



Philosophy in Primary Schools: fostering thinking skills and literacy

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Abstract

We read for many reasons and this paper focuses on one of those – reading for thinking. It reports on the Philosophy in Primary Schools project and argues that one of the best ways teachers can add value to their work in literacy is by incorporating philosophical discussion with children through an approach called *Stories for Thinking*. It outlines what ‘philosophy for children’ is and how it can be used for developing the thinking skills that underpin literacy and higher order reading skills. It argues that a *Stories for Thinking* approach can enrich thinking and learning in the Literacy Hour, and uses evidence from teachers and children to illustrate the effects of the programme on classroom practice and on raising levels of pupil achievement.

If one learns from others but does not think, one will be bewildered. If, on the other hand, one thinks but does not learn from others, one will be in peril. Confucian Analects 11.15

In philosophy sometimes you learn what you already know Child aged 6

A class of ten year olds have spent time discussing a challenging question: ‘What is thinking?’ The question is one they have raised themselves and chosen to discuss after shared reading of a ‘story for thinking’. The lesson is a literacy hour with a difference, for it has been given over to ‘philosophy for children’, an approach aimed at developing not just literacy, but a thinking or critical literacy. Anna writes, at the end of the discussion, in her thinking book:

Thinking is a state of mind. It is divided into two regions, Choice and Pleasure. Choice covers everyday choices, such as what to do at wet play, to serious choices, like whether to go to college. Pleasure covers all other kinds of thinking. Guessing is not thinking. Thinking is life. We could not live without thinking. Dreaming is the only exception. The two regions of Choice and Pleasure do not cover it. Dreams are very strange because your body and mind do not control them. They are almost not thinking. What is a dream?

In recent years there has been growing interest in the UK in the role thinking skills play in the development of literacy and learning. Thinking skills are now established as central to the purpose of the National Curriculum in England (DfEE/QCA 2000, p22) and of the 5-14 Guidelines in Scotland. Research shows that although teachers in the UK are often good at identifying particular problems and deficits in children’s concepts of language (for example concepts of print) but many are less sure of the cognitive interventions needed to develop specific thinking skills (McGuinness 1999). They have an effective framework for teaching reading and writing, such as the Literacy Hour in England, but may lack a systematic ‘thinking’ framework to help structure their cognitive coaching of children. This paper explores one systematic approach designed to help teachers develop children’s thinking skills, develop reflective reading and critical literacy, that of ‘philosophy for children’.

What is philosophy for children?

'Philosophy for me means having adventures in ideas with children' – teacher

The aim of philosophy for children is to develop the ability to go beyond the information given and to engage with texts not just in terms of their literal meaning but at an analytic and conceptual level. To do this the teacher must offer more than instruction in the mechanics of reading or writing. If we want to actively encourage children to think for themselves and give them the means to think critically, creatively and to solve problems then philosophy, in the Socratic tradition of discussion, questioning and experimenting with ideas, seems to have much to offer. How to encourage independent thinking and co-operative learning are key questions for teachers of children at any age. Philosophy holds one possible answer for rather than being told what to think, through philosophy children encounter at first hand a community of enquiry, in which children are exposed to and internalise the skills and habits of higher order thinking (Fisher 1995, 1998).

Philosophy and thinking skills

Among the thinking skills that philosophy for children aims to foster are just those skills which underpin the National Curriculum in England (DfEE/QCA 2000), namely information-processing, enquiry, reasoning, creative thinking and evaluation.

Philosophy for children provides opportunities for developing:

- Information-processing skills: through reading, discussion and writing to make meaning from the texts they read, identifying what they do and do not understand, reflecting on what they read and discuss, and interpreting information to show they understand relevant concepts and ideas. 'Philosophy is good,' as Camilla, aged 10 said, 'because it helps you make the most of your mind.' Information processing skills are guided during discussion by questions such as: *What do we know from the text? What do we not know? What do we need to know?*
- Enquiry skills: through reading, discussion and writing to ask relevant questions, pose problems, engage in a process of investigation and find possible solutions and open new areas of enquiry (as when Tom aged five asked: 'Where does time go when it is over?') Enquiry skills are guided during a philosophical enquiry by questions such as: *What do we want to find out? What question(s) do we want to ask? What are the problems?*
- Reasoning skills: through reading, discussion and writing to draw inferences and make deductions, give reasons for opinions, use precise language to explain what they think, and make judgements and decisions informed by reasons and/or evidence. As Carl, aged 11 said: 'Philosophy helps me to give reasons and explain what I mean.' Reasoning skills are guided during a philosophical enquiry by questions such as: *What can we infer? Are there good reasons for believing it? Can we explain what it means?*
- Creative thinking skills: through reading, discussion and writing to generate and be playful with ideas, suggest possible hypotheses, apply imagination to their thinking, and to look for alternative explanations and ideas. As Ravi, age 10 says: 'It can be fun

