# Using Philosophy for/with Children in Initial Teacher Education as a pedagogical approach to challenge neoliberalism in education

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## Abstract:

The effects of the last forty years of political movement in England have been an inexorable move towards a standards-based and marketized system of teacher education (Menter *et al.*, 2017). Current performative education policies, influenced by prevailing neoliberal tenets, have also redefined the model of a teacher, to one whose purpose is to deliver knowledge to largely passive students (Hardy & Lewis, 2017; Strom & Martin, 2017). This reinforces a particular conceptualisation of education, as articulated in Freire's (1996) banking education, with knowledge seen as an objective and quantifiable content to be disseminated (Freire, 1996; Strom & Martin, 2017).

Likewise, this impacts on initial teacher education (ITE), as this model presumes that ITE is concerned with transferring a body of knowledge to its student teachers, that can subsequently be passed on, unmodified, to their pupils (Strom & Martin, 2017).

This chapter will advocate Philosophy for Children (P4wC) as a form of problem-posing critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996) to be explored with student teachers as an antidote or challenge to neoliberal educational narratives. The suggestion will be that P4wC can both encourage philosophical dialogue and critical thinking in education seminars, but also can provide a pedagogical model for student teachers to enact in the primary classroom, to challenge narrow and reductionist performative agendas, and encourage democratic teaching and learning environments.

## Introduction

Over the past forty years, studies show an increasingly close relationship between the world of politics and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (Menter *et al.*, 2017). This chapter will briefly explore the history of ITE in England, considering the impact of changing political agendas and their influence on practice in primary education. It will be argued that the neoliberal narrative prevalent in the English education system has significant parallels with the banking concept of education described by Freire (1996). The consequence of such an agenda can be seen in increased passivity in students and a re-imagining of the role of the teacher (Childs & Mender, 2013; Love, 2021).

Freire's (1996) vision of problem-posing education will be considered, alongside possible implications for ITE. The possibility of using Philosophy for/with Children (P4wC) in ITE as a form of problem-posing education to challenge neoliberal performativity will be discussed. The suggestion being, that this can concurrently strengthen the student teacher's teacher identity, political literacy and educational values (Love, 2019, 2021). This chapter will conclude that P4wC can both encourage philosophical dialogue and thinking in education seminars, alongside providing a pedagogical model for student teachers to enact in the primary classroom, to challenge narrow and reductionist performative agendas, and encourage democratic teaching and learning environments.

## The history of Initial Teacher Education

Studies show an increasing correlation between the world of politics and education. In England, prior to 1970, there was professional autonomy for teacher educators, schools and teachers with regard to curriculum and pedagogy, this however changed with the ensuing Conservative and (New) Labour governments who sought to conform and reform education (Hill, 2007).

Teacher education in England has undergone three distinct phases since the mid-1970s (Menter *et al.*, 2017). The first phase (1970s -1984) saw a focus on 'professionalisation' (Menter *et al.*, 2017:622), which called for teaching to become an all-graduate profession, emphasising the importance of continuing learning for teachers. Concerns over the quality of educational provision were raised, ushering in an era of accountability and an end to the autonomous professional education community (Ranson, 2003). The second phase (1980s - 2010) saw increased intervention in teacher education; typified as a time of 'standardisation and diversification' (Menter *et al.*, 2017:623). Standardisation signified tighter control and the establishment of particular standards against which beginning teachers were to be judged; diversification related to the new philosophy regarding teacher training, which encouraged school-led routes into teaching, minimalising input from higher education institutions (Childs & Mender, 2013). This reflected the governmental view that educational research, theory and university influences were suspect (Hill, 2007). ITE was deemed to be 'too important to be left in the hands of academics and teacher educators' (Mor, 2018:11). This then heralded the final phase of teacher education (2010 - present), that of 'marketisation'; which claimed that opening up education to market-style competition, would improve the quality of provision of teacher education (Menter *et al.*, 2017:624).

In effect there has been an inexorable move towards a standards-based approach and marketized system of teacher education. This is coupled with a dismantling of traditional

higher educational ITE routes, in favour of an increasing proliferation of 'schools reproducing teachers 'in their own image'' (Menter *et al.*, 2017:625).

