

Philosophy-Based Learning as The Foundation for Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Elementary Schools

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Abstract. Philosophy is often viewed as a subject for adults, yet the acts of thinking and questioning are natural instincts in children. In primary education, philosophy especially through the Philosophy for Children approach has great potential to build critical, reflective, and ethical thinking from an early age. This study explores the application of philosophy in elementary education and its relevance to character development and critical thinking skills. A qualitative literature review method was used by examining various national and international studies on philosophy for children. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns, main concepts, and practical implications of philosophy in schools. The findings show that philosophy-based learning through dialogic discussion and the Socratic method improves students' critical thinking, empathy, communication, and moral awareness. Teachers serve as philosophical facilitators who guide students to ask questions, reason, and reflect logically. However, implementing philosophy for children still faces challenges such as limited teacher training, lack of time, and the need for cultural adaptation of topics. In conclusion, philosophy education in primary schools develops not only intellectual capacity but also moral wisdom and reflective character. Thus, integrating philosophy for children into curricula and teacher training is a strategic step toward humanistic and context-based education.

Keywords: Children's philosophy, critical thinking, elementary school, philosophy for children

INTRODUCTION

Elementary school is the initial stage for children to learn about the wider world. Children are naturally curious and often ask “why” and “how” questions, which are the roots of philosophy (Wattimena, 2016). The philosophy of education guides the learning process according to the stages of child development (Rofi'ah, et al., 2023) and fosters critical thinking skills, namely reflective and rational thinking in determining what to believe or do (Kurniawan & Putri, 2023; Mardanova, 2023). With proper guidance, children can think philosophically from an early age (Safriyani & Mustofa, 2024).

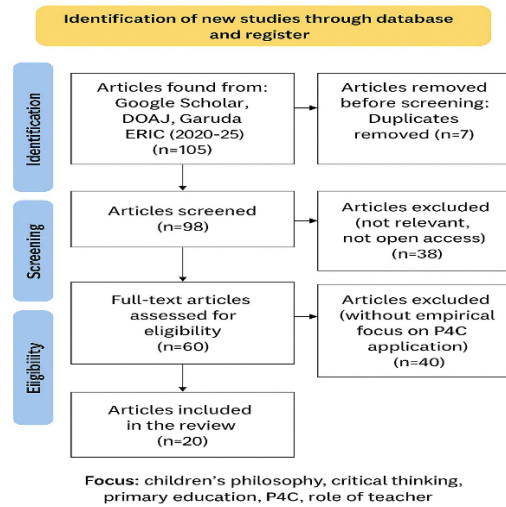
Current learning practices tend to emphasize memorization and right-or-wrong answers, so that reasoning, dialogue, and questioning skills are underdeveloped (Faradella, et al., 2024; Sutrisno, et al., 2023). In fact, philosophy fosters deep thinking, curiosity, and the ability to ask questions (Ab Wahab, et al., 2022; Tarigan, et al., 2023). The philosophy for children approach places dialogue at the core of learning, with teachers as facilitators who encourage children to discover meaning through simple questions (Aksoy & Uğraş, 2024; Wattimena, 2016). philosophy for children has been proven to improve critical thinking, dialogue, problem solving, empathy, and moral awareness (Safriyani & Mustofa, 2024; Rahmah, et al., 2024; Gorard, et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, local wisdom such as the Sundanese philosophy of *silih asah, silih asih, silih asuh* can be used as an entry point for contextual philosophy learning (Suryana, 2021; Nuryani, et al., 2019; Herawati, 2025). Teachers as facilitators encourage children to learn independently, seek meaning, and appreciate differences in views, in accordance with the principles (Lipman, 2020; Safitri, et al., 2022). Philosophy in elementary school serves as a foundation for critical and reflective thinking, while also shaping character and wisdom (Unwakoly, 2022; Yusella & Degeng, 2023). Its implementation still needs support from the government, educators, the community, and an appropriate curriculum (Poerwati, et al., 2024). This article aims to review the application of philosophy in elementary school education through a review of the latest literature, focusing on philosophy for children in developing children's critical and reflective thinking and character, as well as discussing the challenges of its application in Indonesia. This study emphasizes that elementary education is not merely about developing academic abilities but also laying the foundation for a generation that thinks critically, empathizes, and lives meaningfully.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with a qualitative approach. The aim was to examine various previous research results related to philosophy for children in elementary schools. The data collection process was carried out through literature searches in various open databases and scientific journals, both national and international. The keywords used in the search process included “philosophy for children,” “philosophy of elementary school education,” and “philosophy of primary education.” The articles found were then selected based on topic relevance, research method suitability, and empirical findings discussing the influence of philosophy programs on elementary school students. The data obtained was then analyzed thematically to identify patterns, main ideas, and interrelationships between findings, resulting in a comprehensive conceptual synthesis and practical implications. To facilitate understanding of this research process, the following figure shows the stages of a (SLR) using the PRISMA method (Syahrir, et al., 2024).

