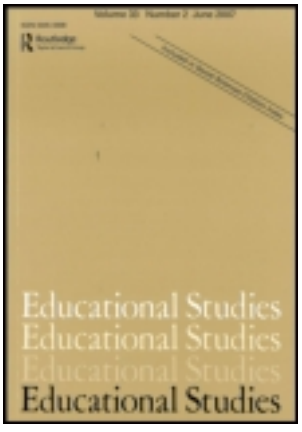

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Dialogic practice in primary schools: how primary head teachers plan to embed philosophy for children into the whole school

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The Philosophy for Children in Schools Project is an ongoing research project to explore the impact of philosophy for children (P4C) on classroom practice. This paper reports on the responses of head teachers, teachers and local educational authority (LA) officers in South Wales, UK, to the initial training programme in Philosophy for Children carried out by the University School of Education. Achieving change in schools through the embedding of new practices is an important challenge for head teachers. Interviews and qualitative questionnaires were used to explore perceptions of and attitudes towards the dialogic practice of P4C and the related challenges for school leaders. The results provide an insight into how head teachers planned to embed the new practice of P4C in their schools. Results from the interviews and questionnaires have been subject to iterative analysis and categories derived under which to discuss the findings. There are many similarities in the ways in which different head teachers go about planning change n their schools as well as differences. The results provide insight into the role of initial continuing professional development (CPD) in school development and the processes by which individual heads plan to embed change in practice across the whole school.

Keywords: philosophy for children; school leadership; continuing professional development

Introduction

This paper reports on the views of primary head teachers, local educational authority (LA) officers and classroom teachers towards the process of introducing philosophy for children (P4C) in primary schools. We wished to find out how head teachers were planning to support their staff in introducing P4C following an initial two-day training course. Changes in whole-school practices are dependent on the leadership of head teachers. The quality of leadership matters if teachers are to be motivated to improve their teaching (Fullan 2001). We were particularly interested in finding out how heads approach P4C, because it poses a challenge to dominant ways of organising teaching. Embedding practices, which require different organisational and interactional approaches, are challenging on many different levels. To fully understand the changes needed to embed P4C, we provide an overview of the programme.

Philosophy for children

P4C is a thinking-skills programme developed by Lipman, Sharp, and Olscanyhon (1980) in the USA. P4C has an international pedigree and is taught in over 50

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countries worldwide. A strength of the Lipman approach is the flexibility of the core methods which have been developed in the UK by members of SAPERE (http://sapere.org.uk/) including Fisher (1996), Murris and Haynes (2000) and Haynes (2002), resulting in a very successful, "home grown" approach to P4C. Training courses developed by SAPERE aim to provide teachers with the skills to facilitate and manage a "community of enquiry" (COE) whereby pupils get the opportunity to raise questions and, in exploring those questions, develop the quality of their thinking and conceptual understanding. P4C develops the ability to ask questions, listen carefully and empathetically to others and solve problems collaboratively. The vehicle for the COE is dialogue between pupils facilitated by the class or subject teacher.

Dialogic discourses

The revolutionary nature of P4C can be understood only in relation to current patterns of classroom interaction. It is well documented that classroom questioning is dominated by the IRF: initiation, usually a closed question asked by the teacher, response by a nominated pupil and feedback by the teacher of the pupil's contribution. First identified by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), the primary purpose of the IRF is the accumulation of knowledge and understanding through questions designed to test or stimulate recall (Alexander 2006). The IRF supports traditional power relationships of the classroom, which tend to reproduce a pedagogy based on the transmission of pre-packaged knowledge (Lyle 1998). In England, the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (DfEE 1998, 1999) raised hopes that more dialogic approaches to whole-class interaction may be developed (Burns and Myhill 2004). Instead it has seen an increase in traditional whole-class teaching (Mroz, Smith, and Hardman 2000) where pupils have few opportunities to question or explore ideas. Observational research suggests practice is still dominated by the IRF (Hargreaves et al. 2003). In a study of the literacy hour in primary schools, Skidmore (2000) has argued that even when teachers work with small groups to lead guided reading, the IRF structure predominates.