playing with ideas, like thinking impossible things and wondering if they are impossible.' Creative thinking skills are guided during a philosophical enquiry by questions such as: *Can we suggest another question? Is there another possible viewpoint? Could it have been different?*

- Evaluation skills: through reading, discussion and writing to apply their own judgement to contestable issues, develop criteria for judging the value of ideas, evaluate the ideas and contributions of others, and practice being self critical and self correcting. As Paula aged 13 said: 'Philosophy gives you the confidence to speak and think for yourself'. Evaluation skills are guided during a philosophical enquiry by questions such as: *What have we learned from this enquiry? How has our thinking changed? What do we still need to think about?*

These skills include the higher order thinking skills identified in many taxonomies of thinking skills. But skills alone are not enough, what must be added to these to make them effective are the dispositions to use the skills to make a difference. These involve two sets of dispositions or attitudes which philosophy for children aims to foster. Both derive from the dialogical nature of the process, developing individual skills through co-operative activity. We might call these aspects 'caring', 'collaborative' or 'connected' thinking. It is caring in the sense of taking responsibility for one's own thinking, and collaborative in the sense of being open to and connecting with what others think (Fisher 2000b). Co-operative dispositions involve learning to collaborate and cooperate with others in a community of enquiry, building self esteem, empathy and respect towards others, guided by the question: *What do others think? Can I understand what they think? Can I learn from what they think?*

Philosophy for children integrates all these aspects of thinking into one process. Nothing achieves these ends more effectively than open-ended group discussions of ideas and questions in which young people are interested, assisted by a philosophically aware teacher. This is the claim that has been made for philosophy for children as a cognitive intervention programme (Splitter & Sharp 1995). My research aimed to see whether philosophical enquiry, involving serious, sustained and structured discussion, could form a central core around which a literacy curriculum involving critical, creative and co-operative thinking could be developed.

Stories for Thinking and the Literacy Hour

When we are talking about stories I like to have enough time to do it Kate, aged six

The teacher demonstrates reading strategies with a shared text. The class reads the text together and discusses ideas and textual features, engaging in a high level of interaction with the teacher.

(National Literacy Strategy definition of shared reading)

One potential drawback to the conventional Literacy Hour is that there is not long for shared reading and discussion of a text and for all points and issues to be discussed. The trouble with teaching for limited amounts of time, at pace, is that it suits hare brains but not tortoise minds. Creative teachers are not constrained by the clock, but use their professional judgement in orchestrating classroom discussion and reading time. We know that the oral groundwork of discussion, if it can be sustained, will enhance understanding and

the quality of children's reading and writing.

Many teachers are exercising their professional judgement in adapting the Literacy Hour to benefit from of a *Stories for Thinking* approach. Others prefer to find time, usually once a week, for more extended discussion than the Literacy Hour allows. *Stories for Thinking* aims to be a flexible introduction to doing philosophy with children by helping them engage in serious, systematic and sustained discussion about what they read, think and feel. The approach can add value to shared reading and be used as a stimulus for group and individual reading activities in the Literacy Hour. The Literacy Hour and *Stories for Thinking* share some common features. Both emphasise the importance of discussing the text to identify themes, ideas, and implicit meanings. Both aim to develop critical reading skills. *Stories for Thinking* emphasises the importance of children formulating their own questions and aims to add philosophical depth to the discussion.