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following table summarizes research on philosophy-based learning in elementary schools as a basis for developing critical thinking skills. This approach emphasizes questioning, dialogue, and reflection, which help children understand meaning and evaluate reasons logically and ethically.

Table 1. Article Review Results

No	Article Title & Author	Article Summary (Brief Summary)	Results & Findings	Relevance to the Topic
1.	Philosophy education for children? Foundations, application, and critical reflection for the Indonesian context. Wattimena, R. A. (2016).	The philosophical foundation of philosophy education for children in Indonesia, methods of implementation, and critical reflection.	Philosophy education builds children's critical thinking skills from an early age if it is adapted to the local context.	Theoretical basis and Indonesian context for philosophy for children.
2.	Impact of philosophy for children and its challenges. Ab Wahab, D., dkk. (2022).	A systematic review of philosophy for children implementation and the challenges faced.	philosophy for children enhances critical, moral, and social thinking; challenges include teacher readiness and curriculum.	The effectiveness of philosophy for children and barriers to its implementation.
3.	The influence of the philosophy for children curriculum on critical thinking through philosophical inquiry and problem-solving skills. Işıklar,	A quantitative study on the effect of philosophy for children on critical thinking and problem solving.	philosophy for children significantly improves critical thinking and problem-solving skills.	Empirical evidence of philosophy for children implementation.

	S., & Abalı Öztürk, Y. (2022).			
4.	Philosophical Inquiry with 5–7-Year-Olds: ‘My New Thinking Friends’. Quickfall, A. (2025).	Exploring philosophical inquiry activities for children aged 5–7 years.	Children are able to engage in simple philosophical discussions, enhancing self-reflection.	Supporting the implementation of philosophy for children for children aged 5–7 years.
5.	Analysis of Philosophy Studies: Integration of the Value of Honesty in the Educational Curriculum. Dewi, D. P., & Ali, M. (2025).	Analysis of the integration of honesty values in philosophy-based curricula.	The philosophy of education helps internalize moral values such as honesty.	Relevant for character development through philosophy for children.
6.	The Use of Questioning Strategies in the Development of Critical Thinking Skills in Children: A Qualitative Study of the Socratic Method. Kanat, K., & Temel, Z. F. (2025).	The use of the Socratic question-and-answer method to develop children's critical thinking.	Open-ended questions and in-depth dialogue enhance critical thinking skills.	Practical strategies in philosophy for children.
7.	Questions as dialogue games: the pragmatic dimensions of “authentic” questions. Macagno, F. (2023).	The use of authentic questions in philosophical discussions.	Authentic questions stimulate more meaningful and reflective dialogue.	Supporting the design of effective philosophy for children activities.
8.	The effect of philosophy for children curriculum on formulating question skills of children with special learning disabilities. Karadağ, F. (2023).	philosophy for children for children with special needs in training questioning skills.	Children with learning disabilities improve their questioning skills.	Demonstrating philosophy for children inclusivity.
9.	On the theoretical foundations of the ‘Philosophy for Children’ programme. Figueiredo, F. F. (2022).	The theoretical basis of philosophy for children and pedagogical approaches.	Philosophy for children builds critical, reflective, and dialogical thinking skills.	Theoretical foundations for philosophy for children research and practice.
10.	Empowering Young Minds: The Impact of philosophy for children and Picture Storybooks on EFL Learners’ Anxiety and Reading Comprehension. Sutono, A., & Padera, M. P. C. (2025).	Integrating philosophy for children with storybooks for English language learning.	Reduce learning anxiety and improve reading comprehension.	Cross-curricular philosophy for children application.

