

## **Philosophical Inquiry: Fostering Practices for Thoughtful Civic Participation**

*“I think part of what I like about philosophy is that there aren’t final answers. I sometimes come to an answer myself, but I know that it might change. Mostly I really like listening to other people’s ideas and knowing that there might be a new idea that would make me change my mind.” –Julia, age 10*

For Julia, carefully considering the perspectives of others is a cornerstone of her own developing views. This disposition stands in stark contrast to the current state of discourse in the public sphere, where acrimony and unsupported claims have become all too common. Thus, we posit that engaging students in philosophical inquiry may help youth to develop dispositions that we see as fundamental to a thriving democracy.

Communities of philosophical inquiry engage students in critical analysis of the personal, social, ethical and political questions that matter to them. The substance of the inquiry is philosophical, involving larger abstract questions that underlie and overlap among all subjects. Through deep engagement with meaningful questions over time, young people develop a repertoire of philosophical dispositions that we believe are at the heart of civic engagement.

This qualitative study seeks to understand how students in a diverse, public elementary school develop philosophical dispositions through philosophical inquiry groups. Specifically, we ask: *1) How and why do the youth take up philosophical dispositions within and beyond the philosophical inquiry group? 2) What do students’ patterns of uptake tell us about their developing identities and civic commitments?* The study’s findings will help to uncover crucial dimensions of a quality democratic education, dimensions that have been empirically elusive.

## **Philosophical Practices: Building Blocks for Thoughtful Civic Engagement**

In philosophical inquiry, students are positioned as knowers whose individual perspectives are valued. The questions students analyze are student-generated; the facilitator typically does not

know, going into the session, what the topics under consideration will be. Although there is no step-by-step lesson plan that involves the facilitator as the main driver, the facilitator's role is nevertheless a robust one: he or she pays close attention to the initiation and progress of the dialogue, seeks connections among what students say, asks for clarification and for reasons supporting particular statements, and in general is attuned to the philosophical content of questions and ideas that might otherwise be lost.

Drawing on Dr. Jana Mohr Lone's (2016) work on cultivating philosophical dispositions with children and youth, we identify three dispositions we believe are at the core of both a robust civic identity and thoughtful, informed civic participation.

The first of these dispositions is a propensity to inquire searchingly: to ask questions, search for assumptions, and seek and evaluate reasons. Philosophical inquiry seeks to elicit the "questions behind the questions" and help the participants learn to seek the assumptions that underlie their own and others' perspectives, thereby helping them to better understand and challenge them. At the heart of philosophical inquiry is the practice of giving good reasons for one's views and assessing the caliber of the reasons given by others.

Cultivating epistemological modesty and a comfort with uncertainty constitute the second philosophical disposition that, we believe, is essential to a democratic education, which requires an openness to the multiplicity of perspectives at work in communities. By definition, questions of philosophy have not been resolved with final settled answers and, therefore, examining these questions involves openness to many possible answers and recognition that one's own answers are provisional and could be mistaken. The epistemological modesty is an important disposition for civic engagement, in that students begin to understand that there are many ways to understand the world and to develop a comfort with uncertainty.

The third philosophical disposition essential for civic engagement involves independence of mind and a critical consciousness about information and sources of knowledge. By focusing on fundamental questions about the human condition, (e.g., Who am I? What is justice?), philosophical inquiry makes space for students to develop their own way of understanding the world, grounded in growing clarity about the reasons for their views and the assumptions upon which they rest. Essential to effective civic participation is the ability to think for oneself and to trust one's own questions and ideas.

