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From Cultivating Thinking to Nurturing Meaning: Re-envisioning Philosophy for Children as an Interactive Meaning-Making System in the Context of the Educational Meaning Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary education increasingly rewards measurable cognitive performance and digital competence, yet many students report low motivation, anxiety, and a weakened sense of educational purpose. The present article reconceptualizes Philosophy for Children (P4C) as a meaning-centered interactive system capable of responding to this educational meaning crisis. A qualitative theory-building design was adopted, combining systematic conceptual review with philosophical reconstruction. Literature on P4C, meaning in life, dialogic pedagogy, and interactive learning systems was examined across major scholarly databases and synthesized through thematic analysis. The review yielded three core findings: first, mainstream P4C is predominantly framed through cognitive and reasoning-based outcomes; second, current educational discourse insufficiently addresses purpose, coherence, and personal significance; and third, the P4C community of inquiry already contains the structural elements of an interactive system, including rules, roles, feedback, and collaborative interpretation. The article proposes a Meaning-Centered P4C model in which philosophical dialogue functions not only as a method for cultivating reasoning but also as a structured process of collective meaning-making. In this expanded framework, students interpret lived experience, negotiate significance, and orient themselves toward worthwhile forms of participation in a shared world. The model contributes to interdisciplinary discussions across philosophy of education, educational technology, and game-informed learning design by showing how inquiry can support both thinking and meaning.

Keywords: Philosophy for Children; meaning-making; educational meaning crisis; dialogic pedagogy; interactive systems; game-based learning

Introduction

Across many educational systems, the success of schooling is increasingly evaluated through what can be measured: attainment scores, transferable skills, digital competence, and readiness for future labour markets. International organizations have strongly encouraged such priorities, especially as education systems respond to digital transformation and the need to prepare learners for technologically saturated societies (1, 2). These developments have undoubtedly generated important benefits, including improved access to information, new possibilities for participation, and more sophisticated approaches to teaching and assessment. Yet alongside these gains, many educators and scholars have raised a concern that is more difficult to quantify: students may be learning more efficiently, but not necessarily more meaningfully. A growing body of philosophical

and psychological scholarship suggests that many learners experience school as fragmented, instrumental, and increasingly detached from personal purpose and lived significance (3-5).

This concern can be described as an educational meaning crisis. The phrase does not imply that students are incapable of learning or that contemporary education lacks value; rather, it points to a structural imbalance. When educational systems focus primarily on performance, efficiency, and skill acquisition, they may leave insufficient space for students to ask why learning matters, how knowledge relates to their lives, and what sort of person they are becoming through education. Dewey (1938) argued long ago that learning becomes educative only when it connects with experience in ways that foster continuity and growth (6). More recent work in the psychology of meaning similarly shows that a sense of purpose, coherence, and significance is associated with resilience, motivation, and well-being (7, 8). Damon (2008) further emphasizes that young people benefit developmentally when education supports purpose formation rather than merely external achievement (9). If schooling neglects such dimensions, it risks producing students who can perform tasks without being able to situate those tasks within a meaningful life orientation.

Philosophy for Children (P4C), originally developed by Lipman (2003) (10), offers a distinctive educational response to this problem. Through the community of inquiry, students are invited to raise questions, examine assumptions, reason together, and reflect on issues that matter to them. P4C has generated a substantial body of research demonstrating positive effects on reasoning, dialogue, and classroom participation. Large evaluations and systematic reviews have found gains in critical thinking, discussion quality, and, in some cases, broader academic attainment (11-14). From this perspective, P4C is rightly valued as a pedagogy of thoughtful dialogue. However, the dominant research framing of P4C has remained strongly cognition-centered. Its outcomes are typically measured in terms of reasoning ability, cognitive development, and deliberative competence, while its contribution to meaning formation, existential orientation, or interpretive self-understanding has received far less systematic attention.

