

SAPERE P4C in SEND Schools

Barbara Priestman Academy: nurturing oracy, thinking skills and independent learning in a Secondary Special School

Barbara Priestman Academy is a Secondary Special provision in Sunderland for students aged 11 to 19 who have a diagnosis of ASD and/or complex needs. The school has 162 students and is oversubscribed. It is one of four special schools in a multi-academy trust in north-east England. The school has National Autistic Society Accreditation, the NFER Research Mark at extended level, and Advanced Thinking School Accreditation – currently the only special school anywhere in the world to have achieved this recognition. It has also been recognised by the Challenge Partners Network, which designated Thinking Skills at the school to be an Area of Excellence.

Though the school has been involved in thinking skills for many years, teachers were concerned that, with many passive learners among the student body, the way the curriculum was delivered meant that some students were being given the information they needed to pass exams, but had little opportunity to discover things for themselves, to become motivated in their own learning, and to want to challenge themselves.

The school looked at ways to raise the level of challenge and to encourage students to become more active, independent learners. As 98% of students have a diagnosis of ASD, it was a challenge to find an approach that students would be able to connect with: many students like things to be right or wrong and find it difficult when there isn't a definitive answer, while a fear of failure means they can be reluctant to offer answers. In addition, the majority of students see subjects as very separate entities and compartmentalise skills, and so found it difficult to transfer skills between curriculum subjects.

The school came to P4C through Lead Practitioner Judith Stephenson. She had been introduced to P4C at a previous school and was impressed with the level of thinking she witnessed taking place during P4C lessons, with how students were able to articulate their thinking and justify their opinions, and with the way in which students challenged others' points of view.

'Seeing our students articulating their thoughts and feelings, and considering other people's viewpoints, is extremely powerful and has been commented on by a number of outside agencies; including the Speaking and Listening Moderator for GCSE English and the accreditors for NAS who observed a P4C session. Working in this way has led to a number of our students becoming involved with the Shakespeare Schools Festival and National Theatre Connections.'

Judith Stephenson, Lead Practitioner and P4C Lead

Image of the week

One of the ways in which the school brings P4C into the classroom is through the Image of the Week. Each week, students discuss what they think about a chosen image. They are encouraged to share thoughts and ideas, to ask questions, and to develop the skills to become engage in purposeful talk and become better thinkers. Key thoughts are shared on displays around the school, on Twitter [@ThinkingBPA](https://twitter.com/ThinkingBPA) and [@b_p_academy](https://twitter.com/b_p_academy), and on the Thinking section of the school's website at <https://www.barbara-priestman.org.uk/how-we-work/teaching-learning-academy/thinking-school/>

Get that thinking feeling@BarbaraPriestman Academy Retweeted



Barbara Priestman @b_p_academy · Nov 22

This week's image made us think about the benefit of opening our minds to new possibilities and experiences, how our thoughts loop and turn like a maze and what our conscience actually is. We'd love to hear your thoughts.
[#p4c](#) [#dialogicthinking](#) [#thinkingmatters](#)



The impact of P4C

Though initially some staff were unsure whether students would be able to cope with working in this way, the results have been remarkable. Teachers report that:

- students' self-confidence has increased and their speaking and listening skills have improved
- students are more willing to contribute and to take risks when sharing their opinions
- students are more able to see things from a different perspective

Asked about how P4C had helped him in his learning, a student talked about the responsibility of students to come up with a good question. When asked what made a good question, he answered 'When you're still thinking and talking about it later in the day.'

In her MEd dissertation, Judith Stephenson explored whether the P4C approach could help students with ASD overcome particular difficulties relating to the Triad of Impairment and, in particular, around Theory of Mind. This led to some interesting discoveries:

- By 'thinking aloud', students are able to talk and work things out together.
- By 'puzzling aloud' they helped to have their problem clarified, resulting in a clearer understanding.
- When students felt they had ownership of the lesson they seemed more engaged and willing to join in. A P4C enquiry is a collaborative process, shared by all. With a question chosen in a democratic way, teachers reported fewer cries of 'It's not fair!' or 'It's boring!'
- Students are able to reflect on what they themselves have learnt through using the P4C approach and how powerful it is:

'P4C got me thinking about things going on around me – real life not 'candy floss and rainbows'. It has been emotional at times but has made me look at things more realistically. I like that we make the question and that it's not just a yes or no. The discussion widens and you're learning from each other and trying to work out what you agree with. When I first started here, I was very quiet and wouldn't say what I thought and whether I agreed or disagreed with people. P4C has helped shape my opinions. I no longer just accept things – I challenge and have learnt to say why I think things.'

Year 13 student

Judith sums up: **'Watching our students grow into articulate, resilient young men and women who are able to reflect on their learning and the impact being a member of our school community has had on them, never fails to make me proud. Seeing how they are able to recognise the journey they have been on and sharing their accomplishments with governors, parents and visitors, reinforces our belief that the use of P4C has been invaluable for our students and will enable them to use the transferrable skills they have developed in the next stage of their lives.'**

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SAPERE P4C is the UK's national charity supporting Philosophy for Children. We provide high-quality P4C training and support and have over 25 years' experience in bringing P4C into a range of schools and educational settings. We offer whole school INSET training as well as open courses which are open to all.

www.sapere.org.uk | enquiries@sapere.org.uk | 01865 408333