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The Effectiveness of a Philosophy for Children Program on Aspects of School Engagement

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Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a Philosophy for Children Course on aspects of students' school engagement. School engagement is a structure indicating that students can create personal relationships with their teachers in addition to the educational content. For this purpose, a quasi-experimental study was conducted on 7th-grade students (n=128) from 4 classes at the same school as the intervention and control groups. In the current quasi-experimental, pre-test, and post-test study, the independent variable was the philosophy for children (P4C) program (ten 60 minute sessions) and the dependent variables were the school engagement aspects including behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agency engagements. To analyze the data ANOVA was used. The findings indicated that the score of all four aspects of school engagement were significantly higher in the intervention group who attended the Philosophy for Children Program than those of the control group. Based on the obtained results, 28.2% of changes in total school engagement were attributed to the P4C program. The results show a significant increase in school engagement and its aspects. Philosophy for Children Program can be used to create an educational atmosphere with the highest relationship to students' curriculum in which the students can rule out their learning behaviors with high motivation.

Keywords: Effectiveness, Philosophy for Children, School Engagement, Students

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Introduction

School is a part of daily life for many people, and school engagement is one of the most critical aspects of school children's present and future lives (Taylor & Nelms, 2006). In addition, school engagement is one of the main goals of education and a criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of school engagement (Sharan et al., 2008). Active engagement in school is essential for learning and the overall educational success of students. As such, school engagement and learning activities are among the most critical educational structures. Previous studies revealed that students with more educational achievements show higher degrees of school engagement, attend school regularly, concentrate on learning, adhere to school regulations, receive higher scores, and have better performance (e.g. Reeve &

Tseng, 2011). In contrast, lack of school engagement is associated with various adverse outcomes such as low literacy, involvement in deviations, and students' academic failure (Bong, 2001).

There are several reasons for increasing engagement in the educational structure: one reason is that school engagement acts as an antidote for the students with low academic achievements, higher levels of boredom and reluctance, and higher rates of academic failure. The adaptive and responsive engagement is assumed to be another reason for increased school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

School engagement is a multidimensional structure whose definition has advanced over time. It was first defined as an on-task behavior and most of the recent reports has emphasized the nature of behavior. According to Greenwood et al. (2002), school engagement is a combination of classroom-related behaviors, including writing, participating in tasks, reading aloud, reading slowly, and discussing as well as questioning and answering. Shonk and Cicchettib (2001) believed that engagement is a 2-component structure: the first component is the inner need, and the second is the external adjustment. The inner need includes students' motivation, preference for challenging tasks, and tendency toward success. On the other hand, students who rely on the external adjustment of school engagement usually hope to be rewarded or avoid punishment and depend on their peers and teachers (Bardin & Lewis, 2011).

School engagement is an instrument by which students can create personal relationships with their teachers in addition to the educational content. Schools should show their students how the teachers understand them, pay attention to them, and emphasize teacher-student relationships (Sharan et al., 2008). School engagement is perceived as behavioral interaction or fusion, emotion, and understanding of the learning process. It is a vast and multi-dimensional concept, including ideas such as students' interests, attachment to school, achievement motivation, self-regulating learning, commitment to learning, and energy investment in learning. Hence, the concept is used as a goal for schools' educational efforts and the educational experiences of students (Fredricks et al., 2004). In addition, school engagement is an important social sign inducing mutually supportive reactions. For instance, students with more engagement benefit from more emotional support from their teachers. In contrast, children with low motivation feel dissatisfaction, particularly in challenging conditions (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

By examining the multi-dimensional structure of school engagement, the elements describing the structure can be extracted. For example, the comprehensive study conducted by Fredrick et al. (2004) integrated the results of different studies on school engagement. It provided a theoretic platform including three types of engagement based on the research goals: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagements. Fredrick et al. (2004) believed that such interactions are dynamically correlated and are not distinct processes. The classification is just an instrument to understand that engagement, as a whole, is a multi-dimensional structure.