11.	The impact of philosophy for children on middle school students' empathy, perspective-taking, and autonomy. Asgari, M., Whitehead, J., Schonert-Reichl, K., & Weber, B. (2023).	The effect of philosophy for children on students' empathy, perspective, and autonomy.	philosophy for children enhances empathy, perspective-taking, and autonomy..	The effect of philosophy for children on social-emotional development
12.	The impact of philosophy for children activities on enhancing the speaking skills of gifted students. Balcı, E., & Eryılmaz, R. (2024).	Philosophy for children for gifted students improves speaking skills.	Philosophy for children activities improve speaking and verbal expression skills.	Developing communicative skills through philosophy for children.
13.	The effect of philosophy for children activities on the development of moral perception and social rules of preschool children. Unal, U., & Gunes, G. (2024).	Philosophy for children for preschoolers in moral education.	Children better understand social rules and moral values.	The effectiveness of philosophy for children for early moral education.
14.	The philosophical basis of education and the concept of teaching. Arsyad, H., & Sauri, S. (2024).	The philosophical basis of education and the concept of educating children.	Philosophy-based education improves the quality of learning and character.	The conceptual foundation of philosophy for children.
15.	Teaching healthy lifestyle behaviors based on philosophical thinking to preschool children. Khoramaki, Z., dkk. (2025).	Philosophy for children intervention for healthy lifestyle education in preschool children.	The child shows improved understanding and healthy behavior.	Philosophy for children can be applied to the development of healthy behavior.
16.	Philosophy for children in improving critical thinking in a secondary moral education class. Zulkifli, H., & Hashim, R. (2020).	Philosophy for children in moral education classes.	Philosophy for children improves critical thinking skills.	The effectiveness of philosophy for children in adolescent moral education.
17.	Can philosophy for children practices be done in primary schools? Zengin, E. (2022).	Qualitative research on elementary school teachers regarding the implementation of philosophy for children.	Teachers see philosophy for children as effective but require training.	Challenges in implementing philosophy for children in elementary schools.
18.	The effects of philosophy for children on children's cognitive	Meta-analysis of the effects of philosophy for children on	Philosophy for children improves cognitive abilities,	Strong evidence of the widespread effectiveness of

	development: A three-level. Wei, C., & Chen, L. (2025). -analysis.	children's cognitive development.	critical thinking, and creativity.	philosophy for children.
19.	The impact of philosophy for children on teachers' professional development. Lam, C. M. (2021).	The impact of philosophy for children on teacher professional development.	Teachers improve their pedagogical competence and professional reflection.	The benefits of philosophy for children for teachers and students.
20.	Fostering epistemic space for collaborative solutions in primary science through a Socratic seminar inquiry approach. Kirk, M., dkk. (2025).	The Socratic seminar method for collaborative problem solving in elementary schools.	Children are able to collaborate and think critically in science.	Application of the philosophy for children /Socratic method for science learning.

