The Positive Impact of Teaching Philosophy in English Primary and Secondary Schools

Simon Uttley

A Thinkpiece

Table of Contents

Introduction

Think of philosophy and what comes to mind? Smoked-filled rooms? Armchair theorems? Worrying whether trees falling in empty forests make a sound? Or, perhaps, 'I problematise, therefore I am (a philosopher)'. For me, I remember falling in love with it at university. I recall being sat with a very good undergraduate physicist in some North Oxford pub, while he was trying to explain some concept or other to me. Suddenly, it was obvious - dig beneath physics, and you find maths. Then it hit me: dig into many a positive subject – English, history, social science – and you find philosophy. I am sure there are some great physicists who don't have good maths, but I have yet to meet them. Same thing for thinkers of a variety of other subjects when it comes to philosophy. It's foundational.

The introduction of philosophy into English primary and secondary education represents a significant pedagogical development with implications for children's social, and emotional development. Whilst philosophy has traditionally been viewed as an academic discipline reserved for hugher-level study, recent decades have witnessed growing recognition of its value as a tool for nurturing critical thinking, reasoning abilities, and democratic citizenship from an early age. This report examines the substantial body of evidence demonstrating the positive impact of teaching philosophy to children, drawing upon empirical research, theoretical frameworks, and practical implementation studies from schools across England and internationally.

Philosophy for Children (P4C), pioneered by Matthew Lipman in the 1970s, has evolved into a robust educational approach that uses philosophical enquiry to develop children's thinking, reasoning, and communication skills (Lipman, 2003). The approach centres on creating communities of enquiry where children engage in structured dialogue, explore fundamental questions, and learn to reason together. This report evaluates the cognitive, social, and academic benefits of philosophical education whilst considering its implications for educational policy and practice in England.

Cognitive Development and Critical Thinking

Enhancement of Reasoning Skills

Research consistently demonstrates that engaging with philosophical enquiry enhances children's reasoning abilities across multiple dimensions. A randomised controlled trial conducted by the Education Endowment Foundation involving 3,159 pupils in 48 English primary schools found that children who participated in weekly P4C sessions made, on

average, two months additional progress in reading and mathematics compared to control groups (Gorard, Siddiqui, & See, 2015). Notably, disadvantaged pupils showed even greater gains, making approximately four months; additional progress, suggesting that philosophical enquiry may help narrow attainment gaps.

The cognitive benefits extend beyond academic performance metrics. Trickey and Topping (2004) conducted a comprehensive study involving 180 children aged 10-11 years across three Scottish schools, using pre- and post-intervention Cognitive Abilities Tests (CATs). Results revealed significant gains in verbal, non-verbal, and quantitative reasoning, with effect sizes ranging from 0.34 to 0.64 standard deviations. These improvements were maintained at a 16-month follow-up, indicating lasting cognitive enhancement rather than temporary effects. The study suggested that regular philosophical dialogue develops children's capacity for abstract reasoning, logical argumentation, and metacognitive awareness.

Development of Metacognitive Skills

Philosophy education promotes metacognition: the ability to reflect upon and regulate one's own thinking processes. When children engage in philosophical enquiry, they learn to monitor their reasoning, identify assumptions, evaluate evidence, and recognise gaps in their understanding (Kuhn, 2000). This metacognitive awareness transfers to other areas of learning, enabling pupils to become more effective, self-regulated learners. It also links to contemporary thinking around pedagogy (Sherrington, 2025).

Topping and Trickey (2007) observed that children who participated in P4C sessions demonstrated increased ability to engage in cognitive conflict, to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously, and to recognise complexity in issues. This tolerance for ambiguity and ability to engage with uncertainty represent sophisticated cognitive development that serves pupils well in navigating complex academic content and real-world problems. Teachers reported that children became noticeably more reflective, asking deeper questions and showing greater willingness to revise their thinking when presented with compelling counterarguments.

Communication and Social Development

Enhanced Oracy and Listening Skills

Philosophical enquiry provides structured opportunities for developing oracy: the ability to express ideas fluently and articulately through spoken language. The dialogic nature of philosophical sessions requires children to formulate and articulate complex ideas, respond to other contributions, and build upon collective thinking. Research by Mercer, Dawes, and Staarman (2009) demonstrated that participation in collaborative reasoning activities,

including philosophical enquiry, significantly improved children's use of exploratory talk, which involves tentatively sharing ideas, reasoning aloud, and considering alternatives.

