Hillbrook School

Philosophical Inquiry Research and Reflection

Executive Summary

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The first thing that sprang to mind … was an experience I had on camp a few months after I had started working at Hillbrook. I was woken by kids chatting in the middle of the night and, being exhausted, was quite frustrated with being woken up until I heard what they were talking about: an in-depth philosophical conversation about 'nothing', and whether this concept of 'nothing' truly exists or not. This was year 9 boys, at 2am on camp, when they had been away from school for a few days, engaging in a very complex discussion. I thought it was a pretty alright reason to be woken up and knew that things at Hillbrook were a little different than I had been used to!

(Humanities teacher)

Rationale

Hillbrook is an independent, co-educational, secondary school in Brisbane, Queensland, with about 800 students. It is a 'thinking-centred' school that provides opportunities for members of the school community to work together to become critical, creative, independent thinkers. One of these opportunities is the engagement by all students in collaborative Philosophical Inquiry (PI).

PI aims to develop:
- the ability to understand and engage with life's big, philosophical ideas,
- the ability to think and reason accurately and well, and to develop good argument,
- the ability to engage collaboratively, confidently and respectfully with others.

PI at Hillbrook began in 2015 with the first cohort of Yr 7 students. As this cohort moved through the school, so too did PI, so that all students at Hillbrook in Years 7 – 10 now have a weekly PI lesson. In Years 11 and 12, the authority subject Philosophy and Reason is offered as an elective.

Given that the original group of 2015 Year 7 students is now at the end of their secondary schooling, it is timely and appropriate to investigate whether having done PI for four years has had any impact, and if so, what that impact might be.

Method

Data to explore this question were obtained from students through written responses to scenarios and reflection questions, and from teachers, through written responses to reflection questions. Data were collected from four groups:
- 17 Yr 11/12 Hillbrook students who undertook PI in Yrs 7-10 only (Group 1). These students were self-selected and represented a cross-section of the student population.
- 20 Yr 11/12 students from another school (judged similar on several criteria), who have never done PI (Group 2) – the control/comparison group.
- 11 Hillbrook teachers of PI.
- 7 Hillbrook teachers who have not taught PI (representing most school subjects, varying lengths of time at Hillbrook, different year levels, and differing views about PI).

All groups were of mixed gender.

Data Collection Stimulus Measures and Process

All data were collected by means of an individual written response from each participant.

Students. All students were asked to respond to two scenarios (See Appendices with full report).

The Hillbrook students also responded to the following questions:
- *What has PI taught you about yourself as a learner?*
- *In what ways can you use the knowledge/understanding/skills learned and used in PI, in other learning areas?*
- *If you had to describe the benefits of PI to someone who knows nothing about it, what would you say?*

Teachers. Teachers responded to the following questions:
- *Do you think PI has had any impact (social? academic? general? other?) on our students? If so, in what ways?*
- *Are there any particular differences you noticed between either: Hillbrook cohorts before and after the introduction of PI, or Hillbrook cohorts and those at another school you have worked at? Can you provide an example of when you noticed the difference?*
- *Do you think PI is a useful subject? Why or why not?*
- *Do you think PI is a good 'fit' for Hillbrook? Why or why not?*
- *Any other comments?*

PI teachers were also asked:
- *Has teaching PI had any impact on you as a teacher? (e.g. changes in pedagogy, new ways of understanding students' thinking, engagement with students, etc).*

Data Analysis

An initial immersion in the written responses enabled the recognition and identification of several key themes from both student and teacher respondents. Once the themes had been identified, the data were then re-examined to look specifically for more responses related to those themes. This in turn allowed some of the themes to be aggregated to form broader themes, which were then aligned with key PI concepts as embedded in the Hillbrook PI program.

Throughout the process, the researchers discussed the themes and their correlation across the group responses. Upon agreement between the researchers, appropriate next steps in the data analysis followed.

Summary of Findings

Data from both students and teachers support the positive impact of the PI program at Hillbrook. Key themes that emerged included:
- the ability to understand and engage with life's big, philosophical ideas,
- the ability to think and reason accurately and well, and to develop good argument,
- metacognition,
- the ability to engage collaboratively, confidently and respectfully with others,
- engaging with ethics,
- critical thinking and broader application of PI.

The following discussion will focus on summarising the findings from both students and teachers based on responses to scenarios and reflection questions. A full presentation of findings is available with the full report. All italics are direct quotes from respondents.

Hillbrook data – students and teachers

The ability to understand and engage with life's big, philosophical ideas was clearly evident in the student responses to the scenarios. Language such as: *moral/social responsibility, the greatest good for the greatest number, consequentialist belief, an individualistic ideal* was used by students. They quickly and competently identified the philosophical concepts and questions behind the idea presented and engaged with those, so that, for example, an issue involving the rights of an individual became a pertinent discussion of rights conflicting.

> *the right of those others to continue living should override the complainant's right to be comfortably maskless….*

Whilst students in their responses to the scenarios demonstrated their ability to think and reason accurately and well and to develop good argument (e.g. *the central claim is…there is a fundamental issue with this argument, the first part of the argument is somewhat valid in that…but what follows is a non-sequitur and quite flawed because…),* their responses to the questions indicated that they are aware of being able to do this, and, importantly, that they learned it through engaging in PI. They were also clear that these skills are relevant more widely than just at school, suggesting that *what is happening in PI can be used anywhere.* Teachers, both PI and non-PI, supported this finding.

