

Why Philosophy with Children?

In Clackmannanshire (Central Scotland), a programme is underway to introduce a philosophy programme for eight to eleven year olds in every primary school in the Authority. A detailed study is underway to monitor its effectiveness, but already the anecdotal evidence is good. Teachers have talked about the quality of writing improving as dialogue has developed; of noticing changes in the class ethos. In one class containing a child with major behavioural problems, the teacher reported that the class were beginning to discipline the child, by letting her know what was and wasn't acceptable to them! Another girl out for a walk with her father spoke of starting a dialogue with him on the nature of beauty. This was not in a leafy suburb, but in an area of high unemployment and deprivation. The same programme is starting in a group of Nottinghamshire schools in September 2002.

When people are first introduced to the idea of philosophy with children they are often dismissive. What is the point of teaching children philosophy when the curriculum is already overcrowded, and to what purpose? They envisage lessons on existentialism, or the life and thoughts of Schopenhauer. The first point to make therefore, is that this is practical philosophy – it is about the process, not the teaching of facts. We are not interested in facts about Kant, Wittgenstein, or even Socrates, but we are interested in the process of exploring philosophical questions through Socratic questioning. It is the dialogue that is important!

Raising pupil attainment is something that is currently of high political profile, and consequently in a climate of constant testing and league tables, is never far from the consciousness of either individual teachers or school managers. Raising attainment has been described as requiring effective teaching,

and tackling the barriers to learning. These will depend on at least four factors:

- The extent to which early years experiential deficits are analysed and addressed;
- The extent to which there is a focus on the processes of learning and teaching;
- The extent to which learning and teaching is harmonised with the way in which the brain works;
- **The extent to which children are supported and challenged to think for themselves.**

In terms of raising pupil attainment, these might be looked upon as something like the tiers of a wedding cake, with each level somewhat dependant on the others. Also, however, it should be realised that attainment can only be raised to a certain level with each strategy. Therefore for each child to reach full potential, the final level of developing improved thinking skills must be accessed, and this is where a 'philosophy with children' programme is of great benefit.

It was earlier stated that the crux of such a programme is dialogue (or dialectic to use the Socratic term). This is much more than mere conversation, and offers the exciting possibility that ones own ideas and perceptions may change in the process. To use the jargon, this process begins to develop a 'community of enquiry', wherein teacher and pupils learn and develop together. Following the introduction of a stimulus such as a story or poem, philosophical questions are formulated from which the dialogue is derived. The key to developing good dialogue is the skill of the 'facilitator' in asking good, open-ended questions and encouraging the children to develop the same. These will include such questions as:-

- Can you say more about that?
- What makes you say that?
- Do you have any evidence for that view?
- How do you know that?

- Why? Why? Why?
- Is it possible to know if that is true?
- Does anyone else support that view?
- If.....then what do you think about.....? and so on.

It is through this process of dialogue that many things begin to take place:-

Thinking skills are developed. These include :

1. Information Handling – processing skills about analysing, interpreting, locating.
2. Enquiry – Posing and defining problems, planning, predicting, testing conclusions.
3. Reasoning – giving reasons for opinions, making deductions, making judgements informed by evidence.
4. Creative Thinking – generating ideas, being imaginative in thinking, being innovative.
5. Evaluation – evaluating what is read or heard, developing criteria for judging.

In the next ten to fifteen years, one of the effects of globalisation will be that economies will become more and more knowledge based. If we don't have young people who can think well, the effect will be felt across the whole country, besides which those young people will not have been allowed to reach their full potential. It is vital that our education system begins to not only *allow* children to think, but *teaches* them to think. We spend so much effort teaching children the content of the subjects but don't actually teach them how to think, how to learn. If we don't change that, it will have tragic consequences. So, we must give children *time to think*, we must *teach them to think*, and we must *challenge them to think!* Philosophy plays a big part in this.

Life, of course, is not only about the economic well-being of the individual or the community, and this brings us to the second

great strength of a ‘philosophy with children’ programme - it develops and strengthens the emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman (‘Emotional Intelligence’, ‘Working with Emotional Intelligence’) quotes studies that show that a youngsters life chances are at least as much affected by emotional intelligence (EQ), as they are by IQ.

These intelligences include :

1. Self-Awareness – knowing how/what you are feeling and how it impinges on your work, having a realistic awareness of ones abilities.
2. Self-Regulation – Handling emotions so they facilitate the task in hand, being conscientious.
3. Motivation – knowing what motivates us, persevering in the face of set-backs, striving to improve.
4. Empathy – Sensing what other people are feeling, using that information in our dealings with them, being able to have a rapport with a wide range of people.
5. Social Skills – reading social situations, using skills to persuade, lead, negotiate.

As parents, as a society, we are not only concerned about how smart our children are, but *what kind of people* they grow up to be. When children explore moral and ethical questions, and look at different values in the philosophy programme, they begin explore their own ideas, thoughts, behaviours – and there opens up the possibility of even seeing the causes for these. This is a very empowering process because it brings the youngster to a point where *choice* is possible instead of habitual behaviour. This is *real* learning. It begins to have an effect on the whole community, whether that community is a family, a class, a school, or indeed society itself. For example, how do we get a just society? Imposing rules (laws) from the outside doesn’t seem to work too well! It is better when the regulation comes from the ‘inside’, with each citizen being self-regulated through having the self-knowledge to make informed choices! Teaching about citizenship is also politically high profile at the moment – how much better when it is not just another set of facts, but part

of a process of *discovering* what it is like to be a citizen!
Philosophy can play a powerful role in this.

The third main strength of the philosophy programme is that it develops Spiritual Intelligence (SQ).

This includes :

1. Having vision and values.
2. Seeing holistically – that is seeing the unity of things around us.
3. Being ‘field independent’ – being able to work against convention
4. Spontaneously Adaptive – Being able to learn as situations are developing and use that information to affect the situation.

This aspect is seen as being further along the spectrum from emotional intelligence. It is about knowledge of myself, not as a collection of attributes, but in essence. Not myself, but my Self – that which I am.

As Chief Seattle, a Suquamish chief, said in 1854, “The earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that connects us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

Hopefully we can all move towards being as spiritually intelligent as he was!

As very young children begin to explore the world around them they touch, smell, and even taste everything and anything they can get their hands on. As they move into the world of language they begin to ask questions about everything - why, why, why... There is a natural spirit of enquiry that seeks to know ‘What is this creation and what is my relationship to it?’ Little philosophers abound! Unfortunately, in most cases this natural curiosity is largely knocked out of them by being ignored or told not to ask silly questions! The philosophy programme with children seeks to restore what is in fact absolutely natural, and

build on this as cognitive development allows - then a 'community of enquiry' is born! In this, children learn about the process of learning, and also about themselves as learners.

Besides pupil development, the process helps create powerful professionals who can naturally transfer the method to other curricular areas. Again, it is about the process of learning, not One sees that that a 'philosophy with children' programme strengthens and develops the cognitive abilities and emotional literacy. It is a very powerful vehicle which empowers youngsters to become better learners and 'better', more fulfilled people.

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