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The Effect of the P4C Initiative on Primary School Students' Learning and Social Outcomes

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigated its impact on reading comprehension, math interest, self-esteem, pro-social behavior, and emotional well-being. **Methods**: This study used a longitudinal time series quasi-experimental design involving an experimental group and a matched comparison group. Participants in this study were two hundred and eighty children (149 intervention group, 131 comparison group) from eight state primary schools in the Southeast Queensland region. The research sample consisted of 48% (n=135) girls and 52% (n=145) boys all in Grade 6 (with an age range of 10-12 years). **Results**: Results showed improvements in reading comprehension, decreased interest in mathematics and self-esteem, while pro-social behavior and emotional well-being remained unchanged among COI program participants compared to non-participants. **Conclusion**: The COI philosophical intervention found improvements in reading comprehension but reduced interest in mathematics and self-esteem, with no changes in pro-social behavior and emotional well-being in the Year 6 group of students compared to those who did not receive the COI intervention. The COI's philosophical focus primarily on language may have led to significant increases in reading comprehension over time and significant decreases in interest in mathematics among these Grade 6 participants. Pre-service teachers who aspire to become philosophical COI facilitators need to be encouraged to develop their ability to examine and identify the personal characteristics, beliefs and attitudes that influence the way they think about teaching and learning.

Keywords: *elementary school, philosophy, mathematics.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the National Assessment for Plan in Australian schools, there has been an increased focus on the academic achievement of primary school children, driven by increased public interest in school outcomes. At the same time, the increasing prevalence of mental health problems has underscored the importance of addressing emotional well-being in primary school children, coupled with ongoing mental health problems (Brown & Shay, 2021; Silver & Zinsser, 2020). Concerns about bullying, so there needs to be an increased emphasis on teaching pro-social behavior. Various independent programs, such as You Can Do It, Friends Program, and Aussie Optimism, have been implemented in schools to improve individual academic achievement and emotional well-being (Subasno et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021; Gomide et al., 2022).

Other programs have also been implemented, such as Philosophy for Children (P4C) which stands out for its potential benefits on academic outcomes and emotional well-being (Andal, 2020). These educational programs are designed to stimulate students' contemplation of philosophical questions and emphasize ethical, aesthetic, and logical inquiry (Kumar, 2023; Saputri, 2024). This gives students the opportunity to explore issues from multiple perspectives. The Community of Inquiry (COI) philosophy is characteristic of the broader P4C program (Poulton, 2022; Austin, 2020). However, existing research reveals conflicting results regarding the impact of P4C programs on students' academic performance and affective domains (Asgari et al., 2023; Ventista, 2021).

Therefore, the main aim of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the Community of Inquiry (COI) philosophical intervention. This study aims to systematically observe and measure the impact of the intervention on elementary school students, specifically examining aspects such as reading comprehension, interest in mathematics, self-esteem, pro-social behavior and emotional well-being.

Various researchers have examined the effects of the P4C program on reading comprehension, following in the footsteps of investigations of the role of classroom discussions in improving reading comprehension (Bhurekeni, 2021). Setyosari et al., (2020) study investigated the impact of a philosophical COI program on an experimental group of students who were exposed to a total of 18 40-minute sessions over nine weeks and found that students’ reading comprehension scores were higher for the philosophical COI group than for peer groups not engaged in the program. The effects of the program were still evident two and a half years later. Furthermore, compared with traditional instruction. Khanmohammadi et al., (2020) found that the P4C program significantly improved the reading comprehension scores of 319, 4th to 6th grade African American students in a suburban area with low SES over a period of 24 weeks. Using a sample of 100 students aged 11 years, Safriyani & Mustofa, (2021) also found that the P4C approach improved students’ general reading comprehension of all levels of ability compared to a sample of students traditionally taught.