Student data from both the scenarios and the reflections also demonstrated that students are operating confidently and comfortably at a metacognitive level.

> *Some assumptions and circumstances will be put in place for my response….if these … are met then I believe it is justified to say ….*
>
> *I am not sure that I have an entirely cogent justification for that assumption…*

The presence of metacognition in the students is supported by their responses to the question, 'What has PI taught you about yourself as a learner?':

> *taught me to be a curious learner…*
>
> *taught me to actually listen in and value other people's ideas, rather than only hear the things which solidify my personal viewpoint…*
>
> *to see things not as black and white but shades of grey…*
>
> *before PI I would jump to conclusions and fall for confirmation bias…*

Comments from teachers such as *self-cognitive, much more self-reflective in their work, thinking about thinking,* indicate their awareness of the presence of metacognition in the students.

In addition, the data from students and most teachers supported the view that engaging in PI has had a positive impact on the ability of students to listen to one another with a will to understand what is really meant, and to be willing to respectfully discuss and explore differences in ideas.

> *PI has really opened my mind up to listening to what other people have to say, and has taught me how to respectfully disagree with somebody over sensitive topics…*
>
> *PI allowed me to change my opinions for the better without feeling the need to hold on to a bad idea. This especially happens when working with other people…*

As one PI teacher put it:

(PI) *teaches them to be more open and accepting of different perspectives which causes them to reflect on and amend their own views...*

Data from students show that they not only engage willingly with ethics both inside and outside the PI classroom, but also they appear to appreciate the benefit this will give them in their future lives. They see the exploration of moral dilemmas and understanding what consequences might come about as:

helping you understand difficult and worldly topics that you may need to consider later in life, while preparing you to be able to present a more well-structured, balanced and coherent argument to supplement views and encounters in life…

Mention was also made of specific instances where knowing about ethics could be of use, such as *understanding the ethical implications in scientific study*, as well as playing a role in *developing your individual beliefs and values as you explore situations you wouldn't have otherwise given thought to*.

I find myself doing deep critical thinking about things like the greatest good for the greatest number to help with decisions and choices. It helps you think deeper about outcomes actions will have and about doing what is morally right.

That they engage with ethics outside of the PI classes was also supported by teachers' responses.

Both students and teachers recognised and acknowledged that critical thinking is at the heart of PI. In addition, both acknowledged the extent to which this can benefit student performance in other subjects. Students described in particular, the usefulness of skills related to the development of arguments.

With the knowledge (from PI) I am able to find valid, sound arguments to include in reports, I can structure my own argument in essay writing and speeches and I can also touch on counterexamples for these arguments and create more open questions.

Teachers: Additional data
Additional data reported by teachers (both PI and non-PI) confirmed that teachers think PI is having a positive or very positive impact on the students, citing differences in academic and social behaviours. Reservation was expressed by four teachers. However, even those teachers who said they had not noticed a difference still thought it was a useful subject (one declined to comment on the basis of lack of knowledge of PI), and offered suggestions that they thought would help contribute to its usefulness, e.g. longer lesson times (PI teacher).

All teachers thought PI is a good fit for Hillbrook, and all PI teachers said that teaching PI has had a positive impact on their own pedagogy.

I'm so glad that I've had this opportunity at Hillbrook. I'm not being hyperbolic when I say that teaching P.I. has changed my life (hopefully for the better?- any philosopher worth their salt knows that's a term fraught with problems) (PI teacher)

Comparative data: Differences between Hillbrook and control group students

Differences between students who had participated in PI classes and those that had not were evident on a number of indices. These included the following:

- type of language and complexity of responses,
- clarity of language even when delivering complex responses,
- discussion of the big ideas behind the idea stated, as opposed to only the idea itself,
- generalising,
- defining concept before exploring meaning,
- using philosophical or ethical terms correctly,
- using no information superfluous or not related to the topic,
- describing own thinking processes while developing argument,
- quality of arguments.

Conclusion

While these data have been gathered from small student and teacher groups, and consist of self-report data only, they provide compelling support for the efficacy of, and positive outcomes from, the PI program at Hillbrook.

Two research strategies were employed to provide a greater confidence in the findings. First, data were gathered from a comparison group and these data have demonstrated that there is validity to this evidence supporting the outcomes at Hillbrook. In addition, two researchers were engaged in analysing and reporting on the data, with one of those independent from the PI program. Thus the correlation between researcher analyses and findings demonstrates an inter-rater reliability.

Given the positive and worthwhile outcomes described, we would recommend that Hillbrook continues to offer PI as part of the core curriculum.

The full report draws heavily from students' and teachers' own words, as these provide the strongest support. It is fitting therefore to conclude with a comment from a graduating year 12 student and from a PI teacher:

> *PI was a subject that seemed pointless and a school subject at the start but turned into something that really helped me grow in my understandings and knowledge of the world and the kind of situations I might find myself in one day. PI, as a subject will help you understand the argument styles of other people and help you learn what hollow and falsified arguments look like. PI helps you understand difficult and worldly topics that you may need to consider later in life, while preparing you to be able to present a more well-structured, balanced and coherent argument to supplement views and encounters in life. (Yr 12 student)*

> *there is a humility to their intelligence- which I believe all good education should encourage…*(PI teacher)