

Philosophy in schools as practice in ‘critical’ civility:

A study in post-conflict Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This article explores the outcome of a Philosophy with Children (PwC)-focused pilot citizenship programme (The Critical Civility Project) on children in post-conflict Northern Ireland. A six-week study was conducted with 10 primary-level classes of children aged 8 to 11. The programme delivered to children combined PwC pedagogy with themes drawn from recent work on civility from political philosophy, where civility here is understood as a set of norms and dispositions that allow individuals (as citizens) to communicate respect for one another, particularly when engaging collaboratively and critically on matters of local and global democratic importance. Post-pilot questionnaire results from children reveal self-reported positive changes in attitudes and behaviours towards others, particularly in contexts of disagreement. While further, more rigorous testing of the benefits of the programme is needed, the study points to the potential for philosophy as an underpinning component of democratic citizenship education in the region.

Key words

citizenship, civility, democracy, Northern Ireland, post-conflict, respect

Introduction

The concept of ‘civility’, broadly defined as a set of norms, practices, and behaviours that guide our interactions with other persons, has re-emerged as a topic of serious concern in recent years across a range of academic disciplines and real-world contexts (Boyd 2006; Calhoun 2000; Edyvane 2017). Those who defend civility as a moral duty argue that we ought to leave behind the historically oppressive and exclusionary versions of the practice and instead consider its purpose in communicating and

fostering mutual respect among persons (Buss 1999)¹. Some accounts extend this moral duty to the relations between members of a shared polity. Establishing robust civility norms, according to this view, provides for citizens the kind of common communicative resources essential for realising basic aspects of their intersubjectivity, something which in turn fosters social inclusion and stability (Bardon et al. 2022).

However, in comparison to versions of citizenship that demand either adherence to a 'thick' conception of the good or a promotion of 'esteem for difference',² civility is argued here to be sensitive to the realities of the plural, diverse societies of today. So-called 'radical' or 'critical' civility (Whitten 2022) rejects the idea that expressive respect requires polite constraint, and instead recognises that active, vigorous dialogue, including about competing conceptions of the good, serves an important function from the perspective of human flourishing.³ This 'new-and-improved' account of civility is considered necessary for dealing with a range of social issues thought to be plaguing contemporary democratic societies, including increased epistemic and affective polarisation, decreasing levels of toleration for diverse opinions and conceptions of the good, and general social division (Brown 2019; Jamieson et al. 2017). To take civility seriously is thus to recognise the essential role that such practices of expressive respect play in maintaining a robust democratic culture in which all citizens enjoy the equal standing required in order to flourish. The practice of civility, therefore, is not a residual and dispensable feature of hierarchical societies but is in fact necessary for citizens to recognise themselves and one another as equals who must live together as co-creators of the same ethical and political community (Bejan 2017; Laegaard 2010).

The question remains, however, as to *how* we can establish the norms and practices of critical or 'radical' civility in societies today. As we suggest here, by offering constructive and structured opportunities to practice communicating respect, to 'disagree agreeably', and to engage in critical dialogue with others on matters of ethical and political importance, Philosophy with Children (PwC) offers plenty of

¹ For one reflection on these concerns about the historically exclusionary aspects of civility see Zerilli (2014). See also Zurn (2013) on the limits of political civility.

² The 'esteem'-enhancing model of multiculturalism promotes the positive celebration of cultural practices as an essential aspect of equal citizenship. Conflict is dealt with on this account by affirming the 'identity' of various groups. See, for example, McBride (2022).

³ Importantly, this openness requires that practices of civility also involve critical reflexivity about the content of civility norms *themselves*.

promise as the basis of a programme of citizenship education aimed towards 'critical' civility, particularly in divided or post-conflict societies.

Following an overview of the relationship between democratic citizenship and PwC, we describe a pilot study that involved delivering a structured programme of PwC-grounded, citizenship-focused activities to 10 primary classes across Northern Ireland (The Critical Civility Project). End-of-pilot questionnaire results from children are discussed and analysed thematically. Overall, pupils describe having changed both in how they relate to fellow pupils and in their attitudes towards difference. In particular, they report experiencing increased tolerance towards disagreement, which was accompanied by a growing confidence in their abilities to communicate and reason through arguments effectively. Pupils also describe experiencing reduced conflict with peers that extends beyond the philosophy sessions themselves. While it is important not to draw any sweeping conclusions from one limited study, they are tentatively suggestive of a positive relationship between philosophy practice and the kind of norms and dispositions defended in the recent theoretical literature on the emergence and benefits of civility norms in contexts of disagreement. The results of the project thus point to the need for further experimental study on the potential for PwC as a basis for a citizenship programme in post-conflict societies.