There is widespread agreement based on a large number of studies that the IRF provides the basis of teaching by direct instruction and enables teachers to stay in control of events and ideas in lessons (Alexander 2002). Its effect is to emphasise the asymmetrical nature of relationships between teachers and the ones who are taught. Following Bakhtin (1981), this type of teacher–pupil discourse is described as monologic and is increasingly contrasted with another Bakhtinian concept, that of dialogism. Dialogic teaching favours a different pattern of interaction which is characterised by the use of authentic questions on the part of the teacher and the pupils, where answers are not pre-specified but incorporated into subsequent dialogue so that pupil responses modify the topic of discourse (Nystrand et al. 1997). Alexander (2006) summarises dialogic interactions as ones where pupils ask questions, state points of view and comment on ideas that arise in lessons. Teachers have to take account of pupils' ideas in developing the subject theme of the lesson and use talk to provide a cumulative, continuing, contextual frame to enable students' involvement with the new knowledge that they are encountering and creating. This dialogic conception of teaching and learning challenges the power-relationships of the classroom and promotes a more inclusive classroom as pupils who normally do not compete to speak in class gain the confidence to contribute (Alexander 2006).

Despite the evidence of positive impact, there is a well-established and long line of research, which suggests that the establishment of dialogic approaches to classroom discourse will not be easy. A study of primary whole-class teaching during the literacy and numeracy hours with and without the interactive whiteboard indicates that teacher-led IRF patterns of interaction are robust and not easily displaced (Higgins et al. 2005).

However, a number of writers have suggested that dialogic teaching holds the greatest cognitive potential for pupils, whilst at the same time demanding the most of teachers (Alexander 2006; Alexander and Flutter 2009; Lyle 1998; Nystrand et al. 1997). P4C seeks to challenge dominant forms of classroom discourse and by implication the power relationships that support them. It therefore sets particular challenges to head teachers who wish to embed the practice of P4C in their schools.

Impact of philosophy for children

P4C requires considerable investment on behalf of schools and LAs in continuing professional development and time. Before making such an investment it would be important to feel confident of successful outcomes. In a systematic and critical review of controlled outcome studies, Topping and Trickey (2004) found that positive outcomes of engagement with P4C included improved reading, reasoning and cognitive ability as well as increased measures of self-esteem and child behaviour. Evidence was also found of increased emotional intelligence, creative thinking and mathematical skills. Jenkins and Lyle (2010) report positive impact on higher-order thinking amongst low-attaining pupils. Supporting evidence comes from OfSted (2007) reports (see, for example, Seaton Suice First School, March 2005; Tweedmouth West First School, June 2005; First School, Betwick-upon-Tweed, December 2005) and from Estyn (2010) (see Hafod Primary School, Swansea, 2008; Glynncollen Primary School, Swansea 2010). Ofsted comments on pupils' ability to formulate and investigate their own questions and to engage in enquiry systematically and reflectively in a caring manner. Language development is singled out as a plus of P4C, in particular in schools serving pupils from poor socio-economic backgrounds. An evaluation of P4C in Clackmannanshire indicated a gain of 6.5 IQ points for the average child (Topping 2006). The evidence base is clear; P4C has the potential to promote cognitive and affective development in pupils.

Research design

The aim of the research is to determine respondents' perceptions of P4C and their attitudes towards it as a thinking-skills programme for schools following the two-day SAPERE Level 1 Philosophy for Children training.

The sample was drawn from a group of 20 head teachers who attended the training. Eight heads were interviewed which included experienced and inexperienced heads who work in a variety of settings including three schools in challenging areas (one of which was multi-ethnic and two largely white); four suburban schools and one rural. Three LA advisory staff took part in a focus group interview. The support of the LA for P4C is important if heads are to take the initiative forward. Fifteen teachers completed qualitative questionnaires before and after the training – teacher attitudes are important to the outcome of the initiative.

Analysis of data

The teacher responses were analysed in order to determine patterns and present a summary of findings. A force field analysis was used as a tool to collate the summarised data. Transcriptions of head teacher interviews and focus group interview with LA advisors were made and analysed for key themes. Following analysis all interview transcripts together with our discussion of results were returned to the respondents for verification and permission to disseminate results to a wider audience. All data were triangulated to determine key findings and to identify similarities and differences between the three groups of respondents.

