

Findings from the NFER P4C report March 2021

'When the teacher says that it's P4C time, we all cheer, YES!'

The NFER report into the impact of P4C on upper primary school teachers in the UK is likely to be one of the largest and most thorough ever conducted. It was sponsored by the Education Endowment Foundation, which is respected worldwide for its evaluations of interventions. It was evaluated by the National Foundation for Educational Research, which has built a reputation as a leader in its field over the last 75 years. It was delivered by SAPERE, acknowledged as one of the world's leading P4C training and support organisations. Opportunities to evaluate the impact of P4C don't come much better than this, so the findings deserve to be taken seriously – and it is worth considering what lessons can be learnt for the benefit of future P4C practice globally.

The report describes P4C in these terms:

- *Philosophy for Children (P4C) is an educational pedagogy and a social practice, extending beyond the school community. It emphasises the importance of questioning and enquiry in the development of reasoning. P4C places practical wisdom, reasonableness and good judgement as a goal of education. It focuses upon meaning and value.*

The overall message from the report is that there are a wide range of important educational and social benefits for students, teachers and schools from P4C. Schools can get the benefit of P4C without sacrificing anything in terms of core attainment in literacy and numeracy, but they should not expect to get a measurable uplift from P4C in these areas of attainment. This is a positive and comforting message for schools considering taking up P4C.

This summary is set out in four sections:

- What was the research looking at?
- What was the scale and nature of the trial?
- What were the findings?
- What are the suggestions for development?
- Appendix: teacher survey charts

Link to full report: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/philosophy-for-children-effectiveness-trial/>

What was the research looking at?

The research examined a hypothesis, called a Theory of Change in the report, that goes as follows:

- P4C, when delivered in line with SAPERE's Going for Gold approach, can deliver positive impacts for:
 - Student attainment in literacy and numeracy;
 - Pupils' social competencies;
 - Teachers' practice;
 - The wider school community including senior leaders, non-teaching staff and parents/carers.

- P4C would primarily achieve these impacts by improving pupils' and teachers' capability to think in a caring, collaborative, creative and critical way in order to improve their personal, social and educational development.
- Teachers would report positive changes in their teaching practice and classroom management.
- Students would demonstrate positive changes in metacognition including reasoning skills and oracy, in resilience and confidence and in behaviour including tolerance and relationships.

As well as testing this hypothesis against a range of educational and social criteria, the research also sought to draw lessons about the implementation of P4C in schools.

What was the scale and nature of the trial?

- This was a large-scale trial designed to replicate everyday conditions faced by schools.
- It was a randomised control trial, designed to even out the influence of all external factors, so that any impacts could legitimately be ascribed to the P4C intervention.
- It involved 75 intervention schools which implemented P4C and 123 control schools which did not.
- The schools were all English primary schools with higher-than-average levels of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- P4C was implemented as a whole-school programme, but the evaluation was conducted on students in year 6 in 2018/19.
- The main trial ran for two years across 2017/18 and 2018/19. Plans for further evaluation in a third year, 2019/20, were curtailed because of the Covid crisis.

What were the findings?

There are two categories of findings: findings from the implementation evaluation and findings from the impact assessment. The former are qualitative; the latter are quantitative. In my view the qualitative findings generally give more insight, although headline attention is typically directed to the quantitative findings. [In this section, I have identified quantitative impact findings by putting them in blue type.](#)

The expected perceived outcomes for pupils, in terms of improvements in metacognition including reasoning skills and oracy, self-esteem, resilience and confidence, and behaviour (including tolerance and relationships) – were reported in varying degrees in the implementation evaluation. Teachers and pupils found P4C to be suitable and engaging for all pupils, and particularly helpful at an individual level for children who were less self-confident, who were shy, or who had not previously experienced this kind of opportunity to share and discuss ideas. Pupils themselves emphasised that they enjoyed being able to express their own opinions in a non-judgemental way.

Implementation: training and support

- The quality of training and resources provided by SAPERE was high and was an important facilitating factor for schools. Trainers were knowledgeable and supportive, often adapting support to suit the needs of

teachers and their pupils.