To date, most research on philosophy in the classroom has focused on program evaluation by documenting the impact on a range of outcomes, such as critical thinking, academic achievement, and self-esteem (Gorard et al., 2015; Topping & Trickey, 2004, 2007a, 2007b). This study departs from prior work in that our purpose is to understand how philosophical inquiry might cultivate particular dispositions, and how youth might take up these dispositions for their own purposes within and beyond the classroom.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The philosophical dispositions described above can become powerful tools for thoughtful civic engagement. Yet this will only occur if students take up these dispositions and practices as their own, leveraging them to make sense of their own questions. Our study seeks to understand how youth take up philosophical dispositions and practices as part of their identities within and beyond the classroom. To understand how these identities emerge through participation in a school-based philosophical inquiry group, we ground our work in sociocultural theories of practice-linked identity (Holland et al., 2001)

From this perspective, a person's identities are always shaped and reshaped through social interactions in particular contexts. In this way, identity is dynamic and situative, rather

than static and essentialized (Gee, 2015; Holland et al., 2001). Identities are also “constrained by the historically, culturally, and socially legitimized norms, rules, and expectations that operate within the spaces in which such work takes place” (Calabrese-Barton et al., 2013). This provides a theoretical explanation for why the practice-linked identities that individuals enact may be quite different across setting (e.g., between the humanities classroom and the basketball court) (Nasir & Hand, 2008). By tracing youths’ dispositions over time, we hope to understand whether and how youth take them up within the philosophical inquiry space and across their sites of engagement.

## **Methodology**

The proposed study was conceived in collaboration with ----- .The study uses a longitudinal, qualitative design to investigate students’ philosophical dispositions in a diverse urban elementary school. By analyzing patterns across discussion transcripts, student writing, and student interviews, we will construct an explanation for how philosophical inquiry might mediate the dispositions and civic commitments that students take up in their practice-linked identities within and beyond their philosophical inquiry groups.

**Site selection and participants.** Harriet Tubman Elementary (a pseudonym) was identified as offering several affordances for conducting this study. First, Tubman is a new partnership school. Philosophy will likely be new to the youth, increasing the likelihood of seeing changes in students’ dispositions. Second, the school’s diverse socioeconomic, racial, and cultural diversity provides an optimal mix for bringing diverse perspectives into conversation. Third, the students have already been experiencing ability tracking for a number of years. “Academically Accelerated” students, most of whom are affluent white and Asian students, are assigned to separate classrooms, while students in general education classrooms are primarily

students of color from low-income families. This arrangement has created tensions that highlight the larger forces of power and privilege at play in students' lives. The philosophical inquiry sessions, led by -----, will focus on issues of inequity in general and race in particular, offering students opportunities to engage with questions that are at the heart of these tensions. To support this effort, the principal and faculty have made time for untracked philosophical inquiry groups twice per month. As researchers, this context provides an opportunity to understand the role that philosophical inquiry might play in supporting difficult conversations among youth.

**Data collection.** The primary investigator and two research assistants will be responsible for all data collection and analysis. During the 2016-2017 school year, we will observe three philosophical inquiry groups of about 25-30 students each. Each of these meetings will last for about one hour. We will audio record each session and use field notes to record our initial observations. Reflective writing produced during these sessions will be collected, digitized, and returned. In May, we will conduct semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with students to understand their experiences in the philosophy sessions, the dispositions they bring to bear on the issues and questions that matter to them, and their civic commitments. Recordings of philosophical discussions and student interviews will be transcribed, All data sources will be uploaded into Atlas.ti, for analysis.

**Data Analysis.** To capture youths' identities in practice related to philosophical dispositions, we focus our analysis on students' language as they engage with the questions that matter to them and reflect on that process (Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 2015; Holland et al., 2001). To begin, we will employ an iterative process of open coding to identify the range of dispositions that students bring to their talk and writing. We will consider these grounded interpretations alongside the dispositions from the literature on philosophical inquiry with youth. From this

work, we will delineate a final list of codes. These core codes will be applied across discussion transcripts, students' reflective writing, and interview transcripts to help us trace students' dispositions over time and across settings of engagement. In addition, codes specific to each data source will help to mine these sources for further insights. For example, we will code discussion transcripts for the nature of facilitators' responses to and elicitations of student ideas. Tracing these moves in conjunction with the nature of student participation will help us to understand how facilitators' actions mediate students' uptake of particular dispositions and practices.

**Conclusion.** Through a careful analysis that traces student dispositions over time and across social spaces, this study stands to make important contributions to the field of education at the intersections of civic engagement and philosophy. Specifically, findings will illuminate our theoretical and practical understanding of how to support youth—and the ways in which youth can and do support themselves—toward thoughtful, informed civic engagement.