This narrowing is especially striking because philosophical dialogue in classrooms often revolves around questions that are already saturated with meaning: fairness, loss, belonging, responsibility, success, suffering, friendship, truth, or the future. Such topics are not only intellectual but also existential. They invite students to interpret their experiences and test their emerging values in relation to others. Dialogic pedagogy more broadly has long emphasized that learning is relational and that understanding grows through interaction, response, and shared inquiry (15, 16). When this insight is combined with meaning-centered psychology, a richer interpretation of P4C becomes possible. The community of inquiry can be understood not merely as a device for training reasoning but as a structured environment in which students make sense of themselves and their world through dialogue.

A further reason to revisit P4C lies in the rise of interactive learning environments. Educational technology, digital platforms, and game-informed learning designs increasingly conceptualize learning as participation in systems of interaction governed by rules, feedback loops, roles, and emergent meaning. In physical education and related pedagogical domains, researchers have shown that digital and game-like environments can shape how learners engage, interpret feedback, and construct experience (17). In a different but conceptually relevant register, Selwyn (2019) argues that digitally mediated education should not be judged only by technical efficiency but by the kinds of human relations and educational purposes it enables or constrains (18). From this perspective, P4C can be productively re-read as an interactive system: it has norms, participants, turns, constraints, feedback, progression, and outcomes. What makes it educationally distinctive is that the emergent product is not simply correct performance, but shared meaning.

Re-envisioning P4C in this way does not mean reducing philosophy to play or treating classrooms as literal games. Rather, it means recognizing that philosophical dialogue involves system-like qualities of participation, interpretation, and negotiated

significance. Like a well-designed interactive environment, a community of inquiry gives students a structure within which their contributions matter, where responses from others alter the trajectory of discussion, and where meaning is not transmitted but co-constructed. This article therefore argues that P4C should be reconceptualized as a meaning-centered interactive system capable of addressing the educational meaning crisis. Specifically, it seeks to clarify how mainstream P4C has been framed, to identify the gap between cognitive outcomes and meaning formation, and to develop a theoretical model that places purpose, coherence, and significance at the center of philosophical inquiry in education.

Methods and Materials

This article adopts a qualitative, theory-building design that combines systematic conceptual review with philosophical reconstruction. The aim is not to test an intervention empirically, but to synthesize and reinterpret existing scholarship in order to develop a more conceptually adequate framework for understanding Philosophy for Children in the context of the educational meaning crisis. This design is appropriate when the task is to connect research traditions that have developed largely in parallel and to identify theoretical gaps that are not immediately visible within single-discipline studies.

A structured literature search was undertaken across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and PsycINFO, supplemented by targeted searches of major academic publishers and policy repositories. Search terms included combinations of "Philosophy for Children," "community of inquiry," "meaning in life," "purpose," "coherence," "dialogic pedagogy," "interactive learning," and "educational technology." Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, systematic reviews, and major policy documents published between 2000 and 2025, while foundational earlier texts were retained when they provided indispensable conceptual grounding, such as Dewey (1938) and Lipman (2003) (6, 10).

The review process had three analytic foci. First, literature on P4C was examined to identify how the field currently frames its main outcomes, especially the extent to which it privileges reasoning, critical thinking, and academic attainment. Second, work from psychology and philosophy of education was analyzed in order to clarify meaning-related constructs relevant to schooling, particularly purpose, coherence, significance, and subjectification (3, 4, 7, 8). Third, selected literature on interactive learning and digital pedagogies was reviewed to explore whether P4C can be interpreted as a structured system of participation rather than only a method of talk (17, 18).

Analysis proceeded through thematic synthesis. Key ideas, recurring assumptions, and conceptual tensions were coded and grouped into higher-order categories. These categories were then compared across the three literature streams in order to identify points of convergence and omission. The resulting reconstruction is interpretive rather than statistical: it seeks coherence, explanatory power, and theoretical usefulness. To support trustworthiness, only traceable and scholarly sources were included, the analytical procedure was kept transparent, and conceptual claims were grounded in published literature rather than anecdotal inference.

Findings and Results

The review yielded three interconnected findings that together support the reconceptualization of P4C as a meaning-centered interactive system.