Philosophy with children and citizenship education

While philosophical thinking has formed part of child and adolescent education in many societies across the centuries, the current (global) project to introduce philosophy to the pre-university stage of education has been led largely by the work of Matthew Lipman and Margaret Ann Sharp (1978). Beginning in the 1970s, Lipman's Philosophy for Children (P4C) programme employs 'community of inquiry' (CoI) practices in the classroom setting (Lipman 1988). Here, children, guided by a trained facilitator, engage in open-ended discussion in response to a 'stimuli' or prompt, employing practices of dialogical reasoning, collaboration, and mutual respect to gain a clearer understanding of the questions posed (D'Olimpio & Peterson 2018; Lipman & Bynum 1976). Since Lipman's original intervention and subsequent research studies on the programme, the broader Philosophy *with* Children (PwC) movement has evolved considerably, branching out to more than 63 countries worldwide. The ongoing popularity of PwC is a testament both to its potential to fill a cross-sectional 'gap' in the curricula that children are traditionally exposed to, and to the reliably positive evaluations it has received from educators and children alike.

A large body of research on the effectiveness of PwC reveals a range of extrinsic and intrinsic benefits (Millet & Tapper 2012; Trickey & Topping 2004). Regular PwC sessions have been shown to have noticeable and long-lasting positive *cognitive* outcomes for children, which includes reading and writing abilities, logical reasoning, and critical thinking skills (Garcia-Moriyon 2005; Topping & Trickey 2007b). Reported *non-cognitive* benefits include reduced anxiety and increased emotional regulation and self-esteem (Trickey & Topping 2006). Among the reported *social* benefits of regular PwC sessions, we find improved confidence in sharing and defending beliefs with others, a reduction in antisocial classroom behaviours, and an increased tendency towards collaboration and teamwork (Splitter & Sharp 1995; Topping & Trickey 2007a).

Since its inception, both PwC practitioners and scholars have stressed the central role that it plays in nurturing the norms, habits, and dispositions essential for democratic participation and shared civic life (Burgh 2003a; Burgh et al. 2006; Lipman 2002). Of course, PwC enthusiasts are not unique in pointing out the importance of schooling in fostering civic-mindedness. Since at least as far back as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009), the education system has been widely accepted as one of the central means by which the dispositions and norms of citizenship can be embedded in a society (Gutmann 1999; Peterson 2009, 2019a, 2019b). A cursory glance at the literature on citizenship education reveals considerable overlap in aims with PwC. According to Darling (2002), for instance

citizenship education is (or should be) about preparing citizens to constructively engage in an ongoing moral argument about how to live together, in other words, how to participate in various public spheres characterized by diverse perspectives and understandings. Despite the differences between people's beliefs and desires, there will occasionally be shared commitment to finding and furthering some common good. On this view, citizenship education is about learning ways to live peaceably and fairly with each other, in the face of conflicting interests and values. Thus, the thoughtful examination of ethical ideals and constructive communicative practices should be at the heart of this educational enterprise. (p. 230)

Here, Darling stresses the role of communicative virtues in guiding the ongoing deliberations we have with one another. On this view, such virtues of civility do not emerge as a natural consequence of living among others but must be deliberately

cultivated and nurtured through structured practice. At base, then, future citizens will need to develop a shared commitment to reciprocity, which itself is built on the mutual recognition of others as equal claims-makers deserving of moral respect (Burgh 2009).

Similarly, and relying heavily on Dewey's (1916) conception of 'radical' democracy, PwC defenders emphasise the integral role that education plays in the active and participatory 'bottom-up' process of community formation and deliberation found in democratic life (Burgh 2003b, 2018). By offering children structured opportunities to practice virtues of tolerance, epistemic humility, critical reflection, communicative respect, and empathetic reasoning, it is argued that PwC helps nurture future citizens who are well-equipped to engage in democratic deliberation which, for radical democrats, takes place across a vast range of social contexts (Burgh 2014). Importantly, the vision of a radical, deliberative democracy that PwC practitioners draw upon informs a communicative, dialogical, and community-based method of citizenship education that stands in contrast to those that focus on instilling knowledge in children and young people 'from above' (D'Olimpio 2016). Despite the importance of ground rules in guiding inquiries, children are actively encouraged to have genuine autonomy to participate without much concern for disagreement or unpopularity of opinion.