However, other studies have not found the P4C program benefited students’ reading comprehension. Siddiqui et al., (2022) study focused on 5-year-old students and used a whole class approach using the ‘Philosophy of Teaching with Picture Books’ as a stimulus for discussion. Six schools in this study used two interventions (P4C and reading activities), six other schools used reading activities alone with a small group of children who were 'at risk' of experiencing reading difficulties, and a third group consisting of six schools did not carry out the intervention. The schools were randomly selected, balanced in terms of size and whether

the language of instruction was Welsh or English. Standard tests of analysis of reading errors and reading comprehension yielded no evidence of differences between groups. The main limitation of this study is that no details were provided about the statistical analysis..

The effects of P4C have also been investigated in relation to students' attitudes to mathematics (Isiklar & Abali Öztürk, 2022). Li et al., (2021) conducted an experiment that explored the affective dimension of learning mathematics. Quantitative and qualitative results indicated from this study that the philosophical approach helped students aged 9 to 12 avoid developing more negative attitudes towards mathematics. A further experiment by Gilbert et al., (2022) was carried out over most of a school year, with five classes in grades four, five and six (ages 9 to 12) involved in a community of enquiry and five classes as control in French schools in Quebec. It was found that students in the control groups experienced far less pleasure when doing mathematics, and also felt less involved in the subject, than those in the experimental groups.

It has also been claimed that the self-esteem of elementary school students is enhanced by involvement with P4C. A Canadian study conducted by Pala, (2022) explored the effects of participation in a P4C program on student self-esteem. The experimental group comprised 124 students and the control group 96 students. The teachers involved received 12 hours pre-project training and 4 days training during the 5-month period of the research. On the Piers-Harris self-esteem test, philosophy students showed an overall statistically significant gain in self-esteem compared to students in the control group. The largest gains in self- esteem were with students with the lowest pre-test self-esteem, while those with high self-esteem actually showed a relative loss compared with the controls. Participating in a philosophical community of inquiry does not appear to enable all students in such a program to develop an improved self-image.

To study the effects of P4C on children's pro-social behaviour, Asgari et al., (2023) used a pre/post-controlled intervention study of P4C with 133 ethnically diverse students in five South Australian elementary schools for two terms (6-months). The pre/post questionnaire tested students' justificatory thinking abilities and dispositions. It was found that a philosophical COI intervention led to growth in the participants' ability and disposition to consider issues empathetically and to weigh consequences for all concerned. P4C has also been described as a pedagogical vehicle by which students in the school community can address the attributes essential for a successful bullying intervention by promoting empathy, caring and respect and working toward rectifying the imbalance that exists between bullies and their victims in an effort to begin to readdress bullying behaviour. However, Bhurekeni, (2021) looked at the effects of a philosophical COI program on bullying comparing students' selfreports on bullying between schools with and without a Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach. A sample of 35 students exposed to a philosophical COI and a matched sample of 35 students in other schools between the ages of 10 and 13 completed the Student Bullying Survey. A higher percentage of P4C school students claimed to have both been face- to-face bullied and bullied others face-to-face in the year of the study than matched students at other schools with both groups showing similar involvement in cyberbullying.

Finally, P4C involvement has been shown to enhance elementary students' emotional wellbeing. Khanmohammadi et al., (2020) investigated the effects of P4C on student emotional literacy; that is skills in self-awareness, emotional resilience, motivation, and handling of emotions and relationships. It was found that parents reported a significant increase in their children's emotional intelligence in the experimental group as compared to the control group.

However, some studies have found that students who were generally negative about learning philosophy had little understanding of why they were doing philosophy, and girls progressively lost interest in the program.

