

Marcelo Staricoff argues for a philosophical approach to the primary curriculum

One of the greatest accolades I ever received happened when an excited year 1 child shouted: 'Here comes the philosophy man!' as I approached his classroom for a weekly philosophy session. It is the inspiration behind the approach described in this article.

Children are born philosophical – their pre-school years are bathed in wonder. They have an inquisitive approach to their surroundings. As they start school, they bring all this with them. The Foundation stage provides a fantastic platform for children's inquisitiveness to be nurtured and developed. There are three main components to the approach I am suggesting.

Here comes the philosophy man!



Philosophising the learning environment

The learning environment is very important. Children should be encouraged to feel that they are all working within and helping to create a philosophical classroom. Permanent displays of children's questions, MindMaps and lists of positive dispositions are always prominent. A table of children's own thinking skills books, including a wonderful collection of philosophical texts, are freely available for them to access at all times.

As soon as the children enter my classroom in the morning, they are greeted by classical music and a 'thinking skills starter' (Staricoff and Rees, 2003; Staricoff and Rees, 2005). The 'starter' is presented in different ways according to the age of the children. It may be on the board or on cards for children to write about. With young children, starters are introduced verbally and then discussed, rather than written about. The starters are designed to inspire thinking and allow children to philosophise and play with their thoughts, feelings and opinions. Starters cover a range of curriculum areas and are presented as fun, challenging, appealing and accessible to all.

As part of their thinking skills toolbox, all children are given a pack of Post-it notes at the beginning of the year. Every time a child has a thought or a question, instead of interrupting the teaching and learning process, they place their Post-it with their thoughts on the dedicated area on the whiteboard, knowing that it will be addressed at the nearest convenient time. These have ranged from 'Do we exist?' to 'How do babies happen?' The former one led to fantastic discussion, but unfortunately I was not able to expand on the latter as the children were only in year 4!

Philosophising the curriculum

I aim to deliver the curriculum in a classroom atmosphere based upon discussion, open dialogue, critical thinking and questioning – all representing transferable skills promoted and developed during philosophical enquiry. Written work is preceded by the date, the title and the lesson objective or TLP (Today's Learning Point). The TLP is generated in conjunction with the children and takes the form of a question, very often a philosophical one: 'What is time?' (Connected to learning to tell the time.) 'Do shadows exist?' (Connected to learning about light.)

These questions invariably lead to purposeful discussion and dialogue even before the main body of the lesson is presented, giving children the feeling that they have a say in driving and personalising the teaching and learning process and the teacher the opportunity to explore unexpected but relevant avenues. Success criteria for the TLP are then discussed and negotiated as a whole class, making sure that everyone feels able to succeed. Once the work is completed, the children add a TIL (Today I Learnt)

comment, which gives them the opportunity to reflect upon their learning, make connections in their learning, or discuss any difficulties on a one-to-one basis with the teacher. TILs are also very often philosophical: 'Today I learnt to tell the time, but I am not sure it exists.' or 'Today I learnt the names and properties of 2-D shapes, but I don't think they exist.' Enrichment is a key component of all lessons and this can take the form of an open-ended task designed to motivate the children by applying the TLP of the lesson in a different context. Alternatively, children are given the opportunity to act as 'teachers'. I believe that being able to explain a concept to a friend is a very powerful means of ensuring that one has grasped a particular concept.

Philosophy also equips children with a means of structuring their thinking by allowing them to construct coherent arguments in their minds. This process can be mediated to children using tools such as MindMaps and Concept Lines (Murriss and Haynes, 2000). Once explained, these become tools children can use to direct their own learning.

Through MindMapping, the children are able to organise their thinking about a topic, a person, a place, or a concept in a visual way. This invariably leads them to make connections that they wouldn't have otherwise made. The hierarchical nature of the branches of the MindMaps also allows children to rank and question their connections. MindMapping is a useful tool for note taking, story planning and character sketching.

Concept Lines are actual lines (often pieces of string) that represent a continuum and have opposite attributes at either end. Concept Lines are excellent vehicles for taking away the worry of being right or wrong and for allowing personal opinions and feelings to be expressed – as long as children are able to justify why they have placed their characters, thoughts, feelings or opinions in particular places on the line. For example, one could have children place the character of Little Red Riding Hood on a line with *very intelligent* at one extreme and *not at all intelligent* at the other. It is fascinating listening to children justifying their choices.

Philosophising the extra-curriculum

I really like expressing my feelings in philosophy and trying to change other people's points of views. (Eva) I really like philosophy as it is the only time that people feel they can say what they really think. (Marianne) I love the philosophical homework – it lets me present it in any way I like. (Bonnie)

I feel that it is very important to develop a culture in schools where the staff and the children are encouraged to take risks. Nothing illustrates this better than the hourly

Publication Preview

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