

Hawaii

# Philosophy for Children: Promoting Peace in the Classroom

Kailua High School program linked to Dalai Lama's visit.

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By Nathan Eagle    / April 15, 2012

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[Kailua High School](#) may have devoted the past six weeks to educational exercises directly linked to the [Dalai Lama](#)'s visit Monday, but students and staff have inadvertently been preparing for years.

In 2000, the Surfriders saw [Philosophy for Children Hawaii](#) — more commonly called p4c — tiptoe into their classrooms. This unique instructional method, a departure from the traditional top-down model, aims to create a community of engaged student thinkers.

Principal [Francine Honda](#) and other top educators attribute the program's subsequent success as a primary reason the [Dalai Lama](#) decided to address their students at a special assembly.

“This whole experience has just been really timely for us because it’s our whole philosophical focus anyway,” she said. “While our students are like any other high school students, I’m not sure all of them may have understood

initially the significance of the visit and also the contributions that he has made to the world in terms of global peace. So we wanted to make sure they not only realized that but that they really learn from it.”

Some 65 teachers work at the school, which enrolls roughly 850 students. This is down from almost 1,000 students several years ago but Honda said she is optimistic enrollment will rise again.

During the past few years, the principal said she has seen violent incidents on campus, and related suspensions, plummet. She links the improved student culture to p4c Hawaii.

Philosophy for Children is a worldwide movement that started in the late-1960s with [Matthew Lipman](#), a Columbia University professor. His books have since been translated into dozens of languages.

He thought schools should start earlier with developing children’s intellectual thinking abilities, said [Ben Lukey](#), who serves as a Philosopher in Residence through a partnership with the University of Hawaii. He divides his time between Waikiki Elementary and Kailua High School.

It was Thomas Jackson, affectionately known as Dr. J, who first brought Lipman’s teachings and the p4c program to Hawaii, Lukey said. But what sets him apart is his desire to get teachers engaged in the process too.

Now that many educators have embraced p4c as “a pedagogical approach,” Lukey said the program has shifted from Lipman’s material and moved to “something more culturally relevant” to Hawaii students.

“It went from a philosophical activity to that activity as an approach to whatever you want to teach,” Lukey said. “It’s not just a happy Kumbayah circle.”

Far from preaching Aristotle to stone-faced teenagers, the method is all about “doing” philosophy.

“We’re not necessarily trying to just understand Plato, but rather how do we try to understand ourselves in the world and make other people a part of that process of introspection,” Lukey said.

One of the exercises students recently did sprang from examining the Dalai Lama’s tweets. In January, Lukey said the [Dalai Lama posted a message on Twitter](#) that said self-awareness, introspection and good reasoning are more important than meditation and prayer.

Lukey, 36, of Honolulu, used “The Great Gatsby” as an example of the p4c approach. Instead of a teacher standing in front of a class asking what the green light symbolizes, then telling them how it should be interpreted, the students produce questions based on the text and steer the discussion.

“Even though I may have an answer, there’s all these other possibilities to think about,” he said. “If the green light doesn’t come up, that’s fine.”

Lukey works with fellow Philosopher in Residence [Chad Miller, Hawaii’s 2012 Teacher of the Year](#). They have brought the program to life with the help of other educators like Amber Makaiau, who teaches ethnic studies at KHS.

The p4c program centers on [four pillars](#): Community, Inquiry, Philosophy and Reflection. Building an “intellectually safe community” is perhaps the most critical component.

“One of the things that I think is the thread that’s helped us become these thinkers and philosophers is the idea that the kids have learned to value the importance of intellectual safety, where all ideas matter,” Miller said. “It doesn’t matter who you are or where you live. Your ideas can help me, can help all of us figure out things. Because it’s one thing to teach thinking, but if you don’t have the environment to let kids actually take intellectual risks then it’s not going to happen.

“As the kids have become more comfortable with philosophy, it’s really been as a result of this idea of intellectual safety that permeates all four corners of the campus now,” he said.

The p4c program has in turn benefitted the teachers as much as the students, Honda said.

“While the students are encouraged in this safe environment to think critically and to ask questions, deep questions, and to ponder and wonder what would happen if, or why is this, then the educators begin to do the same thing,” she said. “Not maybe even consciously, but as they engage the students in this higher level of thinking they also become better thinkers themselves.”

Jill LaBoy, the KHS curriculum coordinator who wears many other hats, said the students then take this new thinking ability and apply it to various subjects.

“When they take courses like ethnic studies, they’re focused on being more tolerant and understanding of others and being able to think deeply about it and being more mindful of their behavior to really help,” she said. “What’s been exciting is to see how many of our students are really making those connections.”

LaBoy said the students’ applications to attend Saturday’s talk by the Dalai Lama at Stan Sheriff Center were quite telling. In reading the students’ responses, she said there were many who wrote about how they were “philosophical thinkers” trying to learn as much as they can about other ways of life and beliefs.

“They’re getting it. It’s working. They’re connecting,” LaBoy said.

The principal said the p4c program was one of three “big ideas” that really picked up in 2004.

“So it’s learning over a period of time because we actually started our work with Habits of Mind in 2004, and began exploring ideas and learning about ethnic studies and what was happening on the Mainland, and then at the same time, almost concurrently, started learning about p4c,” Honda said. “So with those three major, major initiatives, or big ideas, we just built on it every

year. Learned more about it. And because we're fortunate to have our expert teachers, Amber and Chad and Jill, really master teachers who are here to support the learning, it's become really powerful."

## About the Author



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