

Passion and commitment in action

Primary Ethics
program review 2022-23



THINK · REASON · DISCUSS

Primary
ETHICS

Primary Ethics offers an ambitious program of ethics education

In Term 4 of 2022, Primary Ethics conducted a review of our ethics education program – we sent a team of trainers and classroom support officers to observe 81 ethics lessons in 76 primary schools.

Our ethics education program

Primary Ethics offers an ambitious program of ethics education. We train volunteers who need no previous teaching experience or knowledge of philosophical ethics to deliver lessons to classes of 8-to-22 children in schools across NSW.

We supply our thousands of volunteers with constantly reviewed and updated lesson scripts. We maintain several lively communications channels and offer many levels of feedback and support. Yet it's possible that an ethics volunteer could train online and then have no further close contact with the organisation, other than downloading lessons each week and renewing each year.

Aims of the review

After 11 years of successfully running an expanding program, this review aimed to take a close look at our people and program in action in classrooms.

With this program review, we asked ourselves:

- Are the skills and techniques taught in our training program being retained and successfully put into practice by volunteers?
- Do we need to make changes to our training program?
- Do the volunteer teachers think the approaches they've been taught work well for them – or not?

We also asked:

- What is the overall quality of the ethics lessons observed?

What does our program aim for in each ethics lesson?

For our review to investigate the overall quality of the ethics lessons observed, we needed a clear picture of the ideal excellent, high-quality ethics lesson our training, curriculum and support structures aim for.

Community of inquiry

Our program aims to train volunteer teachers to facilitate a community of inquiry in each lesson in which students, even of kindergarten age, will work together to explore an ethical problem, build on one another's ideas and develop well-reasoned responses to the questions raised in the lesson.

Primary Ethics community of inquiry

Our lesson materials

- Stories and scenarios on a range of topics
- questions with no easy/straightforward answer
- balance of philosophical perspectives

in combination with our ethics teachers

- who bring the stories and scenarios to life
- create a sense of curiosity about topic and questions
- facilitate discussion of questions
- model the inquiry process, and
- remain neutral

We teach the foundational teacher skills of anchoring, asking for reasons, opening input to others.

We teach techniques in organising the class and the lesson, as well as in proactive and reactive behaviour management.

We provide high quality lesson scripts, which have been through extensive expert development and are approved as age-appropriate by the Department of Education.

Ideally, the skills and techniques employed by the volunteer ethics teacher, in conjunction with the script, enable a high-functioning student community of inquiry to come into being. This is what our program review looked for.

... prompt students to

- express their own views and reasons for holding them
- consider and engage with a range of views
- judge whether the reasons they and others have are good reasons (ie. relevant, logical, supported by evidence)
- think about important ethical concepts, including intentions, circumstances, consequences and what contributes to good character
- empathise with people in different situations

... which helps students develop skills in

- collaborative inquiry
- critical thinking
- ethical reasoning.



Our four areas of investigation

Our team of observers was asked to focus on four areas:

- How well are teachers sticking to the script?
- How engaged are students?
- Are students being disruptive?
- How well is the community of inquiry functioning?

Our findings

- Our ethics program is in **very good health** – our approach is effective at creating communities of inquiry that foster critical thinking and ethical reasoning in students of all ages
- Student engagement was seen to be **very high**
- Our foundational teacher skills – anchoring, asking for reasons, opening to others – correlate, as hoped, with a **good quality community of inquiry**
- More than half of all lessons observed were rated **good or higher in all four** categories, 18% were **excellent in all four**.
- Only a small number were rated not acceptable in one or more categories, indicating an area of **potential improvement**, not only for that teacher, with our support, but also for our training program.

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Investigative question 1: How well are teachers sticking to the script?

The script: We provide lesson scripts to our ethics teachers and ask them to follow these carefully. The script provides not only the stories and scenarios, but a range of questions to ask and directions for managing activities. The scripts are developed by experts and approved for age-appropriateness by the Department of Education.

Finding

Around 80% of the observed teachers were rated excellent or satisfactory on sticking to the script.

However:

- 31% of teachers asked their own questions at least once in a lesson
- 28% of teachers skipped a question at least once
- 26% of teachers went off script and introduced their own commentary on the lesson – even if only briefly.



Why does sticking to the script matter?

The review found that going off script correlated with an overall poor community of inquiry.

Going off script:

- detracts from the carefully scripted progression of ideas in each curriculum topic
- A teacher re-framing a prepared question can limit student thinking and rein in their free-flowing discussion.