Key findings

Key findings are summarised in the following sections. Categories have been generated from the raw data and are used to discuss the findings. The first two categories deal with the national context the respondents are working in, the next five categories deal with the impact P4C can have on school practices. The final four categories focus on the mechanisms schools intend to use to support staff in the process of embedding P4C in school practice.

Category 1: Welsh context

The national context emerged as an important consideration for all participants. Many aspects of government, including responsibility for education, have been devolved from the government of the UK to the Welsh National Assembly. In post-devolution Wales there is increasing disillusion with a "skills and standards" approach to education and a growing interest in transferable skills such as critical and creative thinking and problem-solving as a means to facilitate deeper learning. All head teachers saw this as a critical factor in their decision to promote P4C.

The abolition of testing at age 7, 11 and 13 in Wales through SATs (standard assessment tests) was seen as an important factor in opening up a space for practices such as P4C. Following a quarter of a century where the content of the curriculum has taken centre stage, in Wales a clear commitment to move away from a focus on knowledge in favour of skills was clearly signalled as ACCAC (2005) announced its intention to promote "thinking skills and assessment for learning". A range of approaches including subject-specific programmes, such as cognitive acceleration in science/maths education (CASE and CAME) and others such as Leat (2001) *Thinking Through Geography*, were identified as examples of good practice. P4C was also recommended and was therefore flagged up as an assembly-approved initiative.

The introduction of a new curriculum and creation of three distinct phases in education (the foundation phase (three to seven years), a key stage 2–3 (8–13 years) and the 14–19 curriculum) was an important consideration for respondents. Planning for all three phases and aspects of education in Wales is informed by a skills framework 3–19 (DCELLS 2008), which includes:

- thinking skills;
- communication skills (incorporating oracy, reading and writing);
- ICT; and
- number.

The skills framework provides for continuity and development across the 3–19 age range, and all head teachers saw P4C as an initiative that cohered well with the framework. The assembly's proposals opened up possibilities for innovation and change. To what extent heads can rise above the impact of "two decades of detailed, micro-managed legislation, backed by a punitive external inspectorate" (Bottery 2007, 101) and become more pro-active remains to be seen.

Category 2: commitment to CPD

All heads expressed a commitment to continuing professional development (CPD) and recognised its role in introducing and supporting new practices. LA staff valued CPD programmes that introduce thinking skills as part of a curriculum subject and saw P4C as potentially providing an arts-based approach to thinking skills, particularly relevant for English and humanities teaching, which could be taught across the entire school age range (3–19) and would complement other thinking-skills programmes promoted in the county.

Category 3: the potential of P4C to impact on whole-school practice

All respondents were extremely enthusiastic about P4C. Head teachers used such words as "powerful", "huge impact", "immense impact" and "significant potential". An LA advisor commented, "I aspire to have every school having philosophy as part and parcel of what they do as normal practice". Eight teachers wrote "enthusiastic" to describe their response to P4C; 17 comments reflected their intention to embed P4C in their classrooms, "I'd like to have it fully embedded in my class next year" "Hopefully the rest of the school will have seen the value and be using it throughout". The heads saw the benefit of P4C for pupils and valued child-centred approaches as reflected in the next category.

Category 4: benefits for children

P4C was considered to be an inclusive model of practice; however, to be effective the school would have to be operating in an inclusive way already. P4C was not seen as a first step towards inclusion, but one that should build on existing practice. P4C would help teachers recognise what children are capable of. P4C would support "gifted and talented" and yet would also "allow teachers to recognise (all) children's potential, especially those who can't get their ideas down on paper".

Many of the head teachers were concerned about children's language development. It was frequently mentioned as a priority in school planning. P4C's potential role in the development of oracy was valued; it was seen as "a forum for use of language" "for language development, especially for children coming into school" "improve children's questioning" and "to develop vocabulary".

Category 5: the potential for P4C to link with other on-going initiatives

The LA wants P4C to be linked and supported by other strategies for the development of thinking skills. All respondents agreed that P4C would fit with other initiatives. All the schools in the sample had started to promote thinking skills and other pedagogic initiatives that were complementary to P4C, especially assessment for learning (see Black and William 1998).

