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Elbra-Ramsay, Caroline ORCID

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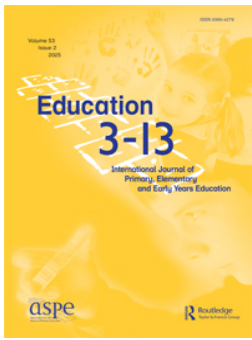
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## Education 3-13

International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/rett20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rett20)

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**To cite this article:** Caroline Elbra-Ramsay (12 Feb 2025): Finding their voice: how children experience philosophical dialogue as a path to liberation, Education 3-13, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2025.2463968](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2025.2463968)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2025.2463968>



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# Finding their voice: how children experience philosophical dialogue as a path to liberation

Caroline Elbra-Ramsay 

School of Education, Language and Psychology, York St John University, York, UK

## ABSTRACT

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is an educational approach centred on dialogue and Socratic discussion. Communities of Enquiries are used as a core strategy to explore questions developed by the children. The teacher's role is to facilitate a collaborative, critical, caring and creative dialogue through a staged response to the question. This study seeks to examine how children conceptualise this dialogue. Sixty 9-10 year olds from a UK school undertook P4C over a fifteen-week period. The children were then interviewed in small groups. Initially using Batkin's work on dialogism, a phenomenographic approach was used to capture the 'essences' of the dialogue. Not only did analysis identify that these were conceptualised as largely dialogic, using the work of Freire, 3 broader themes were identified indicating that philosophical dialogue was liberating. This supports the view that P4C is concerned with social justice where everybody has an equally valid participating voice.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 December 2024  
Accepted 2 February 2025

## KEYWORDS

Philosophy for children;  
dialogue; liberation

## Introduction

Both dialogue and philosophy have been argued to be the very basis of humanity. Fisher states 'human intelligence is primarily developed through speaking and listening' (Fisher 2007, 615) and Bakhtin understands 'human life as an open ended dialogue' (Robinson 2011), the basis of existence. Philosophy too is viewed as innate to humanity (Xu 2022) as the philosophical search for 'truth and wisdom' (Xu 2022, 23) is what makes us human. One might expect, therefore, that both philosophy and dialogue would be a core part of any educational pedagogy.

However, pedagogy is continually contested in educational circles. Often politicised, polarised and misinterpreted, it can become categorised into good/bad or traditional/progressive. The approaches to curriculum, assessment and measurable performance in many Western neoliberal countries further disrupt the pedagogical decisions available to educators. This is certainly the case in the UK where the encouraging research around dialogic pedagogy has largely not infiltrated primary practice (Fisher 2007). Reference to dialogue, oracy or speaking/listening has moved in and out of UK curriculum fashion. In earlier iterations of the English DoE (1989), speaking and listening were situated with equal status to reading and writing (Howe 2016). Later versions (Department for Education 2013) saw dialogue relegated to generic statements with little wordage and therefore value. More recently, there has been a call to increase emphasis on dialogue in UK schools, resulting in the need to 'move oracy more centrally into the experience of all young people' (Oracy Education

**CONTACT** Caroline Elbra-Ramsay  c.elbramsay@yorksja.ac.uk  School of Education, Language and Psychology, York St John University, York, YO31 7EX, UK  @celbramsay

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Commission 2024, 5). Furthermore, the report emphasised the value of dialogic teaching as a ‘pedagogy of the spoken word which harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend students’ thinking, learning, knowing and understanding, and to enable them to discuss, reason and argue’ (Oracy Education Commission 2024, 15). It is not only the UK where there is the possibility of a move towards a more dialogic pedagogy. At an international level also, speaking, listening and communication are included as key priorities for the future (OECD 2019b). However, it appears that so far the neoliberal context has not allowed this to happen.

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is understood as an important vehicle for developing dialogic talk. Using an enquiry<sup>1</sup>-focused approach, P4C encourages children to autonomously engage in collaborative, critical and creative discussion (SAPERE 2016). Although the term is contested (Cassidy 2023), children are encouraged to each have their own *voice* i.e. contribute, express ideas and make choices. However, existing research into P4C has not sought to understand how the children *themselves* understand the form of dialogue P4C encourages. This paper, however, focuses on how UK children conceptualise the dialogue they experience in P4C enquiries. Using a phenomenographic approach, sixty 9–10-year-old children were interviewed after taking part in P4C enquiries for 15 weeks. The findings of the study contribute new perspectives: how *children* understand dialogue within P4C and how this is a liberating force in a neoliberal educational climate.

