

Opening Young Minds to Diversity

How do you encourage the very youngest pupils to take ownership of their own thinking and learning?

Armathwaite Community First School in Cumbria uses Philosophy for Children (P4C) to develop pupils' thinking, understanding, and ability to articulate what they think.

What did they want to achieve?

The school uses P4C as part of its whole school approach to improving critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinking, with the aim of developing children who are open minded and who take ownership of their thinking and learning. They hope to challenge pupil's perceptions, stereotypes and prejudices about other people and about global issues.

How did they set about doing this?

Jane Yates first ran P4C sessions in the school while working for Cumbria Development Education Centre (CDEC) as part of her P4C training programme. The staff rapidly saw the impact of this work in other lessons. They decided they would all train in the P4C methodology, in which children set the agenda and are given tools to help them think and learn from each other. The school embedded enquiry and child-initiated learning across the curriculum and now Jane is a member of the teaching staff and runs P4C sessions across the school.

All P4C sessions have a similar format, with the teacher providing a stimulus (such as a picture, story, news report or activity). The children then generate questions that the stimulus has raised for them and vote on which one they wish to discuss further, while the teacher acts as facilitator, opening out the discussion, challenging and asking questions. *'It's a rigorous process but it's so exciting'*, says Jane, *'You never know where the discussion is going to go.'*

For example, Reception and Year 1 pupils began with reading *Meet Zogg*, a CDEC publication about an alien who lives on a planet built of the Earth's rubbish. The book is full of global and sustainability issues, but the question the children were most intrigued by was 'Is it possible to live on rubbish?'. For the next session, Jane brought in pictures from around the world of people living on rubbish, such as a homeless person living in a cardboard box, a shanty town, and children making a living from 'recycling' from a rubbish tip. These images

amazed the children, being completely outside their experience, and in turn generated further questions like: 'Does everyone need money?' and 'Why do some people have no money?' which were also discussed.

How well did they achieve their aims?

Jane has found that P4C creates an atmosphere of questioning and respect which enables even young children to engage with images that help them to make sense of the world and understand stereotypes. Because the children are involved in their own learning and in directing the enquiry, they remember what has emerged from the sessions and transfer it to other situations. Jane has noticed the children becoming less 'set in their ways' and more open in other classroom activities and in real life. For example, when given photos of a selection of diverse children and asked who they would like to meet and play with, the pupils were very open-minded in their choices. They can also think more imaginatively and creatively, for example, they don't think there is only one way to solve a problem and are comfortable with generating a range of possible approaches.

What do they plan to do next?

The school are keen to build on the success of a recent CDEC project (Keeping Diversity on Track) which included joint P4C sessions with pupils from four other schools from rural and urban environments. Jane is now planning philosophy sessions for parents and past pupils with the aim of developing community learning which will hopefully lead to greater understanding of local and global issues.

The school has created a private Virtual Learning Environment with a database which facilitates the sharing and exchanging of skills and expertise between members as well as a forum which allows community members to post questions which receive responses from people of all ages and backgrounds. The principle is that everyone regardless of age or background has expertise which they can share to enhance the learning of others.



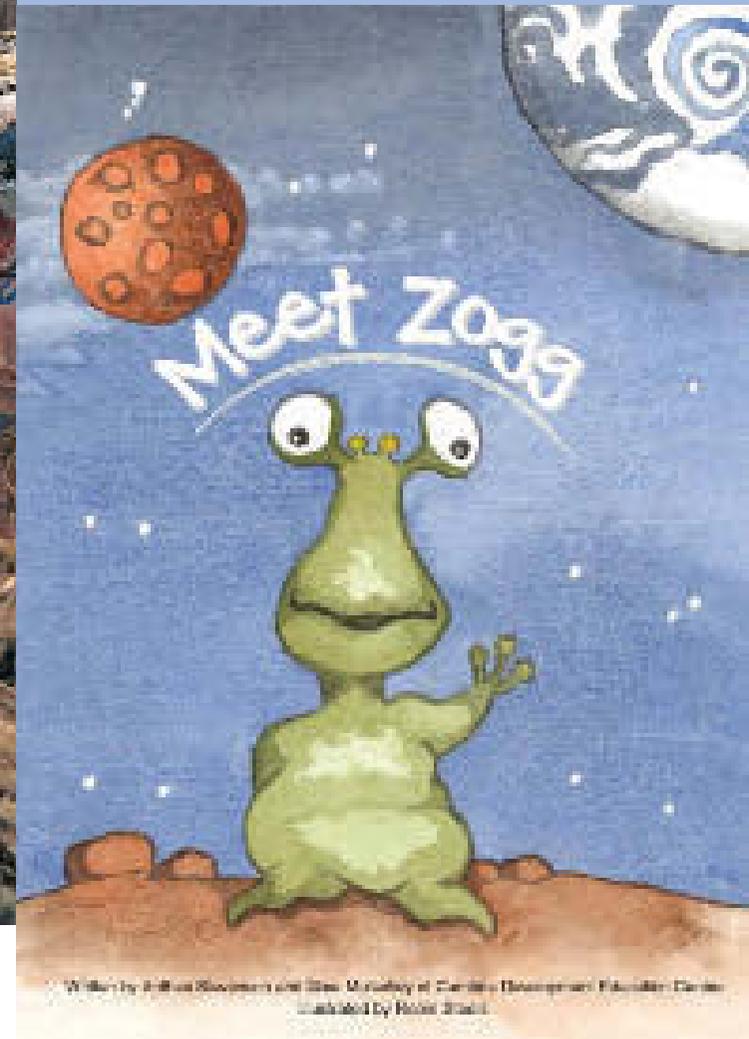
“ Teachers are extremely skilled at using the responses of all groups of pupils and, as a result, pupils' self-esteem is high and they are not afraid to 'have a say'. Pupils' speaking skills are excellent and their responses are rapid. ”

OFSTED report on Armathwaite School
(May 2007)



Reflections:

- Philosophy for Children (P4C) is extremely valuable in promoting open mindedness; critical and creative thinking and a capacity to discuss complex issues respectfully.
- Children learn by example. Democracy can only really be understood by pupils in schools where there is an inclusive environment and where everyone's voice is valued.
- Even very young children can engage with complex global issues and there are a range of Early Years materials available to support this.



More information:

- Armathwaite School website: www.armathwaite.cumbria.sch.uk.
- SAPERE website (P4C in the UK): www.sapere.net.
- Cumbria DEC: www.cdec.org.uk.