The Community of Philosophical Inquiry as a place of agon:

Exploring children's experiences of competitiveness in philosophical dialogue

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Abstract

This paper explores an important yet overlooked aspect of Philosophy for Children (P4C): how children experience competitiveness in the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI). It describes a qualitative case study conducted with 76 young people (aged 8-17) involved in CPI dialogues in formal and informal educational settings in Canada and New Zealand. Interviews and video observation revealed that participants often experienced dialogues as competitive exchanges in which 'winning' consisted of convincing others, while giving in to others' opinions was associated with defeat and disappointment. Participants recognised the potential dangers of competitiveness, notably the epistemic risk of excluding alternative perspectives and the social risk of damaging their relationships. Participants often successfully managed competitive dynamics by remaining engaged and open-minded. The last part of the paper discusses these findings in relation to theoretical work in P4C, notably Kennedy's (1997) notion of the CPI as a 'place of agon.' Further, it argues that we should rethink the role of competitiveness in the CPI while remaining mindful of its risks, notably by considering its potential as a motivational drive and its place within a larger process of inquiry.

Key words

competitiveness, Community of Philosophical Inquiry, conflict, disagreement, experiences, Philosophy for Children

Introduction

Over two thousand years ago, Plato cautioned against the danger of introducing young people to philosophical dialogue:

> When young fellows first encounter discussion they treat it as a plaything to use for contradiction. They imitate the cross-examiners and refute others,

> delighting like puppies in tearing and dragging anyone around in an argument … And when they've refuted and been refuted many times, they quickly and vehemently fall to doubting all their former beliefs. From this they and philosophy both fall into disrepute among others. (Plato 1979, p. 249)

In this passage, Plato seems especially concerned about the combative way in which young people approach philosophy. Instead of seeking virtue and wisdom, they reduce philosophical inquiry to a mere game of contradiction and refutation, where the goal is primarily to defeat others. This adversarial attitude may be called *competitiveness*, and it is this aspect of philosophical competition that I will explore in relation to Philosophy for Children (P4C). Specifically, I define competitiveness as the desire to contend with others and to prevail over them, though I do not assume an aggressive connotation. In this paper, I investigate children's experiences of competitiveness in the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI) by sharing the findings of an empirical study which combined interviews and video observation. Hence, I focus on P4C carried out in 'regular' contexts, rather than in competitive events such as Ethics Bowls. Yet, as I show below, the participants in my study were not entirely unlike the young people described by Plato in that they also understood philosophy partly as a competitive venture.

Competitiveness in the theoretical P4C literature

P4C theorists emphatically reject competition and competitiveness. Helkala, Järvinen and Tomperi (in press) write that 'shared philosophical reflection … seeks to break away from competition and friend-or-enemy divisions in order to respect the opponents' points of view' (p. 14). To underscore this point, P4C scholars frequently distinguish the dialogical nature of the CPI from the adversarial structure of debating (e.g. Butnor 2012; Davey 2004; Lipman 2003). For example, Gregory (2004) notes that P4C 'cautions the participants against trying to 'win' arguments and emphasizes the importance of recognizing the strength of another's ideas and the weakness of one's own' (p. 171). This aversion to adversarial dynamics derives from the foundational principles of P4C: the very idea of a community of inquirers seems to presuppose collaboration and to preclude competition.

However, P4C theorists recognise the central importance of *disagreement* in the CPI, which they view as a powerful driver of inquiry (Butnor 2012; Kennedy 1997). Of course, not all disagreements in the CPI are competitive, and not all instances of competitiveness involve disagreement (e.g. two children competing to be the first to

share the same idea). Yet the two often seem to go together, especially when disagreements over incompatible positions become heated conflicts. While few P4C scholars discuss competitiveness, some have explored how conflicts arise in the CPI (e.g. Burgh & Yorshansky 2011; Fletcher 2014; Kennedy 1997). For instance, Fletcher (2014) notes that 'while powerful … the experience of dialoguing bodies in a CPI is not always a harmonious one, and can include hostility expressed not only verbally but also corporeally' (p. 14). More closely connected to competitiveness, she claims that a child's aggressive behaviour may be rooted in a desire to 'assert themselves … as the leader, the elite' of the community (p. 17). More generally, Kennedy (1997) posits that there is in everyone a 'will to power,' or the drive to 'struggle against each other for domination' (pp. 74, 77). Accordingly, a fundamental dimension of the CPI is what he calls 'the community of interest,' which encompasses the various efforts made by children, 'mostly unconsciously,' to 'seek power and invulnerability through friendship, alliance, performance, influence, domination, hierarchy, special favor, etc.' (pp. 74-75). While Kennedy argues that this struggle for power can be productively channeled, he also warns that 'the fact that conflict is a necessary, central aspect of any dialectical process does not reduce the great risk it represents for the CPI' (p. 81). Overall, P4C theorists have thus cast competitiveness in a mostly negative light.

Competitiveness in the empirical P4C literature

Most empirical research in P4C consists of quantitative studies measuring the benefits associated with CPI dialogues (Bowyer, Amos & Stevens 2021), whether cognitive (e.g. Millet & Tapper 2012) or socio-emotional (e.g. Siddiqui, Gorard & See 2019). In contrast, there is little research exploring how young people engage with, and experience, CPI dialogues. Yet, given my interest in competitiveness, it is this kind of research that I review here, starting with studies of children's interactions during CPI dialogues, followed by studies of their experiences. To the best of my knowledge, no study of either kind has directly investigated competitiveness in the CPI. Accordingly, I have needed to canvass studies exploring how children approach disagreement more generally. While these studies are grounded in different contexts and investigate different approaches to P4C, they provide valuable insights into children's interactions and experiences of CPI dialogues.