Not only are there inconsistent results of the P4C program on children's academic achievement and emotional well-being, the studies are dated and often do not present their statistical analysis. Furthermore, much of the positive research has been reported in Lipman's own journal, creating interpretive problems which suggest problems of vested interest. There are very few studies that substantiate the claims made by P4C proponents, and few that include short and specifically, long-term follow-up. In addition, many of the studies lack methodological rigor. The utilization of the techniques of multilevel modelling as an analytic strategy is strongly recommended as it corrects for autocorrelation inherent in studies where clustering or nesting is present, as in previous studies on COI programs. This means that, where nesting was present, the research may have not been measuring the differences accurately, as without this strategy there is a higher probability of making a Type I error. The current study addressed these gaps by researching how participation in a COI affected Year 6 students' reading comprehension, interest in math, self-esteem, pro-social behaviour and emotional well-being compared to a control group using multi-level modelling.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants in this study were two hundred and eighty children (149 intervention group, 131 comparison group) from eight state primary schools in the Southeast Queensland region. The research sample consisted of 48% (n=135) girls and 52% (n=145) boys all in Grade 6 (with an age range of 10-12 years).

The Reading Comprehension Test, commonly known as the TORCH Test, is a comprehensive evaluation tool used for students ranging from Grade 3 to Grade 10. Consisting of fourteen untimed reading tests, the assessment includes sections with different lengths, includes approximately 200 to 900 words. During test administration, students are presented with a passage, and afterward, they articulate a retelling of the passage using different words on the retell form provided. The retell form includes strategically placed gaps related to the original passage, encouraging students to fill in these gaps with one or more of their own words. Primarily designed to assess reading comprehension, the TORCH test establishes its validity through content validity. This is achieved by careful examination of the test content through a variety of methods, including item selection and checks for suitability and representativeness. Additionally, test validity is confirmed by aligning items with the accepted curriculum, ensuring a robust evaluation of students' comprehension skills.

The Self-Description Questionnaire II, is an instrument comprising eight scales designed to assess seven facets of self-concept in preadolescent children (ages 7-13) and their overall sense of self-worth. The global score derived from this questionnaire serves as a metric for measuring self-esteem, while the 'interest in math' sub-scale specifically gauges students' enthusiasm for mathematics. Recognized for its reliability and validity, the Self-Description Questionnaire is considered one of the most robust tools for evaluating self-concept. Internal consistency estimates for the instrument demonstrated a minimum value of .74, indicating a high level of reliability. Factor loadings for each facet within the questionnaire averaged around .70, with no loadings falling below .44. Cross-loadings, reflecting the correlation of items with non-targeted factors, varied from -.17 to .27, and factor correlations were generally modest. In

the present study's sample, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .94 for both self-esteem and interest in mathematics, affirming the questionnaire's internal consistency and reliability.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire II, serves as a concise behavioral screening tool suitable for children aged 5 to 16 years. Comprising 25 items, the questionnaire is organized into five scales, encompassing emotional symptoms (5 items), conduct problems (5 items), hyperactivity/inattention (5 items), peer relationship problems (5 items), and pro-social behavior (5 items). Demonstrated as a reliable and valid instrument, the Pro-social subscale was employed in this study to assess students' pro-social behaviors, while the emotional symptoms subscale was utilized to gauge students' emotional well-being. The questionnaire exhibits satisfactory reliability, as evidenced by internal consistency with a mean Cronbach's alpha of .73 and retest stability ranging from 0.62 after 4 to 6 months. In the present sample, the Cronbach's alpha for the pro-social behavior scale was .62, and for the emotional well-being scale, it was .65.

The initial step taken by the primary researcher involved seeking approval from the Principals of the participating schools to conduct the research within their educational institutions. Following the successful acquisition of permission from the school principal and ethical clearance from both the Queensland State Education Board and the University Ethical Committee, students were furnished with written information detailing the research project along with a consent form to be taken home prior to the study's commencement. Only students who returned the signed consent forms were considered participants in the research. The first author, responsible for the administration of all questionnaires and tests, conducted these assessments at three distinct time points: baseline, six months later, and during the follow-up period. It's important to note that all testing procedures occurred during regular class time for students in both the experimental and control classes.

