How can philosophy help kids' mental health?

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Authors:
Catherine Malboeuf-Hurtubise,
David Lefrançois, and others
Associate Editors:
Elitsa Panayotova and Madeleine Corcoran

Abstract

Just as it's important for you to have a healthy body, it's also important to have a healthy mind. For a healthy body, you need to eat healthy food and do some exercise. But how do you keep your mind healthy? Perhaps exploring the meaning of things around us and thinking about how we should act in the world might help. That's called philosophy!

We wanted to know if doing philosophy with children had a positive impact on their mental health. We conducted a 5-week experiment – two elementary school classes took part in philosophy activities for children and we compared the results to another class which didn't. We found out that philosophy increases kids' sense of autonomy (the ability to choose things for yourself) and decreases their anxiety. It didn't make them feel more capable or give them a greater sense of belonging, though.

Introduction

Have you ever wondered about the big things in life, like what is happiness? Or what is true friendship? It's normal for all of us to ask these questions. Usually when you are a kid your parents try to teach you about these kinds of things. In the 1970s, philosophy professor Matthew Lipman developed a series of activities for the classroom which he called Philosophy for Children (P4C). The aim of these activities is to help children think for themselves about things that matter. The series includes different kinds of activities in which kids discuss various topics: social justice, the environment, animal rights, and more. Since kids usually spend more time at school than they do at home, school is a great place for these discussions. The teacher's role is to encourage the students to talk and express their thoughts and beliefs, not to give them the 'answers' – after all, these are the kind of questions to which there are no easy answers!

There is evidence that P4C really does make kids better thinkers and better students. But we thought that the program might also help with the students' *mental health*. After all, over the past decade, mental health problems among children have been increasing. So what if schools implemented the P4C program? Would it have a positive impact on their mental health? This is the question we wanted to answer.

What characteristics are important for mental health?

There are three basic psychological needs:
1. "I am in control" = *Autonomy*: the feeling that we can make our own choices in life.
2. "I am capable" = Competence: feeling like we are able to succeed at things we set our minds to.
3. "I matter to others" = Relatedness: feeling like we belong with others and we are valued in a group, whether with friends or family.

We wanted to know if P4C helped to develop these characteristics and improve mental health.

Methods

To assess the impact of P4C on children's mental health, we asked three classrooms to take part in our study. Two classes did the P4C program (they were the experimental group). One was in 1st grade and the other was in 3rd grade. We also used a *control group*: one class which didn't do the P4C program.
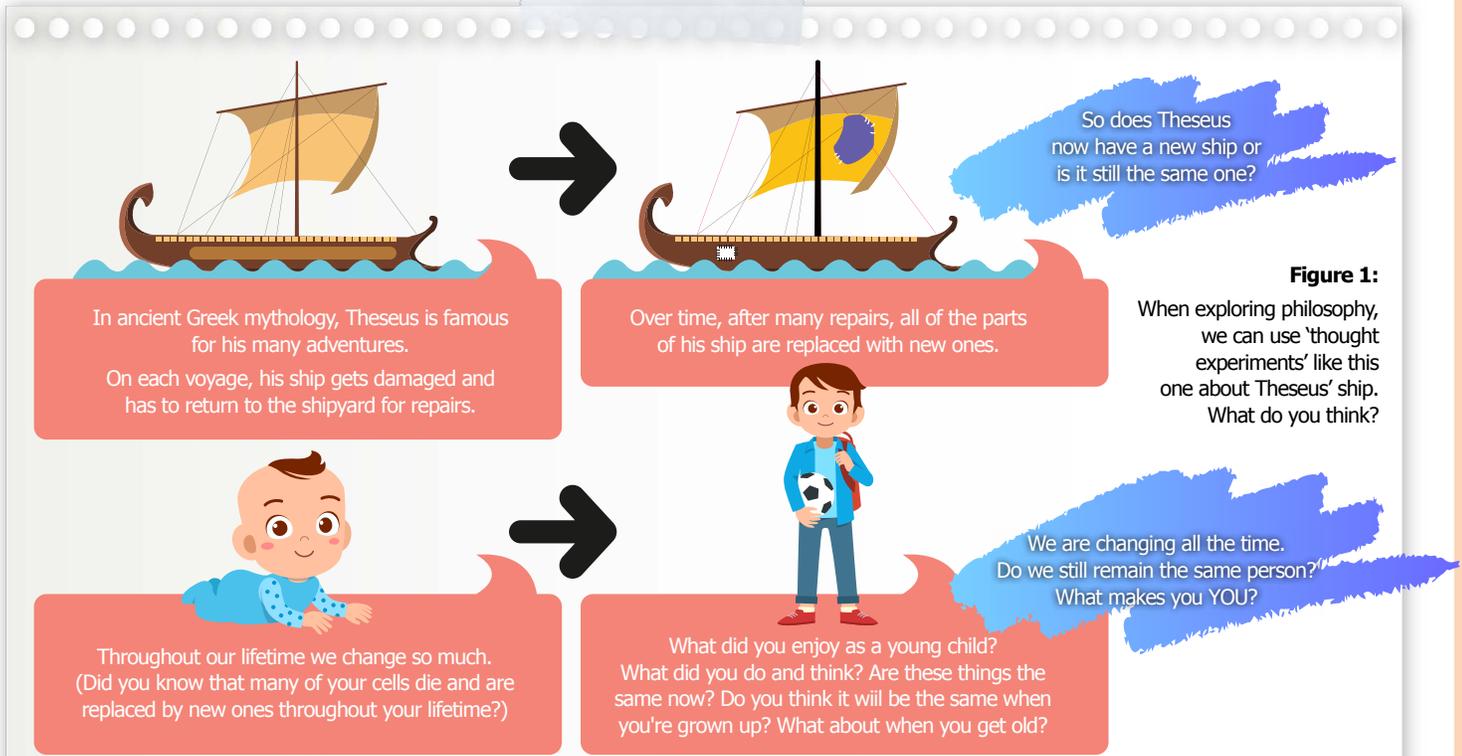
The students in the experimental groups discussed different topics for one hour per week over five weeks. They discussed topics such as happiness, normal vs. not normal, pride and shame, sadness, death, anger, identity, and growing up.