Only a handful of studies have investigated children's interactions in the CPI as they relate to conflict and competition. An in-depth analysis of a single dialogue among French children (Polo 2017) provides indirect evidence that the CPI is atypical in its *lack* of competitive dynamic. Polo notes that, unlike other kinds of argumentative

discussions, the dialogue she observed rarely saw children contend over incompatible positions and did not feature any alliance among them. She suggests that this may be due to the frequent shifts in children's focus and to the systematic interventions of the facilitator, which both precluded sustained controversy. Despite this lack of competitiveness, children still engaged in disagreements: they often explicitly labeled their dissenting utterances (e.g. 'I disagree with this because …') and seemed unperturbed when others disagreed with them. Polo attributes this comfort with disagreement to children's creation over time of a 'discussion culture in which philosophical objects matter more than sparing sensitivities' (p. 12). Such a culture is what the incarcerated Scottish adolescents in Heron and Cassidy's (2018) study progressed toward over a series of 10 dialogues. While conflicts were more frequent at the beginning of the programme, participants were better able to manage disagreement without giving or taking offense in the later dialogues, for instance by justifying their opinions or by mitigating their dissenting statements (e.g. 'I agree with you to a certain extent').

Turning to children's experiences in the CPI, previous studies suggest that, by and large, children enjoy philosophical dialogues (Gasparatou & Ergazaki 2015; Michalik 2019; Reznitskaya & Glina 2013). Typically, children report that they like exploring interesting topics and appreciate having the freedom to express their opinions, especially when they trust that others will respect their views (Barrow 2015; Cassidy & Heron 2020; Gasparatou & Ergazaki 2015; Michalik 2019). More closely related to competitiveness is the finding that children enjoy disagreeing with one another during dialogues (Cassidy & Heron 2020; Hess 2015; Polo 2017; Reznitskaya & Glina 2013). Comparing the experiences of 60 primary students who took part in 12 CPI dialogues to those of 60 students who participated in regular classroom discussions, Reznitskaya and Glina (2013) report that significantly more students in the former group identify disagreement as one of their favourite aspects of discussion. Children tend to find disagreement fun ('when some people disagreed … that was the most exciting part', p. 54) and useful ('if we disagreed, we would help the question come out more', p. 54), a pattern also present in Hess's (2015) study.

However, children's experiences of CPI dialogues also involve challenges. For example, children sometimes feel bored, confused or impatient during dialogues (Cassidy & Heron 2020; Gasparatou & Ergazaki 2015; Michalik 2019; Reznitskaya & Glina 2013). Navigating disagreement seems especially difficult, as many children find it anxiety-provoking, demoralising or divisive (Gasparatou & Ergazaki 2015; Helkala et al. in press; Reznitskaya & Glina 2013). Notwithstanding the finding

mentioned above, in Reznitskaya and Glina's (2013) study, four times as many students disliked the centrality of disagreement in CPI dialogues compared to students involved in regular discussions. Helkala and colleagues (in press) suggest that children may resent disagreement in part because it undermines their sense of safety in the CPI. They attribute their participants' reluctance to share their opinions during dialogues in part to a fear of disagreement and lament that 'dissenting opinions were often perceived as a threat of conflict and not a chance for dialogue' (p. 18).

While this research provides important insights into how children approach disagreement in the CPI, it remains scant with regards to children's experiences of competitiveness. There is thus a clear empirical gap, which the study presented in the next section aims to address.

The study

As part of my doctoral work (Roucau 2022), I conducted a qualitative case-study with 76 participants involved in CPI dialogues in formal and informal educational settings in Canada and New Zealand. This broader study combined interviews, video observation and body mapping to explore how participants navigated disagreements and addressed political issues in CPI dialogues, and how they emotionally experienced these exchanges. In this paper, I draw on the interview and video data I collected to focus on participants' experiences of competitiveness in the CPI.

Research context

To understand how children experience CPI dialogues, I adopted a case study methodology (Merriam 1998), selecting as my case the philocreative CPI, which is the dialogical component of the broader approach of philocreation. Developed by Natalie Fletcher, philocreation 'is a trademarked term that denotes the approach to the P4C model that Brila [a Canadian educational charity] has designed to integrate creativity into every phase of philosophical inquiry with youth' (Fletcher 2020, p. 85). Its key principles include: a commitment to empowering youth; the importance of curating the affective, embodied and tacit aspects of philosophical inquiry; and a responsibility to nurture thoughtfulness, understood not just as careful reasoning but also as 'genuine consideration for the world through responsible thought and action' (p. 67).

While philocreation combines 'dialogical forms' and 'cooperative projects' (Fletcher 2018, p. 351), I focus on the former in this study.

Philocreative dialogues enlist creative elements to deepen children's engagement in philosophical inquiry. Three philocreative dialogue types are particularly relevant to my focus on competitiveness: Multiversation, Perspectrum and Taktikou. Multiversations are thought experiments that invite children to imagine an alternative world (e.g. a world without love) and to consider the effects of the change in various contexts, before reflecting on real-world implications. In Perspectrum dialogues, children are asked to 'literally position their bodies or name tags on a yes-to-no line in reaction to a philosophical question. They must then offer good reasons in support of their chosen spot, which can change as the inquiry exposes new shades of grey' (Fletcher 2020, p. 71). Finally, in Taktikou dialogues, children enlist personified concepts (i.e. they imagine concepts as living, breathing creatures) to help them develop practical strategies to address fictional yet pressing ethical problems. While some participants felt especially competitive during these dialogues, it is crucial to note that philocreative dialogues are not designed to foster competitiveness. Further, facilitators in my study never encouraged inquirers to be competitive, instead promoting the collaborative ethos typical of P4C. This makes the findings discussed below that much more striking.

Sites and participants

To maximise variation (Merriam 1998), my study included two sites—Brila's summer camp in Canada and Aotearoa School in New Zealand[1]—and four groups—Session 1 (S1) and Session 2 (S2) at Brila, and Class and Club at Aotearoa School.

Brila

Brila Youth Projects is an educational charity based in Montréal, Canada founded in 2008 by Natalie Fletcher. It aims to 'inspire young people through philosophical dialogue and creative projects' (Brila 2021). Brila offers bilingual workshops, clubs and summer camps to young people in schools (from preschools to universities) and community organisations (from art galleries to Indigenous friendship centres), while training educators in its philocreation approach. Brila is also a research laboratory, whose findings are published in academic outlets and used to enhance programmes.

[1] The school's name and all participants' names are pseudonyms.