Young children tend to expect to have their questions unequivocally answered by grown-ups, not discussed by other children. They are often not used to having their attention focused on a particular issue for a length of time, to discuss questions in a systematic and sustained way or to consider things from a variety of viewpoints. But if they have a stimulus (for example a story) then even young children can respond to questions in ways that can be called philosophical. This may mean helping them to move from the concrete and literal aspects of the story to the conceptual and the abstract, moving from discussing *what* happened in the story to *why*. Many, even very young, readers may go straight to the abstract – like the girl who, after her father finished a story with the words ‘... and they lived happily ever after’, asked: ‘What is happiness dad?’ Children may understand the relationship between content and theme in a story, but often this understanding is tentative or incomplete. A philosophical discussion with children will therefore move between pre-philosophical and philosophical or conceptual levels, not in a linear but a recursive sequence, moving back and forth between literal knowledge, reasoning from the text and understanding of underlying philosophical concepts such as truth, beauty or happiness.

Discussion can be moved to philosophical levels through a Socratic use of questions as in this excerpt of discussion of the story *The Monkey and her Baby* (Fisher 1999a) with 6/7 year olds:

Teacher: Why did the mother think that her baby was best?
Child: Because it was beautiful. She thought it was beautiful.
Child: She thought it was beautiful because she was the mother.
Teacher: What does it mean to be beautiful?
Child: It means someone thinks you are lovely.
Child: You are perfect ...
Child: Good to look at.
Teacher: Can you be beautiful even if no-one thinks you are lovely.
Child: No. You can't be beautiful if no-one thinks you are beautiful.
Child: You can be beautiful inside, you can *feel* beautiful ...

Through engaging in a community of enquiry children learn how to:

- ask their own questions and raise issues for discussion
- explore and develop their own ideas, views and theories
- give reasons for what they think and believe
- explain and argue their point of view with others
- listen to and consider the views and ideas of others
- change their ideas in the light of good reasons and evidence

Even four year olds can benefit from the process of community of enquiry. They often find it easier to make statements about the story, like 'The king was wicked', than to ask questions. These can be recorded on the board (with the child's name) and become a focus for discussion, for example by asking: 'What do you mean by that?' or by focusing on a key word such as: 'What does 'wicked' mean?' Even if they are not capable of entering into philosophical discussion, it introduces them to the experience and to the habits of mind that prepare them for more complex thinking in the future. As one nursery teacher said: 'My Stories for Thinking lessons are pre-philosophical. I am preparing my children for the kinds of thinking and reasoning I hope my children will grow into. After all they are the thinkers of the future, and it is never too early to start them on it.'

Often young children will choose to call philosophical discussion by its proper name - Philosophy, if they are introduced to the term. The lesson may have different names, such as Stories for Thinking, Thinking Circle or even Literacy Hour. Whatever it is called children are often quick to see the value of having time set aside to think through stories. Kirandeep, aged eight, says philosophy discussions are important because 'thinking is what we are here for.' Karen, aged eight, says she likes Stories for Thinking lessons because they makes stories 'a kind of puzzle.'

Most children by the age of 11 have learnt to read the lines, but they are less good at reading between the lines or beyond the lines. If they were better at reasoning from stories, poems and other texts their ability to engage in reflective reading (and maybe their SATs scores) would improve. What philosophical enquiry offers is a tried and tested strategy for helping children to apply reasoning to texts. The teaching strategy, includes shared reading, questioning and discussion with the whole class, and is called 'community of enquiry'. It is not a new strategy, but one that is gaining popularity around the world, because it works in making children reflective and critical readers.

What is a community of enquiry, and how does it work?

'A story circle is different because it is our turn to say what we think' Jemma, aged eight

In a community of enquiry the teacher and children share in the reading of a story. The children take thinking time to devise their own questions, and then discuss them. The class meets regularly in a thinking circle for the half hour or more of shared reading. The children's questions get deeper and more thoughtful. The discussions become disciplined and focused, and at the same time more reflective.

Paul, a reluctant reader, aged 8, suddenly sees the point of it all during a philosophical discussion of a story: 'Oh I get it. We're not supposed to just read the story. Were supposed to think about it.' For him it is a revelation. Although still struggling with the mechan-

ics of reading he finds he is able to make a personal response, to question, to discuss inferences and meanings using challenging texts during the shared reading session. At the plenary session in reviewing a discussion he says, 'I think philosophy makes you think more because it gives you time to think.'

For John, aged 10, philosophy not only gives him time to think in a serious, structured and sustained way, but also: 'It helps you ask questions. It shows you there can be many answers to one question (and) it makes you think that everything must have a reason.' For Michelle, aged 10, the community of enquiry gives you a chance to self-correct your thinking. She says: 'In philosophy lessons you can say what you really think and sometimes you change your mind.'