## Literature review

### *Neo-liberal education in the UK*

Before we examine the role of the Philosophy of Children and its links to dialogue, further it is important to situate the discussion within the neo-liberal context. As in many Western countries, neoliberalism has had a profound influence on the education sector in the UK. Connell (2013) defines neo-liberalism as broadly meaning ‘the agenda of economic and social transformation under the sign of the free market’ (110). This is supported by others (Cahill and Konings 2017). However, a definition solely focused on the free market oversimplifies; it is more than an economic ideology. In fact, Steger and Roy identify three interrelated dimensions: ‘ideology, a mode of governance and a policy package’ (Steger and Roy 2010, 222, 11). Theoretically, the ideological emphasis on the free market signifies education moving away from state control. However, neoliberalism has also brought with it an increased ideal of competitiveness (Davies 2018) in education which necessitates regulation, efficiency, benchmarking and accountability, all of which could be considered as a form of governmentality. Performance metrics and league tables increase accountability and competition which subsequently influence what (and how) is taught. However, as Metcalf (2017) states, focusing too heavily on the logic of the market... strips away the things that make us human; neoliberalism can ignore the variation and nuances of the human state. Given that education in the UK sits firmly within a neoliberal climate, the need to refocus on the ‘things that make us human’ (Metcalf 2017) is more pertinent now than ever. This paper will argue that P4C and the dialogue it encourages provides an antidote to the influence of the neoliberal movement on education.

### *Philosophy for children*

Philosophy for Children (P4C) supersedes the neoliberal educational drive being developed by Matthew Lipman in the late 1960s (Lipman 2017). Influenced by the work of Dewey and Peirce, Lipman developed the notion of a Community of Enquiry alongside the use of stimuli to provoke philosophical thinking (Demissie and Doxey 2020; Rosas 2023; Williams no date a). P4C should not be confused with Philosophy as an academic subject, as the aim of P4C ‘is not to make children into little philosophers but to help them to think better than they now think’ and develop ‘mental acts, thinking skills, reasoning and judgment’ (Lipman 2017, 9).

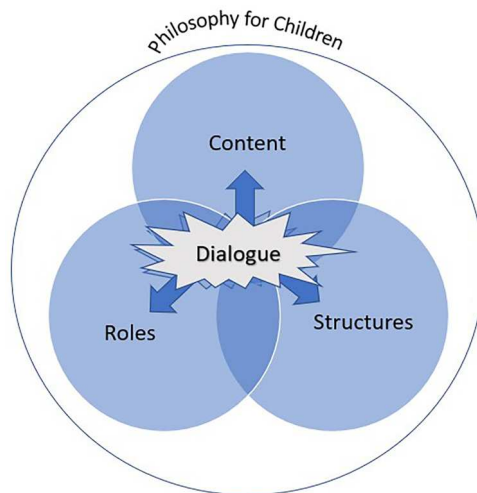
Over time, P4C has developed into what many would see as a tightly structured (Cassidy and Christie 2013) or instrumental (Vansielegheem 2005) approach championed by organisations such as SAPERE (The Society for Advancing Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education). Despite this, P4C has never reached national status. This will be in no part due to the politicised nature of the curriculum, assessment and inspection regime within the UK and the subsequent jostling for status across subjects and pedagogical approaches. P4C aims to develop creative, critical, caring and collaborative thinking (SAPERE 2016) through curious exploration of philosophical questions selected by the learners themselves. Such philosophical questions are understood as contestable, common and central (SAPERE 2018; Williams *no date b*). As such, it sits outside what is generally viewed as a content-heavy knowledge-based UK national curriculum.

Existing P4C research tends to focus on the benefits of P4C and reflect a teacher's perspective. Topping and Trickey (2007a) found engaging in dialogic philosophical enquiries during primary school (ages 4–11) led to significant gains in verbal cognitive ability and reasoning which were maintained two years later (Topping and Trickey 2007b). Similarly, The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) found that P4C resulted in a positive impact on UK Key Stage 2 (7–11-year-olds) attainment, particularly for disadvantaged children (Gorard, Siddiqui, and See 2015). However, a subsequent study (Lord et al. 2021) found no significant impact on academic outcomes although P4C was enjoyable, engaging and particularly beneficial for EAL or SEND pupils. There is also strong evidence that P4C supports pro-social behaviour, increases emotional stability (Colom et al. 2014) and the development of interpersonal relationship skills over at least four months (Hedayati and Ghaedi 2009). Other studies have found that P4C increases teacher effectiveness in dialogic teaching (Ab Wahab, Zulkifli, and Abdul Razak 2022) and the quality of talk in P4C enquiries (Cassidy and Christie 2013). However, given that P4C prioritises the voices of learners (Vansielegheem 2005) it is surprising there are so few existing studies examining how children actually understand the experience themselves. Indeed, research in P4C is primarily 'on children, rather than with children' (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010, 175). A key contribution of this research is that it seeks to understand how children experience and therefore conceptualise dialogue within P4C enquiries agreeing the children are 'social actors who are 'experts' on their own lives' (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010, 175). The link between P4C and dialogue is explicit. P4C focuses on meaningful and in-depth dialogue as a vehicle to develop philosophical thinking, specifically collaborative and critical thinking (Ab Wahab, Zulkifli, and Abdul Razak 2022; Demissie and Doxey 2020; SAPERE 2016; 2018; Vansielegheem 2005; Xu 2022). As SAPERE states 'It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this' (SAPERE 2018, 12). However, Vansielegheem (2006) argues the focus on rationality means P4C cannot be fully dialogical as participants do not always listen and engage with other participants fully but listen to evaluate the degree of rationality. Notwithstanding this, dialogue is well understood to be a key part of P4C, although notions of dialogue are somewhat contestable (Figure 1).