I selected Brila's summer camp because I worked there as a facilitator for three years, and because it provided an opportunity to study the philocreative CPI in a concentrated form. Two 10-day sessions usually take place each summer, Session 1 (S1) and Session 2 (S2), both of which I studied.[2]

After obtaining ethical approval from Victoria University's Human Ethics Committee (#0000027533), I recruited participants by circulating information sheets, consent forms and children assent forms via email, several weeks prior to the beginning of the camp.[3]

In both sessions, CPI dialogues took place every day and all campers participated in them. Participants were assigned to one of two groups, one facilitated by Brila's director, the other by me, and the composition of groups changed every day to give participants the chance to dialogue with everyone. In terms of content, the programme featured seven philocreative dialogue types (e.g. Multiversation, Taktikou, etc.) and various themes. Table 1 outlines the different dialogues that took place across groups.

Table 1: Philocreative dialogues across groups

Group	**Dialogues**
Session 1	10 dialogues of various types over 10 days, each lasting 90-120 minutes Themes included femininity, origins, fulfilment, etc.
Session 2	10 dialogues of various types over 10 days, each lasting 75-90 minutes Themes focused on playing with concepts (reflecting on their importance, phenomenology, etc.)
Class	Five dialogues of various types over five weeks, each lasting 45-50 minutes All facilitated by me Themes included personality, knowledge, authority, culture and humility
Club	Five dialogues over five weeks, each lasting 50-60 minutes All facilitated by me Same dialogue types and themes as Class

[2] See Fletcher (2020) for more details about the content of Brila's summer camps and philocreative dialogue types.

[3] This approval included the authorisation to share de-identified data obtained from video observation—in the case of Figure 1, artist renditions of video frames—in research venues.

Aotearoa School

Aotearoa School is a Year 1-8 primary school located in Wellington, New Zealand. It is a decile 9 school,[4] with a relatively small enrolment. Approximately 63% of its students are Pākehā/European, 11% are Māori, 11% are Asian and 15% are from other ethnic groups (Education Review Office 2021). I studied two groups in the school: a year 7-8 Class and a philosophy Club that was put together specifically for the study. In both groups, I designed and facilitated all CPI dialogues (see Table 1). I recruited Aotearoa participants in the same way as Brila participants. Table 2 summarises the demographic information of participants.

Table 2: Demographic information of participants

	N	**Female**	**Male**	**Mean age (age range)**	**Mean years exp with CPI**	**Language of dialogues**	**% second-language speakers**
Session 1	18	18	0[5]	13.94 (12-17)	3.67	English	22.2
Session 2	24	14	10	9.54 (8-12)	1.75	English or French	37.5
Class	22	12	10	11.74 (11-13)	0.52	English	18.2
Club	12	7	5	9.5 (8-12)	0	English	0
Total / Average	**76**	**51**	**25**	**11.22 (8-17)**	**1.56**		**22.4**

Methods

Multi-method approaches enable triangulation (Denzin 2015) and give children more freedom and flexibility to share their experiences (Crivello, Camfield & Woodhead 2009). To identify the best methods to investigate children's experiences in the CPI, I trialled several data collection methods during a pilot study conducted at Brila in July 2018. For my doctoral study, I selected three methods—interviews, video observation

[4] This is a term used in New Zealand to refer to the relative wealth of the area surrounding a school, with decile 10 being the wealthiest.

[5] All S1 participants were female, in part deliberately arranged by Brila's director to provide campers with a space inspired by feminist traditions. The hope was that conversations about themes like body image, gender norms and sexism would flow more freely in such a space.

and body mapping—but in this paper, I only discuss data collected through the first two methods.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews allow participants to share their experiences from their own perspectives, an important goal of research conducted *with* children rather than *on* them (Christensen & James 2017). In my study, I interviewed 47 participants in pairs, in English or French, for 15-45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. I adopted the semi-structured format commonly used in qualitative research (Galletta 2013). The interview guide I developed comprised 13 questions, some probing participants' experiences at a general level, while others focused on specific elements of the CPI.[6] Four questions were especially relevant to competitiveness:

- How do you feel when others disagree with you?
- How do you feel when others agree with you?
- Is there sometimes conflict in philosophy?
- Are you ever worried during philosophy dialogues?

I analysed the interview data using Braun and Clarke's (2012) reflexive thematic analysis. I systematically coded units of meaning in the transcripts and aggregated these codes to form themes, which I iteratively refined until they had clear boundaries, were coherent and were sufficiently substantiated by the data.

Video observation

Videos can capture the moment-to-moment unfolding of interaction and provide a fine-grained, multimodal 'record that can be repeatedly viewed and manipulated' (Jewitt 2012, p. 6). In my study, I filmed 30 dialogues using a 360° camera that recorded the entire circle of participants around it. Unlike a traditional camera, a 360° camera has no blind spot, and the images can be viewed at a very wide angle or from close up, thus maximising the richness of video data (Pretlove et al. 2020).

[6] For more information about the interview process, the content of the sessions, and, more generally, the study's methodological framework, see Roucau (2022).

To manage the amount of data generated by filming, especially with a 360° camera, I selected short episodes to analyse in depth (Blikstad-Balas 2017). Given my focus on disagreement, I selected episodes that: (i) featured at least two opinions I deemed incompatible; and (ii) unfolded over at least three turns (Netz 2014). Across the corpus, 131 episodes met both criteria. In line with the exploratory nature of my study, I analysed these episodes following the progressive refinement of hypotheses approach (Engle, Conant, & Greeno 2007), beginning with a broad focus on the dynamics of disagreement in the CPI and gradually generating more specific hypotheses by iteratively examining the data.

Findings

Participants often felt like they were vying for dominance during CPI dialogues. Drawing on my analysis of the interview data, I first describe participants' experiences of competitiveness, delving into their sense of being on opposite teams, their passionate engagement and the risks they identified. Then, drawing on the video data, I offer a vignette illustrating a productive competitive dynamic in the CPI.