While becoming familiar with the content of political principles, values, and systems will still have a place in PwC-style citizenship education, the ways in which children engage with the material are also starkly different to the traditional lecture-style classes still found in many classrooms today (Michaud 2020). Instead, a PwC form of citizenship education will introduce children to the ways of civic life by exposing them to stimuli (stories, group activities, news reports, video clips, pictures, etc.) that trigger reflective engagement with democratic themes and values, including, for example, 'friendship', 'othering', 'loyalty', and 'equality', among others. With the support of a trained PwC facilitator, children will gain experience in the (civil) practices of deliberation and communicative enquiry in a way that will guide them towards a clearer understanding of the ideas and values of both themselves and others as common members of a shared community.

Just as essential to the success of PwC as what is serving as a stimulus, particularly as a foundation for citizenship education, are the behaviours and practices of the teacher facilitating the conversation and creating the philosophical environment (Splitter 2022). It is here where the distinction between so-called 'directive' and 'non-directive'

approaches to PwC are perhaps most stark.⁴ In the conventional, non-directive form of Community of Inquiry (CoI), facilitators/teachers are strongly encouraged to rely on open questions to guide discussion. There are important pedagogical and democratic reasons for this. First, the use of open, seemingly 'unanswerable' questions exposes children to diverse points of view, while at the same time reinforcing the underpinning ethos of equality that grounds PwC (Sowey & Lockrobin 2020, p. 32). Here, and because no one holds the 'answer', so to speak, attaining clarity requires working together as a community within which each person takes responsibility for their contributions. The requirement that participants in PwC listen to others to pursue this collective endeavour fosters in both the listener(s) and speaker the core virtue of communicative respect that is so essential to civility. Second, encountering differing perspectives, it is argued, also supports the epistemic humility needed to engage in deliberation outside of the classroom setting (Sowey & Lockrobin 2020, p. 38). Here, PwC practice teaches children about the multiplicity of life experiences held by those with whom they share society. At the same time, such practice will nurture the democratic virtues required to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty. Third, the non-directive approach, by collapsing (or attempting to collapse) the traditional power imbalances between teachers-as-knowers and the children, provides the opportunities for speakers to practice the kind of honest and good faith claims-making necessary for political deliberation in a caring and safe setting.

It is important not to confuse a commitment to non-directiveness, however, for an 'anything goes' form of child-led inquiry. Instead, nurturing habits of virtuous deliberation requires that the facilitator take an active role in guiding discussion. As Phillips (2011) reminds us, while the facilitator should certainly lend the spotlight to children, they must also facilitate conversations in a way that ensures that beliefs are challenged or re-evaluated. Without directing children to any particular conclusion on a question, the teacher here will also act as an authority or ethical 'exemplar' on the *habits* of virtuous deliberation. Fostering the good habits of civic life, therefore, requires that children are exposed to and gain practice in responding to inquiries of a democratic-ethical nature, led by those already habituated in virtuous practices (Robinson 2015). For a PwC programme aimed towards securing the dispositions necessary for shared civic life, then, both a structured and intentional, yet appropriately non-directive approach is necessary (Cleghorn 2002).

⁴ For a defence of the 'directive' approach see Hand (2018, 2020).

Crucially, PwC not only supports the critical reasoning skills of young people but also nurtures their capacities for thinking and collaborating in a way that is sensitive to the affective and emotional lives of themselves and others. The collaborative nature of philosophical dialogue as a community activity encourages children to see themselves and one another as agents with complex inner lives and background emotional experiences (Erikson 1964; Giménez-Dasí et al. 2013). Exposure to such a diversity of situated experiences nurtures the caring disposition in children that allows them to be suitably empathetic and responsive to the ethical claims and emotional lives of others (Barrow 2015; Bleazby 2006). Engagement on the emotional and affective register thereby provides opportunities for mutual recognition, whereby children come to recognise both their own social vulnerability and interdependence with others in their community (Björnsson 2023). Modelling the norms of civil interaction, the facilitator builds trust by acting in a critically-responsive manner towards children, something which includes acknowledging the seriousness and value of each child's contribution (Jenkins & Lyle 2010). By creating this 'safe space' for the deliberation of real-world issues, children will feel confident in exercising the voice required to share in the construction of a common philosophical project (D'Olimpio 2015). Over time, practiced discussion of philosophical questions in a safe setting allows children to internalise the kind of civility norms that carry through to their real-world engagement with them (Schwitzgebel et al. 2020; Sharp 1984; Nishiyama 2023). Taken together, then, the structured conditions of the PwC-focused deliberation of matters of civic importance appear to satisfy the demands of a citizenship education aimed towards the twin goals of equal respect and intellectual growth.