### ***Dialogue and dialogism***

The term dialogic has become rather ubiquitous in education. Often misused, dialogic or dialogue is not merely talk. True dialogic interactions necessitate at least two equitable voices who metaphorically dance together extending, challenging and consolidating ideas through talk.

To be dialogic, a discussion needs to be equitable, collective and reciprocal (Mercer, Wegerif, and Major 2019). It needs to include authentic, genuine questions (Cui and Teo 2021) and exploratory talk (Mercer and Dawes 2008) and should result in collective rather than individual thinking; this does not mean everyone thinks the same but rather they are collectively involved in the exploration. Dialogic talk is perhaps best understood as being the opposite of monologic talk. Monologic talk (and monologism) represents one voice; a 'single thought discourse' (Robinson 2011) rather than multiple. It is a transmission of this one meaning to others; not there is one voice speaking, merely there is one meaning being transferred to the other rather than a new meaning being constructed *with* the



**Figure 1.** Dialogue as liberation.

other. In contrast, in dialogic talk, there is no *one* meaning to transmit. Rather, equitable contributions from all help build new meanings for everyone.

As an underpinning theory, Bakhtin's dialogism (Bakhtin 1981) proposes it is not the talk creating meaning but rather the differences they represent (Holquist 2002). Through talk, these differences in meaning create a new shared meaning rather than impose one meaning on another through talk. There is no right or wrong. Dialogism and philosophical dialogue both therefore attempt to see things differently through reasoned equitable interaction. This could be viewed as conciliatory in nature given the 'new' understanding is shared rather than imposed. However, as an exponent of a dialogic approach, Paulo Freire (1996) sees it as liberating rather than conciliatory (although these are not mutually exclusive). Although some (Kohan 2018) feel links are overblown, Bowers (2005) acknowledges Freire's writing on dialogue also aligns closely with the purpose and practice of P4C. For Freire 'dialogic pedagogy forms the basis of social change and liberation' (Bowers 2005, 368) and a socially liberating force (Kohan 2018); it liberates by raising critical consciousness, questioning, exploring alternatives and maintaining a critical and curious approach (Bowers 2005). Freire understood dialogue as the key tool for liberation, encouraging participants to critically engage with their experiences and understand things could be different; learners are emancipated (Freire 1996) as autonomous thinkers capable of challenging the norms.

Freire, Lipman and Bakhtin all argue dialogue should be equitable, critical and active and create new understandings. According to Freire (1996; Freire and Macedo 2014), it is also capable of liberation as contributors begin to question norms, realise they are autonomous beings and open their eyes (and ears) to new ways of understanding. This study seeks to find how children experience this; does philosophical dialogue liberate from the norms inherent in neoliberal UK education?

## Justifying the research

In essence, although noteworthy research already exists about P4C, it largely focuses on teacher perceptions and learner outcomes. This research examines how the children *themselves* conceptualise P4C and, as such, prioritises the voices of the participants focusing on the research question 'How do children conceptualise dialogue within Philosophy for Children lessons?' In addition (as discussed next), the research continues to prioritise participant voice and agency in the approach taken to consent and the use of the findings within the paper. It, therefore, contributes to knowledge about conducting research with children more generally.

## Research design

In line with a constructionist epistemology, semi-structured phenomenographic group interviews were the methodological approach used. Group interviews allowed for a dialogic and participatory approach that enabled the pupils to put into practice the oracy skills developed through P4C. As a branch of phenomenology, phenomenography seeks to examine the lived experience of a phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell 2024), in this case, dialogue within P4C enquiries.

The research took place at a large primary school near a northern English city. As a class teacher, I implemented weekly P4C sessions with two Year 5 classes (ages 9–10) over 15 weeks, followed by small group interviews of 5–6. Total population sampling was used as a purposive sampling method. This non-random technique does not require a set number of participants but focuses on groups of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016), i.e. the year groups who had taken part in P4C enquiries.