To further clarify the focus of this research, twenty selected articles were classified according to their most prominent themes. The results of this thematic grouping are presented in Table 2, titled "Classification of Articles Based on the Theme of Philosophy-Based Learning as the Foundation for Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Elementary Schools." This classification identifies four main themes, namely:

Table 2. Classification of Articles Based on Theme

No	Main Theme	Number of Articles	Percentage %	Main Focus
1.	Children's Philosophy	6	30%	Study of the philosophical foundations of children's thinking, philosophical approaches, and their relevance in elementary education.
2.	Critical and Reflective Thinking	5	25%	Developing children's critical thinking skills through dialogue, open-ended questioning, and the Socratic method.
3.	Elementary School	3	15%	Implementation of philosophical and reflective activities within elementary school learning contexts.
4.	Philosophy For Children	4	20%	The philosophy for children program as a learning model that fosters children's reflective, moral, and social thinking.
5.	The Role of Teachers	2	10%	The role of teachers in managing philosophical discussions, facilitating critical thinking, and integrating philosophical values into learning.
	Total	20	100%	

Children are naturally “little philosophers” because they are curious and tend to question everything (Wattimena, 2016; Quickfall, 2025; Figueiredo, 2022). A systematic review and literature review found that philosophy for children programs tend to improve critical thinking and moral reasoning skills in students, while also showing benefits in terms of well-being and social skills, although the results vary depending on the study design and the quality of the facilitators (Ab Wahab, et al., 2022; Asgari, et al., 2023). Beyond cognitive aspects, recent research indicates that philosophy for children programs also influence children's language and social-emotional abilities. Integrating philosophy for children into language learning has been shown to improve students' speaking skills, self-confidence, curiosity, and engagement. This confirms that philosophical dialogue not only trains ways of thinking but also develops communication and argumentation skills as part of the formation of “practical philosophy” in children (Balci & Eryilmaz, 2024; Sutono & Padera, 2025). In the moral and social realm, research on early childhood shows that philosophy for children programs can improve understanding of social rules, moral awareness, and the ability to see other people's perspectives. However, its impact on broader character aspects, such as self-control and resilience, still varies, requiring more contextual evaluation (Unal & Gunes, 2024).

The metaphor of philosophy as a foundation views philosophy and applied philosophical practices such as philosophy for children not merely as separate subjects, but as the most basic layer that supports the way children question, evaluate reasons, and reflect on their beliefs, much like the foundation of a building that determines the stability of the structure above it (Figueiredo, 2022; Karadag, 2023). In other words, when philosophy is placed as the foundation, the goal of education is not only to convey facts, but to build intellectual habits, question assumptions, construct simple arguments, recognize evidence, and think about thinking (Arsyad & Sauri, 2024). Philosophy for children helps them learn to evaluate rationally, rather than memorizing moral rules, so that they can live wisely in a diverse society, where children are encouraged to understand differences in values without falling into relativism, but rather developing contextual pluralism, the awareness that values can vary but remain rational (Wattimena, 2016). For example, quasi-experimental research on preschool-aged children shows that philosophy-based teaching that emphasizes critical, creative, and empathetic thinking significantly helps improve the healthy behavior of children and their parents (Khoramaki et al., 2025). In line with this, research on philosophy for children (which facilitates open dialogue and shared reflection) has been shown to have a significant effect on improving children's critical thinking skills at the secondary school level. Although this research focuses more on moral education, its implications are highly relevant to the context of “values” and

“living together” in a pluralistic society (Zulkifli & Hashim, 2020). This shows that philosophy education can be a means of equipping children with the capacity to reflect on their actions and decisions, not just learning “what is right.” In this case, philosophy teaches children to ask open-ended questions rather than just answering factual questions, thereby training their critical thinking skills (Zengin, 2022; Işıklar & Abalı, 2022).