## Neoliberal Influences and Impacts on Education

Neoliberalism as a concept is frequently deployed in educational literature; however, rarely are the nuances of this notion defined. Rowlands and Rawolle (2013) suggest that neoliberalism and neoliberal are often used as a 'catch-all explanation for anything negative' (p261), particularly related to perceived right-wing phenomena. Advocates argue that neoliberalism merely encourages healthy competition amongst individuals and institutions, releasing them from progress-hindering social responsibilities, yet there is a concern that neoliberalism relinquishes too much authority to the state (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). Neoliberalism, as conceptualised in this chapter, relates to the propagation of an ideology that promotes and prioritises the economy of the free market, individualisation and competition (Hill, 2007). This conceptualisation has been influenced by the writings of Freire, whose position regarding 'the scourge of neoliberalism' (1998:22) was unflinching, considering it an immobilising ideology that disempowered individuals, encouraging their acquiescence to state-imposed will.

A particular concern about neoliberalism and its effects on education, is the associated promotion of performativity. Educators claim that the competitiveness inherent in performativity has infiltrated education so successfully that it is now the dominant narrative (Raymond, 2018). This has far-reaching implications; failure to "perform" adequately in this competition has seen teachers under threat of dismissal and children labelled as failures at the age of six (Bradbury, 2019).

Proponents argue that justifiable reasons underpinned the move away from the permissive education structure of the 1960s and 1970s, namely that schools and teachers must be held accountable for the education that they provide. The concern is, however, that this move has gone too far, resulting in over-controlled schools, teachers and teacher educators, to the detriment of the pupils, the teachers and the schools (Keddie, 2017).

**The Banking Concept of Education**

There are significant parallels with the banking education approach Freire (1996) describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and that of current performative educational models. The banking model of teaching advocates prescribed knowledge to be deposited into the minds of pupils by the teachers. Freire proposed that this creates a dependency culture and passivity in pupils, leading students to stop critically engaging in the world around them, meekly accepting and adapting to the worldview presented to them by society. Knowledge is seen as a gift 'bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' (Freire, 1996:53), perpetuating an imbalance of power regarding knowledge and ignorance, and negating any understanding of education and knowledge as processes of enquiry. Consequently, Freire considered this model of education as so engrained that it unintentionally becomes a means to perpetuate oppression and inequality.

Oppression can take many forms. At one end of the continuum, overt manifestations of oppression may marginalise whole sections of society, excluding them from education. In its opposite manifestation, oppression can take a more subtle form, including conscious or unconscious ignorance, shaped, or even constrained, by 'social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics and norms' (Breunig, 2016:979). Freire (2007:3) argued that an 'awakening to oppression' was part of the role and duty of the educator, with ITE providers

responsible for deliberately exploring such issues with their students, alongside critically engaging in dialogue with alternative visions or purposes of education.

**Impact in Initial Teacher Education**

Freire (1996) proposed that neoliberal education promotes and maintains a culture of silence, which perpetuates a lethargy and ignorance on the part of the oppressed (in this case student teachers), resulting in a lack of critical engagement. Research with student teachers about the impact of politics on education exposed their limited understanding or even engagement in this area (Love, 2021). It would be wrong, however, to suggest that students are not politically aware or concerned. Whilst popular media and politicians are quick to disparage or deride the actions of young people (Giroux, 2006), recent campaigns such as *#MeToo*, *Extinction Rebellion* and *Black Lives Matter* demonstrate that although young people might be disillusioned with mainstream political debate, this does not mean they are apolitical (Pontes *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, young people have been animated by these issues and have raised their voices in response to societal injustices. It is my contention that the lack of awareness demonstrated by the students concerning the politicisation of education, is due to an absence of opportunities to engage in such discussions in ITE.

If ITE is to encourage a vision of education that is a 'subversive force' (Freire, 1996:11), that champions the disadvantaged and seeks to liberate and emancipate, it must challenge students to critically examine the current education system and engage more explicitly with the political landscape of education. Schools and universities have recently been criticised for becoming involved in political debate (Murray, 2020). However, Freire (1998) exhorted educators to resist pressure for them to take a neutral stance, claiming that discussions of *conscientização* (critical consciousness) are fundamental considerations for education.

This feels a pertinent consideration for education in England, as recent government directives have forbidden schools from the use of agencies that might suggest that 'that requirements of English civil or criminal law may be disregarded whether for political or religious reasons or otherwise' (Department for Education, 2020:online) - specifically this has been suggested to include groups such as *Stonewall* and *Extinction Rebellion*. In addition, this government guidance instructs schools against the teaching of narratives that they say promote 'divisive or victim narratives that are harmful to British society' (online) - here this is said to be linked to the *Black Lives Matter* movement, alongside issues such as white privilege and anti-capitalism narratives (Busby, 2020). This heavy-handed, potentially oppressive or censoring approach from the government hints at a dystopian direction that is being pursued.