The purpose of the interviews was to explore the participants' experiences of Philosophy for Children. Questions included: What words do you think of when you think of P4C? What makes a P4C discussion the same or different from discussions in other lessons? Do you think you talk/ behave/ think differently in P4C discussions? Do you think the teacher talks/ behaves differently in P4C discussions?

The interview schedule was designed with reference to Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) flexible framework with suggested questions rather than a tight script. Questions were asked to the group and children were invited to respond; these discussions were relaxed with children keen to explore the questions *between* themselves rather than always waiting for a direct question. Opportunistic questions also emerged allowing for further exploration.

The study addressed key ethical considerations in educational research identified by Punch and Oancea (2014): harm, consent, deception and data privacy/confidentiality. While no physical harm was anticipated, the inherent power dynamics between teachers and pupils required careful consideration. However, my established relationship with the children and position of trust could also be viewed as advantageous. To mitigate concerns, it was made clear that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained throughout, and consent could be withdrawn at any time.

A layered consent process was implemented, beginning with the headteacher's gatekeeper's consent. Recognising the centrality of learner's voice in P4C, children were consulted before seeking parental consent. This echoes the advice of Fargas-Malet et al who states 'informed consent should be freely given ... by children who can make an appropriately informed decision' (2010, 177). Finally, an information sheet was shared with parents who then provided consent; opting out consent was used to minimise administrative burden for the school. All but one child gave consent. Deception was minimised by providing full information so participants could provide free and informed consent (Tai 2012). The children were repeatedly reassured that they did not need to partake. Lastly, concerns around confidentiality and the storage of data were dealt with to ensure it was handled appropriately. I confirmed that the confidentiality and anonymity of all the contributors would be preserved throughout the collection, analysis and dissemination of the project and pseudonyms were used throughout.

Once the interviews were complete, recordings were transcribed and analysed. As is common in interpretivist studies (Earl Rinehart 2021), an abductive approach was used in that it was 'neither data-driven nor hypothesis-driven' but moved between 'parallel and equal engagement with ... data and ... theoretical understanding' (Thompson 2022, 1411). As such, analysis was an iterative process where transcripts were examined (and re-examined) (Khan 2014) to identify themes. Initially, thematic analysis focused on ideas associated with dialogic talk e.g. equity. However, at the same time, new theoretical understandings were accessed and data subsequently revisited. This ongoing back and forth between data and literature prompted a new categorisation of ideas which have been used to structure the discussion that follows and explains the integration of both data and theory throughout.



## Findings and discussion

By focusing on participating children, this study found that they, either explicitly or implicitly, held a dialogic understanding of the discussion that took place within P4C sessions. The essence or ‘essences’ of this understanding included conceptions related to equity, autonomy and collaboration. However, as part of the iterative abductive analysis, a broader theme revealed itself – liberation. Participants frequently mentioned the words freedom or freeing in response to questions related to their P4C experiences. Whereas Freire viewed liberation as setting free from oppression, analysis of the data implied the children understood it as freeing from the neoliberal norm. The vehicle for this was the dialogue within the P4C enquiries.

As my model illustrates, there were three areas where the participants felt liberated through philosophical dialogue: curriculum content, existing structures and established roles. Although discussed separately, it is important to note these are not necessarily discrete; content will inform structures and roles will also inform identity. Each should be considered as having a possible influence on the others. In line with the P4C focus on pupil’s voice, these themes will now be explored by prioritising comments from participants themselves, a further contribution to knowledge.

### *Dialogue as liberation from content*

There were many comments from the participants focused on the dialogic possibilities within the philosophical dialogue and how this differed from other school lessons.

Participant 23: Usually you always think inside the box ... but doing philosophy, I kind of thought outside the box. I was like, actually wow, my mind is actually starting to like get outside the box.

Participant 10: I would say your mind if free because you have to focus on one certain thing, but it opens your mind a lot ... with maths you can only think of one, but with philosophy there could be loads of answers.

The participants felt there were more choices available to them during philosophical dialogues. They understood there to be no right or wrong answer, supporting Xu’s claim that ‘the real brilliance of this method is that there is never a fixed answer’ (Xu 2022, 29). Notwithstanding the creative approach embedded with the participating school’s curriculum, several of the participants also felt they had greater freedom to speak and to express themselves during enquiries. The notion of greater choice was frequently mentioned, often in connection with possible questions or answers.

Participant 23: I think it’s really good because ... so many ideas pop into your head and then you’re allowed to say all of them. You always have a chance to say what you think.

Here we see links to dialogism – understanding is developed through the ‘juxtaposition’ of ‘multiple voices’, ‘asking more questions’ and exploring the ‘creative tension’ within these (Trausan-Matu, Wegerif, and Major 2021, 221). The lack of a single discourse or monologic approach felt unique and liberating to the participants.

