Chapter 7

Philosophical inquiry as a tool for well-being

Dr Aimee Quickfall

Keywords

Philosophy

Inquiry

Confidence

Engagement

Self-regulation

Autonomy

This chapter examines using philosophy in schools with children. Philosophy, at its simplest, is engaged with actively thinking and reflecting about a range of topics and ideas. As we have seen in the chapters throughout this book, many approaches to supporting children, specifically those that step away from behaviourism, have a reflective and 'thinking' element. This was seen in the preceding chapters on restorative practices and solution focused approaches, but is a recurrent thread in sociological and systems theory approaches to behaviour. Aimee's chapter will consider in depth how philosophy can support children's well-being and impact on their behaviour.

This chapter aims to:

- Explore the research literature on philosophical inquiry with children
- Describe one of many ways in which philosophical inquiry can be used with children
- Consider three case studies of children in communities of inquiry

Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.

—J.K. Rowling

This is the first chapter from a contributing author. Aimee was asked to write this chapter as using philosophy with children is an area of expertise for her, both practically and in related research in this area. My knowledge of using philosophical inquiry to support children's well-being and behaviour arose through informal conversations with Aimee, and my own understanding and interest in the area is largely a result of listening to Aimee and watching her in action, talking to other colleagues engaged in research, teachers and teacher-trainees as well as children. Aimee's

post-doctoral research is also focused on using philosophical inquiry, and it was an area she was passionate about using in the classroom when she was a teacher and senior leader in schools. Philosophical inquiry was not something I used in the classroom with my children when I was a teacher, but I am convinced – retrospectively – that it would have been incredibly beneficial, not just for children whose behaviours challenged me, but for all of the children in my classes.

Philosophical inquiry is not in and of itself a tool, strategy or intervention to manage behaviour. However, it does facilitate the opportunity for children to speak and be heard, and as a result, to develop their confidence voicing views and opinions (that might be different from others) and provide a structured way to do this. As Aimee will suggest, this develops confidence and independence in children as well as supporting them in understanding each other and working together.

Foundations

What is philosophy with children?

Philosophy with children, when it is embedded in classroom practice, is about children being empowered to turn on the light (as J.K. Rowling describes it); to open up different points of view, build communities and foster respect for other thinkers in the community. In this chapter, I argue that going through the process of establishing a community of philosophical inquiry with a group of children can also turn on the light for adults, encouraging us to review our role in the community and how classroom management strategies can close down independent and group thinking if used in clumsy ways.

The study of philosophy and philosophical inquiry (what philosophy with children is generally based on) are two very different ideas. Philosophical inquiry is about your own thinking, your own ideas and the thoughts and ideas of your community of inquiry, rather than starting with the thoughts of famous philosophers and weaving arguments between them. In greater depth, philosophical inquiry is about approaching an idea in a certain way, which can be easily learnt, constructing an argument and testing it in different scenarios from your experience or fantasy.

Activity stop 1

An example of a philosophical inquiry: The community consider a stimulus, in this case, a photograph of a beached whale. After pursuing their individual thoughts, then talking with a partner, they construct a question and begin a discussion: 'Is it ever right for humans to interfere with nature?' Children then put forward views based on their understanding of the world. They give

examples from their own experience, such as Dad swerving to avoid running over a hedgehog, or taking an injured gull to a local wildlife rescue centre. Using Figure 7.1, consider the following:

- What skills would children need to be able to engage in an activity like this?
- What skills would the teacher/adult need to lead a session like this?
- How many of these skills are linked to managing or supporting behaviour?

Figure 7.1 Philosophical inquiry skills and self/behaviour management skills.

Philosophical inquiry is more than a curriculum subject. In the community of inquiry, 'children are acknowledged as independent thinkers, capable of seeing clearly and contributing in valuable ways to our understanding of our shared world' (Cassidy & Mohr Lone, 2020, p. 16). Children are natural philosophers in many respects (Quickfall, 2018), but strategies within a community can refine the inquiry process and also broaden the reservoir of ideas and experiences that the inquiry draws upon. For individual children, philosophical inquiry has a positive impact on socio-emotional development, confidence and engagement in learning, as well as maths, reading and writing progress (Gorard, Siddiqui & See, 2017; Tolmie *et al*., 2010; Topping & Trickey, 2007). Research also suggests that involvement in weekly philosophical inquiry sessions has a lasting effect, with children exhibiting positive effects of inquiry two years later in secondary education, even though the philosophical inquiry sessions had not continued (Topping & Trickey, 2007).