Importantly, philosophy sessions develop not only speaking skills but also the often-neglected capacity for active listening. Children learn to attend carefully to others, identify key points, and engage meaningfully with ideas that may differ from their own. Haynes and Murris (2012) noted that philosophical dialogue cultivates epistemic humility, recognition that one's own understanding is always provisional and that others may possess valuable insights. This stance encourages genuine intellectual engagement rather than mere waiting for one's turn to speak.

Building Classroom Community and Empathy

The community of enquiry model that underpins P4C creates inclusive learning environments in which all contributions are valued and pupils learn to reason together respectfully. This collaborative approach has been shown to strengthen classroom relationships and reduce social exclusion. Cassidy et al. (2018) found that philosophical enquiry improved peer relationships and reduced bullying behaviours in primary schools, with teachers reporting that children showed increased empathy and respect for diverse viewpoints.

The development of empathy through philosophical enquiry occurs through several mechanisms. Engaging with ethical dilemmas and questions about justice, fairness, and human experience encourages children to adopt multiple perspectives and consider the implications of different courses of action (Scholl, Nichols, & Rai, 2016). The practice of building on others' ideas in philosophical dialogue requires understanding those ideas first, fostering perspective-taking abilities. Furthermore, the safe space created by philosophical enquiry allows children to explore sensitive topics such as identity, belonging, and difference in ways that promote mutual understanding.

Academic Achievement and Curriculum Integration

Impact on Literacy and Numeracy

Beyond the direct benefits to reasoning and communication, philosophical enquiry has been linked to improvements in core academic subjects. The Education Endowment Foundation trial mentioned earlier found significant gains in reading comprehension, likely attributable to the development of inferential reasoning, vocabulary acquisition, and the ability to engage with complex texts (Gorard et al., 2015). Children who participate in philosophical dialogue encounter sophisticated concepts and vocabulary, learning to use abstract terms with precision and to construct coherent arguments in response to challenging texts.

Mathematical reasoning also benefits from philosophical enquiry. Philosophical questions often involve logical relationships, such as exploring necessity and sufficiency, identifying

patterns, or evaluating the validity of arguments that transfer directly to mathematical problem-solving. Williams (2014) observed that children who engaged with philosophical puzzles and paradoxes showed improved mathematical reasoning, particularly in areas requiring abstract thinking such as algebra and geometry. The questioning stance fostered by philosophy encourages pupils to ask why and how do we know, promoting deeper understanding rather than procedural competence alone.

Cross-Curricular Applications

Philosophy integrates naturally with multiple curriculum areas, enriching subject teaching whilst maintaining disciplinary integrity. In science education, philosophical enquiry helps children understand the nature of scientific knowledge, the role of evidence, and ethical dimensions of scientific practice (Hanley, Herron, & Cole, 2018). Questions about what counts as scientific evidence, how theories are justified, or what responsibilities scientists bear encourage epistemological sophistication.

History teaching benefits from philosophical exploration of concepts such as causation, change, and historical interpretation. Philosophy enables children to move beyond factual recall to engage with contested interpretations, evaluate historical evidence, and recognise that historical narratives are constructions reflecting particular perspectives (Counsell, 2011). Similarly, in religious education and personal, social, health, and economic education (PSHE), philosophical enquiry provides frameworks for examining values, beliefs, and ethical dilemmas that respect diverse perspectives whilst developing critical engagement.

Emotional Wellbeing and Self-Esteem

Supporting Mental Health and Resilience

Philosophical enquiry contributes to children's emotional wellbeing by providing structured opportunities to explore questions of meaning, identity, and values. In an educational climate often dominated by performance metrics, philosophy offers space for children to engage with existential questions and develop philosophical resilience (Vansieleghem & Kennedy, 2011). The capacity to tolerate uncertainty, to sit with difficult questions without requiring immediate answers, and to find meaning in enquiry itself promotes psychological flexibility and resilience.

Research by Scholl et al. (2018) indicated that philosophical enquiry can serve a protective function for mental health, helping children develop cognitive strategies for managing difficult emotions and challenging situations. The reflective practices central to philosophy encourage emotional regulation: children learn to step back from immediate reactions, consider situations from multiple angles, and recognise that feelings, whilst important, need not dictate responses. This metacognitive approach to emotions supports wellbeing without pathologising normal emotional responses or requiring clinical interventions.