This study used a longitudinal time series quasi-experimental design involving an experimental group and a matched comparison group. For more details, see figure 1, as follows:

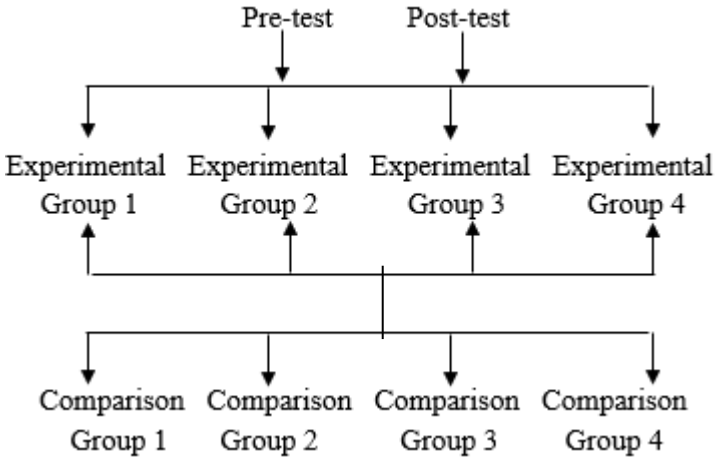

Figure 1. Experimental Group And A Matched Comparison Group

This method was selected for the current study due to the impracticality of randomly assigning the intervention. The research adopted a repeated-measures approach, tracking participants over three time points with data collected at baseline, six months, and twelve months. To analyze the data, a 2-level multilevel model was applied, where age was denoted by time (i) and students by (j). This multilevel model was necessary as the philosophical

Community of Inquiry (COI) program is multidimensional, and the classes are nested. The statistical software MLwiN (Leyland et al., 2020) was utilized for its suitability in handling the complex structure of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations for the variables under consideration. Reading comprehension scores demonstrated an upward trend for both groups, but notably, participants in the Community of Inquiry (COI) group exhibited a more pronounced rate of increase compared to their counterparts in the control group. Initially, students in the COI group presented higher levels of interest in mathematics than control students during the pre-test; however, this interest declined over time, while the control group showed a continual increase in their interest in mathematics. Self-esteem scores exhibited relative stability over time for both groups, with a more noticeable increase observed for the comparison group. Pro-social behavior scores remained relatively consistent over time for both groups. Similarly, emotional well-being scores demonstrated stability over time for both the COI and control groups.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for RC, MATH, SE, PSB, and EWB, by Time and Group

	TIME 1	**TIME 2**	**TIME 3**
Reading Comprehension (RC)			
Age	**11 (n=240)**	**11.5 (n=246)**	**12 (n=222)**
Comparison	47.68 (12.30) (n=110)	47.51 (12.18) (n=114)	49.60 (13.49) (n=105)
Philosophical COI	41.96 (11.67) (n=130)	44.68 (11.98) (n=132)	47.92 (12.38) (n=117)
Interest in Math (Math)			
Age	**11 (n=240)**	**11.5 (n=248)**	**12 (n=223)**
Comparison	27.07 (8.35) (n=110)	27.84 (8.59) (n=114)	28.49 (8.44) (n=105)
Philosophical COI	28.16 (7.81) (n=130)	26.13 (7.71) (n=134)	26.57 (8.39) (n=118)
Self Esteem (SE)			
Age	**11 (n=240)**	**11.5 (n=248)**	**12 (n=223)**
Comparison	28.98 (4.20) (n=110)	29.59 (4.57) (n=114)	30.00 (4.09) (n=105)
Philosophical COI	28.93 (4.24) (n=130)	28.91 (4.24) (n=134)	28.77 (4.48) (n=118)
Pro-social behavior (PSB)			
Age	11 (n=238)	11.5 (n=240)	12 (n=220)
Comparison	7.53 (1.83) (n=108)	8.04 (1.81) (n=112)	7.74 (1.67) (n=104)
Philosophical COI	7.77 (1.76) (n=130)	7.78 (1.91) (n=128)	8.06 (1.66) (n=116)
Emotional well-being (EWB)			
Age	11 (n=238)	11.5 (n=240)	12 (n=219)
Comparison	3.06 (2.24) (n=108)	3.16 (2.09) (n=112)	2.90 (2.22) (n=104)

Philosophical COI	3.53 (2.06) (n=130)	3.42 (2.45) (n=128)	3.06 (2.44) (n=115)

Note. RC=reading comprehension, MATHS=interest in math, SE=self-esteem, PSB=prosocial behavior, EWB=emotional well-being, SD=standard deviation.