Sticking to the script:

- Protects the teacher from inadvertently raising challenging and inappropriate issues or giving offense
- Enables the pedagogical expertise within the lessons to really shine. There is so much that teachers need to do – they must trust the material and focus energy on facilitating rich and productive discussions.

What are we doing in response to this finding?

- We've built an increased focus into our training courses on the need to stick to the script.
- We have three videos in production, which delve into what exactly sticking to or going off script entails, plus why it's so important that all volunteer teachers keep to the script for their own protection as well as enabling the highest quality community of inquiry for their students.



Investigative question 2: How engaged were the ethics students?

Engagement

When students are engaged, they are seen to be:

- On task
- Listening to each other
- Keen to speak
- Building on the ideas in the script and from other students.

Finding

The ethics students in these classes were highly engaged! An excellent 78% of lessons were rated excellent or satisfactory for student engagement.

This is a very positive reflection on the quality of our scripts and the techniques used by teachers to model curiosity, give positive feedback and enable participation by all students.

Not surprisingly, this result correlates very closely to the third area of investigation.

Portrait of an excellent lesson observed in the review

- The teacher didn't skip or modify the script or add material.
- Students considered and/or contributed to the topic, engaged with others' reasons and different views. Overall, the discussion resulted in a deep and nuanced treatment of the topic.
- Students were deeply engaged and enthusiastic in the lesson.
- Students were on-task and following directions. Interruptions to learning were rare.

Investigative question 3: How effective are our classroom management strategies?

Our ethics teachers are trained to set up a lesson routine, help their class to understand and follow the discussion rules and to employ verbal and organisational techniques to manage fidgety, inattentive or disruptive behaviour.

In looking at how effective our classroom management strategies are, our observers looked at:

- how on-task students were or, alternatively, whether they were disruptive, dangerous or disrespectful
- whether and how ethics teachers employed the behaviour management strategies they've been trained in
- how effective the classroom management strategies taught in our new-teacher training workshops were when teachers did use them.

Finding

A very good 77% of classes were rated excellent or good in terms of student behaviour, indicating most students were on-task and followed directions most of the time and that teacher behaviour management strategies were used effectively to minimise student disruption in the majority of lessons.

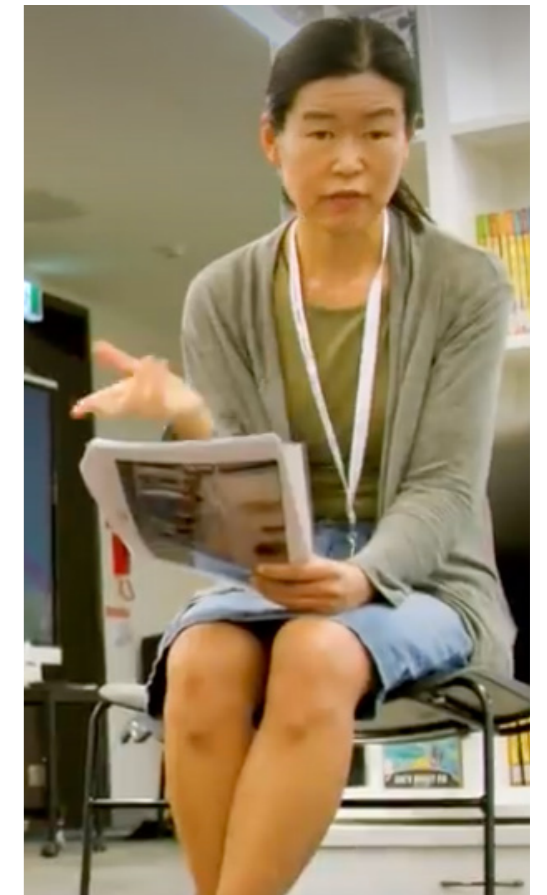
However, the observers noted that a number of teachers ignored or missed off-task behaviour and more than half our teachers did not give any praise to students (to be clear, we suggest praise for making a contribution, never praise for the idea put forward).

What are we doing in response?

We realise we need more work and support for teachers on classroom management – proactive and reactive. Offering extra support on this will not only help teachers feel more confident and able to enjoy their role, but also impact on student engagement and discussion quality for the better.

- A key response is the development of short courses that will target proactive and reactive classroom management strategies
- We will schedule more online webinars from the Classroom Support Team on classroom management strategies
- Another key response is to increase the number of in-person Classroom Support Team visits, as we know this in-person support is best for classroom management issues.

Most of the recommendations arising from this program review will positively impact on classroom management.



Investigative question 4: How well is the community of inquiry functioning?

A high-functioning, high-quality community of inquiry in each lesson is our ideal (as outlined on page 2.)