Case study

Background and context

While citizenship education is broadly considered an essential aspect of any liberal democracy's curricula (Gutmann 1999; Kymlicka 1995), the need for such a programme in post-conflict societies is arguably even more pressing (Duffy et al. 2022; Quaynor 2012). In Northern Ireland, and despite decades of relative peace following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, educators preparing young people for a shared civic life must contend with the fact that around 93% continue to attend a school segregated by religion (Early et al. 2024, p. 4).

Various citizenship education initiatives, including Shared and Integrated Education, have been trialled in the region, each designed to respond to this socio-political context and with varying degrees of success (Loader & Hughes 2017). In 2007,

substantial educational reform came about with the introduction of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC), a key part of which included explicit commitments towards good community relations and 'mutual understanding' (CCEA 2007a). At the primary level (Key Stages 1 and 2), citizenship education was introduced as part of the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) learning area of the curriculum, whereas for secondary level pupils (Key Stages 3 and 4) it fell under Local and Global Citizenship (LGC) (O'Connor et al. 2019). Recognising the contentious nature of citizenship programmes tailored around 'thick' conceptions of local citizenship, particularly within the NI context, LGC emphasised 'global' accounts of human rights and a universal citizenry (Gallagher & Duffy 2016; Osler & Starkey 2005). Along such lines, statutory elements of the LGC were organised around four broad overarching elements, including 'diversity and inclusion', 'human rights and social responsibility', 'equality and social justice', and 'democracy and active participation' (CCEA 2007b).

The pedagogical approach encouraged by the designers of LGC was one which recognised the open-ended nature of ethical and political issues. Teachers delivering the programme were therefore encouraged to adopt a deliberative stance towards classroom discussion, one which is less about imparting knowledge and more about exposing young people to diverse points of view, in the process fostering the kind of communicative and affective dispositions necessary for navigating life in a post-conflict society. While unfamiliar territory for the majority of teachers, this method was designed for its

transformative potential [where] learning can take place - a space where young people can learn from teachers *and* from each other how to respond constructively when they encounter views or perspectives which may challenge their deeply held values (McAuley 2022, p. 4).

Despite the initial promise of LGC, its reach and influence are largely believed to have waned, calling into question the status of citizenship education in the region (Donnelly et al. 2021). Difficulties in fitting LGC in to an already-packed curriculum alongside more 'traditional' academic subjects, teacher apprehensions about dealing with unfamiliar and divisive topics, and a lack of guidance as to how to actually carry out sessions effectively have all been cited as some of the main culprits for LGC's demise (Worden & Smith 2017).

Notable to the above second and third concerns is the worry for teachers about the weight of responsibility that accompanies the teaching of democratic and ethical

values (Kelly 1986). This point relates to the fact that, while the version of citizenship found within LGC and PDMU was designed to be as open and all-encompassing as possible, centring on seemingly uncontroversial values including equality, human rights, and tolerance, the approach endorsed was still *directive* in nature (Worden 2022, p. 22). Inspired by the multiculturalism movement across academic and political policy that began in the late-20th century, educational reform in NI is rooted in a notion of community relations that takes cultural intolerance to be at the heart of much of the conflict (Donnelly et al. 2021). On this view, the solution to conflict can be found in fostering respect for cultural diversity, achieved by endorsing general notions of 'equality' and tolerance while also increasing opportunities for contact between 'both sides' and sharing customs and traditions (Loader & Hughes 2017; Roulston & Hansson 2019). This approach has been criticised for inaccurately presenting conflict as an issue of interpersonal hostility, rather than one that emerges from complex socio-economic and structural circumstances (Rolston 2014; Todd 2018). At the same time, the need to aim discussion towards a particular value-laden conclusion, while simultaneously managing frequently difficult and historically contentious subject matter, has discouraged teachers from engaging with local, conflict-related issues entirely, with many choosing instead general discussion on topics in global ethics, such as world poverty and climate change (Reilly & Niens 2014). A similar set of worries have been reported by teachers tasked with delivering PDMU sessions to their classes at the primary level (Long & McPolin 2010).

For a citizenship programme to have success in the region, then, an effective, consistently structured, and practically feasible alternative is necessary. Instead of turning away from contentious issues in favour of a future-oriented, general promotion of human rights, needed in NI is a citizenship programme that provides teachers with the tools necessary to engage critically with difficult topics and to nurture the norms and dispositions in children that will best prepare them for shared democratic life.

Philosophy in schools in Northern Ireland?