On the other hand, behavioral engagement has been defined in several different ways. Some scholars emphasize positive results such as following the rules and regulations, compliance with class norms, and lack of disrupted behaviors such as scape from school (Finn & Rock, 1997). However, other researchers have focused on participation in learning in the classroom, learning tasks, and behaviors such as sustainability, efforts, concentration, and asking questions (Finn, 1989; Skinner, 1993). Finally, other scientists concentrate on school-related activities such as sports or school management (Finn, 1989). Overall, behavioral engagement results in participation in learning, social, and extracurricular activities.

Moreover, emotional engagement refers to paying attention, working hard, and sustainability in the face of obstacles. It also denotes the positive emotions that facilitate learning and the lack of negative emotions that prevent school engagement in the students. For example, students study hard for long periods while they are emotionally engaged. Additionally, students work based on their interests, curiosity, promotion, and joy in an emotional atmosphere. In contrast, those who are not emotionally engaged may study or work hard, but they do it under the shadow of many negative emotions and stresses (O'Donnell, Reeve, & Smith, 2011). Emotional engagement causes attraction, which includes positive and negative reactions toward teachers, peers, education, or school; it is also assumed that emotional engagement influences the completion of tasks (Skinner, 1993; Stipek, 2002). Other experts conceptualize emotional engagement as a school stimulus including belonging, being worthy, and appreciating educational achievements (Finn, 1989).

Furthermore, cognitive engagement results in the investment idea, which integrates thought and tendency toward efforts to understand complicated ideas and accomplish difficult tasks. Different definitions for school engagement conceptualized this based on psychological investment in learning, the tendency toward going beyond school requirements, and preferring challenges (Holley & Karri, 2009), or even based on strategies or self-regulation (Meece et al.,

1988). The cognitive dimension includes students' perception and beliefs about themselves, school, teachers, and peers (such as self-efficacy, emotion, perception of the supportiveness of teachers or peers, and expectations).

Researchers recently added a new dimension to school engagement called agency engagement, which is the constructive participation of students in their educational processes. This new concept expresses a process in which students intentionally and actively try to make all of their thoughts and educational conditions and situations personal and fruitful. For instance, students may give suggestions about learning inputs and express their preferences, make suggestions, ask questions, discuss what they need and think, suggest a goal, discuss their interests, ask for more references or further learning occasions, and ask about problem-solving methods. It also triggers students to look for more explanations, choose what they want, ask what they prefer or what they hate, or ask for help in modeling, tutoring, receiving feedback, or underlying knowledge, or objective examples for abstract contents (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Students not only show reactions to learning activities, but they influence, reform, and expand upon them; in other words, they tend to change activities to more interesting events through personalization or by making them more challenging. For example, agency engagement occurs when the teacher proposes a mathematical question to students, and the students react based on their emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and agency engagements to enrich the learning activities. In other words, they look for a chance to make tasks enjoyable, make the lessons more personal (talk about what the students want and what they hate; let the students choose what they wish to), gain more independence (express their preferences), and obtain instruments required for better understanding (ask for references or help) (Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

The philosophy for children (P4C) program, developed by Lipman, is one of the most successful attempts at providing a comprehensive program to educate thoughts (Fisher, 2013). The Lipman method of offering philosophy for children is comprised of a community of inquiry. The idea of participation based on a community of inquiry was first raised by an American pragmatic philosopher, Charles Peirce. He believed that we are cooperators in constructing knowledge, not merely observers (Ghaedi, 2016). Lipman, however, had a different perception. He believed that the classroom is a laboratory, and that inquiry is the most critical activity for the learners. According to Lipman, the class can acquire its goals when it is open to investigations about everything from everyone. Under such circumstances, the community of inquiry is formed, thoughts are bred, creativity is developed, and ethical norms (tolerance and accepting the conditions) come true (Jahani, 2008).

Lipman sought such characteristics while telling a story to reach his educational goals:

-Be insistent and persistent in inquiring;

-Always be ready to compare, cope, analyze, and provide a hypothesis; and

-Experience, observe, assess, and test.