Finding

This review found that how well the community of inquiry was functioning in a lesson was intrinsically related to the other areas of investigation – sticking to the script, behaviour management and student engagement.

Around 73% of lessons observed were rated very good or satisfactory on the functioning of the community of inquiry.

Some findings in this area, however, surprised us:

- 80% of teachers didn't display (or refer to) the discussion rules
- 66% didn't give students any thinking time in response to questions
- 65% didn't encourage students to make connections between ideas
- 39% paraphrased students
- 16% didn't sit students (or themselves) in a circle.

Discussion rules

- 1 Only one person speaks at a time
- 2 Pay attention to the person who is speaking
- 3 Build on other people's ideas
- 4 Speak to other students, not just the teacher
- 5 No put downs

Why does this matter?

The discussion rules and circle are foundational elements of the structure that facilitates a Primary Ethics community of inquiry. The rules are a roadmap for how to participate. When students and teacher sit in a circle, everyone is positioned as equal, everyone can see each other, students are more likely to speak to one another (not just the teacher) and the teacher can easily monitor the whole class and proactively manage disruptive behaviour and so on.

Thinking time and being encouraged to build on others' ideas are also intrinsic to a quality ethics lesson in which students together think about an ethical issue.

We're tough on ourselves – even when a community of inquiry misses top ranking in our assessments, students still leave with positive lesson outcomes.

What are we doing in response?

In 2023, we're sending all teachers a durable copy of the discussion rules for them to display in their classes. We've also made a short video about the new streamlined rules and the importance of displaying and referring to them in lessons. Feedback indicates this has already seen a big increase in use of the rules by teachers.

We are placing further emphasis during training on the importance of sitting with your students in a circle for the most engaging community of inquiry. We are looking at ways to extend that for already active teachers.



Although our major focus was on the main four areas of investigation, our review uncovered some other interesting – and some unexpected – findings.

Was a Department of Education teacher present? Yes, in 80% of classes a school teacher was in the room – this was more likely in the younger grades. Having that teacher present correlated with better engagement and behaviour.

Lesson duration: Most lessons had 25-30 minutes of teaching time, which is about right.

Class size of 22+: Although 22 is our recommended maximum, some classes went over this. The review of those classes found that if there is enough space for the students to sit in a circle and if the teacher is able to manage class behaviour well themselves, the lesson is not negatively impacted by having extra students.

Years of experience: There was no significant correlation found in our volunteers between years of teaching experience, quality of lessons and use of teaching skills.

However, new teachers were seen to be more likely to display the rules; they were also more prone to ignore unsafe behaviour amongst and to move on from a question without taking enough responses.

Longer-time teachers were observed giving praise more frequently and using a classroom routine more effectively but were also more likely to go off script.

Response from teachers selected for the review: Our observers reported that the teachers were overwhelmingly positive about having them in the room. We recognise that this, alongside their personal feedback, indicates our volunteers' strong desire for in-person support and engagement. This is something we have taken to heart from the review.

A synopsis of teacher feedback:

- The curriculum is of high quality and enjoyable to teach, although some noted that stories can be too long and some questions feel repetitive
- They express the need for more training and ongoing support in classroom management
- They find think-pair-shares difficult to run
- Some report feeling isolated after training.

What we learnt – a snapshot

The review found that our ethics program is in excellent health and largely living up to our considerable ideals. The skills and techniques taught in our training program, in combination with our excellent curriculum, are successfully translating in most lessons into communities of inquiry that foster critical thinking and ethical reasoning in students of all ages.

There was a very high level of student – and also teacher – engagement. We had extremely useful feedback from the 81 teachers in the review about what works well for them and what doesn't.

These areas require more emphasis in our training:

- Closely following the script
- Classroom management techniques
- Use of the discussion rules in every lesson
- Sit in a circle in every lesson
- Give thinking time after questions
- Echo, don't paraphrase
- Open the question to others after the initial response
- How to run think-pair-shares.

One more thing...

A huge thank you to the 81 volunteer teachers who were selected to be observed teaching ethics – your passion, commitment, effort and opinions are the foundation of this review.

Recommendations for our training and curriculum team:

- Develop short courses and resources (including videos and podcasts) that focus on the identified areas, which would form a training resource library for existing teachers
- Update the Ethics Teacher Handbook and teacher training courses to better emphasise and support the identified areas
- Set a maximum period between completion of training and beginning teaching
- Increase the number of in-person lesson observations by the Classroom Support Team
- Conduct a program review at least every two years to monitor program quality and the efficacy of the proposed measures.



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