Personal and social education (PSE) played a central role in the curriculum in these schools. Almost all respondents saw P4C as building on circle time (see Mosley 2001), a major LA initiative over the past few years:

> my feeling is that it will work extremely well in many of our schools where they have been involved in other initiatives where they promote thinking skills, circle time and teaching approaches which mirror the approaches that philosophy promotes. (LA spokesperson)

Head teachers frequently referred to the links between P4C and circle time, PSE and other thinking skills programmes and assessment for learning. Programmes frequently referred to were the CASE and CAME initiatives. Teachers listed approaches and strategies currently being used in their schools that they felt would complement P4C.

Category 6: impact on respondents

All respondents discussed the initial two-day training in P4C and considered implications for further training. The LA not only considered the training to be "very challenging", but also recognised it as a focus for personal, reflective thinking and welcomed it as such. There was widespread agreement that a teacher would need to have classroom experience (for many, but not all, it was not seen as an approach for novice teachers) and have a good understanding of the concepts associated with philosophical thinking before they could take on the demands of P4C, which was generally considered to require skilful facilitation. The LA suggested that not all teachers were ready to teach P4C and expressed concern about teacher facilitation skills.

Most of the heads interviewed have tried P4C themselves in classes in their schools before planning whole-school training for staff. One leads a P4C lunchtime club. All report being "thrilled" with the outcomes and impressed with the power of the process and the quality of children's thinking. Most of the heads interviewed have observed staff putting P4C into practice. All report positive impact on pupils.

Some head teachers felt that it would be challenging for some teachers in their schools, "a few individuals would not be happy to embrace it" "a few individuals would be reluctant", but also noted that these teachers would probably have similar responses to any new initiative. Overall, heads were more confident than the LA that P4C could be successfully taken forward as a whole-school initiative.

Teachers expressed some concerns about the demands P4C would make on them, for example, their own, "lack of questioning skills" "lack of facilitation skills", and one felt "nervous and concerned about whether it would work". However, there were only five comments on perceived difficulties in contrast to 20 on positive aspects. Motivation came from their enthusiasm for P4C, the opportunity it gave to build on existing practice and feeling confident to begin doing it in their own classrooms.

Overall, respondents believe P4C can promote children's cognitive and affective development and can support inclusive practices. It has the potential to support pupils' language development and oracy skills, which for some are seen as deficit.

The final four categories focus on the mechanisms heads intend to use to embed P4C in school practice.

Category 7: identification of further training needs

Differences emerged between the respondents. The LA took a wider view than the head teachers and expressed concern about sustainability and opportunities to embed the practice of P4C across the LA as a whole. The value of Level 1 training for LA staff was recognised. They were considering "core service training at Level 1 for all education effectiveness staff" (15 members of the LEA advisory team have since been trained). They wanted additional training and support for teachers, and there were indications of a possible supporting structuring emerging from the county. "People within the LEA recognise the potential for this." The value of teacher secondment and the practice of modelling by more experienced P4C practitioners in other classrooms were seen as a valuable way of providing professional development for P4C novices across the county. The LA also hoped that the training would be extended to include secondary staff, "to promote smooth transition". Head teachers also wanted LA involvement, "I think it is important the LA come on board, we do not just want pockets of schools; it would be nice to have an LA feel to everything".

Head teachers saw the need for further training and planned a variety of approaches to take P4C forward in their schools. Following their own training, all the heads booked Level 1 training for their staff. The two-day training programme is a considerable investment of time and resources in a primary school and demonstrates commitment to P4C. In addition, several of the schools sent one or two staff for training prior to the planned whole-school training and see them as potential "champions" of P4C in their schools. They wish to see models of good practice in P4C established in some classrooms before training the whole staff, seeing it as a way of convincing the "reluctant" members of staff that it is a worthwhile initiative. It was clear that heads expected experienced staff to provide models of good practice for other staff and to be prepared to support and facilitate the professional development of colleagues. Many planned to use these staff to model the practice throughout the schools. The heads took the concept of distributed leadership seriously (Harris 2004).

Heads appeared to have differing attitudes to using support staff in this initiative. Some planned to include learning assistants in the planned whole-school training and others did not. Some heads are clear that support staff have a very important part to play when new initiatives are being introduced, and two heads planned to have support staff lead the initiative in their schools. Lack of specified CPD funding for supporting staff was a problem for many heads, although one head is paying for a learning support assistant to attend the Level 2 training and intends to use her to model practice in other classrooms.