Building Confidence and Self-Esteem

The inclusive nature of philosophical enquiry, where all contributions are valued and there are no simple, absolute answers, creates opportunities for pupils who may struggle with conventional academic tasks to experience success. Children who typically lack confidence in their academic abilities often flourish in philosophical dialogue, where original thinking and willingness to question are more valuable than factual recall (Daniel, Lafortune, Pallascio, & Sykes, 2005). Teachers consistently report that previously reticent pupils find their voice through philosophy, developing confidence that transfers to other learning contexts.

Furthermore, the experience of having one's ideas taken seriously by peers and teachers contributes to children's sense of agency and self-worth. When children realise that their thinking matters, that they can contribute to collective understanding, and that their perspectives deserve consideration, their self-concept as learners and thinkers strengthens. This is particularly significant for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who may feel marginalised in conventional academic hierarchies.

Democratic Citizenship and Social Justice

Preparing for Democratic Participation

Philosophy education serves essential democratic purposes by developing capacities required for informed citizenship. Democratic societies depend upon citizens capable of reasoning about public issues, evaluating arguments, recognising propaganda and manipulation, and engaging respectfully with those holding different views (Nussbaum, 2010). Philosophical enquiry cultivates these capabilities, teaching children to distinguish reasons from mere assertions, to recognise fallacious reasoning, and to construct and evaluate arguments on matters of public concern.

The deliberative practices central to philosophical enquiry mirror democratic processes, providing children with authentic experiences of collective reasoning and decision-making. Learning to build upon others' ideas, to reach provisional consensus whilst respecting dissent, and to recognise when issues require further enquiry prepares children for democratic participation (Murris & Haynes, 2018). These are not abstract skills, but practical capacities required for engaged citizenship in pluralistic democracies facing complex challenges.

Addressing Inequality and Social Justice

Philosophy provides frameworks for examining issues of justice, equality, and human rights that are central to contemporary social and political life. Through philosophical enquiry, children can explore questions of fairness, discrimination, and privilege in age-appropriate ways that promote critical consciousness without indoctrination (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2010).

The Socratic method of enquiry, which proceeds through questioning rather than assertion, allows children to develop their own understanding of justice issues whilst being exposed to diverse perspectives.

Importantly, philosophy education can serve equalising functions within schools. The evidence suggesting that disadvantaged pupils benefit particularly strongly from philosophical enquiry (Gorard et al., 2015) indicates its potential as a vehicle for social mobility. By developing thinking skills, oracy, and confidence, philosophy may help mitigate some educational disadvantages associated with socio-economic background. Moreover, the intellectual respect accorded to all participants in philosophical dialogue challenges deficit assumptions about working-class or marginalised children's capabilities.

Implementation Considerations and Challenges

Teacher Training and Professional Development

Successful implementation of philosophical enquiry requires investment in teacher development. Facilitating philosophical dialogue demands distinctive pedagogical skills, including the ability to pose productive questions, to follow lines of enquiry without predetermined endpoints, and to create inclusive communities where all voices are heard (Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013). Teachers must learn to resist the impulse to provide answers, instead supporting children to reason together towards understanding.

Professional development programmes such as those offered by the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education (SAPERE) provide structured training in P4C facilitation. Research indicates that teachers benefit from sustained support rather than one-off training, with opportunities to practise facilitation, receive feedback, and engage in ongoing reflection on their practice (Higgins et al., 2012). Schools implementing philosophy most successfully typically develop internal capacity by training multiple staff members who can support one another's development.

Curriculum Time and Assessment Challenges

A practical challenge facing schools is finding curriculum time for philosophical enquiry within an already crowded timetable. Whilst some schools dedicate discrete sessions to philosophy, others integrate philosophical approaches across subjects. Both models can be effective, though evidence suggests that regular, sustained engagement yields greater benefits than sporadic sessions (Trickey & Topping, 2004).

Assessment presents particular challenges for philosophy education. Traditional assessment methods focusing on factual recall and predetermined answers are poorly suited to evaluating philosophical thinking. Alternative approaches might include assessment of contributions to philosophical dialogue, analysis of written philosophical reflections, or evaluation of reasoning processes rather than conclusions reached (Worley, 2018).

