

Report on school inspection of P4C Plus: Newton International Academy Smash

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Inspected by:

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This is the second P4C inspection visit to NIA Smash, the previous one, in May 2023, resulting in the school being awarded the DW Bronze Award for its achievements in establishing a firm foundation for P4C. These visits, whilst informed by the DW P4C Progression Framework, are very much a formative process and therefore focused not just on how much the school has improved, but also on how the school can become even better.

I would like to sincerely thank everyone involved in the visit, from those teachers confident and brave enough to offer to be observed, to Franki Donnelly, the wonderful P4C coordinator, to the very supportive school leaders and the children (I use this term interchangeably with 'students' and 'pupils'). It was such an enjoyable day and my overriding feeling was that I'd like to have been there for much more than this brief time. Snapshot as this was though, it was clear to me that NIA Smash has made significant progress in P4C since the last inspection. I will provide an overview of the visit below, along with areas I feel the school should work on, but before I do, I would like to offer my congratulations on not just achieving the DW Silver Award, but a Silver Award as solid as they come. I would like to go as far as to say that the school should consider applying for the Gold Award within a year, as I feel that the areas I mention below are achievable in this time frame, given the strong foundation and enthusiasm for P4C that currently exists.

I would also suggest we reflect on how important the P4C approach is becoming in this world of huge technological advancement. Analytical thinking is now the leading job skill (Future of Jobs Report: WEF 2025), with creative thinking, curiosity, active listening and empathy all appearing in the top 10 skills. These are all at the heart of the 4Cs, the driving force for P4C, and it is the focus on particularly the cognitive domain of the 4Cs – critical and creative thinking – rather than the affective domain – caring and collaborative thinking – that I feel should be NIA Smash's direction of travel towards Gold Award. Students work well together and are keen to share their ideas, and we can now capitalise on this by immersing them in the joy of wrestling with ideas. Critical thinking is at the heart of analytical thinking but goes much further, as it involves not just analysis, but judgment. We have in P4C, therefore, an approach that is as close a curriculum for wisdom as we could get, hence the 'philosophy' in Philosophy for Children.

Summative statement:

It was such a joy being in your classrooms during the visit. I personally visited sessions from F1 to Year 7 and Joelle also visited up to Year 10, with her reflections summarised separately below. These reflections, whilst clearly contextualized in classroom observations, are relevant to all teachers, so I would ask that they are read more as general guidance than specific feedback. I am very happy though to communicate with any teachers I visited, for feedback, advice and any questions they may have.

My first visit was to Year 5, in the Primary P4C room, and it was clear that this was both a familiar space and encouraged a familiar routine, with children ready to engage and enthusiastic. It was nice too to see the teacher reviewing what happened in the last lesson and what is expected when watching a stimulus, with the children confidently responding, including using more mature terms such as 'concepts'. Thinking Moves were evident too, particularly as children teased out concepts (Keywording) from the stimulus. They were so good at this and provided excellent justification for their choice of concepts, using evidence from the stimulus, a short video on the theme of sport.

Question stems were used to good effect, although with children of this age and with such a P4C pedigree, I would suggest that we begin to leave those behind. I tend to tell children I've left them at home but can we manage without them, or maybe make an informal list on the board, just to avoid any feeling of routine or excessive scaffolding.

The concepts identified were also good philosophical ones, each one abiding by the 'common/central/contestable' guide – they commonly crop up in the children's lives, are central to how they lead their lives and are contestable. I would suggest that we keep a running list of the concepts that children offer, just to ensure that we don't cover the same ones many times, or the same type (such as personal qualities). I would also encourage getting a little more thinking out of this part of the inquiry process by occasionally exploding each concept offered, so children begin to appreciate the depth (and complexity) of, for example, friendship, which might inspire the concepts of trust, selflessness, selfishness and so on. This might also help with questioning, as questions begin to become clearer the more information there is to guide them.

It was so lovely to see the teacher sitting *with* the children, not separated from them, by distance and by height. It is such an important aspect of P4C that it is seen as an inquiry where children and teacher are co-inquirers, learning and co-constructing concepts together. This is, for many teachers, the 'lightbulb moment', when they remove themselves from feeling the need to 'teach' concepts, rather to explore them together with the children. Children really do appreciate this too.

Questions from this Year 5 class were also very good and they are clearly used to coming up with conceptual questions (about the concept) rather than contextual ones (about the stimulus). I would suggest that before voting for questions, at any age throughout school, we again take a little time to develop creative and/or critical thinking by 'airing' the questions. This might entail children asking for clarification of any question (for example, 'What makes friendship – loyalty or honesty?': "Are you saying it's one or the other, or can it be both?"), or whether any question is assumptive (for example, 'Is it possible to be a winner and a true friend?': "This seems to assume that it might be difficult to be both?"). These kind of airings promote critical thinking, but creative thinking could be encouraged too by asking whether any questions are connected in any way. Either way, this kind of activity makes for a more informed choice when voting and encourages children to be more analytic when tackling questions, both within and outside P4C sessions.

