



Kant in the classroom

Why children should study philosophy alongside maths and English

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Should a school spend time teaching young children philosophy? Aristotle thought not. He argued that the young lacked capacity and life experience and were too preoccupied following 'passions' to seek knowledge. But then again, Aristotle thought the earth was at the centre of the universe, so what did he know?

I can appreciate, however, why many would share Aristotle's doubts. Isn't philosophy too difficult for children? Yet you will be familiar with plenty of philosophically sounding questions from your children: 'Why are we here?' 'Where do we go?' 'Why is my brother more important than

my dog?' Children are naturally curious and want to query how the world works. But does this add up to philosophy? Can teachers structure these rogue questions into meaningful lessons that help them learn?

The academic benefits of teaching children philosophy can be enormous

In my experience, yes, they can, but the subject has to be approached in a certain way. As Peter Worley of the Philosophy Foundation charity points out, philosophy has to be done through conversation because it requires a

response. And given children's level of understanding of the world they need a group to challenge and bounce ideas off. To expect them to reflect in isolation is asking a bit much. Only as they grow up will they develop an ability to internalise conversations and flesh them out critically in their own minds.

The academic benefits of teaching children philosophy can be enormous. Group discussion encourages children to learn how to express and convey their thoughts as well as learning to respect the differing opinions of others. As they consider the alternative views of their classmates they learn how to



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become more open minded and to solve disagreements reasonably.

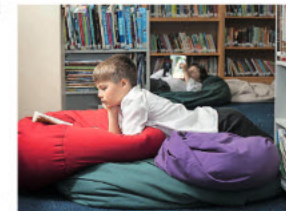
Young philosophers also become very adept at analysing ideas and spotting the holes in theories that don't hold up. Encountering a multitude of possible answers to questions encourages children to think in a different way, beyond things being accepted as simply 'right' or 'wrong'. Philosophy nurtures in youngsters the art of listening, of assessing the validity of what has been said and developing an argument to support a position one might hold. These abilities, if taught well, endure throughout life and long after school.

Some parents might think philosophy is too tangential to the core curriculum or too indulgent. Yet at its core, philosophy is about developing rational thought - the ability to think through a problem following a logical series of steps,



which underpins learning across all subjects, from maths to comprehension. Indeed, according to the Education Endowment Foundation, a year of philosophy results in pupils making two-month's additional progress in maths and reading.

Others may be concerned that grappling with issues such as death, inequality and injustice are too daunting for young children. In my experience the opposite is the case. Children are already aware of these questions; structuring them into a lesson creates a safe environment in which they can be tackled. I'd even go further - introducing philosophy at a young age helps children develop their moral compasses because it



encourages honesty and integrity and leads them to consider the effects of their actions. It acts, too, as a sound basis for democratic, civic values because it encourages young citizens to critically assess arguments and yet to tolerate and respect difference.

Bertrand Russell once pointed out that people generally tend to avoid philosophising and the difficult questions of life: 'Most people would rather die than think; many do.' Looking around my class of eager young philosophers, I know that fate will never befall them. When Aristotle got it wrong, he really got it wrong. ■

Brodie Bibby is Head of North Bridge House Preparatory school, part of Cognita which has some 70 schools in the UK and abroad. See more at www.northbridgeschool.co.uk