Multilevel models included PROGRAM as a predictor of baseline and change status. Interpretation of the four fixed effects: (1) initial reading comprehension estimate for non-participants averaged 47.13 ($p < 0.001$); (2) the estimated difference in initial reading comprehension between program participants and non-participants was -5.22 ($p < 0.001$); (3) the estimated rate of change in non-participants' average reading comprehension was 1.50 (ns); and (4) the estimated difference in the rate of change in reading comprehension between program participants and non-participants was significant ($p < 0.01$). More details can be seen in figure 2, figure 3, figure 4, figure 5, figure 6, as follows:

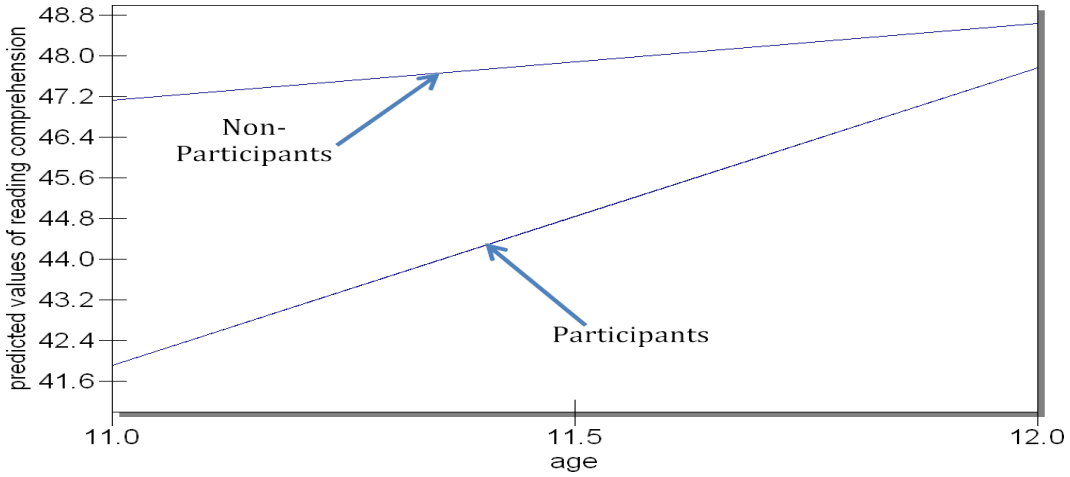

Figure 2. Results of a Fitted Multilevel Model for Change in Reading Comprehension.