As an approach to education capable of confronting contentious political and ethical issues in a structured yet appropriately 'non-directive' way (Cam 2014), a citizenship programme rooted in PwC pedagogy appears to hold a great deal of promise for the NI context. In particular, by combining a commitment to critical reflexivity with the communication of diverse perspectives, a structured PwC programme allows for important—yet divisive—themes to be aired and rigorously discussed in a safe and

respectful setting, without resorting to the intellectually stifling demands of an 'esteem'-based model of citizenship. In this way, then, PwC might be used to

harness the critical capacities of young people who can be taught to engage in a more meaningful way with the political perspectives of groups in conflict. (Donnelly et al. 2021, p. 6)

In addition, and because of PwC's commitment to non-hierarchical and collaborative engagement with stimuli, a PwC approach to citizenship education in NI could help minimise issues of avoidance reported by teachers who, despite expressing positive attitudes towards the teaching of political and ethical issues, report a lack of confidence and practical nous when it comes to guiding discussions of this nature (Gindi & Erlich 2018; Niens et al. 2013). As the literature consistently demonstrates, teachers, as agents tasked with the evaluation, selection, and implementation of recommended curricula changes, are the fundamental drivers of any proposed educational reform (Donnelly 2004; Elwood et al. 2004; Leat 1999). It is thus essential that any prospective addition to the pedagogical practice of a school is both practically feasible and has demonstrable benefits for both pupils and educators. The tendency for non-core additions to the curricula—including citizenship programmes—to flounder over time reinforces the need for reforms that are properly structured and easily implemented in the existing curricula.⁵

Methods

The purpose of the study was to offer some reflections on a PwC-focused pilot citizenship programme that was carried out with primary school children in Northern Ireland. The main objective was to gather pupil perspectives on the programme, with a focus on self-reported levels of enjoyment, on what was learned from taking part, and on any benefits and challenges they experienced. Gathering perspectives on subjective attitudes is important for informing future projects, particularly as pupil

⁵ That said, while NI has not formalised PwC pedagogy in the same way that has been achieved in other countries, it would be misleading to suggest that the movement has had no influence on the education sector in the region. CoI practices, for example, are recognised by many educators in the region as a useful method of exploring ethical and social issues. We can also point to the success of the stars of the *Young Plato* documentary, featuring Holy Cross Boys' Primary School in Ardoyne, Belfast, as an example of the transformative role of philosophy as a method of exploring complex social, ethical, and political issues in post-conflict educational contexts (Meredith 2022). The potential that PwC has for enriching the education sector in NI is therefore evident.

engagement has been reported as a key driver of success for PwC programmes in the past (O’Riordan 2015). In addition, hearing from the voices of children themselves allowed us to explore how their self-understanding as thinkers and deliberators was affected by taking part. At the same time, however, it is important to stress that the study did not take place under ideal, scientific conditions, meaning we can draw only limited conclusions from the results.

The data were collected from anonymous questionnaires of 210 children following a six-week PwC-focused citizenship programme that took place between January and March 2024. Schools were recruited following a PwC information event held in January 2023, to which all primary schools in NI were invited. In total, 10 KS2 classes (pupils aged 8-11) across eight schools agreed to participate in the study.

Ethical approval was granted by the university research ethics panel before sessions began. Written consent was provided from parents/guardians ahead of time, both to allow children to take part in the sessions and for us to collect the questionnaires. Those children whose parents did not consent to take part in the sessions were taken out of the room for the duration for an alternative activity. While written questionnaires were anonymous, they were destroyed once transcribed to an excel sheet to ensure data was secure. The transcribed results grouped responses according to school only and so no identifying information was included.

A further ethical consideration was around both potential conflict and psychological harm during inquiries. Given the nature of philosophical discussion, it was expected that the children—all new to philosophy—might struggle to deal with heightened disagreement. This was dealt with by ensuring that teachers and classroom assistants were always observing and at hand, especially if discussion veered towards interpersonal conflict. While there were a handful of issues of this type, they were on the whole a rare occurrence, and dealt with swiftly and effectively by use of both PwC practice and—when necessary—teacher/classroom assistant intervention.

To mitigate the potential for psychological harm, the facilitator met with either the headteacher or classroom teacher ahead of the study to discuss any potential areas or topics that may require additional sensitivity for certain pupils in the class. While each week’s theme was to be introduced in an abstract way, it was important to remember that children process and understand these issues by reflecting on how they apply to their own lives. So, while children were not invited to share personal anecdotes, these did come up naturally during inquiries. This is an extremely common occurrence for PwC practitioners, and so the facilitator was well prepared to deal with this. By

employing the practices of listening, acknowledging, and highlighting the philosophical import of a contribution, they were able to include the personal perspectives of children in a way that was respectful and considerate. In addition, the continuous support from the teachers and classroom assistants during sessions also meant that any serious issues that were revealed during sessions could be followed up appropriately afterwards.