All head teachers have included P4C in their school development plan. CPD was important to these plans and the allocation of responsibility for action to suitable staff. School development plans are prepared in consultation with governors, and one school carried out governor training in P4C to help them understand its importance. Most heads recognised the importance of having governors "on board" and planned to present P4C to the governors.

Continuity

Transition from primary to secondary schools, particularly with the conceptualisation of a key stage 2–3 curriculum in Wales, is important; heads want secondary teachers to be trained so that they can continue P4C. "What's the point of us developing pupils to be independent thinkers who can ask their own questions if this all stops when they

go to comp?" One head invited four staff from the comprehensive to attend her whole-school training. One cluster of schools included a two-hour workshop on P4C in their transition day where all primary feeders and staff from the comprehensive school came together for training.

Modelling

An experienced P4C practitioner had a six-week secondment to work with schools to model P4C in classrooms. All heads saw modelling as an excellent way of supporting the development of P4C after initial training. "It was a good idea to have somebody model. Phil (the teacher/mentor) has more experience using it in the classroom". Another head who has carried out a number of P4C sessions in school, commented, "I learnt so much watching Phil that helped me realise how I could develop and extend my practice".

Case study example

Although the plans for developing P4C differ amongst heads, some trends have emerged. The practice of one school provides an example of the various ways that head teachers can embed P4C into their schools:

Step 1: Deputy head does Level 1 training – embeds it in her classroom practice.
Step 2: Head teacher does Level 1 training.
Step 3: Deputy head models practice for governors and secures their support for inclusion of P4C in the school development plan.
Step 4: Newsletter to parents to keep them informed about the new development.
Step 5: Two teachers are identified as potential "champions" of P4C, one in the infant department and one in the junior. Complete Level 1 training.
Step 6: Seconded teacher visits school to model P4C observed by several staff.
Step 7: Links made with secondary colleagues.
Step 8: Philosophy room established in the school.
Step 9: Deputy head to carry out P4C sessions in all classes of the school in PPA time.
Step 10: Deputy head to undertake Level 2 training in P4C.
Step 11: Whole-school training booked including four secondary colleagues.
Step 12: Transition day with feeder schools and local comprehensive included a workshop on P4C.
Step 13: Plans to attend P4C conference by head teacher with some staff.
Step 14: Staff to attend P4C support group meetings at local HEI.

This provides an example of how one deputy head teacher put together a plan to embed P4C in the whole-school practice and ethos. Other heads interviewed have development plans that include some or most of these initiatives. Ten of the teachers identified further training and five of these teachers subsequently followed a P4C Level 2 course.

Category 8: school practices that can support embedding of P4C

Head teachers discussed a range of mechanisms to help embed P4C in practice:

- performance management targets for staff to include P4C;
- awarding a teaching and learning responsibility (TLR) to lead P4C;

- using planning, preparation, assessment (PPA) so the lead P4C teacher could model the practice of P4C across the school and build his/her own expertise as a P4C practitioner; and
- training of learning support assistants (LSAs) to support P4C in class or in withdrawal with small groups.

A number of heads see some kind of collaborative practice as a way ahead, for example:

- invite seconded teacher for modelling/ADDs session;
- peer mentoring;
- team teaching; and
- withdrawing groups.

Teachers also wanted:

- outside support;
- P4C support groups;
- support from colleagues;
- peer-coaching; and
- mentoring.

This suggests that teachers and their heads see the mechanisms of modelling, mentoring and coaching as valuable.

Category 9: curriculum planning

The majority of head teachers wanted P4C to support the foundation phase (age three to seven in Wales) and the skills-based curriculum and saw curriculum change supporting P4C. Ten teachers wanted P4C to be timetabled once a week to "make sure it happens".

Category 10: working with and involving others

Heads and LA officers are aware that parents need to be kept informed of developments, for example, newsletters to promote further understanding. One school has established a coffee morning for parents and release a teacher to practice P4C with the parents. Governors are important in terms of the school development plan, and all heads plan to discuss P4C with governors.

Networking to support CPD

The way the training had been carried out, by bringing cohorts of head teachers and representatives from the LA together with staff from the higher education institutions (HEI), was seen as an important networking opportunity. A partnership approach to CPD was seen as an important step forward by respondents.