The skills identified in the National Literacy Strategy are those routinely developed in a philosophy for children session, including:

- linking the story with personal experience
- interrogating and evaluating the story
- identifying themes and ideas
- distinguishing between opinion and evidence in the text
- identifying implicit meanings
- developing a critical reading stance

Philosophy for children fulfils the criteria for high level discussion of texts, but it offers more. Using stories for thinking in a community of enquiry not only provides a method for building reasoning into shared reading, but also opportunities during guided and independent reading for work at sentence and word level. Once a 'story for thinking' has been discussed during shared reading it can be used as a text for work at word and sentence level, for example in grammar or punctuation activities. At sentence level philosophy is of particular help developing the critical thinking needed for comprehension, for example in showing how language serves different functions, and in providing ideas and questions for written composition. As Josh, aged 7 put it, 'Philosophy helps me to ask my own questions, and ask other people questions ... which are sometimes hard to answer.'

The following is part of a discussion with Year 2 children after they had read 'The Cats and the Chapatti' (Fisher 1999a). They had chosen to answer Anna's question about the story: 'Why did they quarrel?'

Child: There were some animals quarrelling.

Teacher: What were they saying?

Child: 'No you can't', 'Yes you can' ...that sort of thing.

Child: They were contradicting each other.

Teacher: So a quarrel is like a contradiction?

Child: (after a pause for thought) Yes.

Child: They were quarrelling with each other.

Teacher: Can you quarrel with yourself?

Child: You can't quarrel with yourself. You need to have more than one person.

Child: You can quarrel with yourself. You could punch yourself. Your brain quarrels with you ... if you want to test yourself.

Child: I disagree with Sarah. You can't quarrel with yourself. You haven't done anything to yourself.

Child: If you punch your leg, it can't say no. Your brain says no.

Teacher: Can animals say 'Yes' and 'No'.

Child: No, only people can say 'Yes' and 'No'. That's how we are different from animals.

At word level philosophical discussion helps to extend vocabulary, focusing as it does on exploring the meanings and uses of words. As Marlene, aged 10, tried to explain during a *Stories for Thinking* session: 'Words don't mean one thing. They like come in families. Sometimes the same word can mean different things. Like twins they look the same but they are different . Sometimes they look different but really they like belong together.'

A philosophical community of enquiry is also a way of 'belonging together', developing personal qualities such as the need to listen, to respect others, the self confidence to speak their mind, to challenge others and to correct themselves. These have to do with literacy - reading, writing and reasoning, but also with the values that help this to happen. Once children have worked in a community of enquiry on reasoning about words and sentences then independent reading and writing activities at word and sentence level (such as cloze and prediction) become that much easier.

The plenary review

The plenary review is a time for thinking about and reviewing the discussion. OFSTED have identified this as the weakest part of literacy lessons in many of their inspection reports. Leading a plenary or review session is a complex teaching skill characterised by main teaching methods used in philosophy for children, namely:

1. A high proportion of open or Socratic questions, such as:

'Have we discussed anything important today?'

'What was the most important concept (or idea) that we discussed?'

'Did we ask any difficult questions (or pose any problems)?'

'Did anyone have good thoughts or new ideas?'

'Did we have good reasons, arguments or evidence to support what was said?'

'Did we explain our ideas well?'

2. Lengthy pupil responses, encouraged by the teacher, as in the following excerpt from a review of a discussion on whether it is right for parents to smack their children by a group of 9 year olds:

Teacher: Who in the discussion had a good reason for what they said?

Child: I think Sophie's was a good idea why smacking children is wrong.

Teacher: What was the idea?

Child: Well she said it was wrong because smacking you doesn't tell you why it was wrong, it just tells you that if you do it you will get smacked. That means you'll do it again if you can get away with it and not be smacked. But if you are told why it is wrong ... whatever it is ... then you are less likely to do it again. Because you know why it is wrong. If you understand the reason ...'

3. Reference by the teacher to the 'big' ideas or concepts under discussion, as in the following way a teacher links a particular point to a broader concept:

Teacher: When you say people should not tell lies do you mean they should be honest in all circumstances? Why is honesty so important? I want you to think about this, because this is something we'll return to tomorrow.