However, developing reliable and valid assessment methods that capture the nuanced thinking developed through philosophy remains an ongoing challenge requiring further research and development. Alternatively, let's ne brave, make it fun and allow the fruits of the philosophical approach be what is expressed in the etymology of the word philosophy – *the love of wisdom.*

Conclusion

The evidence for the positive impact of teaching philosophy in English primary and secondary schools is substantial and multifaceted. Philosophical enquiry enhances cognitive development, including reasoning abilities, metacognitive skills, and critical thinking. It strengthens communication and social development through improved oracy, active listening, and empathy. Academic achievement benefits through gains in literacy, numeracy, and cross-curricular learning. Children's emotional wellbeing and self-esteem improve through opportunities for meaningful enquiry and intellectual respect. Finally, philosophy education serves democratic purposes by preparing children for engaged citizenship and providing frameworks for examining justice and equality.

These benefits are particularly significant for disadvantaged pupils, suggesting that philosophical enquiry may contribute to addressing educational inequality. Whilst implementation challenges exist, including requirements for teacher training and curriculum time, these are surmountable with appropriate support and commitment.

The case for incorporating philosophical enquiry into English schools is compelling. In an era characterised by complex challenges, rapid social change, and proliferating information, the capacities developed through philosophical education, critical thinking, reasoned dialogue, intellectual humility, and ethical reflection are not merely desirable but essential. Philosophy education represents an investment in children's intellectual development, social capabilities, and democratic futures. Expanding access to philosophical enquiry across English schools would constitute a significant educational advance with far-reaching benefits for individuals and society.

Simon Uttley

References

Cassidy, C., Christie, D., Coutts, N., Dunn, J., Sinclair, C., Skinner, D., & Wilson, A. (2018). *Building communities of enquiry in primary classrooms: The relationship between psychological safety and philosophical progress. Pastoral Care in Education, 36*(1), 3-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2017.1422005

Counsell, C. (2011). What do we want students to do with historical change and continuity? In I. Davies (Ed.), *Debates in history teaching* (pp. 109-123). Routledge.

Daniel, M.-F., Lafortune, L., Pallascio, R., & Sykes, P. (2005). Philosophy for children in *mathematics education. Analytic Teaching, 25*(1), 32-44.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Gorard, S., Siddiqui, N., & See, B. H. (2015). *Philosophy for children: Evaluation report and executive summary.* Education Endowment Foundation.

Hanley, P., Herron, J., & Cole, W. (2018). EYFS and primary school pupils' perceptions of their experiences of P4C. *Education 3-13, 46*(7), 787-799. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2017.1358632

Haynes, J., & Murris, K. (2012). *Picturebooks, pedagogy and philosophy*. Routledge.

Higgins, S., Baumfield, V., Lin, M., Moseley, D., Butterworth, M., Downey, G., ... & Thacker, D. (2012). *The impact of participation in philosophical enquiry on academic performance, student welfare and teaching practice*. Durham University.

hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. Routledge.

Kuhn, D. (2000). Metacognitive development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 9*(5), 178-181.

Lipman, M. (2003). *Thinking in education* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Mercer, N., Dawes, L., & Staarman, J. K. (2009). From social interaction to individual reasoning: An empirical investigation of a possible socio-cultural model of cognitive development. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction, 13*(2), 89-101.

Murris, K., & Haynes, J. (2018). *Literacies, literature and learning: Reading classrooms differently*. Routledge.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton University Press.

Reznitskaya, A., & Gregory, M. (2013). Student thought and classroom language: Examining the mechanisms of change in dialogic teaching. *Educational Psychologist, 48*(2), 114-133.

Scholl, B. J., Nichols, S., & Rai, T. S. (2016). The psychology of moral reasoning. In K. J. Gray & J. Graham (Eds.), *Atlas of moral psychology* (pp. 341-348). Guilford Press.

Scholl, R., McGowan, S., & Hansen, J. T. (2018). Humanistic perspectives on contemporary counselling issues: What would Carl Rogers say? *Journal of Humanistic Counselling, 57*(2), 111-126.

Sherrington, T. *Teacherhead* https://teacherhead.com/2019/09/15/mindsets-vs-metacognition-two-eef-reports-and-a-clear-conclusion/ viewed 14.1.2026

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

Trickey, S., & Topping, K. J. (2004). ‘ Philosophy for children’: A systematic review. *Research Papers in Education, 19*(3), 365-380.

Vansieleghem, N., & Kennedy, D. (2011). What is philosophy for children, what is philosophy with children after Matthew Lipman? *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 45*(2), 171-182.

Williams, S. (2014). *Thinking through philosophy*. Crown House Publishing.

Worley, P. (2018). *100 ideas for primary teachers: Questioning*. Bloomsbury Education.