

## Using Philosophical Enquiry in Religious Education

### a) What is Philosophical Enquiry?

It is a teaching and learning strategy that teachers can use in the classroom and is particularly helpful in encouraging pupils to respond to ultimate questions and ethical issues, supporting their exploration, investigation and justification of their responses.

### b) Benefits of Philosophical enquiry

Philosophical enquiry develops the following thinking skills for pupils:

- Generating questions
- Giving reasons
- Listening to and learning from others' opinions
- Building on each others' ideas
- Thinking about their thinking/learning – metacognition
- Retaining curiosity and intellectual courage
- Literacy - Speaking and listening skills

Philosophical enquiry also develops pupils' attitudes in RE, including:

- Self awareness
- Respect for all
- Open mindedness
- Appreciation and wonder

Therefore Philosophical enquiry is based upon the following principles:

- All opinions have to be supported with reasons
- No single right answer
- Learning is collaborative, not competitive
- There are no predictable outcomes
- Children are responsible for own learning and behaviour
- Whole community is responsible for learning outcomes
- Children teach each other
- Teacher is facilitator and co-enquirer, not source of learning

## Other Benefits to Philosophical Enquiry

Other benefits of philosophical enquiry include SEAL skills for the pupils, as well as:

- Giving and receiving attention
- Supporting and drawing on each other
- Investigating, understanding, respecting and tolerating differences
- Practising fairness
- Self confidence
- Functioning in self-governing democracy
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Thus Philosophical Enquiry can support the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils.

Benefits for the teacher include:

- Relief from responsibility of being sole supplier of knowledge
- Opportunity to observe and assess children
- Tracking changes in group dynamic of class
- Opportunity to learn, reflect and think for oneself
- A tool for open-ended discussion: brainstorming, problem solving, preparation and review of topic.

The following is required for a philosophical enquiry to be effective:

## Stages of Philosophical Enquiry

- Questioning, respecting differences, reasoning, deepening investigation/exploration
- Community setting – circle, eye contact, equals
- Agreed rules – e.g. no put downs, one person speaking at a time
- Active Listening
- Contributing – all have opportunity

### c) What does philosophical enquiry look like?

There are several models that could be employed. The following sequence can be effective for Philosophical Enquiry:

1. Sharing of stimulus
2. Thinking time
3. *Formulating questions and finding connections*
4. Discussion
5. Reviewing discussion/learning

When pupils are more experienced in the process, they can start to develop and construct their own philosophical questions to discuss as a group (stage 3). For younger pupils, and those with less experience in this strategy, philosophical questions can be provided by the teacher (see below).

Stage 1: stimulus can be religious or non-religious quotations, pictures, video clips, stories, artefacts, or a combination of the above. They should be chosen because there are clear links with ultimate questions or ethical issues that the pupils are studying. On occasion, it may be more suitable to have only one item, or to provide a selection of stimuli to which pupils can individually respond before stage 3, or the introduction of the philosophical question.

Stage 2: pupils should then be sat in a circle. Pupils should be provided with quiet time to individually respond to the stimulus. This may be followed with think-pair-share strategies.

Stage 3: following the feedback from stage 2, either pupils can suggest a suitable philosophical question for the group discussion, or the teacher can introduce one. Obviously, it is preferable if the pupils create one themselves.

To develop these skills the following strategies in Stage 3 may prove useful:

- In pairs suggest a philosophical question. These should be open questions, containing a key issue, belief or question. These should be written in large pen on A4 paper, so that everyone in the group can see them.
- Share this with the group each in turn. The teacher may wish to ask the pair to explain to the group how they reached their final question.
- The questions/A4 papers can be placed in the middle of the group circle. Pupils should identify links and connections between the questions and the papers be placed accordingly.
- Once all questions have been explored as above, pupils should vote for the question they would like to discuss as a group. In some cases, this vote may need to be done by secret ballot, until pupils are able to vote with maturity. For example, they might vote with eyes closed and hands up, or by leaving their chairs/seats to mark the paper of their chosen paper.
- Once selected, the chosen question should be displayed for all the group to see.

Stage 4: all pupils should be aware of any ground rules prior to the discussion starting. These may be created and agreed as a class (of older pupils) or disseminated by the teacher. See 'core principles' (above) for guidance in the creation of these. These will support the promotion of the right attitudes (listed above), and create a safe environment so that pupils are able to learn and explore issues and ultimate questions together effectively.

The discussion should start with the proposers of the chosen question, explaining to the group how the final question was reached. To aid facilitation, the teacher may need to:

- Ask follow up questions to contributions (why? What makes you think that?)
- Encourage group responses to promote further discussion (do you agree/disagree? Has anyone got a question for X?)
- Clarify contributions and promote contributions (can anyone summarise what x just said?)
- Make contributions or ask questions that promote further discussion (ask 'what if?', 'what groups of people might disagree?')
- Encourage connective thinking by providing sentence starters (e.g. 'I disagree/agree with x because', or 'x just said that, however I feel that) or visual cues (thumbs up if they wish to follow on from a contribution, or flat hands if they want to contribute a new point to the discussion)
- Regulate contributions and dominance of the discussion (e.g. with voting tokens)
- To develop concentration and focus teachers may wish to break in to think-pair-share activities during the group discussion, before returning to the main group

Stage 5: pupils should be seating in a circle and provided with a last opportunity to contribute and summarise their thinking from the discussion. Teachers may wish to pass an object round the circle. Teachers may also wish pupils to write these summarising thoughts in a 'thought log' as a record.

#### **d) Assessing Philosophical enquiry**

Some teachers have kept a record of pupils contributions by using a 'pupil record' sheet and marking the pupils name following a notable contribution. Some teachers may record or video the contributions, or ask pupils to complete a 'thought log' at the end of the session. Copies of philosophical questions or written responses during 'think time' (stage 2) or break-out sessions mid-discussion can also provide evidence, as long as the pupils' names are written. These can be aligned with outcomes or objectives derived from the [Assessment Spectrum](#).