There were several limitations to the study. The first was that, as a pilot quasi-study, the data was not collected under ideal conditions. In particular, there was no control group with which to test the effectiveness of the programme in comparison to other citizenship or PDMU lessons. Two further limitations relate to the sample. With only eight schools taking part, we were unable to gather the amount of data ideally required to draw conclusions about effectiveness. Further, the range of school types that took part in the study was limiting, in that no integrated or Irish-speaking school opted to take part. This is particularly important given the focus of the study on the post-conflict context. The main reason for these limitations was that there was only a single facilitator leading sessions. Any future study, then, would need to employ a larger number of facilitators and schools, where the schools chosen more accurately reflect wider demographics. The study would also need to take place under scientific conditions, which includes involving control groups.

Table 1 details the geographical location (by county) of each school, the number and primary stage of classes that took part, the number of participating children from each school, and the school management type.⁶

⁶ There are two main management types of primary school in Northern Ireland. 'Controlled' refer to those managed by a Board of Governors (BoG) that includes representatives from Protestant churches. Those that are 'Catholic Maintained' are managed by a BoG nominated by Roman Catholic trustees. A smaller number (7%) are 'integrated', managed by a BoG made up of representatives from a range of community backgrounds. An even smaller number of schools are Independent or Special (see eani.org.uk/parents/types-of-school).

Table 1: Characteristics of participating schools

	County	No. of participating classes	Primary year	No. of children	School management type
1	Derry	1	6	19	Catholic maintained
2	Down	2	5	47	Controlled
3	Antrim	1	7	10	Controlled
4	Down	1	6	20	Controlled
5	Tyrone	1	6/7	25	Controlled
6	Armagh	2	6	55	Catholic maintained
7	Antrim	1	7	17	Controlled
8	Antrim	1	7	17	Controlled

The programme was comprised of a one-hour per week session per class delivered by a professional academic philosopher trained in PwC. All sessions were broken down in the following way, with discussion guided by the facilitation moves proposed by Gregory (2007):

- a) *Warm-up (15-20 minutes)*: Philosophical questions/statements were posed to the group, to which they had to indicate their agreement or disagreement. Depending on room set-up, this was carried out by swapping seats, moving from one end of the room to the other, or raising/lowering hands. Example statements included: 'It is never OK to lie', 'It is OK to bully someone who is bullying someone else', 'Children should have a say in what is taught at school'. Pupils volunteered reasons in support of their answer, following which others were invited to contribute.
- b) *Inquiry (30-40 minutes)*: Themes for the inquiries included Friendship, Thinking Ethically, Stereotypes, Making Arguments, Seeing and Believing, and Tolerance. Some inquiries began with group work. In Thinking Ethically, for example, pupils (in small groups) were tasked with ranking a list of behaviours according to how 'bad' they were (e.g. 'talking back to the teacher', 'stealing a pen'). This was followed by an all-class discussion about the reasons why some were ranked higher/lower than others by groups.

Two versions of the theme Friendship also began with group work. In one, groups had to list the essential 'ingredients' of friendship. They were then

instructed to discuss which (if any) could be removed without damaging the friendship. In the second version, groups had to list a set of 'rules' that they would include in their 'Friendship Contract'. Both versions were followed by an all-class inquiry exploring the meaning of friendship. Other inquiries began by presenting a stimulus (i.e. video, short story, photograph). In Stereotyping and one version of Seeing and Believing, pupils were shown a short video. This was followed by a brief period of paired thinking time before proceeding with an all-class inquiry.

While each inquiry was based around a broad theme, discussion was led by questions that emerged from the pupils. In 'Friendship Contract', for example, one common question that emerged concerned whether a 'true' friend had to always be loyal. This raised interesting discussions points about whether it would always be disloyal to report something to an adult that a friend told you not to share, about whether you should support a friend even when they do something wrong (such as bully others), and about the role of forgiveness in friendships that have not met expectations.

- c) *Reflection time (5-10 minutes)*: Structured according to Philip Cam's (2006, pp. 61-63) procedural and structural model for reflection, pupils were then asked to share their experience of the session and to indicate their feelings about how it went. These reflections fed in to how the subsequent session was organised.

Findings and discussion

Pupils provided written responses to the questionnaires in class at the end of the sixth (and final) session. The most relevant questionnaire questions for our analysis include:

- i) What is the best thing about doing philosophy in school?
- ii) Do you think you learned anything new? If so, what was it?
- iii) Would you like to do philosophy again in school?

All 210 responses were collated and each was assigned a pupil code (P2, P3, P4 ...). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was used to identify and analyse themes in pupil responses.