Inquiring is the most crucial part of the Lipman method, which is initiated and guided by self-thinking and learning collective thinking skills (Lipman, 2003). In the P4C, students are engaged in deep thinking and share their ideas while they are in the very safe atmosphere of a community of inquiry. P4C breeds intelligent behaviors such as intellectual cooperation, exploration, creativity, critical thinking, self-care, and caring for others (Fisher, 2007). It seems that the P4C was mainly oriented toward thinking as a cognitive skill, through which it can positively affect the cognitive engagement of students in their educational affairs. Olsen and Kagan (1992) believed that inquiry in self-learning relies on the participatory learning approach organized in such a way as to encourage participants to share information and that they are responsible for their learning.

One of the objectives of cooperative education is to enhance learning in all students so that children, both intelligent and average, can learn through participation and data exchange. There is usually a risk of ignoring weak students in teacher-oriented approaches while the education process may support strong students (Slavin & Nancy, 2002).

Philosophy for children also provides the required context for students' behavioral engagement in their educational events. In addition, the participatory learning approach properly motivates learners to enhance the learning occasions for their peers. Learning together forms friendly relationships among students (Slavin & Nancy, 2002), and they can strengthen their emotional links through educational events. A community of inquiry allows the students to consider exploration, discussion, and rational dialogue. According to P4C, there is no ending for inquiring in children; this is unlike previously used approaches that emphasize teacher-student relationships in which the teacher estimates the students' potency in creative and critical thinking (Butterworth & Thwaites, 2013). Based on the presumptions of P4C developers, by using this program, the children will believe in themselves and evaluate their intellectual activities. In P4C, instead of memorizing the achievements and findings of others and accepting them without any interventions and commenting, children discuss and research issues to

such an extent that they become skilled researchers practically (Shouping & George, 2002). Thus, they actively participate in the selection of their learning approaches, which in turn, increases their agency school engagement. Through such programs, students trust criteria and inferences made by themselves, and their self-confidence improves (Kohan, 2002). Nevertheless, it seems that students' participation in the P4C program may positively impact different aspects of their school engagement and improve the link between the students and their school or educational environment which was investigated in this study.

Considering the aim of the study, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- Participation in the P4C program affects school engagement in students positively.
- Participation in the P4C program has a positive effect on the agency aspect of school engagement in students.
-Participation in the P4C program has a positive effect on students' behavioral aspect of school engagement.
-Participation in the P4C program has a positive effect on the emotional aspect of school engagement in students.
-Participation in the P4C program influences students' cognitive aspect of school engagement positively.

Methods

In the current quasi-experimental, pre-test post-test study, the independent variable was the P4C program while the dependent variables were the school engagement aspects including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, as well as agentic engagements. The participants were matched by gender and grade.

Participants

The statistical population of the current study included all male students in the 2nd grade of a guidance school (7th grade) in Tehran, Iran. In the present study, conducted in 2012, the Rouhallah Guidance School, located in district 2, Tehran, Iran, was selected as an available sample. The two classes in the 2nd grade of the guidance school were randomly selected as the intervention group (n=68), and two classes were considered to be the control group (n=60); both were matched by age (12-13), gender, and grade.

Instruments

To evaluate the four school engagement components, the school engagement scale developed by Reeve and Tseng (2011) was used. The reliability of the scale was reported to be .82. Bordbar and Yousefi (2016) also reported the scale's reliability as .86. To employ this scale, it was first translated into Persian and then based on Reeve's instruction, a bipolar 7-option Likert scale questionnaire from "completely agree" to "totally disagree" was set. The questionnaire was tested in a pilot study on a group of 7th grade students to assess the understandability of items for students and the accuracy of the translation. The comments of experts and some 7th grade students were also considered to ensure that the translation is valid and understandable for the students. The scale's reliability in the present study was obtained using Cronbach's alpha (α= 0.84).

Also, the stories derived from Philip Cam 'thinking stories collection for children' (Robyn et al., 2012) and Iranian stories by 'Mullah-Nasreddin' were used in the P4C program.

Procedure

A 10-session P4C program was offered to the intervention group by a previously trained researcher after administering a pre-test; each session lasted 60 minutes. In each session, the teacher (facilitator) helped students to make a community of inquiry. Students read a story and then raised the topics they had found in the story. They chose one topic and started addressing the topic following the direction of the facilitator. In the offered P4C program, stories derived from the thinking stories collection for children by Philip Cam (Robyn et al., 2012) and Iranian stories by Mullah-Nasreddin were used (Table 1).