- Support from the trainers assigned to each school was helpful.
- Access to top-up training was important where staff turnover was high, including for senior staff. A lack of top-up training for new staff would mean that P4C understanding was low, and would result in enthusiasm for the programme being depleted over time.
- Training worked well when trainers understood the curriculum, when the aims of the training were clear, when trainers included practical examples in their training and when there were opportunities for teachers to observe a trainer leading an enquiry. Teachers preferred the practical aspects of training to the theoretical content.
- It was useful to revisit initial training through ongoing support from the trainer and the P4C lead. It was helpful to have Level 1 training in the same term in which P4C was going to be delivered to ensure that staff enthusiasm was maintained and then to have a spot check later on in the term by the trainer to reaffirm that the delivery processes were in place.

Implementation: In-school practice and resources

- A weekly commitment to standalone sessions was desirable, but unsustainable in the longer term due to other curriculum demands on the timetable.
- Most schools implemented regular 60-minute P4C sessions. Older children were comfortably able to engage with a P4C enquiry for an hour.
- Shorter 30-minute sessions were suitable for younger children. Splitting the enquiry so that pupils could progress more gradually was beneficial. Although younger children were not necessarily asked to devise their own questions or build on others' opinions at first, they benefited from learning P4C language.
- In the first year, P4C sessions were largely stand-alone. Running standalone P4C sessions was vital for teachers to gain confidence in delivery of P4C sessions.
- In the first year, teachers chose topic areas that reflected current affairs, topics from PSHE sessions or ideas collated from their P4C advisors or teaching colleagues.
- By the second year, most schools had moved to a more flexible approach to P4C delivery, with standalone P4C sessions running on an ad-hoc basis at least once a month and other sessions being linked to curriculum topics or themes being taught. This helped overcome the challenge of timetable demands and was pivotal to the programme's success and to encourage sustainability and teacher commitment.
- Whilst it was immediately apparent to teachers how to link P4C to guided reading and PSHE, support from trainers showed how it could be applied in other topic areas. This ensured that P4C became part of curriculum areas and would help P4C become embedded in practice long term.
- P4C was used widely in literacy or English lessons. However, P4C was less easily linked with numeracy and therefore was not being embedded in maths to the same extent as it was in other subjects.
- KS2 year groups can benefit from running an enquiry over two separate sessions as this provides them with more time to explore the topic.
- Teachers came to value the programme and its benefits for pupils' engagement with a topic, such as using P4C sessions as a means of introducing a new theme in art.

- Teachers frequently explained the importance of making it explicit to pupils when a P4C session is running in order for them to understand that the parameters of discussion have broadened.
- Facilitators and pupils both agreed that certain enablers were important:
 - Circular seating formation;
 - P4C displays;
 - Highlighting P4C rules of engagement;
 - Regular repetition of language;
 - Hand signals as a means of communicating opinions
 - Having P4C sentence stems.
- P4C does not require lengthy preparation time as long as there is a well-stocked bank of resources and stimuli. A central P4C online resource folder was important to help teachers deliver P4C, especially those new to the programme. The P4C leads could cascade information to colleagues via this shared folder too. It helped to have resources in this folder filed by year group.

Implementation: P4C leadership

- The P4C lead provided valuable support and momentum for the programme within the school.
- Teachers needed to have a P4C lead to share concerns with and seek support from. They needed a way to share their successes with each other and see the benefits of the programme. In the first few terms P4C leads had to help build staff confidence to deliver the programme, develop ideas and overcome practical issues.
- P4C leads said their coordinating role was manageable in the early stages of implementation and became easier as teachers became more confident with the programme. Typically, P4C leads reported spending around two hours per term undertaking P4C leadership tasks.
- P4C leads explained the benefits of having a second staff member who had attended external training or P4C conferences in order to have someone to consult with in school.
- There were many P4C lead changes during the trial.
- P4C leads valued the ongoing support from their trainer, with trainers providing resources and signposting stimuli and resources online, modelling P4C sessions in school for teaching staff and supporting facilitators in incorporating P4C into curriculum areas.