We showed them different posters, comic strips, video clips, and short stories to make these ideas easier to understand (Fig. 1).

We wanted to see if there was a change in how the children felt about themselves and their lives before and after the program. To find out, we asked them some questions before the program and five weeks after the end of the program. The control group also answered the same questions at the same times. We asked all the children to tell us how much they agreed or disagreed with statements (see Table 1).

Statement	What it measures
In school, I am able to reach my goals.	Competence
In school, I feel free to express my ideas.	Autonomy
In my relationships with others, I feel appreciated.	Relatedness
I feel like I have a good number of qualities.	Self-worth/self-esteem
I am happy with my life	Life satisfaction
I worry about little things	*Anxiety*
Nothing ever goes right for me	*Depression*

Table 1:
Questions and psychological characteristics measured.

Figure 1:
When exploring philosophy, we can use 'thought experiments' like this one about Theseus' ship. What do you think?

In ancient Greek mythology, Theseus is famous for his many adventures.
On each voyage, his ship gets damaged and has to return to the shipyard for repairs.

Over time, after many repairs, all of the parts of his ship are replaced with new ones.

So does Theseus now have a new ship or is it still the same one?

Throughout our lifetime we change so much. (Did you know that many of your cells die and are replaced by new ones throughout your lifetime?)

What did you enjoy as a young child? What did you do and think? Are these things the same now? Do you think it will be the same when you're grown up? What about when you get old?

We are changing all the time. Do we still remain the same person? What makes you YOU?

Results

Our results (summarized in Table 2) showed that the program:

- Increases students' sense of autonomy
- Doesn't really change their feelings of competence
- Doesn't really change their sense of relatedness
- Decreases students' levels of anxiety
- Doesn't have a significant effect on depression levels

Measure of mental health	Control group	Experimental groups
Autonomy	Decrease ⬇	Increase ⬆
Competence	Insignificant change ＝	Insignificant change ＝
Relatedness	Insignificant change ＝	Insignificant change ＝
Self-esteem	Insignificant change ＝	Insignificant change ＝
Life satisfaction	Insignificant change ＝	Insignificant change ＝
Anxiety	Increase ⬆	Decrease ⬇
Depression	Insignificant change ＝	Insignificant change ＝

Table 2:
Changes in the levels of the various signs of mental health in the experimental and control groups after the 5-week P4C program.

Discussion

Even though our results are promising when it comes to levels of autonomy and anxiety, the P4C program didn't show any impact on competence and sense of relatedness (belonging). One reason behind this might be that our activities during the program emphasized autonomy. Future experiments could feature more activities regarding competence and social skills to see if this has an impact on these qualities.

The program didn't have an impact on depression levels either. However, perhaps we could expect an impact on children with clinical depression (a very serious level of depression). Because none of our participants suffered from it, there was not much room for improvement – they were already doing pretty well.

There was no significant change in how satisfied the children were with their lives, nor with themselves. Perhaps the topics we discussed were not that suitable for this kind of improvement. Another possibility is that their self-esteem and life satisfaction won't grow immediately but could do so some time after the end of the program.

The control group experienced some changes too (an increase in anxiety and a decrease in their sense of autonomy) but we don't know exactly why. It could be something to do with school. Students can get anxious about exams coming up towards the end of the year, for example. Or, it could just be the fact that some aspects of our mental health are always changing over time.

Conclusion

Do you think exploring philosophy could help you and your classmates? How satisfied are you with your life?

You can learn about the 'satisfaction with life scale' at:
https://positivepsychology.com/life-satisfaction-scales/

Glossary of Key Terms

Anxiety – the body's response to stress, a feeling of worry and nervousness.

Autonomy – to act from choice, not because someone (or something) pressured you to act. For example, would you feel different if you wanted to take piano lessons vs if your parents wanted you to? How and why?

Control group – a comparison group in a study whose members receive no intervention. (In our case, they didn't participate in the program's activities.).

Depression – a medical and psychological illness which causes a persistent feeling of sadness.

Mental health – our emotional and social well-being. When we have good mental health, we can cope with the normal stresses of life. It doesn't mean we always feel happy, but it does mean we mostly feel OK and like we can handle challenges we might face.

Check your understanding

1 What signs of a healthy mind did we use in our study? What about signs of a less healthy one?

2 How did the P4C activities help the children?

3 Why (most likely) didn't the activities have an impact on the levels of depression among the experimental groups?

4 What was the reason for having a class of children who didn't participate in the P4C program?

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