First, mainstream P4C is predominantly framed as a cognitive pedagogy. Across empirical evaluations, systematic reviews, and meta-analytic studies, the most consistently reported outcomes concern reasoning, critical thinking, dialogical skill, and, in some cases, academic attainment (11-14). These findings are important and should not be minimized. However, they also reveal a recurring limitation: the field has largely operationalized P4C in terms of what is most easily measured. Meaning-

related outcomes such as purpose, significance, and existential coherence are rarely foregrounded, even though classroom philosophical inquiry often addresses precisely such issues.

Second, the broader educational literature points to a substantial gap around meaning. Contemporary schooling is frequently organized around performance and accountability, while questions of why learning matters and how students situate themselves within it remain implicit (1-3). Psychological research suggests that this is not a minor omission. Meaning in life contributes to motivation, resilience, and identity development, and its core dimensions—purpose, coherence, and significance—are relevant to how learners engage with schooling (5, 7, 9). Yet these dimensions remain weakly integrated into mainstream pedagogical models.

Third, the structure of P4C already contains many features of an interactive system. The community of inquiry includes rules of participation, distributed roles, iterative feedback, interpretive turn-taking, and emergent outcomes. Students do not simply exchange information; they shape the evolving meaning of the inquiry through their contributions. This makes P4C comparable, at a structural level, to interactive and game-informed learning systems in which meaning arises through participation under shared constraints (17). The difference is that the central output in P4C is collective interpretation rather than task completion. Together, these three findings provide the basis for a Meaning-Centered P4C model in which dialogue supports not only thinking but also life orientation.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the educational significance of P4C has been wider than its dominant evaluation frameworks have allowed us to see. For more than two decades, the field has built a persuasive case for the cognitive value of philosophical inquiry with children, and this achievement remains important. Reasoning, careful listening, concept formation, and the ability to revise one's views in dialogue are core educational goods. However, when these outcomes become the principal or exclusive way of understanding P4C, the pedagogical practice risks being interpreted too narrowly. The present analysis argues that such a narrowing mirrors a broader tendency in education itself: the tendency to privilege what can be measured over what gives learning depth, continuity, and existential relevance (3, 4).

Seen in this light, the educational meaning crisis is not simply a matter of student disengagement or low motivation. It is also a crisis of educational purpose. The international policy landscape has increasingly stressed digital readiness, adaptability, and future skills, which are all important concerns in rapidly changing societies (1, 2). Yet these priorities can inadvertently foster an instrumental view of education in which students are prepared to function efficiently without necessarily being helped to interpret what their learning means for who they are and how they wish to live. Biesta's distinction between qualification, socialization, and subjectification is especially relevant here. Qualification concerns knowledge and skill, socialization concerns insertion into traditions and practices, but subjectification concerns the emergence of the person as a responsible and responsive agent. A meaning-centered reading of P4C places this third dimension back at the center of educational inquiry.

The psychological literature strengthens this argument. Meaning is not a luxury that can be postponed until adulthood; it is a formative dimension of development that shapes motivation, resilience, and well-being (5, 7). Damon (2008) shows that young people benefit when education helps them develop purpose (9), while Wong (2010) emphasizes that meaning emerges through interpretive engagement with experience rather than through passive reception of content (8). From this perspective, philosophical dialogue matters because it gives students a structured opportunity to examine questions that connect thought with life. When children discuss fairness, identity, courage, or loss, they are not merely practicing abstract reasoning. They are also organizing experience, testing values, and discovering whether their perspectives can be recognized in a shared world. This interpretive function is precisely what is obscured when P4C is treated only as a pathway to better cognitive scores.

The interactive-systems perspective adds a further layer of explanatory power. In educational technology and game-informed learning design, meaningful engagement is often understood as emerging from participation in systems with rules, roles, constraints, and feedback. Learners are motivated not only by information, but by agency, response, and the feeling that their decisions alter what happens next. Although P4C is not a game, it shares these structural characteristics. The community of inquiry is rule-governed but open-ended; contributions have consequences; progression depends on interaction; and outcomes are emergent rather than fully predetermined. This is why P4C can be productively described as an interactive meaning-making system. Such a description does not trivialize philosophy. On the contrary, it clarifies why philosophical dialogue can be so powerful: it gives students a participatory structure in which thinking becomes consequential and meaning is collaboratively produced.