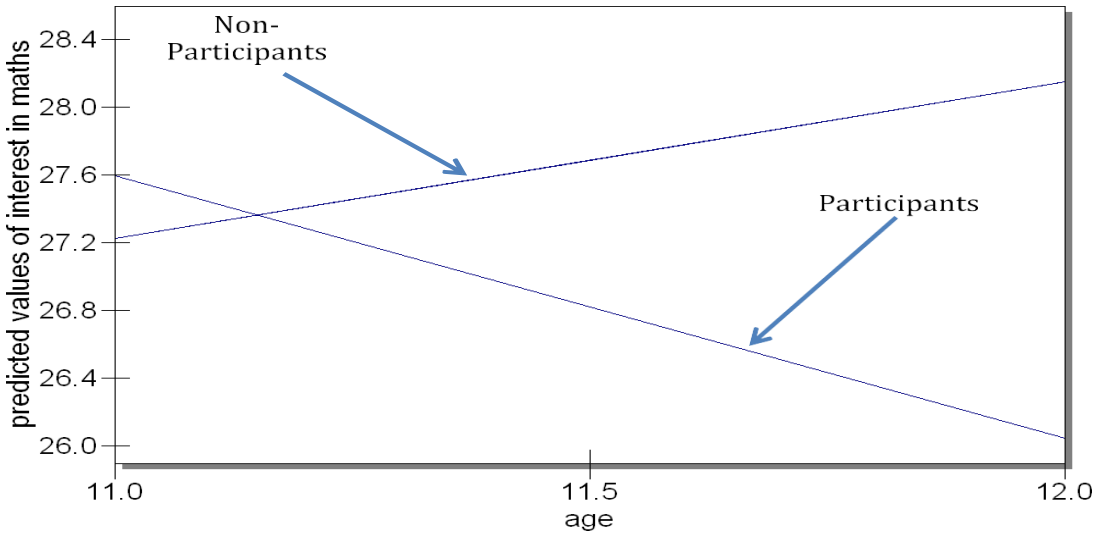

Figure 3. Results of a Fitted Multilevel Model for Change in Interest in Math

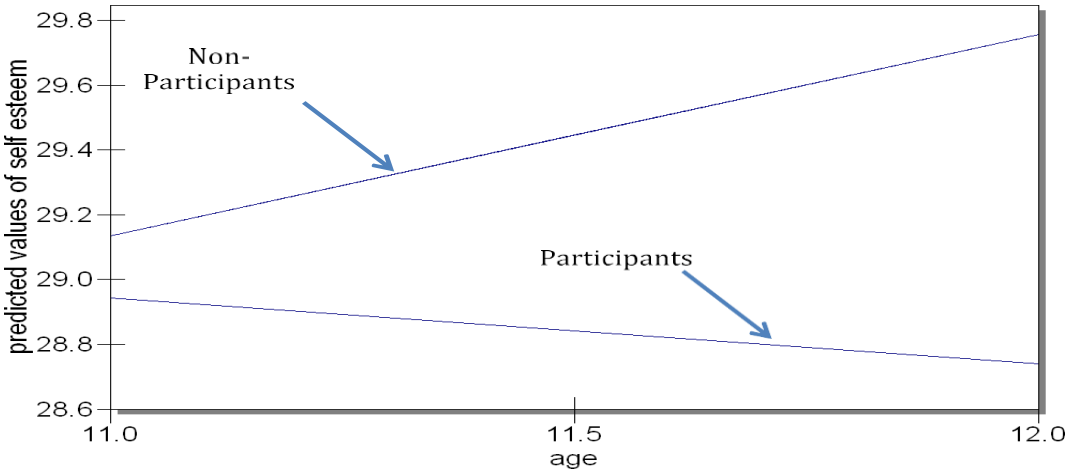

Figure 4. Results of a Fitted Multilevel Model for Change in Self-esteem.

