortable, facilitators should attempt to foster a ‘brave space’ in which participants commit to remaining engaged in difficult discussions in spite of discomfort. These scholars recommend that any discussion of sensitive topics begin with the establishment of ground rules: participants are invited to practice respectfully challenging other students’ ideas and receiving critique from others, to consider the reasons behind their unwillingness to engage with particular topics and step outside of what feels immediately comfortable, and to take responsibility for both the intent and the impact of their words while also recognising that missteps are inevitable when discussing controversial issues (Arao & Clemens 2013). Hirsch et al. (2023) recommend that facilitators prepare for sensitive discussions by researching the themes they will be discussing and examining their personal position on the issue beforehand. To support the discussion, teachers can provide students with information and appropriate terminology to understand and discuss the topics at hand, describe the social, historical, and political context of the subject, and invite students to consider and analyse various perspectives. Hirsch et al. (2023) also recommend establishing guidelines with students before the discussion begins (e.g. expressing one’s emotions while recognising that emotions alone are not sufficient basis for an argument) and inviting students to examine how their life experience shapes their and others’ perspectives.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that P4C may be a promising avenue to help students learn about diversity; it can allow them to gain awareness of the diversity present within their class, to reflect on diversity from a theoretical perspective and to collectively question certain stereotypes. However, this study also illuminates several risks and limitations of P4C as a method for discussing diversity with students. To mitigate these risks, it is important that facilitators receive sensitivity training with regards to ethnocultural diversity, immigration, and racism and be equipped to discuss sensitive subjects in the classroom. For P4C to be helpful rather than harmful in multicultural school settings, facilitators must be caring, politically engaged, and vigilant to the risks that a dialogue about a sensitive topic might pose for marginalised students.

The results of this study do not point to a clear path forward; while P4C's focus on cognitive flexibility and the coexistence of multiple perspectives make it a potentially useful pedagogy for learning about diversity, the facilitator training required to make philosophical dialogue productive rather than harmful is extensive. Philosophical facilitation is already complex and highly demanding, and thorough P4C training already requires more time than many teachers are able to set aside. Furthermore, teachers hoping to use P4C as a tool to discuss diversity in ethnoculturally diverse classrooms must also take the time to educate themselves about the experiences of immigrant and racialised students and to prepare themselves for the challenge of discussing controversial issues in the classroom. Taken together, this is a tall order. Given the already significant demands on teachers' time and resources, is it reasonable to expect them to be available for such extensive training? At the same time, ethnocultural diversity and racial discrimination shape students' lives both in and outside school. If P4C could be a promising approach to help young people develop the tools they need to navigate these realities, perhaps it is an avenue worth exploring further.

I see this study as a contribution to an ongoing academic conversation. While some scholars have already addressed the use of P4C to discuss ethnocultural diversity and racism or to empower marginalised students (Chetty 2014; Chetty & Suissa 2016; Kizel 2016; Reed-Sandoval 2019; Reed-Sandoval & Sykes 2016), there is clearly more to explore, particularly in the context of Quebec, and I hope that future studies will consider the opportunities and risks I have identified here. Future studies could take the form of action research conducted in collaboration with facilitators and teachers to develop pedagogical materials similar to the guide to facilitating controversial discussions by Hirsch et al. (2023) or the P4C manual by Gagnon and Mailhot-Paquette (2022). My hope is that the community of scholars exploring the use of philosophical dialogue for diversity education will be able to collaboratively identify ways to employ P4C in ethnoculturally diverse schools while also mitigating some of its risks.

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Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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