Implementation: Senior leadership

- Senior leaders needed to spearhead the programme to give it urgency and importance.
- Where headteachers valued the P4C model, had attended at least the Level 1 training and kept P4C a priority within school, teachers were seen to value P4C more.
- The most effective senior leaders made P4C part of the school development plan, displayed P4C visuals in the library and classrooms, kept P4C on the agenda at staff meetings or tweeted a P4C question of the week. Such examples ensured that P4C remained visible within the school, highlighting its importance.

Implementation: Engagement with parents

- There was very little engagement with parents surrounding the use of P4C, perhaps because this is mainly an expected part of the programme at higher award levels than those reached by most schools in the trial.

Impact and implementation: teaching and learning

- Teachers felt that P4C had positively impacted pupils' listening skills, their level of respect for others' opinions, their critical thinking, their ability to question and reason, and their ability to express their views clearly and their confidence.
- By the end of year 1, most pupils felt that they had become more confident, that their listening skills had improved and their critical thinking. By the second year, some pupils could see how the skills they had developed in P4C were linking to other lessons, and how they were using the language from P4C.
- Older pupils benefited more from the development of critical thinking and reasoning skills, while younger pupils benefited more from improvements in confidence and developing an understanding that it is acceptable to have your own opinions and answers.
- By the end of the first year of delivery, most of the improvements were limited to changes in children within the P4C lessons.
- By the end of the second year of delivery, the schools were reporting that these impacts were now being seen more widely across the curriculum. Most schools were seeing benefits in literacy. Some schools reported improvements in reading comprehension. Others noted pupils had a much wider vocabulary and had seen improved sentence structures in pupils' writing.
- Teachers felt that P4C had a positive impact on their own professional development and their confidence in trying new teaching approaches.
- Teachers further up the school had developed better questioning skills which then translated into their questioning in guided reading. One P4C lead said that 'learning to let go and let it be student led has been quite helpful because then that's led into other academic subjects.'
- **The quantitative evaluation found that:**
 - There was no significant evidence that P4C had either a positive or negative impact on reading or maths attainment for KS2 pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds or for the whole cohort of Year 6 pupils.
 - There was possible evidence of a positive impact for lower attaining pupils as compared to higher attainers.
 - Almost all teachers felt that pupils had improved their level of respect for others' opinions and their ability to express their views clearly.
 - The pupil survey showed no significant evidence of impact on social and communication skills

Impact and implementation: behaviour and well-being

- Teachers and pupils found P4C enjoyable and engaging. Teachers fully embraced facilitating P4C sessions and valued the P4C approach.
- Teachers said that pupils who struggle to 'have a voice' in normal lessons have benefited the most from P4C and pupils themselves emphasised that they enjoyed being able to express their own opinions in a non-judgmental way.
- EAL, SEN and young children all responded well to the P4C process; a slower pace of the discussion allowed these children the time to explore their own thinking rather than mirror the answers of others. This

increased pupils' self-esteem and confidence to participate.

- By the end of the first year of delivery, most pupils felt that they had become more confident.
- Generally, staff believed that pupils' behaviour had improved but often this improvement was limited to the P4C sessions themselves and was not translated into better behaviour in other lessons. However, turn taking modelled in P4C did start to trickle through into other areas of the school, including the playground.
- **The quantitative evaluation did not find enough statistical evidence from pupils' responses to suggest changes in teachers' approach to a caring, collaborative and confident approach to learning.**
- TAs and HLTAs who were facilitating or supporting P4C sessions benefited enormously from P4C, both in terms of their own development, and also in terms of their status within the school.

Impact and implementation: school development and ethos

- P4C requires a change in whole school ethos and curriculum innovation. It takes time to develop and embed P4C in schools. P4C leads felt that P4C was having a positive impact on their whole school.
- Fewer schools than originally targeted were able to achieve hoped-for levels of progress against the Going-for-Gold criteria. After two years, 20 schools had not yet achieved bronze, 46 were at bronze and 9 were at silver. In the third year, about one in three schools raised their award level, showing that it takes time to embed P4C across the school.
- Whilst P4C leads were aware of the award level indicators, there was limited awareness amongst classroom teachers of using the P4C indicators to monitor progress and provide feedback to staff and pupils.
- Formal monitoring of P4C delivery was very limited. It was on an ad-hoc basis and usually took the form of verbal feedback and observations from learning walks by the P4C lead.