Participant 1: ... anyone has their own opinion. They had the freedom to speak and other people can’t tell them what to do because that’s their opinion.

Participants also suggested their understanding of there being no right (or wrong) response was different to other subjects, and this was freeing or liberating. Freeing, free or freedom was mentioned frequently either explicitly or implicitly. In support, other comments revealed this sense of liberation was two-fold, firstly the freedom to think differently and secondly the freedom to actually state these differing ideas.

Participant 16: ... it’s all just freedom for your mind to think of whatever you want ... you can choose like hundreds and thousands of millions of questions ... and you’ve got the freedom to choose every single one of them.



Being able to say one's own thoughts in a safe space meant the children were liberated from judgement about what an answer should be. There was no right answer hence there was no possible humiliating exposure of ignorance. All ideas were welcomed and encouraged. This supports Ab Wahab, Zulkifli and Abdul Razak's meta-analysis of P4C that found learners were 'free from being labelled (free from judgmental behaviour) while giving different views'. (Ab Wahab, Zulkifli, and Abdul Razak 2022, 10).

Participant 19: ... like when you're doing philosophy, you do feel a bit more free and a bit more like you can say what you want to say than like in other lessons.

Participant 2: you could have had ideas in your head for ... years and years and felt like it was a bit time to let them out.

There are clear links to Freire's work on dialogue as liberation here. However, Freire also wrote extensively about the banking and problem-solving approach to education with the latter also relating to dialogue (Kohan 2018; Stewart and McClure 2013) and P4C. The banking (or narration) approach is understood as a more transmissive form of pedagogy where the teacher is the holder of knowledge who 'makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat' (Freire 1996, 357). This hierarchical vertical (and monologic) structure is seen as oppressive and dehumanising (Freire 1996; Howes 2023; Stewart and McClure 2013). In opposition (Howes 2023), the problem-solving approach is much more democratic and equitable. Of course, as with many aspects of educational theory and practice it is not necessarily helpful to think of pedagogy in such polarised ways. In reality, the two can co-exist and there will be movement across.

In the UK, the National Curriculum has become increasingly knowledge-based (Wyse and Manyukhina 2018). This combined with a high-stakes assessment strategy (Stevenson and Wood 2013) where knowledge is prized could encourage what Freire would call the 'banking approach'; knowledge is banked in the students to be returned at the teacher's (or assessor's) request. Freire argues this is symptomatic of an 'oppressive society as a whole' (Maylor 2012). It appears from the participants' comments that the dialogue encouraged within P4C was more supportive of the problem-solving approach. They were liberated from the statutory curriculum, they did not have to deposit and withdraw prescribed content, there was no right/wrong and everyone was liberated to contribute. It appears therefore that the participating children conceptualised philosophical dialogue as a liberation from prescribed neoliberal content. These findings therefore contribute to knowledge by offering a new perspective on how P4C is conceptualised through the eyes of the participating children themselves.

### ***Dialogue as liberation from established roles and responsibilities***

A key aspect of P4C is the collaborative nature of the enquiries given it is centred on democracy. This is not merely between pupil and pupil but between adults and pupils. In terms of pupil/pupil interaction, the participants appeared to understand the collaborative and collective nature of philosophical discussions.

Participant 16: I think philosophy is something that brings everyone together to think about one thing.

Participant 23: ... the teacher's the leader of the class but then in philosophy you're all just a team and you're all just saying what you feel.

Some participants articulated a nuanced awareness of how the teacher had to be dialogically authoritative as opposed to monologically authoritarian, i.e. the teacher still needed to have a role (Cassidy and Christie 2013). They were aware of how leadership was moveable across those engaged in the dialogue but also that the teacher had a unique and distinct role. Furthermore, the findings associated with how children conceptualise the role of teachers in P4C lessons act as an additional contribution to knowledge.

Participant 2: you feel like the teacher makes that happen, like there's no right and wrong, but ... they've [teachers] still got to be bossy. They've all got to get people to basically ... talk at the right times ...

Participant 37: And in philosophy kind of give us the juicy question and then let us have the discussion.

Facilitator: So, what's my job when that's happening ... ?

Participant 37: To keep the discussion going?

Facilitator: So, ... Who's in charge of philosophy sessions?

Participant 40: The people who are talking.

Participant 38: It kind of switches because whoever talking is ..., so say CHILD'S NAME was talking, she would be in charge then but then if it changed to someone else ... she wouldn't be in charge.

Facilitator: ... I don't get to be the boss in philosophy?

Participant 38: [Not] unless you are talking.