In terms of community and relationships, philosophy with children can have many benefits (Hedayati & Ghaedi, 2009). It makes the community work within a more defined arrangement in terms of communal practices and agreed standards, and it teaches children how to respectfully disagree, make connections, identify weaknesses in evidence and think about their thinking (Murris, 2000). In a community of children, philosophical inquiry helps them to see each other in different ways (Murris, 2000), and research suggests that children engaging in regular inquiry sessions display increases in social and communication skills, teamwork, resilience and empathy (Siddiqui, Gorard and See, 2019). Dialogic advantages of inquiry sessions have been demonstrated, for example in a study by Cassidy and Christie (2013) where children were involved in a one-hour-per-week session which provided 'a context for genuine collaborative engagement in learning where the actual process of learning itself is a shared one' (Cassidy & Christie, 2013, p. 1081, see also Barrow, 2010). The study took place in six primary schools in Scotland, with a range of socio-economic and rural/urban contexts. The researchers used a story as a stimulus for the sessions, and children quickly became adept at using and explaining metaphor and examples from their own experience, and they also learnt to define the terms they were using to ensure the community had a shared understanding of points being made.

Thinking stop 1

The discussion here has considered the research on the positive impact of philosophy with children. Given this, why do you think it is not widespread practice?

- What might prevent schools form using this approach with children?
- Can you think of any additional advantages for the children in your care?
- How do you think these types of activities, and this form of thinking and discussion could impact on behaviour in the short term?
- And in the long term?

In terms of positive impacts on classroom behaviour management and well-being, the research in this area is scarce; possibly because setting up a community of inquiry leads many practitioners to question their beliefs about managing behaviour and what education is all about, together with the adult/child relationship (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). Cassidy and Mohr-Lone (2020) collected responses from children in their inquiry sessions that ably describe other ways of looking at the teacher and pupil distinction:

> Madison: When you think about it, childhood and adulthood are just ideas people
> thought of and then they put boundaries around these names to create something
> that isn't actually real. There really is no such thing as "being a child" or "being an
> adult." They're just labels. We're all people. (Cassidy & Mohr-Lone, 2020, p. 20)

This links with the ideas discussed in chapters in Part II of this book, which emphasise that how we view children impacts on how we manage or support their behaviour. For example, the teacher's understanding and view of children is very different when we compare behaviourist and solution focused interventions, or psychological and humanist perspectives. As Cassidy and Mohr-Lone point out, 'in order to facilitate this transformation, the view of children as irrational, uncritical, under-socialised, and lacking in competence needs to be addressed' (p. 18). Whilst practitioners very rarely hold these views of the children they teach, the main critiques of using philosophical inquiry with children are based on children's inability to grapple with complex concepts, a lack of knowledge and experience and stage models of child development which restrict conceptions of what is possible at specific chronological ages. As practitioners, our training and the traditions of our profession have been shaped by these models and are worth re-examining and reflecting upon as part of the process of setting up a community of inquiry.

Cassidy, Marwick, Deeney and McLean (2018) found that the structure of inquiry sessions (see the next section, 'Building blocks') supported 'children's engaged participation and self-regulation' (p. 81) in a study focused on children with emotional and behavioural challenges, and a similar intervention with children living in secure accommodation (Heron & Cassidy, 2018). As Heron and Cassidy note:

> enhancing self-regulation using argumentation and dialogue might help to
> promote more adaptive behaviours, including better reasoning and judgement,

which can give highly vulnerable children greater control over their own lives. (p. 255)

I would argue that the same applies to other children in less rigid settings, in that learning to disagree with respect and to take on board other points of view is beneficial to anyone, and that practising these skills as a community is a worthwhile aim of education.

Thinking stop 2

Vignette: Josh, who learnt to talk it through

Josh was in my community of inquiry for two years, as part of an after-school club in a school with high percentages of children with behavioural issues and special educational needs. Josh was nominated to come to the club by his class teacher, who explained that he hoped it might help Josh with his behaviour towards peers, as he could be very aggressive when upset, and the hope was that inquiry sessions may encourage Josh to listen to other points of view. Josh had been diagnosed with ADHD and ASD, and funding had been awarded for him to have a one-to-one assistant during lessons. However, Josh's behaviour at breaks and in less structured activities in the classroom was disruptive, and other children had reported feeling frightened of his outbursts, which often stemmed from a difference of opinion.