Participants' experiences of competitiveness

Being on opposite teams

Participants often saw 'two separate sides competing' (Malcolm, S2, 10) in the CPI.[7] The notions of 'friendly competition' (Tawera, Club, 11), 'speaking conflict' (Tessa, Class, 12) or even 'battling' (Him-chan, S2, 9) were surprisingly prevalent across the dataset. As many as 26 participants seemed to understand the CPI partially as a game of influence. In this game, playing consisted in 'getting others to agree with you' by providing arguments to 'push for your side of the opinion' (Tawera, Club). Players were expected to concede to the superior view: 'you're trying to get your point of view to be on top until somebody eventually goes 'OK I'm changing' (Tawera). And if 'people are slowly giving in and going to your side,' then it is a sign that you are 'winning' (Nellie, S2, 11).

This competitive framework pervaded the ways that participants talked about their experiences. For example, Tessa (Class) explicitly described the process of changing her mind in adversarial terms: 'you've found something, not wrong with your idea,

[7] To help the reader contextualise quotes, I indicate their author in either of the following formats: Name (Group, age) or (Name, Group, age). I only report the age of participants the first time that they are mentioned.

just something that isn't quite strong enough to beat the other thing.' The need to revise her opinion did not stem from an epistemic concern about its validity, but rather from its failure to outshine competing accounts. Competitiveness was also manifest in some of the metaphors that participants offered to explain their experiences, which they often borrowed from sports. For example, Sébastien (S2, 11) and Him-chan developed a sophisticated football metaphor to illustrate the competitiveness and one-upmanship that characterised their disagreement: 'every time [one of us spoke], it was like someone scored an amazing goal and then you had to score an even more amazing goal to win.' A combative connotation was even more pronounced in Angelina's (S2, 8) wrestling metaphor: 'I feel like a wrestler. You use words, but, like in wrestling, you fight … for a medal. And those medals are your words being … the big idea that everybody knows.'

Interestingly, the *kind* of CPI dialogue in which participants engaged seemed to influence their experiences. Specifically, several participants found dialogues that assigned them 'missions' more competitive.[8] This was primarily because, 'for a mission, you have to *do* something' (Zhang, S2, 9), which entailed making difficult decisions, such as deciding which personified concepts should rescue endangered trees (Taktikou), or which concepts best suited various roles in society (Multiversation). The necessity of adjudicating between incompatible options created the need to make one's case, often at the expense of alternatives. As Sean (S2, 9) explained: 'the other dialogues, it used to be building on each other's ideas. Here, it's kinda like building on them, but then when we've got an idea, it's also like tearing them down.' Consequently, participants seemed even more eager to convince others: 'the [dialogues] where we're kinda like deciding and debating, it makes me feel a bit more competitive' (Malcolm, S2).

Reinforcing the idea of being on opposite *teams* was the fact that confrontations often involved more than two participants. While some participants held fast to their view even when they were the last person defending it (e.g. 'if you're the only one on one side, and everyone else is against you … you can keep giving your own reasons, if you're really strong about it' Nellie, S2), many participants sought instead to 'make

[8] While this finding was only reported by S2 participants—the only group to have both 'regular' and 'mission-based' dialogues—there are reasons to think it may apply more generally. For example, Tessa (Class) explained that when doing philosophy with another teacher, she had to solve moral dilemmas like the trolley problem. She found these exchanges more competitive ('it was more like a debate') and thus more engaging: 'sometimes, I do just really like the train ones… because each person is different in agreement and that's like the two really strong ideas.'

allies with someone' (Malcolm, S2). Participants believed that the main benefit of alliances was to guarantee support for their views, 'because then, well, they agree with you' (Malcolm), and to avoid isolation—'so then I'm not all alone' (Eloise, Class, 12). Two participants, interviewed together, explained that their alliance allowed them to turn the tide of a dialogue where 'most of the group disagreed with us' (Alejandra, S1, 15), eventually 'chang[ing] the others' point of view' (Fatima, S1, 12).

A passionate engagement

Participants were passionately engaged in this clash of ideas. Fifteen of them described a powerful urge to talk to express their disagreement. Eloise (Class) exclaimed: 'if someone's arguing with me, I put my hand STRAIGHT back up to be like: 'I'm gonna argue back!'' In some cases (e.g. 'if I feel really, really strongly about what I've said', Athena, Class, 11), this eagerness to speak up could turn into anger: 'I felt very mad because I was really not on the same wavelength as Léna … So I really wanted to contradict what she said' (Fatima, S1). Yet 12 participants greatly enjoyed the back-and-forth volley of ideas associated with competitiveness. Some participants liked these electric exchanges because they spurred them to think harder. For example, Brianna (Class, 11) said: 'it's fun trying to think of ways to back yours up.' Others, like Nellie (S2), revelled in the sheer joy of trading intellectual blows:

> When they're disagreeing, it makes you want to talk more, and it makes you want to be more active about the situation. And if you really want to talk, you guys are just going back and forth and back and forth, and then someone else can add on, and more and more and more, and it's this giant disagreement where everyone's in two different teams. And I really like that!

This passionate engagement was also clear in the accounts of the five participants who distinguished 'regular' dialogues from mission-based ones. They not only enjoyed the latter's competitive aspect, but in fact preferred those dialogues. Dean (S2, 11) told me that 'missions I find are a lot more fun for me because they are more engaging,' while Zhang (S2) shared that 'if it's based on questions, it's kinda boring. A lot of people don't want to talk. So I prefer missions.' Malcolm (S2) even recommended that Brila facilitators 'add a few more types of this dialogue into our usual different dialogues.' Participants found mission-based dialogues more engaging because they were more concrete and competitive. Sean (S2) explained that missions required 'more than just saying what you think, it's actually putting what you're saying in [action].' In terms of competitiveness, Malcolm (S2) shared that missions are generally 'funner' because

'we get to argue,' while Opal (S2, 10) justified her enjoyment of a mission-based dialogue simply by saying: 'I was having fun. Yeah. I like arguing.'

In line with the competitive dynamic of CPI dialogues, participants reported powerful emotions associated with winning and losing. They felt 'accomplished' (Alejandra, S1), 'cool' (Audrey, Class, 11), 'triumphant' (Esthelle, Class, 11) or 'victorious' (Fatima, S1) when they successfully rallied others to their view. For most participants, it was swaying others and making 'a difference' (Esthelle, Class) that was so gratifying. Participants like Fatima (S1) exulted: 'people listened to me, yeah!' Yet for a few participants, winning was primarily about establishing their dominance. This sentiment was bluntly expressed by Tawera (Club), who said: 'it's good to feel that you've beaten someone.'