What are the suggestions for development?

- While there are elements of metacognition in P4C include respecting others' opinions, questioning and reasoning skills and expressing views clearly, the specific contribution of metacognition within P4C needs to be strengthened.
- The link from the 4Cs to attainment and social skills is not explicit and needs strengthening, if it is considered important. There was little comment from participants in the process evaluation that P4C was having a wider impact on pupils' attainment, or on the mechanisms by which that would occur.
- It might be helpful to place more emphasis on the pedagogical changes expected by P4C and how these transfer from sessions to wider curriculum areas. If P4C is to affect attainment, schools should consider focusing P4C lesson stimuli more directly on specific subjects.
- Greater specificity about how P4C might benefit disadvantaged pupils more than their peers would be useful.
- There is a need to provide specific input to support handover and continuity of understanding and ethos during periods of senior leadership/P4C lead change.
- Engaging with parents takes time to implement; the planning stages for this need to be strengthened.

- Whilst P4C leads may have been aware of progress indicators, other teachers were not, and the indicators were not being widely used to monitor pupil progress and provide feedback. Where they were being used, they were highly valuable. Schools need more support to engage with and use the indicators.
- Teachers' advice for schools implementing P4C was to:
 - Ensure schools receive good quality training which include lots of practical examples, not just covering the theory of P4C.
 - Pair with a similar school who is already experienced in delivering P4C to share best practice, give support and advice.
 - Run standalone sessions to begin with but then think about the cross-curriculum potential and embed P4C across other subjects, to ensure sustainability in the longer term.
 - Start early with pupils as the earlier you start the more comfortable the pupils become with it.
 - Set up a resource bank to share ideas for sessions.
 - Ensure the headteacher fully supports P4C.
- Keep P4C on the agenda at staff meetings to keep the discussion going.