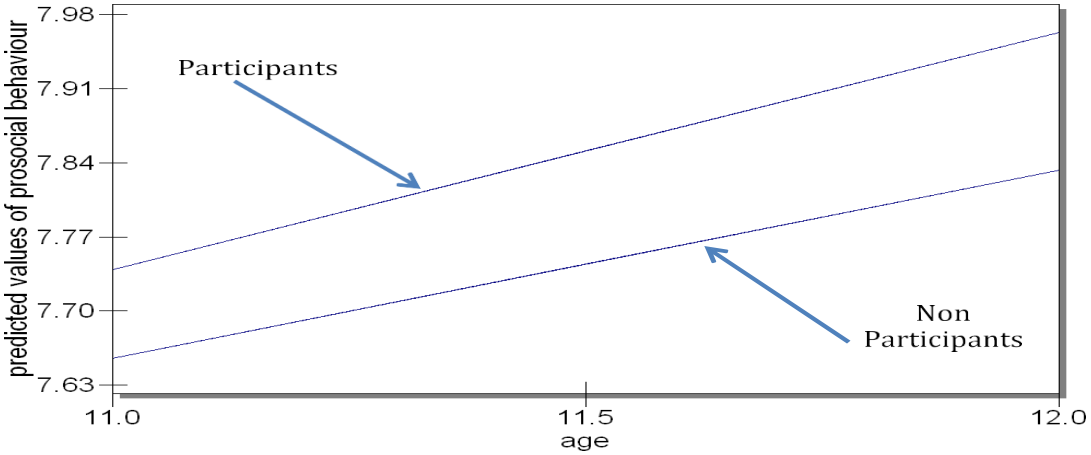

Figure 5. Results of a Fitted Multilevel Model for Change in Pro-social Behavior.

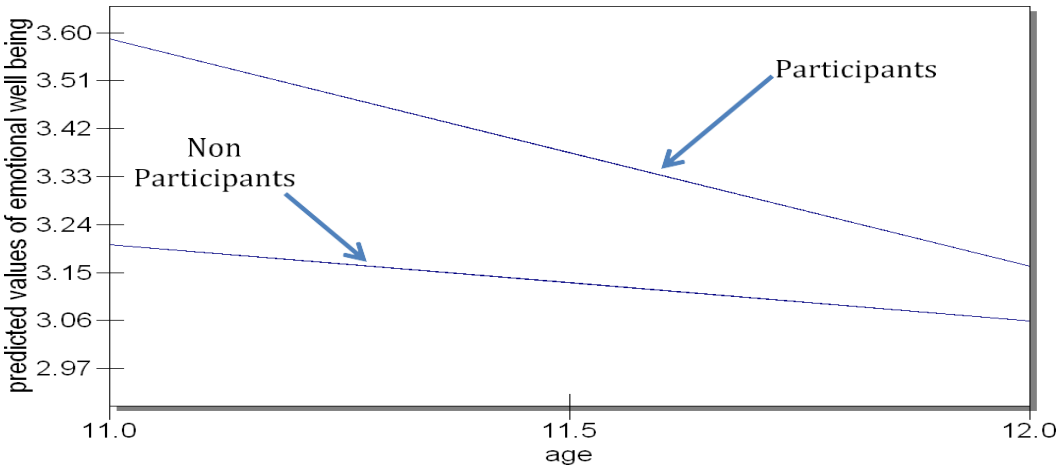

Figure 6. Results of a Fitted Multilevel Model for Change in Emotional Well-Being.

Discussion

This study explored the effects of participation in a philosophical community of inquiry (COI) on Year 6 students' reading comprehension, interest in math, self-esteem, pro-social behaviour and emotional well-being. In summary it was found that students' reading comprehension improved but their interest in mathematics and self-esteem decreased, while

development of their pro-social behaviour and emotional well-being remained relatively unchanged compared to students who did not participate in the COI.

The results of the current study suggest that the philosophical COI program improved reading comprehension for participants over one year faster than it did for students in the comparison group. These results are not surprising given that students in the philosophical COI engaged in a range of activities from talking, questioning and listening to writing, reading and drawing. The talking, questioning and listening, during the philosophical COI, interwoven with these other activities, could have aided reading comprehension as the program involved conversations that were ultimately and intrinsically linked with thinking. The findings suggest that students struggling with reading comprehension can significantly benefit from participation in a philosophical COI. These findings are consistent with the (Pala, 2022; Bhurekeni, 2021; Safriyani & Mustofa, 2021) studies, which also found that reading comprehension improved for students involved in a P4C program.

On the other hand, exposure to a philosophical COI appears to have a negative effect on Year 6t student's growth in interest in math. The result is contrary to Khanmohammadi et al., (2020) investigation, which found that students exposed to the COI became more interested in math. However, those studies which saw an improvement in students' math interest used a mathematical COI and not a philosophical COI, which would have allowed students to exchange dialogue on mathematical and meta-mathematical matters. It is important to note that a philosophical COI and mathematical COI are not comparable in the sense that the content and material covered are different, although the method is the same. Specifically, student engagement in a mathematical COI, by which dialogue on philosophical content is replaced by dialogue on mathematical content, may moderate levels of students' interest in math more effectively and positively, and would be expected to produce different interest in math results to that found in the current study. Alternatively, perhaps time spent facilitating the COI subtracted time that could have otherwise been devoted to math lessons, resulting in the teaching of 'basic' math only, although this was not explored in the current study. It would seem, however, that both the content of the COI, as well as the method, influences students' interest in math.