Table 1.
Sessions of Philosophy Course for Children

Sessions	Topic
1	Introduction and principles
2	Why we do tasks
3& 4	A story of Mullah Nasreddin
5 & 6	Two hunter friends; A story
7 & 8	A shoe; A story
9 & 10	A story of people who said goodbye to their eyes, ears, noses, and mouths

A community of inquiry method was used in the P4C sessions in a U-shaped classroom. Students were given name tags and were asked to place the papers on their desks to show that they were respected and increase their self-confidence. The teacher started the class by reading a part of a story and then asked the students to comment on it, ask questions, or tell an interesting part of the story. Next, the teacher created and directed a discussion among students based on the questions raised by the students and the teacher. The rest of the story was similarly read in the class, and the students discussed it.

A sample of students' discussion and comments on a story of "Mullah Nasreddin" are as follows:

- Mullah Nasreddin was greedy because he was begging for money while he had a lot of money and made himself despicable. He could find a job and make more money.
- People thought they were mocking Mullah Nasreddin, but they mocked themselves.
- If he chose the gold coin, he had just a gold coin and people won't give him anymore, but if he chose the silver coin, he had coins forever.
- People thought Mullah Nasreddin was fool, but he was brilliant and bright; he chose the silver coin to have much money forever.
- You can be wise while you seem a fool.
- Drop by drop fills the tub, or Rome was not built in a day!
- You won't earn most of the time if you listen to people.
- People want to treat someone with contempt.
- Do you think we earn money through knowledge or knowledge through money?

The control group received no specific training in the same interval. Then, the post-test was administered for both groups. After gathering the data, data analysis and evaluation of descriptive statistics (mean ± standard deviation) and inferential statistics (analysis of variance (ANOVA)) were performed using SPSS software.

Findings

To analyze the data, the fitness of the study hypotheses was evaluated through the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to assess the normality of data. Also, the Levene test was used to evaluate the homogeneity of variances. Descriptive data are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.
Descriptive Data of Intervention and Control Groups

Component	Group	Pre-test		Post-test	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Agentic	Intervention	27.952	5.044	30.905	3.807
	Control	24.235	6.960	25.118	6.353
Behavioral	Intervention	29.666	4.570	31.762	3.223
	Control	29.294	4.590	28.882	4.755
Emotional	Intervention	24.333	8.944	26.333	3.469
	Control	23.588	4.175	23.353	3.552
Cognitive	Intervention	44.619	7.883	47.143	8.685
	Control	41.353	8.944	39.588	10.434
Total score	Intervention	126.57	16.593	135.86	14.107
	Control	118.47	20.688	116.94	16.705

Since covariate and dependent regressions were not linear for the agentic engagement in the current study (P=0.077; F= 3.316), ANCOVA was not applicable, owing to the fitness of other study hypotheses, ANOVA was used to analyze data. Based on the results of ANOVA (P = 0.001; F = 12.107), a significant difference was observed between the intervention and control groups in the agentic engagement scores as 25.2% of the changes in agentic engagement were attributed to the P4C program (Table 3). The homogeneity of the slope of the regression line for the dependent and covariant variables was not fitted to behavioral engagement in the current study (P = 0.014; F = 4.837); therefore, ANCOVA was not, applicable and ANOVA was used. Based on the results of ANOVA (P = 0.033; F = 4.924), a significant difference was observed between the intervention and control groups in the scores of behavioral engagements. According to the

results, 12.2% of changes in behavioral engagement were attributed to the P4C program.

Table 3.
Results of ANOVA in Intervention and Control Groups

Component	Variable Resources	Mean of Squares	F	Sig.	Squares
Agentic	Intergroup	314.636	12.107	0.001	0.252
	Intergroup	25.988			
	Total				
Behavioral	Intergroup	83.138	4.924	0.033	0.125
	Intergroup	16.232			
	Total				
Emotional	Intergroup	91.643	6.922	0.013	0.162
	Intergroup	13.142			
	Total				
Cognitive	Intergroup	536.179	5.938	0.02	0.142
	Intergroup	90.297			
	Total				
Total score	Intergroup	3412.533	14.329	0.001	0.282
	Intergroup	235.193			

Since the slope of the regression line for the dependent and covariant variables was not fitted to emotional engagement in the current study (P = 0.521; F = 0.420), ANCOVA was not applicable, and ANOVA was used. Based on the results of ANOVA (P = 0.013; F = 6.922), a significant difference was observed between the intervention and control groups in the scores of emotional engagements. Based on the obtained results, 16.2% of Variances in emotional engagement were attributed to the P4C program.