Teachers or adults in philosophy education do not act as teachers of absolute knowledge, but rather as philosophical facilitators who help children find their own questions and answers (Wattimena, 2016). In practice, philosophical facilitators act as guides for dialogue, asking open-ended questions, encouraging children to give reasons and examples, asking children to consider assumptions and implications, and facilitating joint reflection on their friends' thoughts (Wei & Chen, 2025; Macagno, 2023). A simple philosophical discussion, for example, about “is honesty always good?” forces children to think about reasons, examples, and consequences. With the teacher's guidance, children learn to ask follow-up questions (why?, what if?), consider opposing arguments, and reflect on their own beliefs (Kanat & Temel, 2025; Dewi & Ali, 2025). Such activities strengthen children's metacognition, making them aware of how they think. Systematic reviews and empirical studies show that structured dialogue practices improve these skills when done regularly and facilitated by trained teachers (Ab Wahab, et al., 2022). Research shows that teachers who participate in philosophy for children programs become more skilled at teaching dialogically, are able to create relevant teaching materials, and better understand children's ability to learn through conversation and collaborative thinking (Lam, 2021).

The main method used is Socratic dialogue, which is question-centered learning where children are encouraged to ask questions, express opinions, and give logical reasons without fear of being wrong. In Germany, this method is applied in ethics and art lessons with themes such as justice, happiness, friendship, and the environment. Through activities such as philosophy clubs or group dialogues, children are trained to think critically, rationally, and creatively through thought experiments (Wattimena, 2016). This is in line with research by Kirk et al. (2025), who applied the Socratic Seminar strategy in science projects in elementary schools, showing that this critical question-and-answer method provides opportunities for students to express their opinions and work together to find solutions to social and environmental problems. As a result, the Socratic method has proven to be relevant to various subject areas and helps develop critical thinking and responsibility as caring citizens. In other words, empirical evidence reinforces Wattimena's claim that Socratic dialogue (through philosophy clubs, inquiry communities, or Socratic seminars) trains children's critical, rational,

creative, and ethical thinking skills, but its implementation requires teacher training support, contextual curriculum design, and classroom arrangements that ensure equal participation (Balci & Eryilmaz, 2024).

However, there are challenges in its implementation. The first challenge lies in the bureaucratization of the system, teacher limitations, curriculum overload, and a culture that is not yet open to critical thinking. The solution is to make philosophy a simple, enjoyable, contextual learning paradigm, carried out by teachers as dialogical facilitators who respect children's freedom of thought (Wattimena, 2016). Second, teacher preparation: many teachers are not yet trained to facilitate philosophical dialogue. The solution is short practice-based training (philosophy for children workshops), easy-to-use micro-modules, and ongoing guidance. The literature suggests training that emphasizes questioning techniques, discussion management, and adaptation for elementary school children (Ab Wahab, et al., 2022). Third, time in the curriculum. Elementary schools are often packed with academic achievements. The solution is to integrate philosophy for children into other subjects (civics, Indonesian language), short weekly sessions (20–30 minutes), or daily reflection journal activities. Studies are successful when philosophy for children is integrated, not forced as a separate subject (Balci & Eryilmaz, 2024). Fourth, selecting appropriate topics, which must be concrete and close to children's experiences (stories, everyday situations). Example: “Is lying always wrong?” using children's stories. Topics that are too abstract need to be broken down into simpler questions (Unal & Gunes, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that the application of philosophy, particularly through the philosophy for children approach, plays an important role as a foundation in developing critical, reflective, and ethical thinking skills in elementary school children. Philosophy allows children to learn to reason, dialogue, and evaluate reasons rationally through a process of questioning and reflection, thereby shaping empathetic and moral characters. Teachers act as philosophical facilitators who guide children to discover meaning and develop deep thinking habits, rather than simply memorizing knowledge. However, implementation in Indonesia still faces obstacles such as limited teacher training, time, and cultural context adaptation, requiring the integration of philosophy for children into thematic learning and policy support that favors dialogical and humanistic learning. In the future, educational research and practice need to develop teacher training models based on philosophical practice and curriculum designs that contextualize local values so that philosophy truly becomes the foundation of basic education that nurtures a generation of critical, empathetic, and wise thinkers.

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