Appendix: teacher survey charts

Teachers' Survey

Chart 1: Teachers' confidence with the P4C model

Figure 4: Teachers' confidence with the P4C model

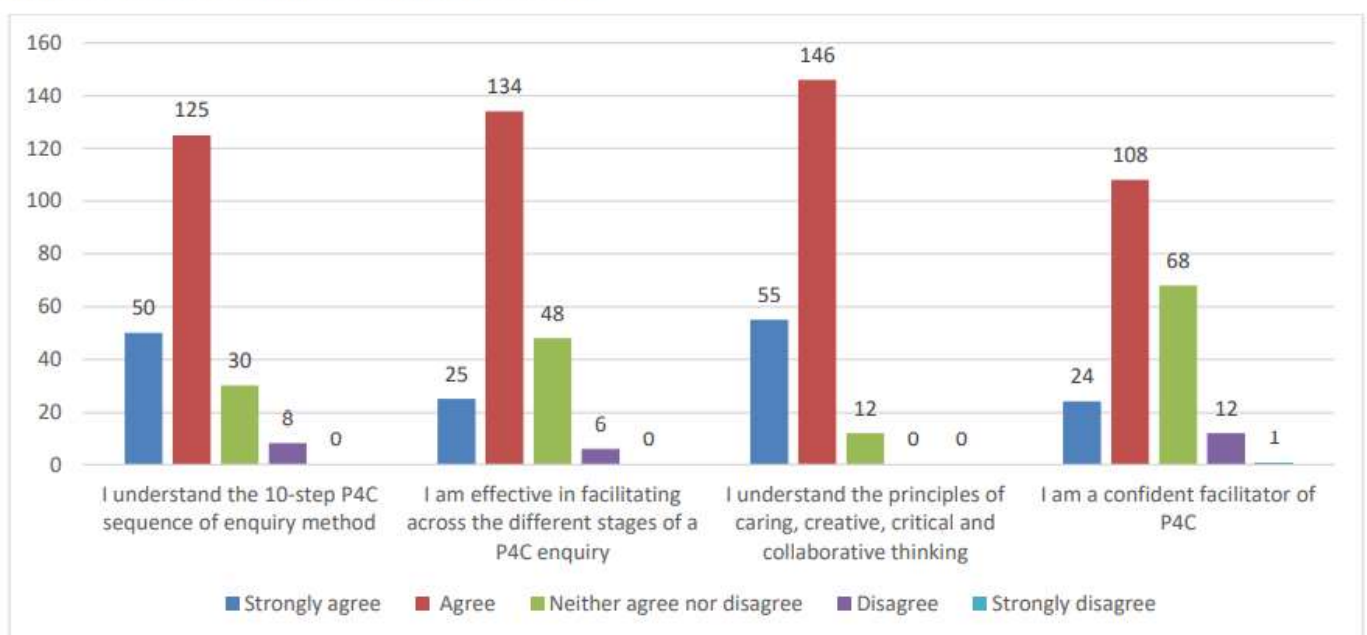
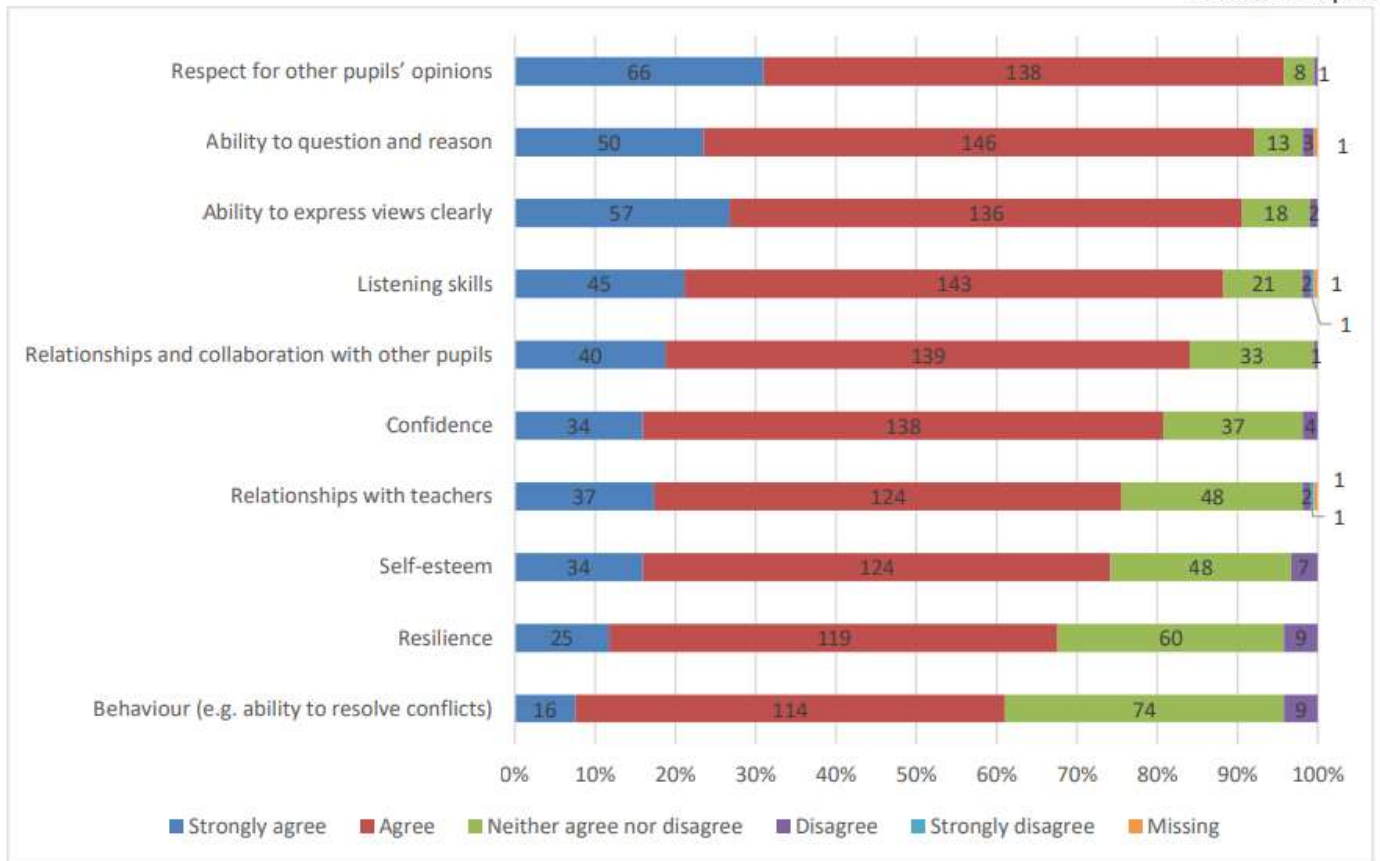
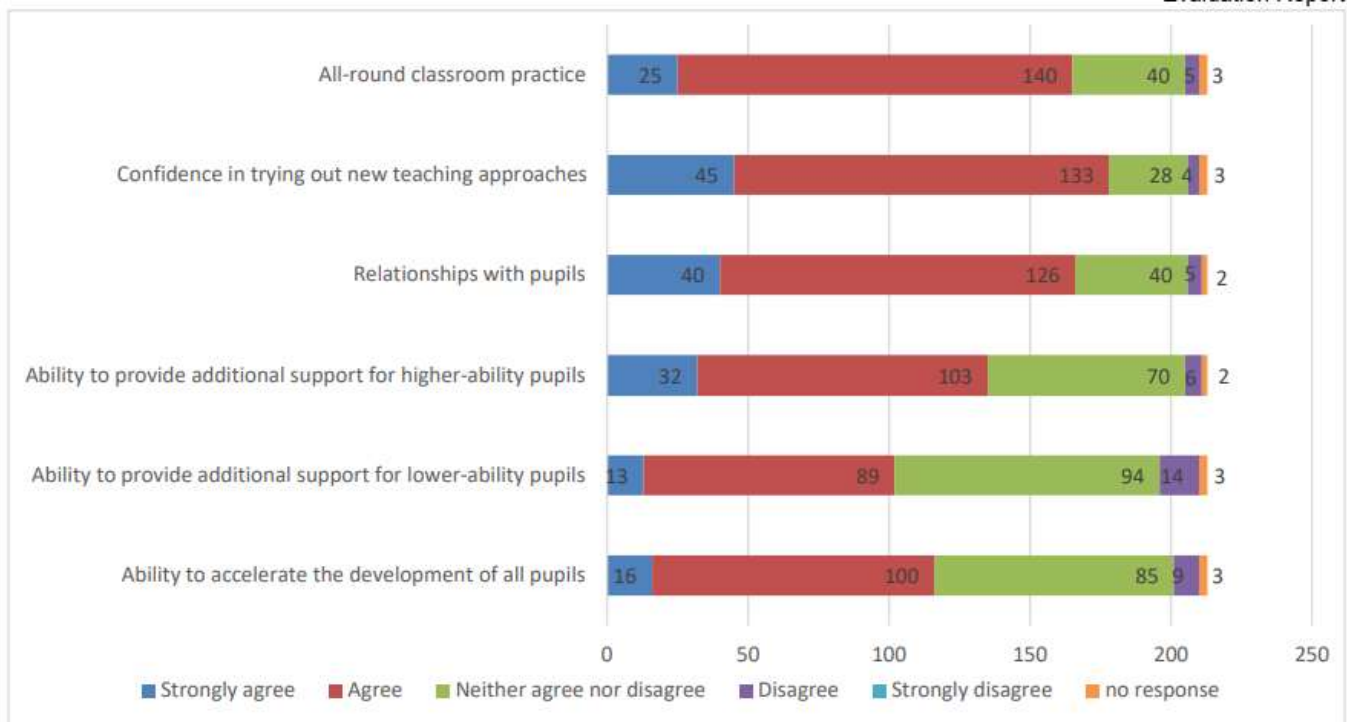


Chart 2: Perceived extent to which P4C has impacted on pupils



Source: NFER P4C intervention staff survey, 2019.

Chart 3: Perceived impact on teachers' pedagogy and teaching practice



Source: NFER P4C intervention staff survey, 2019.