This was such a lovely lesson, and I very much appreciated the teacher's calm approach and excellent relationship with the children. As ever though, we can 'squeeze the juice' even further and I will set out these ways further into this report.

This calm and friendly approach continued as I visited the youngest of children, in F1. One of the challenges typically when facilitating P4C with children of this age is that it is often so difficult to engage a full class for very long, but the teacher of F1 Blue did just this. The starter activity (the song 'Heads, shoulders knees and toes') engaged everyone and provided a very effective link into the main part of the session. One of the main reasons I feel the children were engaged for so long in this session was that the teacher regularly provided something interesting for the children to think about. This relates to the Socratic metaphor of the gadfly – a fly that occasionally spurs whatever it bites into action. 'Gadfly moves' in this session included switching from a song to a picture of body parts on the screen, to the appearance of Mr Gruffalo from a bag, to passing him around, to a cutout of a body with limbs separated, all stitched together with questions from the teacher.

Each of these moves were, in effect, a mini inquiry – something new to think about – and Matthew Lipman, the person behind the creation of P4C, says that it is inquiry that makes for community, not community that makes for inquiry. What he meant here was that we shouldn't wait until our children are ready to engage with P4C before doing it with them. Rather, we give them something interesting into which to inquire, and suddenly, community begins to develop as children begin to share ideas, listen to each other and question.

Given that the children in F1 were capable of sitting so well and able to focus for a time, I would suggest we begin to challenge them even further, by asking them to put their hands out/on their knee if they want to say something and to give lots of opportunities to talk to a partner. Even at this young age, I would try to encourage talk between children and I have no doubt they would be capable of occasionally telling the teacher what their partner said, which can be praised as lovely listening. We might even, if someone says something like 'I like Mr Gruffalo', ask one of the other children to ask them why they like Mr Gruffalo.

These suggestions are just simple additions to what was an already lovely lesson, but I would encourage teachers to think about what P4C skills they want to develop in F1 and then liaise with the F2 teachers to ensure that they take them further. I would also, even at this age, share such session objectives with the children so they know what they're trying to get better at. I am hoping to arrange an online session with EYFS teachers at some point, and this will be covered there.

The session I observed in F2 clearly showed that there was progression from F1 to F2. I loved what I thought might be a fairly challenging starter for children of this age ('This is not juggling...') but I was very impressed how each of the children concentrated enough to be able to repeat the previous person's action and to vary it in their own fashion. I would suggest we extract from any starter we use some kind of 'skill' that can be continued into the session. In this case, for example, it might be paying attention to what someone is saying, not just what they were doing (in the starter). This elevates the starter from just a fun activity into a warm up for the things they're going to practise in the session.

A really lovely tone was set in this session, primarily, I felt, due to the teacher's welcoming smile and soft voice. I will often try consciously to lower the volume of my voice, regardless of the age I'm working with, as it encourages children to listen harder. I felt that the children in this session felt very comfortable sharing their ideas, so as ever, this is a good time to challenge them even further. For example, when someone said the fish in the story was lonely, we might have asked how they knew it was lonely, gathering a few ideas and then 'problematise' them. I gave a short example of problematising at the end, asking children for examples of play and others of work. Lego was very definitely play but when it was suggested a laptop was work, we might say "But what if I'm playing a game on my laptop?".

Important at this phase too is continuous provision, and this can provide so many opportunities for us to continue the thinking beyond the P4C session. In the F1 lesson, children moved to a large cut out of a body on the floor, and a natural extension of this into CP would have been a table-top activity for small groups to play around with. Likewise in the F2 lesson, which ended with children suggesting things that are play and things that are work, a CP activity in the room might be a range of things on a table, along with a space for 'work' things and another for 'play' things. I'm sure this is what would have happened at some point, but I'd like to recommend a lovely book – *Provocations for Learning in Early Years Settings*, by Margaret Longstaffe. Again, provocations (vs invitations) will be discussed in the online session.

The Year 7 History class I visited, my final class visit, had a great opening activity of an A-Z of qualities of leaders, part of their topic. The students were really engaged and keen to contribute, likely due to the relationship the teacher had clearly fostered. This activity took about 20 minutes but was a perfect example of how if something is going well, we have the opportunity in P4C to adapt the lesson accordingly (this lesson was in the P4C room, so I felt it was justifiable to view it as a P4C lesson with a History focus, rather than a History lesson that just happened to be in the P4C room). Students justified well, made links, worked well together and were very engaged throughout the activity. The A-Z is a multi-purpose strategy and I think that part of its appeal is the subliminally competitive edge it adds, as students were keen to complete it.

