

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Oxford Brookes University
Unit of Assessment: 32 - Philosophy
Title of case study: Social Mobility and Philosophy in Schools: essentialism improves educational outcomes for school children
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Philosophical Enquiry, informed by excellent research to explore the metaphysical core of essentialism, has enabled educational benefits to secondary school children through improved social mobility and supporting the development intellectually enquiring minds. These impacts can be demonstrated through Dr Mark Cain and Dr Stephen Boulter's use of Philosophical Enquiry within two secondary schools; leading to positive outcomes for students, supported by testimony of their teachers, and influencing educational practices and learning through the inclusion of philosophical enquiry within the curriculum.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Essentialism is the doctrine that the world is populated by entities that belong to fundamental categories whose members are bound together by having a common essence. Such essences are collections of hidden properties that are causally responsible for observable properties. Given this causal relationship between essential and observable properties, categorizing an object on the basis of its observable properties will usually result in its being assigned to the correct fundamental category. However, such a procedure falls short of being fool proof as it is possible for an entity to have the observable properties typical of a member of a particular fundamental category without having the relevant essence. Dr Stephen Boulter (Senior Lecturer, Oxford Brookes University, 2000 - Present) holds this to be a plausible metaphysical position and a key element of his research involves arguing for it. In particular, he argues that it has a firm basis in commonsense¹ and is supported by evolutionary considerations. Dr Mark Cain (Principal Lecturer, Oxford Brookes University, 2002 - Present) is interested in the idea that children are innately essentialist, an idea that has a lot of support in contemporary developmental psychology. This idea is known as psychological essentialism and one of Cain's research interests lies in examining the implications of psychological essentialism on a range of philosophical issues^{2, 3}.</p> <p>Together Cain and Boulter's research suggests that essentialism is a prominent element of our distinctively human perspective on reality. Being neither culturally nor historically specific it is a key element of human nature that is particularly prominent in childhood. In addition, Boulter researches in the area of Metaphilosophy where he has developed a distinctive view of philosophy according to which the concern of the discipline is to resolve tensions that emerge from the clash of <i>prima facie</i> inconsistent aspects of our general world view³.</p> <p>Cain and Boulter's published research explores the metaphysical core of essentialism which is constituted by the idea that the essence of a thing is the causal basis of its readily perceivable surface properties. They argue that this metaphysical core has an important consequence with respect to the categorisation dispositions of ordinary people: on the one hand, ordinary people typically decide what type of thing something is on the basis of its surface properties, but, on the other hand, they recognise that surface properties can sometimes be misleading as to what something is and are therefore prepared to revise their categorisation judgements if suitably prompted.</p> <p>Cain and Boulter draw out an implication of their account of essentialism and its influence on the categorisation dispositions of ordinary people to provide an explanation of the social phenomenon described earlier in this section. According to that explanation, essentialism predisposes working class children to view their surface properties as indicating their true nature. Hence, they see their own accent, social background, and such like as indicating that they have an essence that makes them ill-suited to higher education. However, their essentialism also provides them with the resources to overcome such a restricting outlook. For, if working class children can be encouraged to reason about the significance of their surface properties they can be steered towards the conclusion that such properties do not indicate their true nature, particularly with respect to their intellectual potential. From Boulter's metaphilosophical perspective this is an example of a tension generated by our everyday world view that can be resolved by philosophical means.</p>

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3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. S.J. Boulter (2007) *The Rediscovery of Commonsense Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. ISBN: 9780230002463
2. M.J. Cain (2012). *Essentialism, Externalism, and Human Nature*. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 70, pp 29-51. doi:10.1017/S1358246112000033.

Submitted to REF2014, Oxford Brookes University, UoA32-Philosophy, REF2, MJ Cain, Output identifier 9214.

3. M.J. Cain (2013) *Learning, concept acquisition and psychological essentialism*. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, doi: 10.1007/s13164-013-0153-4.

Submitted to REF2014, Oxford Brookes University, UoA32-Philosophy, REF2, MJ Cain, Output identifier 9215.