Josh found the inquiry sessions very difficult to start with, and I found myself, several times, talking him into coming back into the building after he had decided to walk home on his own. Over time, he began sharing his ideas more readily, perhaps after recognising that the community valued his contributions. He would still find disputes and challenges very difficult, and I would never claim that the inquiry sessions had solved his issues with aggression towards other children, but what Josh did find was a place to talk through his thoughts. Over time it became easier for him to talk about his feelings, even if this was just with members of the community of inquiry. Children from the community had different perceptions of Josh.

Josh's behaviour changed over this period – and perceptions of Josh's behaviour from his peers also changed.

- What impacts do you think these changes may have had on the well-being of Josh?
- His peers?
- His teacher?

Building blocks

In this section, I will explain how to set up a community of inquiry with a class, and a model for running a basic session. From a teacher's perspective, the role in the classroom is different during philosophy with children inquiry sessions. Once the community is established, the teacher becomes a facilitator, or may step out of the discussion altogether. In terms of behaviour management, classroom management more broadly, and even professional identity, this can be a culture shock. The process of setting up the conditions for philosophical inquiry involves everyone in the room having equal rights to express their opinions and ideas – including the adults. However, as recent research has shown;

> Pro-social behaviour is only encouraged when children see it in adults, and learn to trust adults in schools on the basis of their fair treatment and just values. (Siddiqui, Gorard and See, 2019, p. 148)

Taking on this approach, even for an hour a week, will potentially change the way you see your role in the classroom, and may change the way children perceive their place in the community, too.

Thinking stop 3

Vignette: Jack, the boy who no one noticed

I had noticed Jack at the beginning of Year 5, mostly because he wasn't often noticeable. He got on with his work, he was quiet and, I think it is fair to say, he would be considered 'average' in many respects. He was on track academically but didn't excel. He seemed to like having a kick-about at playtime, but he wasn't interested in joining the football team. Jack could slip through the day at school without attracting much attention from his peers or adults. When we started using philosophy with children, as you might expect, Jack continued to 'fly under the radar'. For the first few sessions, he didn't volunteer any thoughts but would nod in agreement and contribute to votes (see the inquiry process). Then, something remarkable happened. In the fourth session, we talked about a book in which the beloved pet of the protagonist dies and the children were interested in whether the character would get another dog, knowing the pain that another loss would cause to him. The community voted for a discussion question: If you know something is going to be really painful, is it ever right to continue with it? Towards the end of the discussion, the children seemed to agree that if possible, you should try to avoid pain. Jack signalled that he wanted to speak, and told us about his grandma, who was dying in hospital. He explained that no matter how painful it was to lose her, his memories of her were worth hundreds of times more than dodging the pain, and that having known her had made him a stronger person. The rest of the class were stunned – they saw

Jack in a different way after that session. I am not going to claim that he became captain of the football team, but their perceptions of him as someone with real insights to offer had shifted.

Reflecting on the vignette about Jack;

- Do you have a 'Jack' in your class?
- When does your Jack get a chance to share their strengths, feelings and thoughts with the community?
- What difference might it make if your jack got a planned and regular opportunity to do this?
- Who might see and feel that difference the most?

I have been using philosophical inquiry in my classrooms for 15 years, and the model I use has been adapted over time – yours will, too, if you decide to commit to using inquiry in your teaching. Many other models can be found described online or in the literature, but most tend to follow a basic sequence of steps (Haynes, 2002).

Starting up

- Agree how your community will operate – what is important to you? This can be written as rules, an agreement, or discussed at the beginning of each session. It is vital that children understand that disagreements are a strength of the community and should be welcomed, if handled respectfully by all (Cassidy & Christie, 2013).
- Discuss what philosophical inquiry is and who can be a philosopher. We are all philosophers, and with a community of inquiry, we can learn to be better philosophers.
- Consider your place in the community. As the teacher in the room, you will have a key role in setting up the community, but once established, the children should lead the sessions and listen to each other, rather than wait for the adult to give the 'correct answer'. Considering your place in the community at regular points will help.

Preparing for a session

- Choose a stimulus for the inquiry – this could be a photo, story, dilemma, something that has really happened in school –music and smells can also work with an established community.
- Think about roles for the children. In the story of Sophie that follows, I considered giving Sophie a role such as inquiry scribe, so that she could record the discussion rather than dominating it. You may have children who would benefit from being a timekeeper, fairness overseer, scribe or facilitator at different times.

Process for a session (approximately an hour)

1. Play a game with a community objective; for example, a game that builds listening skills, turn taking and noticing.

2. Share the stimulus and give children time to think.

3. Thinking individually – ask children to generate a word that sums up the stimulus for them.

4. Thinking with a friend – share your word with a partner and generate a question from your ideas. Write down the question, or appoint a scribe to record them.