This could actually have formed the stimulus for the whole session, rather than moving on to sharing a story, as students could have identified their top 3 or 5 qualities, ranked them and justified their choice. They could have grouped the qualities they'd come up with, or maybe suggested connections between any, with the session ending maybe with a Headline activity, where students formulated a short explanation of what the activity suggests leadership is. This would have meant the learning became progressively deeper, something we try to achieve in any P4C lesson. As ever though, facilitation of philosophical inquiry is about the facilitator making the call to follow this or that, and whilst even the most experienced facilitator can make a less fruitful call, sustained practice and reflection often helps make a lot out of a little.

Joelle found that question creation in the Primary phase was very effective, with students having reflection time, question prompts and time to think and engage. She could also tell that teachers had been trained and had been conducting P4C regularly. She felt that there

could have been less teacher talk and more use of Thinking Moves, alongside a greater profile of the 4Cs during each lesson. P4C was also a feature of a Year 10 Girls Global Perspectives lesson, in which students had opportunities for discussion, alongside an 'I see, I think, I wonder' activity and using a Venn diagram to represent advantages and disadvantages of deforestation, poverty and captivity. As in the Primary phase, she felt that Thinking Moves would have helped, but of course, this is all dependant on training, and I know that the Newton Group is doing its best to have as many people trained as is feasible.

Of course, one of the most telling indicators of progress in P4C are the children who engage in it. I found those children who came to see me (the school councillors) so delightful and they were very appreciative of the school's commitment to P4C. They told me that their P4C room is a calm place, where ideas are respected and others don't interrupt. They could remember questions they've discussed, such as 'Is it ever ok to change your personality to suit your friends' and 'Is a camera an invasion of privacy?', and that they feel important if they're listened to. They were also unanimous in suggesting they should do more P4C than they already do, with more encouragement to take P4C home ("I'd love to live in a P4C home"). Someone suggested that making P4C the last lesson of the day might help with this, and that having to finish sessions at 12:45 means they often have to stop just as they're getting going.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to meet your children in such a setting, they were all great ambassadors for your school.

Suggestions ongoing:

- Introduce greater challenge in P4C sessions, for example through 'problematising' what students say. Robert Fisher's book *Teaching Thinking* includes a range of very good facilitator questions and I've sent these to Franki. I would suggest we print these off and that teachers have them handy in P4C sessions. Encouraging students to give examples & evidence, focusing more on less and using a range of thinking tools to explore concepts/questions will also help take the thinking deeper.
- Encourage more peer talk, through lots of small group activities, asking students to build on, and challenge, each other. Giving students 'stems' for challenges, such as 'But what if...?', 'But what would happen if...' and giving them the questions I've suggested in the previous point, such as 'How do you know?' and 'Why do you think that?'. Use speaker chooses the next speaker to reduce teacher reliance and have times when the teacher says they'll sit out for a few minutes and just take notes. We should encourage children to use a 'P4C voice' that carries to the other side of the circle when in whole-class discussion, rather than a conversational voice, as this will reduce the temptation for the teacher to repeat what the children say.
- Raise the awareness of the 4Cs by asking students to evaluate themselves and the class against them, then using any they feel they're less good at as foci for future sessions. There should also be a clearer 4C focus for each P4C session, so students know what they need to get better at during the lesson. This shouldn't be 'creative thinking', rather 'making connections' or 'suggesting alternatives'. In the Secondary

P4C room in particular, the 4C 'posters' could be reduced in size and taped to each corner of the desks, for example, to allow students to see them when seated at desks. I can help with any questions on evaluation frameworks and methods.

- Increase reflection, particularly in P4C lessons, to ensure key learning from the lesson has a greater chance of retention. Better to end the lesson 5 minutes early to allow for a reflection activity than to cram a few more voices in (although reflection can/should take place at other times during a lesson). There are some lovely review activities that we cover in the Thinking Moves training, so anyone who has been on that can find them in their follow-up resources. Again, let me know if you need help accessing them.
- Continue to plan continuous provision activities that link to P4C sessions in Early Years.
- Ensure P4C inquiries are given time to play out, which will often mean inquiries taking place over several sessions. I would suggest teachers, once a P4C session is over, plan some kind of thinking activity to follow the session up next time, such as a Venn diagram, a continuum/ranking activity or a discussion plan. It's impossible to inquire into rich concepts in the short time we allow for P4C, so if we want deeper thinking, we should adopt such 'cycles of inquiry'.

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