Overall, 95% of pupils said that they would like to continue with philosophy classes in future. Those pupils who supported their answer to this question with a reason

reported that sessions were 'fun' (94%) and that they provided an opportunity to 'learn something new' (51%). Others stated that they enjoyed the sessions because they 'didn't have to do work' or that 'it wasn't hard like other work' (15%).

Two connected and recurring themes stood out in the pupils' responses; i) The value of expressing one's own opinions and beliefs; and ii) The value of being exposed to and learning about the diverse views of others. For example, out of those who provided a reason in support of their answer to the question 'What did you enjoy most about doing philosophy in school?', most pupils cited having an opportunity to share their opinions with others (19%), arguing/debating with classmates (14%), and learning about the different views of their classmates (20%).

Looking at i) in particular (What is the best thing about doing philosophy in school?), pupils described how sessions allowed them to understand their own feelings better, improved their confidence in their beliefs, and gave them an opportunity to exercise their voice:

I learned to believe your own thoughts. (P47)

The best thing about doing philosophy is that you're able to have a voice, and being able to tell your thoughts. (P38)

You get to express your feelings. (P176)

I learnt not to be afraid of having my own opinion. (P32)

I get to explain what I think and people will listen. (P22)

You get to argue and discuss your opinions. (P33)

The best thing about doing philosophy in school is that everyone gets a go to share their opinion. (P162)

It helped me with my confidence. (P206)

As for ii) (Do you think you learned anything new? If so, what was it?), pupils expressed the importance of learning about the views of others for helping build community and improving shared knowledge through dialogue:

It helped us understand each other's feelings and opinions about different things. (P36)

I learned everyone has different thoughts. (P23)

I love learning what other people know, even if I don't agree. (P74)

I learned something new- that people always have different opinions. (P52)

You get to know other people's opinions. (P3)

[It helped me with] learning to speak up and share my opinion. (P93)

The positive stance taken by pupils towards disagreement and difference of opinion supports the view that the structure and procedure of PwC sessions can foster the kind of trust and emotional safety necessary for effective deliberation (Davey 2005; Sharp 2004). In turn, this finding reinforces the importance of establishing a caring environment for inquiries to be successful. As the Deweyan-inspired method of doing PwC emphasises (Dewey 1916), this communal form of learning takes the expressed diverse perspectives and past histories of children to be indispensable components of educational development for all involved (Splitter & Sharp 1995). The central idea here is that, by communicating their views with one another, children at the same time come to have knowledge of how they and their fellow classmates feature in the surrounding environment, something that is essential for the development of autonomy (Berding 1997, pp. 26–27; Bleazby 2006, p. 44). Crucially, the essential vulnerability involved in disagreement means that such engagement with divergent perspectives will only be productive in contexts of respectful cooperation (Cassidy 2022; Sharp 1991). That the inquiry method of PwC serves to foster a sense of safety when discussing complex issues reveals its potential to deal with the problem of avoidance or non-engagement reported by teachers who attempt to teach political and ethical issues, particularly when they relate to the NI conflict. While the PwC approach requires supporting the critical evaluation of the narratives and sources that inform perspectives, by providing opportunities to share situated perspectives PwC inquiries can expand the empathetic horizons of pupils, thereby building the collective trust needed to work through complex questions.

Relatedly, expressed recognition of the educational benefits of communication of and exposure to diverse ideas was also found in pupil responses:

You learn a lot more about how everyone's mind works around a difficult question. (P35)

[I]t helps me socialize and have better opinions. (P207)

I learnt I don't always have to have the same answer as someone else. (P2)

I learned that everyone has different thoughts. (P23)

I learned about how everyone has a different view on things and also once I heard their view I sometimes changed my mind. (P37)

I learnt to value and respect others' point of view on different opinions. (P36)

I learnt to take others' opinions instead of just mine. (P26)

I think I learned more about how the world works and I learned everyone has a different opinion. (P35)

I learnt how to solve a problem. (P51)

Yes I learned that everyone has different answers and they sometimes make me change my mind. (P42)

[I learned that] loads of different answers can be right but wrong. (P72)

The responses here suggest that pupils felt comfortable not only sharing their views, but also holding themselves and one another responsible for those views. As discussed in the literature, this is one area in particular where the role of the facilitator proves especially important. As stressed by Gardner (2015, p. 72), it is essential that facilitators ensure that sessions do not veer towards the 'fun exchanging of opinions' and that they instead maintain focus as a procedure of philosophical inquiry. In other words, rather than simply providing a forum wherein children get to share subjective perspectives, the properly-guided procedure of an inquiry requires that shared opinions and perspectives are 'put to the test'. Children are thus encouraged to assume the responsibility of justifying and defending their opinions to others, part of which includes exposing those opinions to collaborative and critical testing. As Bleazby notes (2006):

When students are exposed to the different perspectives of others their initial beliefs are problematized and they recognize that the realization of their own ideas is dependent upon other people who can support or impede them ... [T]his is what provokes inquiry as a means of weighing up alternative perspectives and justifying a position. (p. 44)

Crucially, this practice of problematising the diverse contributions of children must be accompanied by the problematisation of (what are at least perceived to be) the shared implicit and explicit commitments of the group as a collective. The facilitator must not shy away from potential conflict and must instead commit to challenging background habits and assumptions that emerge from the surrounding culture itself.

