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Reshuffling the Deck:

p4c Hawai‘i in Special Education Inclusion Classrooms

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1. Introduction

I would first like to thank Dr. Minae Inahara and Dr. Shinji Kajitani for giving me the opportunity to share my ideas and experiences with philosophy for children Hawai‘i (p4cHI) and special education in Hawaii. In this brief paper, I want to focus on two common sayings from p4cHI.¹ Thinking about the pedagogy and theory behind p4c is necessary but the rich history of p4c, especially in Hawaii, is about putting theory into practice. To do so, we need to actively work against the mental and social standards that engender the patterns of who is seen and heard. Anyone who spends time working with p4cHI practitioners will very likely hear the phrases, “we’re not in a rush...,” and “we begin where the community is at.” In fact these phrases are uttered so frequently that the pedagogical insights they point toward are overlooked. By focusing on some examples from the use of p4cHI in Hawaii Special Education (SPED) inclusion classrooms, I hope to illustrate how these phrases are grounded in an understanding of social epistemology that helps those often unseen and unheard be active members of communities of inquiry.

p4cHI pedagogy has been explained in depth elsewhere² but for current purposes it is worth reiterating that p4cHI is not a program or a curriculum. That is, it is not a step-by-step process that any practitioner can just follow for certain guaranteed outcomes. It is not just a series of activities or some magic wand that will transform classrooms into intellectually safe communities of philosophical inquiry. Instead, we often describe p4cHI as a philosophers’ pedagogy: a fundamental approach to teaching and learning that is defined by a conceptual framework (community, inquiry, philosophy, and reflection) and an accompanying set of activities. This

¹ This is not to say that these sayings aren’t also found in other contexts.

² See Makaiau & Miller, 2012 and Jackson, 2001, 2012, & 2013.

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framework and accompanying activities provide both guidance and flexibility for particular contexts as educators develop their own theory and practice.

It is also worth providing a very brief context for Special Education in Hawaii. Inclusion is the preferred and most common practice for serving students with identified disabilities. While there are Fully Self Contained (FSC) classrooms for students with severe physical and cognitive disabilities, most SPED students spend most of their school day in classrooms with students who are not identified as having a disability. They may receive separate support for speech, physical or occupational therapy, or academic help, but the general expectation is that they will be full members of a learning community of their peers and not segregated due to their disability. These inclusion classrooms are often co-taught by a teacher licensed in elementary education or a secondary content area (e.g., social studies), and a teacher licensed in Special Education. Additionally, there may be paraprofessional tutors or one-on-one aides to support students in their classroom. Many of the most rewarding p4c classrooms I have been fortunate to support have been co-taught by a SPED teacher or led by a teacher with a SPED license. In these classrooms there is often the working assumption that what is good for the SPED students in the class is good for the community of inquiry as a whole. Many of the anecdotes that I share will highlight the ways in which this assumption has been affirmed.

2. “We’re not in a rush ...”

On the very first day of the p4c class that’s offered every semester at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, students are told “We’re not in a rush...” This helps them adjust to the different way this course begins (i.e., making a community ball) and recognize that our approach to learning and teaching is going to be different. It also underscores the general claims that thinking cannot be rushed -- if you want someone to share their thinking, rushing them is usually counterproductive -- nor can an intellectually safe community be instantly created. Thinking together with others takes time, both because thinking takes time, and learning how to listen and think with a new group of people takes time. However, what is often overlooked is the full phrase: “We’re not in a rush, but that doesn’t mean we’re not getting somewhere.” Students (and teachers) drawn to p4c tend to remember the first half, but it is the second half of the saying that emphasizes growth, which is what all SPED p4c teachers I’ve worked with are motivated by.

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The balance between not rushing while striving toward growth can be seen in the seemingly trivial activity of making a community ball or playing games with the community ball. For a group of young children the process of making a community ball can seem magical. For a group of adults, it might seem an unnecessary waste of time because they assume that adults already know how to take turns and give their attention to the speaker (an assumption that is persistent even though it is often proven incorrect). However, the making of the community ball is not merely the creation of a facilitation tool. It is the beginning of a process of recalibrating the expectations of all participants. The very process of making the community ball gives everyone a chance to be heard (even if it is only by the facilitator at first), practice their listening, practice their communication with others, and practice expressing their thinking. Even if someone is non-verbal, requires the assistance of a communication device, or requires physical assistance in winding the yarn, they are given a turn to contribute. At the end of the process we have an aesthetically pleasing ball that is the product of our beginning community. This practice of inclusive participation contributing to an enriched community is further reinforced through the games we often play with the community ball, such as Speedball, Fruit Basket, What If, or Good Idea/Bad Idea³. Students enjoy using the community ball and playing these games because they are fun, but they are important ways to not rush the kind of inclusive participation we are striving for.