## Possible Solution: Embracing Problem-Posing Education through Philosophy for/with Children

Considering then the current educational landscape in England, what role might ITE have to play in presenting an alternative vision for education, to develop educators who are politically literate and empowered to challenge not only the restrictive impact of neoliberalism, but the ever-constricting directives that are imposed from the government? If the current generation of students are not cognisant of alternative democratic and emancipatory approaches to education (Kilderry, 2015; Keddie, 2017), it could be argued that ITE is not only a key opportunity to encourage student teachers to 'critically examine the ideological nature of teaching and the nature of teachers' work' (Hill, 2007:215), but actually a necessity. It is my contention that embracing problem-posing education, as conceptualised by Freire (1996) is one possible solution.

### Problem-Posing Education as an alternative vision

Critical pedagogy encourages teachers and students to critically examine and evaluate the power structures of society, education and authority, with the aim of challenging inequality and promoting social transformation (Freire, 1996). Freire proposed that neoliberal educational models needed to be challenged in praxis; as suggested in his vision for problem-posing education. This liberatory approach challenges the traditional paradigm of the knower (the expert/teacher) and those who need to know (the student) (Kohan, 2018), so that new conceptualisations of teachers and learners are formed, 'teacher-student with students-teachers' (Freire, 1996:61). While there will be inevitable inequalities that arise from the adult's greater experience and knowledge, the role of the teacher fundamentally changes, from the authoritative source of truth model, to that of a facilitator of learning (Funston, 2017). This aligns closely with the model of the teacher-facilitator in P4wC practice.

A key characteristic of this model is its dialogic approach, rooted in humility, trust and hope (Freire, 1994, 1996). Freire's emphasis on dialogue contains the belief that every individual is capable of critically engaging with others in dialogue about the world in which they live. Freirean dialogue is embedded with critical thinking and there is a call to action, a challenge to oppose dominant forces and an expectation and hope that a more democratic, just and egalitarian world is possible (Freire, 1994; Kizel, 2017).

**Philosophy for/with Children as a form of Critical Pedagogy and Problem-Posing Education**

It is my contention that the pedagogy of P4wC is resonant with critical pedagogy (CP) and problem-posing education. Kohan (2018) describes how there have been many attempts to clarify a relationship between Lipman and Freire, due to the apparent methodological and theoretical similarities, shared ideas around dialogue and the mutual emphasis on the social construction of knowledge. He cautions however, that despite the similarities between the

two approaches, there are clear distinctions. Kohan notes the dominant theme of ideologies and politics in Freire's writing, and the absence of any method or clear model to which he would ascribe (in comparison with the methodology practised in P4wC).

Gregory (2019) proposes that P4wC scholars are divided about its efficacy as a form of CP. On the one hand there are those who feel P4wC is antithetical or inadequate as a form of CP. Kohan (2018) discusses P4wC's reluctance to overtly engage in political action or questions of in/justice. He states that though Freire emphatically challenged neutrality, P4wC has 'failed in this regard' (Kohan, 2018:626). In part, Kohan (2018) suggests, this is to do with conceptualisations of the P4wC teacher as a neutral, impartial facilitator.

Alternatively, there are those who see P4wC as a potential form of critical pedagogy. Kizel (2015) proposes that careful choice of texts as stimuli in the Community of Enquiry (CoE) can raise political themes such as poverty, which can help students to develop *conscientização* (Freire, 1996). Thus, Gregory (2019) suggests, there is the potential that the CoE can move from dialogue to politically significant action.

This leaves the final group who ascribe to the stance that P4wC is already aligned with critical pedagogy. Gregory (2019) sees the CoE as an ideal environment for recognising and challenging ideology of all kinds. His assertion is that involving students in dialogical thinking, where they deliberate collaboratively on issues such as justice, truth, and freedom, can introduce ideas of social criticism. Gregory maintains that the CoE, where dialogue replaces teacher monologue, and power is shared, fulfils Freire's (1996) vision for problem-posing education. Where this happens, Gregory suggests, education can become an emancipatory tool.

Kohan provokes us to consider 'the political potential of P4C' (2018:627). He asserts that currently this potential is not actualised in P4wC, arguing that being interested in democracy and social justice it is not enough. In Kohan's (2018:627) view, it is time for P4wC

practitioners 'to begin to walk differently'. Funston (2017:2) offers a conceptualisation of P4wC that he terms *Critical P4C*. This synthesis of CP and P4wC has, he claims, the capacity to engage critically with issues of agency and freedom that are key tenets of critical pedagogy, offering authentic strategies to dialogue around social issues and the lived experience of students (Funston, 2017). Likewise, Kizel (2016, 2018) proposes that P4wC envisages children as political beings capable of social critique and transformation. This vision of P4wC aligns with the original purpose and aims as proposed by Lipman and Sharp, specifically that it had a political dimension.