Interestingly, participants also suggested this new dynamic meant the teacher could feel differently. The increased equitable dialogue meant not only was the teacher able to reveal their own thoughts and experiences, the teacher also found it a more enjoyable lesson. As in Freire's problem-solving approach to education, both teachers and pupils were 'knowledgeable and ignorant, and both teach and learn'. (Kohan 2018, 622; see also Freire and Macedo 2014).

Participant 35: I think you communicate more with your teacher in philosophy than you would usually do. Because in maths ... teacher would explain it, then you would do it. But in philosophy you talk more than you usually would.

Kohan (2018) argues that it is the equitable nature of the dialogue itself that leads to new dialogic understanding. Understanding does not 'come from another subject (the teacher) or from oneself (the student)' but from the 'dialogical relationship established between educators and students, based on a shared reading of the world that this dialogue offers and which a democratic and non-hierarchical relationship makes possible' (Kohan 2018; 621 see also Xu 2022). This is another form of liberation – a liberation from the conventional roles existing in the classroom.

P4C explicitly seeks to 'liberate the child from this inequitable power dynamic' and 'give voice to the silenced: the children' (Rosas 2023, 22) which impacts not only the pupil but also the teacher. A fully symmetrical and equitable teacher–student relationship (Xu 2022, 26), however, would require a liberation from the teacher-centricity that exists in any classroom; this seems rather idealistic. For Freire, the prioritising of the teacher's voice in education was symptomatic of an oppressive society, and, as such needed to be resisted if learners were to be liberated. As he states 'I have nothing against teaching. But I have many things against teaching in an authoritarian way' (Horton and Freire 1990, 193) and 'an educator should never become an expert' (Horton and Freire 1990, 128). Equality of the voices is necessary for Freire's problem-solving approach as it requires dialogue that is genuinely open to the contribution of others and where both teacher and pupil are learners (Freire 1996; Freire and Macedo 2014). However, Freire clarifies this does not necessitate a dereliction of professional duty. Rather teachers need to be 'dialogically authoritative as opposed to monologically authoritarian' (Bowers 2005, 375). Nevertheless, it is clear from the participants' comments they viewed the role of both teacher and pupil differently during P4C dialogues which felt unique and liberating.

Participant 5: There's no boss in it so everyone has a chance to talk and it's quite free.

This was often explained by the participants by making comparisons between Philosophy and other lessons. Similar to Barrow's findings, the children 'suggested that the control; and the direction of the talk seem to have distributed' (Barrow 2015, 83).

Participant 6: Because ... you have to, you do more talking in the different lesson, ... but in philosophy you say a few things ... , then it's basically just the children who take it over.

Participant 35: In philosophy you kind of let us do the discussion. ... in most subjects you tell us the thing ... but when you're doing philosophy ... you kind of say your idea but then you ... [you just] just let us do it.

For some participants, this change in role liberated them not just to have greater autonomy but to have a more truthful voice where ideas could be agreed upon and disagreed with.

Participant 26: Usually in our class we sort of have to agree with the teacher, ... the teacher's the boss, the teacher's right. But then lots of people disagree with your answers in philosophy.

Participant 30: Usually in something like English ... you would tell us to tell our partner ... , so that sort of keeps it on the same topic ... in philosophy you usually start us off and then it just goes.

Participant 24: But like everybody's the leader in philosophy. ... Everyone's the boss basically.

The changed teacher role undoubtedly also altered the role inhabited by the learner. Not only did participants feel a greater sense of autonomy they also felt differently about themselves.

Facilitator: So, what is it about philosophy that makes you feel more confident?

Participant 42: Because you kind of have a bit more of a chance to speak ... get your words out.

Participant 44: More time to think of something ... before you actually put your hand up and speak.

For participant 44, the perceived lack of pace had an impact on willingness to speak and individual confidence. The presence of thinking time also acted as preparation or rehearsal time, so participants were ready to contribute with confidence.

Participant 52: I think lots of lots of people have a bit more confidence ... because like ... we actually do have quite a bit of freedom to talk about what we think ...

Participant 54: I feel a bit more confident in philosophy because you get to express your answer, and if you get it wrong that doesn't matter because you can't get it wrong.

As supported by Cassidy and Christie's work (2013), participants commented on how philosophical dialogue had enabled them to see their peers in a different light. For some, this was because the fixed notions they held about their peers' strengths and weaknesses were subverted.

Participant 14: but in philosophy ... I feel like you get the best of everyone in philosophy. So, in maths you might not get the best of everyone ... But in philosophy you usually ... get the best of everyone, and there's a lot of people who might is never really seen the best of, maybe maths is not like their cup of tea and we do maths quite a bit and then they come up in philosophy and you just see the absolute best of them

Furthermore, some participants felt they experienced an older version of themselves in P4C. The nature of the philosophical dialogue was a liberation from their usual classroom identity.