To share some examples that illustrate how not being in a rush helps us all get somewhere, I want to share three brief stories about two students and a high school classroom. At one school in a 2nd grade classroom taught by an exceptional p4c teacher with both her SPED and elementary education licenses, there was a student, Amy⁴, who had severe cognitive and physical disabilities. She had limited control of her gross motor functions and could roughly articulate single words or ideas. Early in the school year, we played Speedball, which involves saying the name of the person you are passing the community ball to, trying to get to every person as fast as we can. Amy would start with the ball so that she would get to start the game. Even if she couldn't clearly pronounce another student's name, she was still

³ These games and activities have not been written down or published in any systematic way, partly because there is so much variance. It would be far beyond the scope of this paper to explain each of these games/activities. But the key aspect of each of these games are that they reinforce practices of turn-taking, listening, making thoughtful connections with others, and expressing one's thoughts.

⁴ All names of students used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the privacy and identity of these students.

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able to indicate who she wanted the ball to go to and move the ball in that general direction. She loved Speedball because she got to play it with everyone else (and it's fun) and the class was successful at it together. This simple game evolved into other activities so that throughout the year, whenever we would have a p4c session, Amy would receive the community ball, a peer would talk with her to help her express whatever she wanted to say, and she would then pass it to another person. Amy was fully included in our community of philosophical inquiry and her active participation greatly helped other students in that class focus, connect, and explore their own thinking, as noted by myself, the classroom teacher and the several visitors to the classroom who knew those children from other years or contexts.

The second story is similar, but it highlights what inclusivity does for the children who don't have an identifiable disability. Mark was a non-verbal 2nd grade student with autism who would frequently vocalize sounds and repeat movements that could have been very distracting in the classroom. He had a one-on-one aid and a tablet with communication software. Mark of course also played Speedball, but the game for this story is Fruit Basket, which is a version of musical chairs where one student in the center of the circle shares an opinion or question (we modify the game for different purposes) and students that agree or share the same question have to find a new chair, leaving one student without a chair who then starts the next round. It's a fun game that can be a bit chaotic as people look for chairs and work to listen to what the person in the middle is saying in the midst of all the excitement. If a student has already had a turn in the middle they can invite someone who hasn't had a turn yet (in my experience, younger children often want to be in the middle, older students don't want to be left in the middle). Every time we played, Mark was invited to go to the middle of the circle, which he happily did. His aid would help him phrase an opinion with his tablet communicator, and students would rush to find a new chair⁵. Mark, like Amy, enjoyed the shared activities with his classmates, but it was seeing how his peers made sure to invite him every time and waited patiently as he took a little more time to express his thoughts that made the biggest impression on myself, the teacher, and the one-on-one. It was clear evidence that a caring and inclusive community of inquiry was emerging, that the students were internalizing the idea that we were not in a rush (even though we were rushing about) because we were getting somewhere together.

⁵ It should be said that if Mark had not enjoyed Fruit Basket or didn't like looking for a new chair, we would have altered the game or done a different activity.

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The final story highlights the role of the teacher in creating a classroom environment that is not in a rush but definitely getting somewhere. A high school Japanese Language and Culture teacher invites students from the fully self-contained SPED classroom to join her Japanese I class once a week. These students learn Japanese self-introduction phrases, numbers and days, and practices popular in Japanese schools such as Radio Taisou. Once a week they also do a p4c inquiry about an aspect of culture, which the SPED students also join. It may seem that slowing down to include students in a course that is typically considered college preparatory would be counter-productive. However, it has improved the language learning for all students, most notably in their confidence to introduce themselves to visitors from Japan. Whether they are invited or actively raise their hand, the SPED students participate in the class inquiries, and pair up with the regularly enrolled students to practice their self-introductions, which make practice and participation easier for all students. Overcoming the stigmas surrounding disability and class participation have seemed to contribute to overcoming the self-conscious anxiety often associated with learning a foreign language.

While all the teachers mentioned in these stories are exemplary p4c teachers, fully incorporating p4cHI pedagogy into their practice, they are also highly aware that time is, in fact, limited during the school day. The lunch bells still ring, students have to go to recess or go to their next class. Not being in a rush does not mean that teachers and students forget about the very real time constraints within a school. They are able to effectively use the time they have to slow down the ever-present rush of getting to the next thing. This ability to not feel rushed then allows all students to grow at a pace appropriate to each, but often faster than they would grow if by themselves. What I have seen in so many of these classroom is that while not being in a rush is particularly good for SPED students, it's good for almost all the students in the community of inquiry.