The alternative, which involves attempting to maintain a stance of 'respectful' neutrality, leads to the unhelpful preservation of epistemic practices that structure our deliberations in intellectually limiting ways (Burgh & Thornton 2017, p. 56). This bolsters the argument for a citizenship education that takes critical-reflexivity and conflict to be key components of our shared, ongoing, and dialogical projects, while at the same time undermining those versions that endorse either 'thick' conceptions of shared identity or the unreflective positive affirmation of difference.

Tied to both of these themes we also see how, from the perspective of the pupils, engaging in regular inquiries also helped them build certain habits in patience, listening, and 'self-control', particularly in contexts of disagreement. Pupils frequently stressed the enjoyment experienced from having dedicated 'thinking time' each week, while others described the 'calming' effect of inquiries:

[I]t gives you time to think. (P12)

[I enjoyed doing philosophy in school] not because I want to get out of work, because I love to learn how life works and how YOU control it. (P194)

We have learned how to be kind to others and helps us learn self control. (P131)

It calms me down. (P120)

I would like to do philosophy again because I think philosophy is very fun and calming. (P157)

I learned to think before I speak. (P20)

I learned that you have to think first [rather] than just judge. (P62)

The thing I learned about was being patient. (P48)

We can see, then, that the dialogical exchange of perspectives, followed by collaborative reflection upon and reconstruction of shared meanings and practices found in PwC appears to support the kinds of norms and dispositions essential to a democratic culture grounded in 'critical' civility. By recognising the realities of both the individual and the interdependent components of collaborative reconstruction, such procedures avoid the damaging reification we see in models of citizenship education that promote 'thick' conceptions of identity, as well as those esteem-based varieties that limit possibilities for internal critique. In that sense, a PwC-grounded framework for exploring complex issues has the potential to help pupils 'become comfortable with complexity and debate' (McCully 2012, p. 152), while at the same

time supporting their development of the skills in critical and caring thinking necessary for shared democratic life.

Implications

The findings of this project highlight several important implications for educational policy in post-conflict societies in general, and in Northern Ireland in particular. As the first (known) assessment of PwC-led citizenship education in the region, the results indicate the positive potential of PwC practices for exploring issues related to democratic and ethical values. Given the longstanding demand from educators in the region for clear and effective frameworks with which to critically explore such issues, the success of this project should offer some encouragement in that regard. This need to equip educators with the tools to explore values is all the more urgent given the increased range of challenges facing today's children and young people in democratic societies more broadly, including the rise in certain contexts of social and political division and polarisation, misinformation, and intolerance. Educational policymakers should therefore take seriously PwC as an evidence-backed set of pedagogical practices with which educators in the region, and beyond, can explore matters of ethical and political importance in an inclusive, yet critical way.

For researchers in educational practice and PwC, the results of the pilot provide further qualitative support in favour of PwC as a framework for developing certain non-cognitive skills in children. While the results are limited in terms of their scientific quality, they are sufficiently robust to support the further testing of PwC citizenship programmes on a larger scale. The results also reinforce the value of child-focused qualitative study in PwC research. While there are, of course, methodological limitations to such research, the inclusion of the individual perspectives of children participating in PwC programmes is essential for understanding some of the key non-cognitive benefits and costs of PwC practice. Given the importance of positive pupil attitudes towards PwC in ensuring ongoing and equal participation, listening to the concerns of pupils themselves is therefore immensely valuable for understanding the success or failure of particular programmes.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the potential role a Philosophy with Children (PwC)-grounded citizenship programme might play in fostering the norms and dispositions necessary for practicing civility in contemporary, post-conflict societies. Of course, as a mere reflection on a pilot programme, any conclusions we have drawn in this study

will be made extremely tentatively. When understood as a catalyst for a further quantitative and qualitative research, however, we believe the study to have highlighted the very real potential that PwC could play in the future design of citizenship programmes in regions that continue to struggle with a divided past. At the very least, the near-universally positive responses from those that took part in the pilot reveal the importance of offering children structured opportunities for collaborative and open-ended discussion on matters of ethical and democratic importance.

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