Participant 14: So ... when in other lessons we see like the kid version of a lot of people ... so we act like our age but in philosophy we act like teenagers, I think we act ... bit more serious ... a bit more like adults.

Similarly Siddiqui, Gorard, and See (2019) and Cassidy et al. (2024) found in their own research that P4C resulted in an increase in children's confidence to question, disagree, challenge and contribute to philosophical dialogues. Fisher also states '[in relation to philosophical dialogue] talk is also a powerful tool for raising the confidence of children' (Fisher 2007, 619). Indeed, Ricci and Pritscher argue it is the traditional hierarchies and structures in the classroom, and the power dynamics these encourage, that actively promote a lack of confidence in children (2015, cited in Kizel 2016, 1) and this lack of confidence in their own intellectual capabilities consequently hinders future development (Kizel 2016). Freire argues full dialogue requires active agency from all contributors (in this case teacher and pupil) and this agency strengthens and defends identity (Rule 2011); genuine, equitable dialogue makes us not only authentically ourselves, with a stronger sense of self but also

authentically human (Rule 2011). As such, an authentic dialogic relationship liberates both teacher and pupil from the 'oppressive reality' that can exist in many neoliberal classrooms (Freire and Macedo 2014); this research demonstrates that the children *themselves* understood P4C as a form of liberation, and further contributes to existing knowledge. The dialogue experienced in P4C sessions liberated the children to see themselves, their peers and their teacher differently from what they understood as the classroom norm.

### ***Dialogue as liberation from structural conventions***

The next section will explore how the dialogue presented in P4C enquiries differed from the perceived normal structural conventions in the classroom. Although P4C can be criticised for the tightly ordered, or instrumental (Vansieleghem 2005) structure, P4C does offer a structure distinct from the rational-linear framework (Farrell 2002) dominant in UK primary lessons. As a consequence of curriculum content and national statutory assessments, many primary school lessons now feel highly paced (Jardine 2013; Povey, Boylan, and Adams 2021), somewhat competitive and with an emphasis on recorded work (Cui and Teo 2021); 'students ... have become accustomed to the mood, tempo and consequences, personal and pedagogical, of how attempts to try to keep up with this time is always running out' (Jardine 2013, 6).

In contrast, P4C has focused time on extended dialogue and rarely includes any written work. Kizel judges this as in 'stark contrast to the atmosphere of competition and power-struggle (even if hidden) that routinely pervades schools' (2016, 5) He goes on to state schools are 'enclosed within a "cage of limitations"' because 'curriculum planning organizes learning into disciplinary fields of knowledge that rely on conservative (and frequently outmoded) models' (Kizel 2016, 5). For the participants, the sole focus on dialogue (without written work) was unusual.

Participant 16: In philosophy you could have just thought the whole lesson and not even put one thing down on the piece of ... just sat there and listened and thought. And that's why I really like about it. It's like not like you need to do the task and just get it done. It's that you can choose whether you want to say your question out loud ...

Participant 21: I think it's different ... in that every ... [other] lesson we do ... we have a sheet, right? So, in philosophy all you need is your mind and a voice ... you don't have to put it down on paper.

Participant 26: In philosophy the entire session is just a conversation but in our other classes it's a short conversation that builds up to our worksheet.

Povey, Boylan, and Adams's (2021) distinguish between regulated and expansive timescapes in the classroom. They define regulated time as a consequence of neoliberal performativity that results in the segmentation of the curriculum and the accountability for time on task and speed of progress. This understanding influences local and national policy in terms of what is understood to be desirable for learning. In contrast, expansive time allows for content to be returned to and explored in depth: it focuses on quality rather than speed (Povey, Boylan, and Adams 2021) and is more in line with the approach taken in P4C. The pace of learning and the expectations of what learning looks like are undoubtedly influenced by the neoliberal high-stakes assessment regime in the UK as not only have changes to national summative assessment resulted in an intensification of teacher accountability (Sturrock 2022), but they have also resulted in an increased focus on learning stamina in preparation for the tests themselves i.e. being able to read /write for extended periods at speed. Typically lessons will include written work usually within a fixed time frame. Again, P4C differs as the use of dialogue within enquiries is valued over the need to record the learning. The participants not only noticed this but found it liberating.

In Freire's (Freire and Macedo 2014) model, a dialogic focus represents the difference between problem-solving and banking approaches. It is both true dialogue and problem-solving pedagogy that are key to liberation. Participants indicated that P4C resulted in a change of pace and structure they welcomed; they were effectively liberated from the change in approach.