4. S. J. Boulter (2013) *The aporetic method and the defence of immodest metaphysics*, pp 28-48 In Feser (ed) *Aristotle on Method and Metaphysics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. ISBN: 9780230360914

Submitted to REF2014, Oxford Brookes University, UoA32-Philosophy, REF2, SJ Boulter, Output identifier 8917.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Informed through their research, Cain and Boulter utilise this commitment to essentialism to help enable improved education outcomes for school children. These impacts are demonstrated through their work to improve not only the social mobility of students from working class backgrounds but also benefitting school children of all backgrounds by boosting their intellectual confidence and ambitions along with appetite capacity for independent learning.

Throughout the 2012-13 academic year Cain has been working with a group of thirty year 12 students (lower sixth form) at Highcrest Academy, a secondary school in High Wycombe. Highcrest is a non-grammar school in a selective educational authority with the majority of students from working class, ethnic minority and family backgrounds where there is little experience of higher education. Cain holds a Philosophical Enquiry session with the students each week; the sessions do not involve presenting the students with a philosophical argument and expecting them to internalize it but encourages them to understand, through philosophical debate, the nature and implications of their own essentialism, particularly with regard to the issue how much they essentially differ from people who appear different from them in terms of accent, dress, behaviour, social background, and such like. The sessions are highly targeted, focussing on topics of real life significance (for example, the role and legitimacy of stereotyping in everyday life, the extent of an individual's responsibility for their own educational and professional success, the meaning and extent of discrimination in contemporary Britain, the legitimacy of positive discrimination, and so on). The ultimate aim of the sessions is to boost the confidence and academic aspirations of the students so that they are more likely to apply to strive to go to university and are more ambitious in their applications.

Cain has now completed a first year of working at Highcrest and has had extensive debriefing conversations with the Assistant Headteacher. On the basis of interviewing the students involved in the Philosophical Enquiry sessions she has concluded that significant positive benefit has taken place for those involved. All of the students have been stimulated by the sessions and this has led to a general rise in intellectual confidence, the ability to reason logically, and the capacity to engage in independent learning. In addition, the sessions have had a transforming effect on a number of students who had been identified by the school as highly able but underachieving due to a lack of confidence. These students are now firmly committed to applying to go to University, something that they hadn't previously envisaged doing. As a result of the success of the Philosophical Enquiry sessions this academic year Highcrest have invited Cain to continue the sessions next academic year with a broader range of students and view the sessions as an important element of their drive to increase the proportion of their students who go to University.

In addition to the work with Highcrest Academy, Cain and Boulter have built a relationship with a second school, namely Chenderit School in Banbury. For the past two academic years the head of Philosophy at Chenderit school, has brought a group of 15 A Level Philosophy students on an

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annual day-trip to Brookes where they have engaged in a Philosophical Enquiry session lead by Boulter; the enquiry sessions are underpinned by Boulter's metaphilosophy in that they explore tensions in the world view of the students that have real life implications through their relation to issues of individual responsibility, fairness, moral conflict, pluralism, social inequality, and so on. As a result of the success of these sessions in boosting the engagement and intellectual confidence of the Chenderit students, Philosophical Enquiry has been incorporated into the Chenderit approach to teaching Philosophy at A level.

The success of this has led Chenderit, under the instigation of Head of Philosophy, to initiate a project of using Philosophical Enquiry throughout the school (beginning with year 7 students) to boost the capacity for reasoning and independence of thought of all students that aims to address Chenderit's concern that many of its students are not fully fledged independent learners operating with enquiring minds Chenderit have invited Cain and Boulter to collaborate on this project and they have met with school representatives to devise a syllabus which will be implemented from September 2013 and Cain will work with the school in supervising the project and will lead some of the sessions.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

REF panel to contact Highcrest Academy and Chenderit School for corroboration of impact. The relevant contacts are:

- Corroborating contact 1. Assistant Headteacher at The Highcrest Academy
- Corroborating contact 2. Head of Philosophy at Chenderit School.