3. “We begin where the community is at”

“We begin where the community is at” is almost a corollary of “we’re not in a rush.” Not being in a rush allows educators to recognize the appropriate starting point for their students with regard to the many skills and dispositions practiced in school. However, this phrase is also a reminder that in our rush for teaching and learning, we often jump into the deep end of the pool before we are confident in our ability to swim. Games, as mentioned above, are a way to practice “swimming.” Part of the reason they are so effective is that they are playful and relatively low-risk.

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Even though the focus of this paper is K-12 education, I have seen how bright university undergraduates are unwilling to speak if they think they are being put on the spot. This is even more true in the inclusion K-12 classrooms I have worked with. Expressing one's thinking with words is difficult. Being precise with one's language and providing relevant reasons is hard. When we ask students to do so, we are asking them to practice something that is likely very difficult for them. This difficulty is increased if they perceive the stakes as high (e.g., defending an idea that is part of their identity or sharing an opinion that may cause loss of social standing). Thus many of the highly effective p4c teachers I have worked with are masters of keeping things playful and keeping the initial barriers to participation low. The previously mentioned game of Fruit Basket allows students to share opinions or wonderings in the low-risk context of the game. The Good Idea/Bad Idea game similarly provides a low-risk context for students to explain their reasoning behind opinions. These and other games often provide practice appropriate for differing communication abilities. One young 2nd grader with a severe speech impairment was still able to be understood by her peers because the format of the activities provided a speech pattern that was easier to copy while adding her unique thoughts. And because we are playing together, other students try harder when listening and interpreting communication. Invitations to share reasoning and differing perspectives are also easier to accept if the student doesn't feel that they have to give a "right" answer. In a discussion about disability, for example, asking students whether people with different abilities should be treated differently is likely to elicit canned answers or students passing because they are worried about offending someone. However, if we use the movie *Zootopia* as an example, many students will excitedly offer genuine opinions and insights about difference and equity. Whether it is the mode of their participation or their genuine, effortful thinking, games and other low-risk invitations provide *all* students an opportunity to practice being an active participant in the community of inquiry.

This idea of beginning where the community is at is most evident in the SPED Pre-K classrooms I support. Many students are non-verbal or struggling with multiple sensory or physical challenges. One particularly memorable non-verbal student did not even point when trying to indicate something he wanted or wanted others to see. Our p4c sessions in this classroom are integrated into the other learning activities designed by the teacher. All activities are multi-modal, involving speech and movement, allowing students to practice a multitude of skills and knowledge. p4c is one of these activities. Some years we can make a community

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ball and get to share opinions, reasons and questions. Other years, developmental delays mean that we use another fun object in the classroom instead of making a community ball and we practice communicating with one another via fun sounds, pictures, or movements. Having a robust philosophical inquiry with a group of engaged participants is an extremely difficult endeavor. The cognitive, affective, and social skills required are considerable and unfortunately, many students do not get the opportunity to practice all these skills in their K-12 schooling. And if the mode in which they exercise these skills is outside what is considered “normal” (e.g., their speech is not easily understood, their thinking requires more time to become expressed through speech, they do not like to sit still, etc.), then their opportunities for practice are likely to be even more restricted. “Beginning where the community is at” is a recognition that we are all at different stages in practicing these skills and that it is more fruitful to find a way to practice together.

I would like to share another story that illustrates how beginning where the community is at and practicing together helps all students in the community of inquiry. There was a 5th grade student with Downs Syndrome, Ken, who had been doing p4c with his peers since he was in Kindergarten. He participated in the activities described above but his engagement in inquiries that might be recognized as “philosophical” was sporadic. His 5th grade teacher and his one-on-one aide had been very successful at trying a range of p4c activities with the class that Ken would actively participate in. He was more “connected” in his 5th grade year than I had seen him in previous years and this was possible because of developmental gains and a more mature and supportive peer group. Mid-year we were doing a “plain vanilla” and students were writing their questions on individual whiteboards. Ken’s question was initially a joke from the school lunch milk carton: what do you call a cow with no legs? Many students voted for Ken’s question because they recognized that Ken was being funny, and that it could also be a legitimate question, so Ken’s question became the start of our inquiry. After Ken explained his question and delivered the punchline -- beef -- an incredibly rich inquiry unfolded. We discussed what determines the boundary between something as an animal and food, between something that should be befriended or helped (should cows be given prosthetics?) and something that is consumed/used. We explored questions of disability, whether disability was a uniquely human property or could be applied to other beings. Throughout this inquiry, Ken remained active, raising his hand and getting the community ball several times. It was one of the inquiries that the students remember in our end-of-year reflection and used as an example of thinking