Conversely, some participants tasted the bitterness of defeat. A few tried to be good sports about it, like Him-chan (S2), who reported thinking at the end of a competitive exchange: 'in my heart, I said: 'Congratulations, you won.'' Yet there was a palpable sense of disappointment in the accounts of participants who did not manage to convince others. For example, Alejandra (S1) felt 'powerless' when she realised that everyone else had adopted the view with which she disagreed. A more disturbing manifestation of this sense of defeat was the anger that some participants reported feeling *at themselves* when giving in and changing their mind. They asked themselves: 'How did I miss that?' (Aaravi, S2, 10), 'Why did I think this in the first place? I should have thought something else!' (Zhang, S2), or even 'WHAT WAS I THINKING?' (Malcolm, S2). Some participants berated themselves harshly, using words like 'stupid' (Richard, Club, 8) or 'idiot' (Sean, S2) to describe themselves. For one participant, having to change his mind even seemed to trigger a powerful sense of inadequacy: 'I would always have this thought, like to me that's saying I have to be BETTER!' (Rongo, Class, 12). As one participant pointed out, the pain of defeat could be exacerbated by the level of commitment one had shown to an idea: 'if you're fully getting into a debate, completely disagreeing with the other, and THEN to have your mind changed, it does feel quite sad' (Orlando, Club, 11).

The risks of competitiveness

Participants recognised the dangers of disagreeing too intensely in the CPI. In a few cases, participants directly connected these risks to competitiveness, as Sean (S2) did when he said: 'it can be positive at the beginning but then, if you get too competitive, it goes downward fast.' Yet because this connection was usually implicit, the interpretations in this section are more tentative. Further, I do not claim that all the

instances of aggressiveness or close-mindedness I observed stemmed from the competitive dimension of dialogues—but some likely did.

When caught up in arguments that they wanted to win, participants were sometimes tempted to impose their own views while disparaging other ideas—a tendency which Daiyu (S1, 17) dubbed 'dictatorial thinking.' For instance, a few participants dismissed the ideas with which they disagreed as 'dumb' (Malcolm, S2), 'stupid' (Sean, S2) or even nonsensical. This resistance to alternative perspectives represents the epistemic risk of competitiveness. Several participants explained that they were more likely to reject other viewpoints when caught up in heated disagreements. Sébastien (S2) described his mindset during a particularly competitive exchange with Him-chan: 'you just get it in your head that [what you think] is right and you don't listen.' Consequently, these participants shut out others' opinions 'instead of actually realising if they are actually right. Or if I can actually build off of it' (Dean, S2). As this last participant admitted, it was more difficult for participants to be open-minded while their emotions were running high: 'after I cool down, then I see they actually have quite a number of good points. But that's usually after the dialogue ends.'

Competitiveness also posed a social risk, according to participants. This could happen when some participants were so insistent as to irk others. Describing his argument with Sébastien, Him-chan (S2) shared: 'I was really angry because he was always saying 'no.'' Similarly, the desire to 'win' may have led some participants to express their disagreement harshly, thus hurting others' feelings. Angelina (S2) told me: 'I start crying on the inside, because they're talking to everybody and they're like: 'HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE?'' Worse, participants were sometimes mocked by their peers. Andrew (S2, 10) explained that 'if they make a joke out of it, I feel very embarrassed. And if they judge me by it, I regret that I even said it.' Participants were understandably distressed by such rebukes: 'if you say something that you really believe in and then they're like: 'Actually no I hate that idea, I think it's very dumb,' it can sort of lower your spirits or your self-confidence' (Lana, Class, 12). Even alliances carried the danger of 'betrayal' (Niran, Class, 12), whether committing betrayal, when personal convictions clashed with loyalties, or being the victim of it, as Andrew (S2) learned the hard way: 'if you trust your allies, you might think, 'This is really nice,' but sometimes they're your friends but you don't really trust them.'

Analysis of the video data confirms that, while rare, aggressive manifestations of competitiveness could undermine the relationships between participants. A telling example was a subtle yet significant incident that took place after a dialogue in which

Andrew (S2) and Sean (S2) had vehemently disagreed with one another multiple times. When told the afternoon would be dedicated to collaborative storytelling, Sean grabbed Malcolm and Andrew—his friends from school—around the neck to bring them into a celebratory group hug. Yet as Figure 1 shows, while Malcolm (right) leaned in closer, smiling, Andrew (left) kept a straight face and pushed Sean's hand off then leaned as far away from him as possible. In the interview that took place the next day, Andrew's words on distrust spoke volumes: 'I have a friend, I'm not going to say the name. I like him, he's a smart guy, but I don't trust him', adding that this kind of person 'could really screw you up and make you feel really bad about yourself, just based on how you think.' Excessive competitiveness thus posed a danger to the relationships between participants, as Sean himself remarked in the quote cited above.

Figure 1: The social risk of competitiveness

Competitive dynamics in the CPI

While competitiveness sometimes proved dangerous, analysis of the video data reveals that, on many occasions, participants successfully managed competitive

dynamics during dialogues. To make this point, I offer a representative vignette illustrating what productive competitive disagreement can look like in the CPI.

Excerpt 1 is drawn from a Multiversation dialogue in which S2 participants were invited to imagine that concepts (e.g. truth, chaos) were living creatures who had to fill the roles of a fictional society (e.g. judge, hairdresser), and then asked to match up the conceptual creatures and the roles as best as possible. The excerpt takes place at the very beginning of the dialogue (for the sake of brevity and clarity, non-essential parts of the excerpt have been removed).

Excerpt 1: Who should be the inventor?