The lead for P4C training originally came from the HEI, and all respondents valued this. Many teachers and schools have links with the HEI through accredited CPD and the initial teacher education and training (ITET) programmes. The school of

education has always sought to work closely in partnership with colleagues in the LA advisory service, and a great deal of trust has evidently been built up between them.

Respondents commented on how these partnerships had been moved forward by this initiative. Networking has brought together a wide variety of people who would otherwise not have worked together. This was considered a positive feature that should be maintained, for example, an LA officer was invited by a head teacher to model a P4C session with a class prior to whole-school training in P4C. Another head invited her school development officer to observe her doing P4C with a group of infants in her school.

A support group for P4C practitioners has been formed through the HEI that meets after school once a term. Further plans for networking are going ahead between primary and secondary schools. Secondary colleagues are to be invited to observe P4C in the year 6 class, and the year 6 teacher has offered to model the practice in the secondary school with a year 7 class.

Several heads of smaller schools have liaised and joined together for the planned whole-school training. All this activity suggests that networking can have very positive benefits for teachers and schools and LA.

Discussion of findings

The personal value system of head teachers impacted on how they saw change being introduced and sustained in their schools. They were excited by the dialogic approach to classroom practice of P4C and its potential for improving the quality of pupil thinking, language development and attainment. Heads recognised the empowering potential of P4C for children and that this may be threatening to some staff. This did not put heads off; they all expressed commitment to promoting pupil dialogue and saw its potential value as a mechanism of inclusion that could support the gifted as well as those with behaviour or learning difficulties. Dialogic pedagogy was seen as something that could contribute to raising standards across the board. Overall, heads recognised the potential of P4C to promote shared values for a more inclusive school.

The LAs were more cautious than the head teachers in believing that such a change in fundamental approaches to classroom discourse could be embedded in schools. P4C "demands a great deal from teachers" and requires "enormous skill" to do it well. Aware of the robustness of monologic approaches to questioning and engagement with pupils, they were less confident that change would be forthcoming. This highlights the importance of continuing monitoring and evaluation of school practices to assess the ability of schools to embed P4C into practice and if, and where successful, to determine what factors are significant.

The evidence gathered from respondents suggests that head teachers are taking the lead in CPD; they all put forward well-articulated cases for a multi-pronged approach to embedding P4C into practice. Heads valued the initial short training course but recognised the need to provide on-going support for teachers. Modelling, mentoring and peer-coaching emerge as valued approaches to professional development as was the desire for advanced training for teachers leading P4C. Modelling of practice by experienced practitioners has emerged as an effective CPD tool that heads wish to deploy. They recognise the CPD opportunities for teachers acting as mentors to other staff through modelling practice or peer-coaching and see the need for advanced training in P4C if this is to work. Peer-coaching emerged as an interesting, but as yet

rarely used approach to professional development that could provide an important adjunct to initial training.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the perceptions and attitudes of teachers, head teachers and LA officers towards embedding a new initiative in primary schools. We have evaluated the response of respondents to the two-day training in P4C and discussed the role of CPD in the change process. Identification of the ways in which head teachers plan to implement the use of P4C shows no clear pattern of head teacher responses, although we have been able to identify some important similarities. This supports the findings of Bottery (2007) who suggests that individual approaches to change are mediated "in terms of values, personality, and contextual challenges" (101).

All the heads were confident they could lead change in their schools and that they were the key people in deciding the educational goals for their schools. They recognised the role of the Welsh Assembly Government in proposed curriculum change, which they believe has opened up a space for innovation. All agreed that the catalyst for change could come from high-quality CPD.

All the head teachers discussed the potential of CPD as a driver for school improvement. In addition, the idea of distributed leadership (Harris 2004) informed the plans of the heads; most of them saw the importance of dispersing responsibility for leading P4C amongst staff. Our intention is to return to the schools in two years to see if P4C has been embedded in practice.

Notes on µcontributors

Dr Sue Lyle was formerly head of Continuing Professional Development at Swansea Metropolitan University. She is now leading The Philosophy for Children in Schools Project to explore the impact of P4C on classroom practice and has published a number of papers on this topic.

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