5. Share all the questions with the whole community.

6. Make connections between the questions- give children opportunities to spot links between the questions, with no correct answers! Agree on sets of questions that go together if you can.

7. Read a representative question for each set and do a 'secret vote' to choose one for the discussion.

8. Begin the discussion – the original authors should be invited to explain how they came up with the question and define any terms.

9. Don't be afraid of silences! If the discussion needs re-invigorating, you (or the facilitator!) can re-read the question.

10. Try to conclude the session with a summary of the discussion. If you have had a scribe, go through the notes/pictures and ask children to pick out the key points.

Activity Stop 2

Try this warm-up game: Everyone stands in a circle, in silence. The aim is to get everyone sitting down. The rules are that each person who sits down must say the next number, e.g. the first person sits down and says '1'. If two people speak at once, everyone stands up and starts again. You must not say a number after a person standing next to you has said one. This takes ages the first time and gets faster and faster as the group learn to read the signs that someone wants to speak next – a vital skill for debate.

Thinking stop 4

Vignette: Sophie, who found her favourite game

Sophie was a really 'bright spark' in my Year 6 class. She often dominated discussions and team work, known as someone who was bright and knowledgeable. My worry was that on introducing

philosophical inquiry sessions, Sophie would either dominate, or the rest of the children would just agree with her after listening to her insights into the topic. I didn't need to worry. After the first session, Sophie stayed behind (a common feature of these sessions – children often don't want them to end) and asked me what we could do to get other children to participate in the discussions. She had noted that with so much time given over to the discussion of the community question, it would be much more fun and productive if others were confident to disagree, explain their ideas and contribute to examples. Sophie had been used to giving short, verifiable answers to closed questions, or to giving concise summaries of her ideas to open questioning. She had not experienced a proper debate, with its twists and turns, evolution, dead-ends and disagreements at school before. Over the next two sessions, Sophie worked on encouraging others to make their points, taking on the role of facilitator and looking out for children who wanted to speak, reminding the community of the question and giving balance when a point was missed.

Philosophical inquiry sessions are based on ideas of fair contributions and respect for others, and a reduction of the disparity in power between adults and children. Are there other times in school when fair treatment is more clearly defined or felt?

Using the vignette to reflect on Sophie (the one described, or a 'Sophie' of you own):

- How could Sophie's new skills be utilised in other sessions?

- How can this be balanced with her right to express her own ideas?

Experiences of behaviour and strengthening well-being

In the case studies included in this section, I have briefly summarised the experience of working with three very different children in communities of inquiry; Josh, in an after-school club focused on improving behaviour; Jack, as part of his class but very much on the periphery at the beginning of the community; and Sophie, a confident child who could easily dominate class discussions in other sessions. In this section, I am going to talk about those three examples of children, but they represent many individuals who I have worked with over the years, and undoubtedly share much with children in your class and school.

In terms of their well-being, I saw improvements for all three of these children in different ways. Josh, like the children in Heron and Cassidy's work (2018), learnt other ways to express himself that gave him options for handling disagreements and situations that he found tense. Over time, this changed the perception of Josh's behaviour amongst his peers, and it gave Josh choices. He didn't always choose to use the skills of philosophical inquiry, but at least he had some alternative ways of behaving, and I feel this did improve his well-being and his relationships with other children. His

behaviour was modified in many subsequent situations, but I think it is fair to say that his well-being was also positively impacted.

Jack's behaviour changed in a subtle way, following the inquiry sessions. He grew in confidence and again, the perception of Jack by his peers changed, too. In some respects, some observers may consider Jack's behaviour to have been modified negatively; with some newfound confidence, he was more likely to shout out in class (although not often!) However, his well-being was surely positively impacted. Jack's contributions, whilst not as frequent as others, were insightful, other children looked at him in a different way, and each session reinforced the idea within the community that Jack was someone worth listening to. As a teacher, watching a child grow in confidence over a year is a privilege; one that can be brought about by many different topics, subjects, competitions and interactions – philosophical inquiry provided this opportunity for Jack.

Sophie's behaviour certainly wouldn't have been pointed out as problematic, or in need of modification. However, in a short time, she realised that her impact on the community was considerable and needed to be carefully reflected upon. Sophie identified where she could benefit the community in more than one way; her contributions were always well thought out and interesting, but she also had the trust of the community and the skills to help others share their ideas. Sophie could easily have been pushed out of discussions, so her well-being had to be carefully considered, too – but this was greatly cushioned because she had the freedom to reflect and make decisions about her role in the community.