1	Amber:	OK, so I think that Chaos should be like an inventor. Because usually their labs are really, like scientists and inventors, their labs are really chaotic.
2	Baptiste:	OK, what do you guys think? Should Chaos be the inventor?
3	Andrew:	Nope.
4	Sean:	No.
5	Andrew:	I don't really agree, and I think it should be more Perseverance, because Chaos, if the thing goes crazy, Chaos would get really mad if it doesn't work out. So then it all burns and then it turns into chaos. But Perseverance, if the invention doesn't work, then you find another way, you persevere until you figure it out.
6	Sean:	Yeah I completely agree with Andrew, because [reiterates Andrew's point].
7	Baptiste:	OK, so the consequence of Chaos being the inventor is that he would act out and it wouldn't work. Whereas Perseverance would eventually get it.
8	Andrew:	Yeah.
9	Sean:	(triumphant) Yeaaah!
10	Baptiste:	OK, let's hear from the ones who haven't spoken yet.
11	Opal:	I think the inventor should be Imagination. Because sometimes, inventors need their imagination to create things.
12	Andrew:	Maybe, yeah you're right. Yeah, I think I agree with that one.
13	Malcolm:	Yeah.
14	Baptiste:	Yeah? Can we have a show of hands for Imagination being the inventor? Oh, still some disagreement.

15	Amber:	Totally, completely DOWN. Look at my hands.[9]
16	Baptiste:	OK. I see your hands. I think Liling wanted to respond to that.
17	Liling:	Perseverance and Imagination.
18	Baptiste:	Both of them as inventors?
19	Liling:	They can do like ... (inaudible) to have Imagination to be inventor.
20	Baptiste:	OK. What do you guys think about Imagination and Perseverance working together to be the inventors?
21	Sean:	Boom, done. Sold.
22	Baptiste:	You're sold on that? What do you guys think? Do you want to respond to that one?
23	Amber:	I STILL think Chaos should go, because, for example, if Perseverance was there, it would be calm and stuff like that. And like, it's not going to go all chaotic, but then what's the point of having an inventor, when you can't go chaotic? I'd find that Chaos and Imagination would go better. Because with the Imagination it can invent things, and then with the Chaos, they could be their own personality.
24	Baptiste:	OK, so what's the contribution that Chaos would make if Imagination is doing the inventing?
25	Amber:	Well no because Chaos would be like the room and stuff like that. Because usually inventors go chaotic.
26	Baptiste:	OK. I think some people want to respond to that.
27	Sean:	Big time.
28	Baptiste:	I think Malcolm, he's definitely been waiting and hasn't talked yet.
29	Malcolm:	Well, I mean […] it wouldn't really matter what environment it was in. If Chaos wasn't there, because it wouldn't really be used to the chaotic environment. […]
30	Baptiste:	Mmm, so you're saying if Chaos wasn't the inventor, the environment wouldn't need to be chaotic? For the inventor to make inventions?
31	Malcolm:	Yeah!

[9] At Brila, participants point their hands up, down or in the middle and wiggle their fingers to show agreement, disagreement, and doubt, respectively.

32	Sean:	Yeah and like going back to what Amber said at the beginning, when she said: 'Well Chaos should be the inventor because, like, inventors' labs and scientists' labs can only be chaotic,' but I don't really think that that relates to why Chaos should be the inventor at all. Because that's describing the lab, not the inventor in any way.
33	Baptiste:	OK, so the inventor isn't the same thing as the lab, yeah.
34	Andrew:	Well I didn't agree either, because ... Yes, a lot of inventors are chaotic, but that's not their good quality. That's one of their bad qualities.
35	Baptiste:	Mmm, so it's not what makes them good inventors, it's just kind of like ...
36	Andrew:	No, it's just like their personality.
37	Sean:	Trend.
38	Baptiste:	OK, so do you think Perseverance and Imagination, like Liling proposed, should work together to invent stuff?
39	Andrew:	Yeah. That would go really well.

Several clues reveal the competitive nature of this disagreement episode. First, participants clearly understood that they had to adjudicate between various options and seemed concerned about making the wrong choice; they evaluated the merits of different candidates and did not hesitate to point out their flaws, notably Chaos's (turns 5, 6, 29, 32, 34). Second was the presence of a strong opposition between positions, as indicated by the unmitigated expression of disagreement (Netz, 2014) on turns 3, 4, 15 and 23. Participants forcefully defended their opinions, even after they had been challenged. Third, further reinforcing the competitive nature of this exchange was the alliance between Andrew and Sean. On three occasions (turns 3-6, 32-34, and 36-37), their contributions either mirrored or complemented one another. They formed a team intent on opposing Amber's position, and, judging by the note of triumph in Sean's voice on turn 9, they saw themselves as having the upper hand over her.

My findings suggest that disagreements in the CPI can be both competitive and productive. Three features make Excerpt 1 an example of such productive competitive disagreement. First, participants appeared highly *engaged* in this excerpt. Their eagerness to express their own opinions (turns 1, 5, 11, 17) or to respond to others' contributions (turns 3-6, 12, 13, etc.) is palpable, as expressed notably by Sean when

he exclaimed 'Big time!' on turn 27. Combined with the evidence from the interview data, this suggests that competitiveness can energise participants.

Second, the competitive nature of the exchange may have encouraged participants to provide *reasons* for their claims. All eight positions articulated in the excerpt were supported by at least one reason, usually made explicit by the word 'because.' Even the turns that express ungrounded opinions (3, 4, 15, 17) were quickly elaborated and justified (turns 5, 6, 19, 23). One possible interpretation is that participants substantiated their assertions in order to convince others. Even if competitiveness was not what motivated participants to justify their views, it was at least compatible with reason-giving.

Lastly, despite their strong feelings about different positions, participants still appeared to be open-minded when they became competitive. This is evidenced by their willingness to consider, and even adopt, the suggestions made by Opal and Liling (turns 13, 14, 21, 39). Andrew, Malcolm and Sean, who initially favoured Perseverance, seemed happy to select Imagination, then the Imagination-Perseverance duo. While Amber's insistence on Chaos may appear stubborn, it should be noted that, on turn 23, she took on board Liling's suggestion to include Imagination alongside another concept, although she deftly substituted Chaos for Perseverance.

Discussion

To explore children's experiences of competitiveness in the CPI, I conducted a qualitative case-study with 76 young people involved in CPI dialogues in formal and informal educational settings in Canada and New Zealand. Interviews and video observation revealed that participants often experienced dialogues as competitive exchanges in which 'winning' consisted of convincing others, while giving in to others' opinions was associated with defeat and disappointment. Participants recognised the potential dangers of competitiveness, notably the epistemic risk of excluding alternative perspectives and the social risk of damaging their relationships. Participants often successfully managed competitive dynamics during dialogues: in the vignette I analysed; they were highly engaged, justified their views with reasons and remained open-minded.