4. Connecting what is discussed to other areas of learning and everyday life, as in the following:

Teacher: We've talked about courage and how it is sometimes difficult to tell other people what we think. Who can give me an example of courage from a recent news story?

Questions for the group to consider during self-evaluation include:

'What have we learnt?'

'What were the most interesting thoughts and ideas?'

'Has anyone changed their minds (and if so why)?'

'Are there any important issues we have not discussed?'

'Does anyone have a question we should discuss next time?'

'Is there a better way to organise the discussion?'

This kind of oral feedback about what has been discussed can be extended through the use of written review. Here a 7 year old writes her reflections on the story : 'The Talking Turtle' (Fisher 1996) that has just been discussed by the class: 'In this story I learnt that you can talk too much. I can control my mouth, but I sometimes go over the top and I use horibal laguage (sic). I can control my mouth sometimes if I try.'

What was the impact of philosophy for children on classroom practice?

'Philosophy helps me to think, and I need to think well if I want to learn' - Megan, aged 9

The research evidence from a wide range of small-scale studies across the world indicate that the philosophy for children programmes can make a difference to various aspects of a child's academic performance. Findings from my Philosophy in Primary Schools research project echo worldwide research into Philosophy for Children programmes, showing that the *Stories for Thinking* programme has a positive effect on:

- teachers' professional confidence and self esteem
- pupils' achievements in tests of literacy
- children's self esteem and self concept as thinkers and learners
- the fluency and quality of children's questioning
- the quality of their thinking
- their ability to listen to others and engage effectively in class discussion

Formative evaluations of these projects confirm that students enjoy philosophic discussion and find the community of enquiry approach motivating. Teachers generally feel that philosophical discussion adds a new dimension to their teaching and the way their pupils think. Children become more ready to ask questions, to challenge each other and to explain what they mean. Discussion in a community of enquiry requires the group to develop trust and the ability to co-operate, and to respect the views of others. They develop insight into

the problematical nature of knowledge, and the need to subject what they read, see and hear to critical enquiry. Through this process they develop self esteem as thinkers and learners. They can be expected to obtain higher achievement scores in tests of verbal reasoning. These effects are most powerful when philosophical discussion is extended across the curriculum. As Jemma, aged 10 said: 'Philosophy can help in all your lessons, no matter what you're learning.'

A frequent finding is that the more experienced children become at interrogating texts the better they become at it. As one teacher reports: 'For the first few stories the children gave few comments or questions, after six weeks I got twice as many, and now (after a term) they often ask more questions than I can fit onto the board.' Of her lists of questions another teacher said: 'It provides me with written evidence that this is an enquiring classroom.' Generating questions from children is not enough to develop critical thinking, but it does show they have learnt how to pose and phrase questions. If questioning is one of the characteristics of skilled reading then the practice of externalising explicit questions about texts, within a community of enquiry, will aid the process of internalising a questioning approach and help them to muse, wonder and enquire when reading alone. As one child put it: 'It (philosophy for children) helps me to ask questions in my head.'

The sorts of evidence teachers report seeing include children being better able to:

Evidence

listen to each other
formulate and ask questions
think of good/new ideas
translate their thoughts and ideas into words
communicate their ideas
respond to others in a discussion
make inferences and give reasons for what they think
develop their understanding of challenging concepts
read, reflect and respond critically to texts

Skills

listening skills
questioning and enquiry skills
creative thinking
communication
speaking skills
co-operative and social skills
verbal reasoning skills
concept building
critical reading skills

One school team who adopted philosophy for children approach to develop thinking across the curriculum found that their most able pupils benefited most from this approach: 'The able children have really benefited from the project' said the head of one school. 'It has moved the other on too, but we have seen a real moving forward in terms of the process skills and thinking of our able children.' Other project schools, including a Special School, identified ways it helped their less able children to develop self-confidence and develop conceptual and abstract modes of thinking. One Year 6 teacher said that through philosophy for children 'the more reticent children have grown in confidence and in their ability to give reasons for what they say.' There was evidence too that Philosophy for Children had a measurable impact on raising pupil self esteem. All schools reported improved levels of literacy, several reporting improved SATs results as a result of the introducing a *Stories for Thinking* approach. One school ran a Saturday Club and an Easter school where thinking skills and philosophical discussion were a focus. Several helped their pupils to keep thinking journals about their learning thus helping them to become more aware of themselves as thinkers and learners.