Kizel (2016) expounds that Lipman's thinking was built on the belief that the CoE might enable the community not only to identify societal problems, but also collaboratively propose solutions. Kizel (2016) suggests that the goal of encouraging activism through the CoE is to enable the participants to find meaning in their lives, through their philosophical discussion, asking of questions and the expectation of reasonableness and justification of opinions.


**P4wC and ITE**

I believe that ITE should play a greater role in encouraging greater critical debate around dominant educational narratives. Encouraging P4wC in ITE as a form of problem-posing critical pedagogy can provide a means to challenge neoliberal performativity, whilst concurrently strengthening the student teacher's teacher identity, political literacy and educational values (Love, 2019).

Murris *et al.* (2009) argue that the pedagogy of P4wC can play a useful role in Higher Education in general and ITE specifically, as a pedagogical approach for engaging students in collaborative, creative, caring and critical thinking on any number of topics, as well as to enhance and deepen the student learning experience. They reported that where P4wC had

been used in university seminars, the feedback from students had been similar to that seen in school classrooms, namely:

> more profound engagement with the subject at hand, increased tolerance of and appreciation of new ideas, rise in self-confidence, better questioning and responsive listening, more creative and thoughtful writing (Murris *et al.*, 2009:online).

My own experience has echoed this, ITE students' feedback from P4wC modules has been overwhelmingly positive, stating that it has challenged their thinking in new ways, developed their Socratic questioning, and impacted significantly on their teacher identity (Love, 2016, 2019).

The CoE can provide a useful learning environment in ITE to engage in diverse questions around education; for example, discussing democratic approaches to the classroom, a re-imagined role as teacher-facilitator or questions around power dynamics (Murris *et al.*, 2009; Haynes & Murris, 2011; Love, 2021). Equally, research has shown that engaging in a CoE can help to develop reflective practice amongst student teachers (Haynes & Murris, 2011; Demissie, 2015). The structure and environment encouraged by the CoE can provide opportunities to challenge dominant mind-sets, philosophies and even the role of the teacher (Haynes & Murris, 2011; Anderson, 2016). Baumfield (2016:125) stresses that the CoE is a 'powerful pedagogical strategy in its own right' and suggests that used effectively, it has the capacity to be a 'radical challenge to power, status and conventional knowledge.' It is my contention that P4wC provides vital opportunities for student teachers to critically consider and reflect on their practice, their values, and beliefs about education, and can have a transformative impact on their teacher identity (Love, 2019).

## Conclusion

Discussions with student teachers in my institution confirms the suggestion that younger teachers not only are less cognisant of the intricacies of neoliberal discourse, but also are less likely to resist performative agendas, preferring instead to opt for the familiar narrative that they themselves were educated under (Kilderry, 2015; Keddie, 2017). My contention is that Freire's (1996) rejection of neutral education is pivotal for ITE, and ITE providers are doing their student teachers a disservice if they do not adequately expose them to alternative narratives, to ensure that they are making reasoned, well-informed decisions. I propose that ITE could, and indeed should, provide opportunities for discussion and debate around the neoliberal educational culture and its ensuing performative discourse, as well as engaging with alternative views of education.

Specifically, one key recommendation is for ITE to engage more explicitly with the political dimension of education. In the current climate, where universities, amongst other organisations, are being challenged to take part in critical self-examination to ensure they are championing diversity and standing up for rights of all people, it could be argued that now is the time for ITE to more explicitly champion student teachers as advocates of social justice and transformation of the oppressed. If teaching is to be more than dissemination of information, then ITE must decide how that can be achieved in contrast to the narrative that is dominating education. Exiting the global pandemic, no aspect of our culture is expected to remain unchanged (Holcombe, 2020), arguably creating an opportunity to re-evaluate current practices. Movements such as *#Metoo*, *Black Lives Matter*, climate change awareness, and LGBTQ+ rights indicate the rising trend of grass-roots social justice and political advocacy, the influence of which will undoubtably be felt by student teachers.

Such a radical movement against the tides of this dominating force will need to be

courageous and assured, I propose that it is the role of ITE to nurture courageous and assured

student teachers, and one such way is to embed a critical pedagogy approach such as P4wC.

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