In this last part of the paper, I connect my findings to the empirical and theoretical P4C literature, before arguing that we should rethink the role of competitiveness in the CPI, for which I suggest two possible approaches. Finally, I discuss the limitations of the study and identify areas for future research.

Connections to the literature

My findings are largely consistent with previous empirical work in P4C, although the latter investigates disagreement in general rather than competitiveness specifically. My research confirms that many children enjoy disagreeing about philosophical ideas during CPI dialogues, notably because they find disagreement exciting (Cassidy & Heron 2020; Hess 2015; Reznitskaya & Glina 2013). It further suggests that children can successfully navigate disagreement during dialogues, which aligns with previous work showing that, as children gain experience with CPI dialogues, they become more comfortable with disagreement and better able to manage it (Heron & Cassidy 2018; Polo 2017).

At the same time, some children in my study and in other work report disliking disagreement, in part because they fear it may damage their relationships (Gasparatou & Ergazaki 2015; Helkala et al. in press; Reznitskaya & Glina 2013). Indeed, the few conflicts that broke out between my participants seemed to undermine trust among them. Such infrequent yet intense altercations also occurred in Heron and Cassidy's (2018) study of incarcerated Scottish adolescents, in which three 'emotional outbursts' occurred over 10 dialogues, and in the dialogues that Kennedy (2006) conducted with American children, which featured two heated conflicts.

A key finding of my study is that children often approached disagreement in a competitive way. Unlike the CPI dialogue analysed by Polo (2017), which featured 'very limited polarisation' (p. 100), participants in my study frequently attempted to persuade others to win arguments. Further, participants often employed a martial vocabulary to describe their disagreements, as did the students who discussed water ethics in the socio-scientific cafés examined by Polo (2014). While these findings represent a novel contribution to the empirical literature in P4C, they dovetail with Kennedy's (1997) theoretical work on 'the community of interest.' My research supports his claim that inquirers are, among other goals, concerned with gaining influence in the CPI: 'each individual is driven to 'be somebody,' to count, to make a difference' (p. 75). To achieve this goal necessarily involves outshining others to some extent, because of the 'ineradicable element of competition for scarce resources (the resources here being the attention of the whole group)' (Kennedy 2006, p. 138). Participants knew that only some of them would be able to make their contribution 'the big idea that everybody knows' (Angelina, S2). To gain control of the dialogue, my participants used many of the strategies identified by Kennedy (1997): 'friendship, alliance, performance, influence, domination, hierarchy, special favor, etc.' (pp. 74-75).

A telling example of the latter was captured by my microphone: Ely (Class, 12), disliking the idea that another participant was explaining, leaned toward his friend who had his hand up and, in a whisper, commanded: 'Disagree with her!'

Interestingly, a playful element was manifest in my participants' accounts. They often used the language of games and sports to describe their experiences when disagreeing, and most of them found this 'friendly competition' (Tawera, Club) quite fun. In my opinion, it is thus Kennedy's (1997) metaphor of the CPI as a 'place of agon' that best captures my participants' experiences of competitiveness. Building on Caillois's (2001) concept of agon as competitive play, where 'the point of the game is for each player to have his superiority in a given area recognized' (p. 15), Kennedy (2010) writes:

> Communal dialogue is also play in the sense of agon, or contest, for it involves the conflict and the struggle of ideas—a game in which the demarcations of the playing field are the rules and principles of formal and informal logic. (p. 47)

Since CPI dialogues require inquirers to offer arguments that can be evaluated as better or worse (ideally, using the criteria of logic), they possess clear victory conditions. Indeed, many participants talked about the group's acceptance or rejection of their ideas in terms of winning and losing. And yet no one instructed them to approach the CPI in this way: they intuitively understood the game and played it enthusiastically. Further supporting this interpretation is the notion of 'playful arguing' developed by argumentation scholars, who claim that people sometimes argue simply because they enjoy it, rather than for any practical reason (e.g. Hample, Han & Payne 2010; Stoltz 2019). Many of my participants certainly seemed to find it pleasant to challenge and convince one another, even without having any stake in the outcome of the dialogue. Thus, a key insight offered by my study is that children often see the CPI as a playful intellectual competition—a game of influence—where the chief goal is to persuade others.

Participants in my study identified both epistemic and social risks related to competitiveness. They worried that being too competitive could make them more aggressive or close-minded. At the epistemic level, these findings are consistent with studies suggesting that children produce better reasoning in collaborative contexts than in competitive ones (Domberg, Köymen & Tomasello 2018; Felton et al. 2015; Garcia-Mila et al. 2013). For example, when asked to persuade others in order to 'win' argumentative tasks, children made more moves that foreclosed the inquiry (Felton et

al. 2015) and were more likely to favour their own side by withholding known arguments (Domberg et al. 2018). At the social level, my findings echo the concerns raised in the psychological literature about children's tendency to be more aggressive (Nipedal, Nesdale & Killen 2010) and more likely to exclude peers (Gasser et al. 2017) when placed in competitive contexts. They also support Hample and colleagues' (2010) claim that playful arguing often involves aggressive behaviour, such as mocking—which I sometimes observed in my study.

At the same time, my participants demonstrated that competitive disagreements could also be productive. In the vignette I described, and on many other occasions, participants remained engaged, open-minded and able to justify their opinions with reasons. These findings are consistent with Polo's (2014) study, in which children sometimes engaged in heated disagreements yet produced 'exploratory talk' of high argumentative quality, characterised notably by a willingness to consider other viewpoints and to justify their opinions. On this basis, Polo claims that the argumentative 'style' of an exchange 'tells us nothing about the effective reasoning process of the group' (p. 219). A competitive dynamic may thus be entirely compatible with productive inquiry. A bolder proposition made by some researchers is that competitiveness might *enhance* children's argumentation (Cohen 1994; Hogan et al. 2017; Okebukola 1985), although the relationship between competition and cognitive performance is complex (DiMenichi & Tricomi 2015; Domberg, Tomasello & Köymen 2021; Murayama & Elliot 2012). In my study, it is at any rate possible that competitive dynamics contributed to participants' engagement, open-mindedness and reason-giving.