Review

Whilst there are theoretical critiques of using philosophical inquiry with children, there are many examples from research where there have been benefits to children. Whilst I have personally found philosophical inquiry beneficial for my class and my pedagogy, you may not hold with the underpinning ideas, particularly around the management of behaviour during an inquiry session and the shifting identity of the teacher as part of this process. I would never suggest taking on something like philosophical inquiry if, as a professional, someone decides it is not compatible with their views. However, I would advocate that if you do not use philosophical inquiry, there are other opportunities in your class for community building, voicing opinions and sharing different and sometimes conflicting points of view.

Activity stop 3

This chapter has considered a focus that has not been touched upon in previous chapters. However, there are lots of cross-overs and common themes. Use the diagram (Figure 7.2) to see if there are any links for you between this chapter and some of the ideas or theories introduced in the previous chapters.

Figure 7.2 Identifies cross-overs between philosophical inquiry and other chapters.

This chapter has:

- Explored the research literature on philosophical inquiry with children.
- Described one of many ways in which philosophical inquiry can be used with children.
- Considered three case studies of children in communities of inquiry.

In doing so, you have been prompted to consider the role of the adult in the classroom during philosophical inquiry sessions, and how these (possibly) different roles for you and the children may have positive impacts on well-being, social interactions and peer relationships.

Whole-school actions might include the following:

- Investigating philosophical inquiry as a whole-school project, making time and space for a one-hour session per week in each class.
- Considering how philosophical inquiry can be introduced to other sessions, as a discussion activity with a shared understanding of the value of different opinions.
- Support staff continued professional development in facilitating and introducing philosophical inquiry.

Individual teacher actions might include some or all of the following:

- Research resources and approaches to philosophical inquiry with children, which are freely available online.
- Have a go at using philosophical inquiry with your class – bearing in mind that a community of inquiry takes time to establish!
- Use further reading to enhance your understanding of philosophical approaches in the classroom.

Possible mental health and well-being implications:

- There is a clear link between children's well-being and fair treatment at school (Pretsch *et al*., 2016). Whilst research in this area is scarce, anecdotally, the fair treatment and respect that is fostered in a community of inquiry has a positive impact on well-being and a sense of belonging.

If you decide to set up a community of inquiry with your class, I would love to hear about it:

Aimee.quickfall@bishopg.ac.uk.

Practitioner-related take-away:

- Communities of philosophical inquiry give structure and support children in voicing their views or opinions. This same structure and confidence in being heard can support them in managing their own and others' emotions and behaviours.

Practitioner Reading:

- Quickfall, A. (2019). Philosophy and learning to think. In, Ogier, S. (Ed.) *A Broad and Balanced Curriculum in Primary Schools: Educating the Whole Child*. London: Learning Matters.

References

Barrow, W. (2010). Dialogic, participation and the potential for philosophy for children. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, **5**(2), pp. 61–69.

Cassidy, C., and Christie, D. (2013) Philosophy with children: Talking, thinking and learning together. *Early Child Development and Care*, **183**(8), pp. 1072–1083.

Cassidy, C., and Mohr-Lone, J. (2020). Thinking about childhood: Being and becoming in the world. *Analytic Teaching and Philosophical Praxis*, **40**(1) pp. 16–26.

Cassidy, C., Marwick, H., Deeney, L., and McLean, G. (2018). Philosophy with children, self-regulation and engaged participation for children with emotional behavioural and social communication needs. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, **23**(1), pp. 81–96.

Durlak, J., Weissberg, A., Dymnicki, R., Taylor, and Schellinger, K. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development,* **82**(1), pp. 405–432.

Gorard, S., Siddiqui, N., and See, B. (2017). Can 'Philosophy for Children' improve primary school attainment? *Journal of Philosophy of Education,* **51**(1), pp. 5–22.

Hedayati, M., and Ghaedi, Y. (2009). Effects of the philosophy for children program through the community of inquiry method on the improvement of interpersonal relationship skills in primary school students. *Childhood & Philosophy*, **5**(9), pp. 199–217.

Heron, G, and Cassidy, C. (2018). Using practical philosophy to enhance the self-regulation of children in secure accommodation. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, **23**(3), pp. 254–269.

Pretsch, J., Ehrhardt, N., Engl, L., Risch, B., Roth, J., Schumacher, S., and Schmitt, M. (2016). Injustice in school and students' emotions, well-being, and behavior: A longitudinal study. *Social Justice Research,* **29**(1), pp. 119–138.

Topping, K., and Trickey, S. (2007). Impact of philosophical enquiry on school students' interactive behaviour. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, **2**(2), pp 73–84.