Participant 23: In a maths lesson ... you say your answer and what you think it is and put it on your sheet. ... But in philosophy you talk to yourself ... and then you can show your ideas and explain them ... So, I think you talk a lot more.

Participant 28: I feel less rushed in philosophy because you don't say five more minutes and stuff ... in maths they just do one more minute ... three seconds left.

For some participants, this liberation of structure and pace made the entire experience less stressful with some even commenting it was relaxing.

Participant 31: Takes your mind off everything.

Participant 30: I think it's relaxing ... Because I can talk ... Just relaxing, you just talk about things.

Participant 56: I think when you're thinking about it like blurs everything else out in your mind, so it's easier to concentrate.

It appears, therefore, that participants conceptualised philosophical dialogue as liberating – free from the norm of a neoliberal classroom. The dialogic nature of philosophical enquiries liberated the way they understood the role of the teacher and themselves in the learning process, the pace and structure of the primary classroom and their perception of the understandings were considered 'right and wrong'. Given that existing research tends to focus on teacher conceptions of P4C or perceived impact on learning, this offers a unique window into how children not only understand P4C but also what they understand to be the norm of a neoliberal UK classroom and, as such, contributes to existing understanding about P4C.

## Conclusion

Given that P4C prioritises the voice of children through democratic and equitable dialogue, this paper has sought to explore how children themselves conceptualise the experience. This unique take on P4C research extends existing understanding. In doing so it is clear that although the children did understand P4C as dialogic, they also, and perhaps more powerfully viewed it as a form of liberation. The findings offer a further contribution to knowledge by understanding dialogue as liberation for the children themselves, rather than as what was understood by adults in the room. This in itself says something about not only the form of the liberation but what they were being liberated from, the UK neoliberal education context and its associated curricular and structures. At the time of writing, the UK government just announced a review of the UK national curriculum and associated assessment (Department for Education 2024). Although the neoliberal philosophy is unlikely to change maybe there is an opportunity to reconsider P4C. The timing seems pertinent as early announcements have indicated a focus on dialogue is a priority (The Labour Party 2024; Voice 21 2024). Indeed, the UK Government's manifesto stated 'the ability young people have to articulate themselves, justify, persuade, challenge and explain, are crucial ... Labour wants to help every child find their voice' (The Labour Party 2024, 10). Similarly the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) lists 'the ability to read, write, speak and listen ... lets people communicate effectively and make sense of the world' (2019a, 4) and also critical thinking as key priorities for the international Future of Education and Skills 2030 Project (OECD 2019b). Philosophy for Children would support this.

As well as pedagogical reasons for philosophical dialogue, the associated liberation could also be viewed as social justice; it is not merely being able to contribute one's voice but coming to understand one's voice has value in the context. Indeed, SAPERE argues the core aim of their work is social justice stating 'we believe too few people have the opportunity to think for themselves in conversation with others, especially the most disadvantaged in society, to the detriment of everyone's learning and life chances because this exacerbates educational and social inequality' (SAPERE no date). As has been shown in this study, engaging in philosophical dialogue developed confidence to speak, to understand others and to engage in reasoned debate. Participants saw themselves, others and the

world differently. The role of the teacher became subverted which in turn subverted the role of the learner. Participants were liberated from the shackles of the curriculum and realised understanding is not always right/wrong and the world is not always black/white. SAPERE argue by doing so they 'become more tolerant of "the other" enabling "politics [to] become[s] less polarised and more democratic"'. (SAPERE no date). It is difficult to argue this is not a good thing.

By considering Freire's work, children participating in P4C see philosophical dialogue as a liberating or freeing experience no doubt partly because the structure, content and format of the discussions were distinct from the educational norm. Even withstanding the limitations of the study, the participants felt liberated to have voices, know their voices had value and liberated to be an autonomous thinker and communicator able to fully engage and thrive in the public discourse. If as Freire believes, dialogic pedagogy 'forms the basis of social change and liberation' (Bowers 2005, 368) and is a socially liberating force (Kohan 2018), the philosophical dialogue in Philosophy for Children is the perfect conduit to enable this to happen. It is through philosophical dialogue that children come to realise a critical consciousness (Bowers 2005) reminding us again what it is to be human despite our strong focus on 'the [neoliberal] logic of the market' (Metcalf 2017) As UNESCO neatly summarise 'What is the teaching of philosophy if not the teaching of freedom and critical reasoning? (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2007, 10)'. A neoliberal approach can strip away our humanity (Metcalf 2017), P4C and the dialogue it encourages reclaims it.

## Note

1. Sometimes spelt as inquiry

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

## Ethics approval

Ethical guidance was agreed by the School of Education, Language and Psychology Ethics Committee at York St John University – Reference: ETH2324-0006.

## ORCID

Caroline Elbra-Ramsay  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7281-0166>

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