This reinterpretation also has implications for educational technology. Selwyn (2019) warns that the expansion of digital systems in education should not be judged only by efficiency or novelty, but by the kinds of human purposes they serve (18). The same caution applies here. If interactive environments—whether digital, game-based, or dialogic—are designed only to maximize engagement in a thin behavioral sense, they may still fail educationally. What matters is whether they support deeper forms of interpretation, reflection, and orientation. P4C offers a valuable model because it demonstrates how interaction can remain human-centered. It relies on dialogue rather than automation, shared inquiry rather than scripted personalization, and mutual recognition rather than isolated individual performance. In that sense, it offers a powerful counterpoint to technocratic trends in education.

A meaning-centered P4C model therefore invites a shift in how classrooms are imagined. Teachers are not simply facilitators of discussion techniques; they are designers of conditions in which meaningful inquiry can occur. Their task is to select stimuli that resonate with lived experience, sustain norms of dialogical openness, and help students connect conceptual exploration with the interpretive work of making sense of life. Here, dialogic pedagogy is crucial. Alexander (2017) and Mercer and Littleton (2007) show that dialogue can function as a medium of shared understanding rather than mere recitation or opinion exchange (15, 16). When combined with the relational orientation emphasized by Noddings (2013), the classroom becomes a place where thought and care, rigor and recognition, can operate together (19). This combination is central to any pedagogy that seeks to nurture meaning rather than merely produce performance.

The article also points toward future empirical work. If P4C is to be understood as a meaning-centered interactive system, then researchers will need to design studies capable of tracing not only gains in reasoning but also shifts in purpose, coherence, belonging, and self-understanding over time. This will require methodological creativity, including qualitative inquiry, mixed methods, and age-appropriate indicators of meaning formation. It will also require cross-cultural sensitivity, since the meanings students pursue and the forms of dialogue they inhabit are shaped by language, tradition, and educational context. The present study does not claim to settle these empirical questions. Rather, its contribution is to make them visible and conceptually urgent.

In sum, the value of P4C lies not only in cultivating better thinkers but in helping learners become meaning-making participants in a shared world. Re-envisioned in this way, P4C can respond directly to the educational meaning crisis by restoring attention to the human purposes of learning. It remains a dialogical pedagogy of thought, but it also becomes a pedagogy of orientation: one through which students begin to discover not only how to reason, but why inquiry matters and how their lives might take shape in relation to it.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has argued that Philosophy for Children should be re-envisioned as a meaning-centered interactive system rather than understood solely as a pedagogy of cognitive development. By bringing together research on P4C, meaning in life, dialogic

pedagogy, and interactive learning, the analysis showed that philosophical inquiry in classrooms already contains the structural conditions for collective meaning-making. What has been missing is a conceptual framework capable of making that role explicit.

The proposed reinterpretation does not abandon reasoning, critical dialogue, or cognitive rigor. Instead, it situates them within a broader educational horizon in which students seek purpose, coherence, and significance through shared inquiry. Such a shift is increasingly necessary at a time when educational systems are under pressure to prioritize efficiency, quantification, and technological adaptation. If the crisis of meaning in education is to be taken seriously, pedagogical models must address not only how students think, but how they orient themselves within learning and life. P4C, precisely because it is dialogical, participatory, and interpretive, is well positioned to meet this challenge.

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AI Use Statement

Artificial intelligence tools were used only for language support and editorial refinement. The conceptual design, literature selection, argument development, and final scholarly responsibility remain entirely with the authors.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, theoretical framing, writing—original draft preparation, and revision were undertaken collaboratively by the authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on secondary theoretical and conceptual analysis and did not involve human participants, personal data collection, or experimental intervention. Accordingly, formal human-subject ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the study adhered to scholarly standards of integrity, accurate citation, and responsible interpretation of published sources.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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