The covariate and dependent regressions were not linear for the cognitive engagement in the current study (p = 0.056; F = 3.899); hence, ANCOVA was not applicable, and ANOVA was used. According to ANOVA results (P = 0.02; F = 5.938), a significant difference was observed between the study groups in cognitive engagement scores; therefore, 14.2% of changes in cognitive engagement were attributed to the P4C program.

Overall, despite the fitness of other ANVOCA hypotheses, the homogeneity of the slope of the regression line for the dependent and covariant variables was not fitted to the study variables (P = 0.001; F = 11.721); hence, ANCOVA was not applicable, and ANOVA was used. Based on the results of ANOVA (P = 0.001; F = 14.329), a significant difference was observed between the study groups in the total school engagement scores; accordingly, 28.2% of changes in the total school engagement score were attributed to the P4C program.

Discussion

According to the results, about 25.2% of changes in agentic engagement, 12.5 % of behavioral engagement, 16.2% of emotional engagement, 14.2% of cognitive engagement, and 28.2% of the total score of the school engagement were attributed to the P4C program. This effect could be the result of the social support provided in the P4C program (Estell & Perdue, 2013). Besides, high levels of support, other elements in P4C program like positive peer relationships, positive school climate, and opportunities for autonomy can be considered as the leading factors to high levels of school engagement (Smith et al., 2010).

Claire et al. (2018) showed the same effect of P4C on school engagement. They selected two groups of children aged between nine and twelve. The philosophy session was conducted as a part of the regular classwork. They showed that the children were able to engage in collaborative, philosophical dialogue with their peers without being any more disruptive than their classmates.

Moreover, Filiz and Vesile (2018) showed that the 'Philosophy for Children' curriculum are effective in critical thinking skills, while in the initial test before the intervention, no difference was observed in the scores of children's critical thinking which is in line with the findings in our study. Also, in a study by Giménez et al. (2013), researchers examined the improvement of social and communication skills in 5-year-old children with the P4C program. Based on their findings, there is a

significant difference in both of these skills in the experimental group. In addition, a better understanding of the mechanism of the P4C effectiveness on school engagement in children may have fruitful results.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study indicate a significant increase in school engagement and its aspects (agency, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) following the implementation of the P4C program. It isn't easy to conduct philosophy programs for children, but there is a need for a modest level of school philosophy education for children. This program causes the development and strengthening of thinking skills in students to learn life skills and how to control their behaviors. Accordingly, the program can be used to create an educational atmosphere with the highest relationship to students' curriculum in which the students can rule out their learning behaviors with high motivation.

One of the limitations of the current study was that ANCOVA was not applicable in behavioral engagement or the total score since the hypothesis of the homogeneity of the slope of the regression line was not fitted to the study; hence, this part of the study was not controlled adequately owing to not removing pre-test effects on the behavioral aspect and the total score. The problem may be the result of excluding some study subjects because of failing to attend the classes or one of the tests and attending regular school classes, which did not provide conditions suitable for random selection and complete experimental study. Another limitation of the study was the sample size. According to the P4C protocol, classes should have 10 to 12 students; however, the average number of students in the two classes in the current study was 34 in the intervention group owing to existing limitations. This caused some problems during the P4C course, such as difficulty in analyzing each story within a session. Hence, it is recommended that the sample size in the P4C be kept at an appropriate level in future studies.

These days, excitement and arousing behaviors are observed in many students, hence, integrating the P4C program in the curriculum can promote school engagement in students through which the learning status and compliance with the educational environment will improve. Moreover, since Lipman recommended the P4C for populations both younger and older than that of the current study, it seems that the effectiveness of this program on the school engagement of other educational grades should be assessed in further studies.

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Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest declared.

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