The thinking circle is a natural setting in which to explore not only stories but issues of personal concern. As Justin, aged eight, put it: 'I like our philosophy sessions because you don't have to just think of the story you can talk about what is important as well.' Another feature of philosophical discussion which pupils liked was the emphasis on challenge and problem solving, as well as extended opportunities for discussion and peer support. According to one child philosophy was valuable because 'it makes me think more than I used to.' Another child reported: 'I never used to share my thinking and I used to keep it inside of me and like normally I can just take it out now.'

One school involved parents closely in the process of personal target setting, reading and homework. Parents responded positively to being active participants in the project. What was identified in discussion with parents involved in the project was their need for support in helping to develop the thinking and learning of their children at home. They liked the idea of 'thinking homework' but wanted help in helping their children. To meet this need a book of advice for parents on ways of developing thinking skills and 'philosophical intelligence' at home was published (Fisher 1999b). Another school trained their classroom assistants, including parent helpers, in strategies to develop thinking skills, particularly through an emphasis on asking open questions and reasoning. As one helper commented: 'We not only help children to learn, we also get them to think'. An enthusiastic parent commented: 'This thinking they have to do is good, we didn't have to do it in my day.'

Both teachers and heads reported that their skills had been enhanced by inclusion of philosophy for children in the curriculum. One head reported that the project had made 'the school as a whole more reflective and thoughtful'. Another said: 'We are now a thinking school. We now have a philosophy which underpins the curriculum, and we have philosophy within the curriculum.' These projects show that teachers can help develop children's thinking by becoming philosophically sensitive and able to engage children in philosophical discussion the more will children develop the skills of critical literacy. Philosophy for children provides a well-researched methodology for developing the skills of critical, creative and collaborative thinking through discussion. We have evidence that philosophy for children can help accelerate literacy development in young children (Davies 1994, Fisher 1998). Materials for philosophical enquiry have been developed in the UK to provide adventures in thinking with picture books (Murriss 1992), stories, poems and pictures (Fisher, in press) and news stories (*Newswise*). A distinctive feature of philosophy for children is the emphasis placed on the development of teacher and pupil questioning, something which has long been identified in inspection reports as a weakness in classrooms. Evidence for school inspection reports shows that philosophy for children contributes not only to good pupil questioning but also the oral skills that underpin literacy. As one inspection report commented:

'In philosophy lessons, pupils respond readily with comments and probing questions. The emphasis placed on pupils' thinking and speaking for themselves at all times, but particularly through philosophy sessions, enables them to make good progress in speaking and listening.' (OFSTED Report, Tuckswold First School, February 1998).

Conclusion

Research suggests that programmes that promote thinking skills have positive effects on academic achievement (McGuinness 1999). The implications of research into philosophy for children suggests it can help raise the achievements of primary children across a range of measures, including literacy, and can enable teachers to plan more consciously for their

pupils' metacognitive development. Such benefits are not only cognitive. Thinking skills, and the ability to cope with cognitive conflict and to work things out together through group discussion, are at the heart of education for democracy and citizenship. There is no better preparation for being an active citizen in a democracy than for a child to participate with others in a community of enquiry founded on reasoning, freedom of expression and mutual respect (Fisher 2000). If children are aware of other views, and are forced to question their assumptions their thinking is enriched and their choices become better informed. As Jamie, aged six said, reflecting on what he had learnt from a 'Stories for Thinking' session: 'You should listen to other people because sometimes they have good ideas'.

Note on Socratic questioning

Socratic questioning means using a series of questions to progressively engage higher levels of thinking – including literal, analytical and conceptual levels of thinking. The following are examples of questions that engage these three levels of thinking:

1. Literal (or factual) questions ask for information

'What is this about?'

'Can you remember what happened?'

'What do you have to do?'

2. Analytic questions call for critical and creative thinking

'What question(s) do you have?'

'What reasons can you give?'

'What are the problems/possible solutions here?'

3. Conceptual questions call for abstract thinking

'What is the key concept (strategy or rule) here and what does it mean?'

'What criteria are we using to judge this (or test if it is true)?'

'How might we further investigate this concept (strategy or hypothesis)?'

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