Reconsidering competitiveness in the CPI

P4C theory unequivocally favours collaboration over competition, with the latter often being framed as something to be avoided at all costs (Davey 2004; Gregory 2004; Lipman 2003). Yet my findings suggest (i) that competitiveness is an important aspect of participants' experiences in the CPI, whether we like it or not, and (ii) that it is compatible with, if not conducive to, productive philosophical inquiry. Therefore, I argue that we should rethink the role of competitiveness in the CPI. I see two main ways to do so.

First, competitiveness can be understood as a force that motivates children to inquire. According to Fletcher and Oyler (2017), we should be surprised by children's sustained engagement in CPI dialogues, for it is arduous and often frustrating work. There are no doubt multiple reasons why children are (usually) willing to make the

effort to tackle difficult philosophical questions, but my findings suggest that competitiveness might be one of them. It seems to be in part the desire to intellectually challenge and outdo one another that keeps children interested in CPI dialogues. Of course, excessive competitiveness can be dangerous. But, much like the 'mad desiring energy for growth' theorised by Fletcher and Oyler (2017, p. 157), competitiveness can be harnessed—rather than repressed—to fuel children's motivation to philosophise. As an example, Guégan (2016) provides several examples of 'educational ruses' that educators can use to channel students' competitive impulse toward productive ends. Philosophically, this is broadly aligned with the Aristotelian (Viano 2003), and more generally Greek (Joho 2020), idea that young people's competitive feelings—their agonistic spirit—can be enlisted to foster their intellectual and moral excellence.

Second, competitiveness can be understood as a valuable part of a broader process of inquiry. I borrow this idea from Gregory's (2006) analysis of normative dialogue types in the CPI. Building on a taxonomy developed by Walton, Gregory argues that the different stages of philosophical inquiry rely on different types of dialogue—persuasion, inquiry, negotiation, information-seeking, deliberation and eristic dialogue. Most relevant to my focus on competitiveness is persuasion dialogue, in which children attempt to convince one another in order to resolve conflicts of opinions.[10] What makes this process potentially competitive is children's partisanship: if they favour incompatible positions, they must advocate for their view. This partisan focus means that, in persuasion dialogue, children are not normatively obliged to provide the best possible argument—a weaker argument may suffice to convince others—nor to change their mind if other views turn out to be more reasonable. Since children could refuse to relinquish inadequate views, the competitive aspect of persuasion dialogue poses epistemic risks, as I noted in my study, and potentially jeopardises the overarching goal of CPI dialogue: to determine 'what is most reasonable to believe or to value or to do in this case' (Gregory 2006, p. 163).

Yet Gregory makes the crucial point that children's individual goal of convincing others is what enables conflicts of opinions to be resolved, which is a necessary part of any philosophical inquiry. Accordingly, individual children advocating for their positions may not directly seek out the most reasonable answer, but the confrontation of their arguments enables the entire community to test the plausibility of various positions more thoroughly than it might have without a competitive impetus. As

[10] Negotiation dialogue is also conducive to competitiveness, since it is the process whereby children attempt to resolve their conflicts of interests. For the sake of brevity, I will assume that my claims about persuasion dialogue also apply to negotiation dialogue.

Gregory notes, this resembles the adversarial legal system, in which each side attempts to convince the jury, thereby helping it to make the most reasonable judgement possible. Thus, 'episodes of persuasion dialogue may be appropriate within the larger context of an inquiry dialogue' (p. 166). As long as children are willing to concede to the stronger argument, as they often seemed to be in my study, albeit not without disappointment, persuasion dialogue can take them closer to the most reasonable answer. In Gregory's words: 'such partisanship can be beneficial for the inquiry, so long as it is tempered by the potential obligation to lose' (p. 166).

Although not without risks, competitiveness can thus play a positive role in the CPI, whether as motivational fuel or as a sequence of advocacy within a broader process of inquiry.

Limitations and avenues for future research

This small-scale, exploratory study presents some limitations. First, its results are specific to the contexts that I investigated and cannot be readily generalised. Further research conducted across different contexts and on a larger scale is needed to confirm my findings. While this is a typical feature of case studies (Merriam 1998), it enabled me to provide an in-depth and contextualised understanding of competitiveness in the CPI. In line with the notion of 'reader generalizability' (Maxwell 2021), this fine-grained picture enables readers to determine the applicability of my findings to their own contexts—to the extent that our contexts overlap, my research can inform theory and guide practice.

Second, the findings in this paper are drawn from a larger study, which did not set out to investigate competitiveness. Future research that includes items specifically related to competitiveness in interview guides would thus be valuable. However, this omission can also be considered a strength of my study, since it gave my analysis a robust inductive foundation. The fact that competitiveness emerged as a central theme, even when participants were not asked about it, should increase our confidence that it represents a genuinely important aspect of their experiences.

Third, my findings suggest that the kind of dialogues in which children participate influences their experiences of competitiveness, yet my study did not allow for rigorous comparisons across dialogue types, nor did it compare across age ranges, gender or cultural contexts. Future research should investigate these possibilities by (i) exposing children to various kinds of CPI dialogues, notably dialogues that require them to make decisions, (ii) asking children about their experiences of

competitiveness across these different dialogue types, and (iii) comparing children's accounts based on their demographic characteristics. Further, given the focus of this special issue of the Journal of Philosophy in Schools, it would be particularly valuable to conduct empirical research with children participating in competitive philosophical events (e.g. Ethics Bowls) to explore how they navigate the specific competitive dynamics of these contexts.

Conclusion

In this paper, I explored how children experience competitiveness in the CPI through an empirical study. My findings suggest that competitiveness is both central to children's experiences in the CPI and compatible with productive philosophical inquiry. Based on this research, I argued that we should rethink the role of competitiveness in the CPI while remaining mindful of its risks, notably by considering its potential as a motivational drive and as an important component of a larger inquiry process. In my opinion, experimenting with competitiveness in P4C could be worthwhile not just educationally but politically, for I agree with philosopher Tryggvason (2019) that 'it could be considered educationally valuable that students get to experience both what it means to win and what it means to lose democratic conflicts' (p. 5).

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