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philosophically. While the inquiry was a result that impressed the other visitors in the classroom (some university students), I saw it as an example of how beginnings matter. Ken had been fortunate to practice p4c since Kindergarten and had developed confidence in the skills associated with the community of inquiry. His 5th grade year had emphasized social connection and inclusive participation, empowering Ken as a philosophical peer. Ken's question, the beginning of our inquiry, was not dismissed by his peers (as might have been the case in other contexts because of his differences), nor by the teacher (as might have been the case in another classroom because it was a "joke" question). Thus, in the end, everyone benefited from the attention given to the beginnings that allowed the community of inquiry to be genuinely inclusive.

4. The p4c journey

Ken's story above is a snapshot of a journey I have seen many SPED students make in their years doing p4c. The story of Charlie speaks to the effects of not being in a rush and beginning where the community is at over the course of a K-12 career. I first met Charlie in the SPED Pre-K class mentioned above when she was 3 years old. As is often the case at that age, it is difficult to determine what may be long-term impairments and what may be developmental delays. From the teacher, I learned that Charlie was in a high risk home environment. However, because Charlie was fortunate to spend three years in a nurturing Pre-K classroom that didn't try to rush her development, by the time she entered Kindergarten at 6 years old she had caught up considerably with her peers. Her differences still often made her a target of teasing (and sometimes bullying) and her cognitive impairments/delays were still a source of concern for her teachers. However, because she had done p4c for three years in the SPED Pre-K classroom, she was more prepared than most of her peers for participating in a community of inquiry. P4c sessions became time when her strengths were recognized. I continued to see Charlie as she matriculated through elementary school into middle school. The pandemic interrupted in-person classroom support so there were two years I didn't see her in classes. Then I joined a high school English I class and was happy to see Charlie with a group of friends talking before class. While she struggles with the novel that the class was reading, she was still an active and thoughtful participant in the inquiry about the novel. The community of inquiry skills that she had been given time to practice and develop were helping her be successful in a "regular" class that was challenging, given her other cognitive differences. She continues to grow on her high school journey and is also taking Japanese with the

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teacher mentioned above. What is truly inspiring is that Charlie's story is just like many others. I have been fortunate to support Pre-K-12 p4c classrooms for the past decade and just saw another group of students I knew as Kindergarteners graduate high school. Even if they don't have p4c every year or in every class, they still carry these community of inquiry skills and dispositions with them. The p4cHI pedagogy has helped thousands of students and it's not just one group of students. Public K-12 students encompass the range of abilities, personalities, and life circumstances that make up our society. If we have aspirations for shaping a society in which we hope to thrive, then we must have a pedagogy that can adapt to all these differences.

5. Conclusion

People often ask me whether p4c can be done with special needs students. I hope this paper has provided an answer. But the question itself is worth revisiting because it reveals an assumption about p4c, most likely embedded in our associations with "philosophy." I don't disagree that philosophy is difficult, but instead of focusing on the difficulty of complex and highly abstract texts, or the difficulty of reasoning clearly, insightfully, and persuasively, I want to call attention to the difficulty of putting thoughts into words and thinking with other human beings (i.e., listening to others, incorporating their perspectives and reasons into one's own emerging understanding, and revisiting assumptions and ideas). Creating mental "shortcuts" (e.g., "so and so can be trusted") is necessary for making sense of the world. As C.T. Nguyen points out, these shortcuts create vulnerabilities. They may preclude the recognition of other perspectives and reasons in one's understanding of the world. Philosophy as an activity is a kind of mental flexibility training that can help us recognize our mental shortcuts and recognise when we need to make changes to them. But this is only true if the activity of philosophy isn't itself an echo chamber of individuals who all have a highly developed facility with language and other shared particularities. The 4th commitment of Makaiau and Miller's "Philosopher's Pedagogy" is Dewey's view of philosophy as the general theory of education. If education is intended to be fully and genuinely inclusive for all in our society, then our understanding of philosophy must also be so. If we rush to "dig into" the areas of philosophy that most interest us, or fail to recognize that the activity depends upon the practice of skills that may be exercised in different modes and according to different talents, then we limit philosophy from being something that becomes an integral part of public education. So when people ask whether students with special needs can do

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philosophy, then I worry that their conception of philosophy not only excludes those with special needs, but also fails to include most of us who don't have the relatively narrow set of skills and dispositions that characterize professional philosophers. Unfortunately I don't have a magic wand that can solve this problem, but I do think that some simple pedagogical reminders can go a long way.

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