Both the experimental and control groups were comparable in their self-esteem scores at the beginning of the study. Students exposed to a philosophical COI, however, experienced a significant decrease in self-esteem over one year, while students in the comparison group significantly improved in self-esteem. These results suggest that the philosophical COI was not only ineffective in increasing self-esteem among program participants, but actually harmed their self-esteem. Isiklar & Abali Öztürk, (2022), did, however, note that the largest gains in self-esteem were with students with the lowest pre-test self-esteem, while those with high self-esteem at pre-test, actually showed a relative loss compared with the controls. This could have been because the students with low self- esteem were involved in the COI more than students with high self-esteem.

In this study exposure to a philosophical COI appears to have no effect on pro-social behaviour. The current findings on pro-social behaviour are similar to those of Setyosari et al., (2020) who also found that on a scale for teacher observation of student social skills in problematic situations, a random sample of experimental philosophical community of inquiry students gained no more than controls overall. This was surprising given teachers encourage students to be social and cultural beings who learn through interactions with others and that

ideas that are generated during the socio-cultural exchange are reflected upon, cognitively accommodated and then internalized. It is believed that through this process students learn to think for themselves. In regard to the current results on pro-social behaviour in the current sample, and in line with the analysis by Wang et al., (2021), it is suggested that the students in the current sample may require, at least, more than one year to enter into the community of philosophical inquiry and to experiment with the dialectical argumentation and that pro-social behaviour, as an end, would develop effectively in the medium to long-term.

In the current research, exposure to a philosophical COI program appears to have no effect on emotional well-being on philosophical COI participants compared to a comparison group. These findings are in contrast to assertions that when children experience a difficult emotion, exposure to a philosophical COI could help them find a way to develop thoughts and behaviours that strengthen the messages from the "left hemisphere to the emotional centre; further, that there is a possibility for the child to develop emotional flexibility if the child has experiences that comes from 'ah-ha' moments, which comes from seeing things in a different way and understanding them that way.

CONCLUSION

In the current study a philosophical COI intervention found an increase in reading comprehension but diminished interest in math and self-esteem, with no changes for pro-social behavior and emotional well-being in a group of Year 6 students compared to those who did not experience COI. The focus of the philosophical COI being mainly on language (wordiness) may have accounted for both the significant increase in reading comprehension over time and the significant declining trajectory of interest in math among these Year 6 participants.

This study is the first on the effects of philosophical COI on students' reading comprehension, interest in math, self-esteem, pro-social behaviors and emotional well-being in Australia, using multilevel modelling. The use of this random coefficient's technique, as an analytic strategy added statistical rigor to the study. The results, therefore, are believed to be a truer picture of differences between the groups than previous studies' results. It is noted, however, that due to the small number of clusters and small number of level 1 participants, further research using a larger data set is needed to fully substantiate the results. In addition, it is also important to note that although there has been research on COI's conducted with younger children, the current research focused only on students in Year 6.

With an already overcrowded curriculum, these results need to be carefully considered before widespread implementation of the COI in elementary schools. Additionally, it is recommended that the philosophy taught to future philosophical COI facilitators be practically oriented rather than the typical academic approach that is standard in university philosophy courses. It is suggested that ongoing coaching may also help first time implementers of philosophical COI sessions. Pre-service teachers aspiring to be facilitators of the philosophical COI need to be encouraged to develop their ability to examine and identify the personal characteristics, beliefs and attitudes that make them who they are and influence the way they think about teaching and learning.

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