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# Philosophy 4 Skool

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*The Philosophical Society of England has advocated both the use of philosophical material (and, perhaps more importantly, philosophical methods) in schools since the 1930s. When Mr Lipmann was just a lad in short trousers, we were pondering Bernard Youngman's 1952 assessment of the task of a philosophical education, a task he based on Bible study and saw in typically Platonist terms as bringing children towards the light of knowledge of the good. Mind you, he observed:*

*... In **Ecclesiastes** there is bitterness and cynicism enough to challenge any adolescent; there is clearly an attitude of sheer materialism, and the writer is devastatingly frank in his statements God, he says, is far away, and not interested in the world or the people in it; He allows evil to flourish all is vanity! Man is just the victim of chance and time. But, he adds, have a good time while the going is good. Here is an almost modern pessimism, and a small dose of this philosophy is probably quite sufficient for the average adolescent.*

*But here, in 2003, with contemporary experience of teaching in 21st century London, is a teacher both with a welcome restatement of the value of the 'Socratic method' and a wider lesson for all in education ...*

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One of the problems with schools is that it is quite artificial to put lots of children together into a room with one adult to keep order. If you think about previous societies, or even the heavy industries of the Twentieth Century, one or two young people were put with an older person, in places like shipyards or factories. Otherwise, as my Dad put it once, nothing got done as they would talk, laugh and mess about all day. The problem was perhaps that they would try to become fully human, rather than industrial workers.

But discussion and talk is natural to children. The main task for a teacher is quite simply, directing it. 'Lets listen to what so-and-so has to say, after all they have had to sit and listen to us all this time' and so on. Another danger every teacher is aware of is that children and teenagers often become over-excited and it can rapidly become a babble like a market place. Even so, according to something I read somewhere, perhaps it was in *New Scientist*, the act of repressing your own instinct to speak, and listening to someone else before answering, actually enhances the growth of neural pathways in the brain. In other words, shut up and listen.

I first became interested in discussion work with teenagers in what's known (in the education business) as an EBD unit in Bow, East London. EBD stands for Emotional and Behavioural Disorder. The definition I've heard of this is that when they are upset, EBD pupils throw the chairs and tables about: if they like you, they aim to miss. I've worked in other schools, ranging from the crowd of street-wise girls and boys at a Turkish Cypriot Saturday

School taking GCSE English Booster classes, to all-boy classes at fee-paying schools, and I've known some pretty rough situations - but this is actually the best definition. It was my role to be Head of English in this place.

These children found it difficult to focus on anything for very long, so you would have a little chat about things and people, every five minutes or so: in between banging on about Julius Caesar or something. This calmed them, and made them happier. There were big gaps though, where peoples lives were so painful that they really did not want to discuss them at all.

After a time though, they became more used to me, and me to them. Then we started using more complex ideas- jokes as well. But really discussion was quite limited to the here and now, what was on television- football news, that kind of thing. However, when the Science teacher was off sick, the biggest breakthrough came when I discovered that they were quite interested in simple science and some of the ideas that were counter-intuitive, like the range of the electromagnetic spectrum - and more unusual suggestions, such as magnetism being the energy leaking into out world from other universes. They would go quiet and consider this for some time, asking intelligent questions which I used to have to research to give them the answers.

I started to consider the possibility of taking a course at College in something related to this, something to do with teaching philosophy... my ideas were so vague that, in search of ideas, I went to see a Professor Adey at Kings College in London University. It was someone who I had read about arguing that active discussion and speculation enhanced neural connections in the brain.

Philip Adey was indeed very helpful and

explained his work was part of a UK government funded 'accelerated learning' project, talking about his ideas of cognitive acceleration, and what he called 'teaching intelligence'.

I don't know what was attractive to the government about 'CASE', that is Cognitive Acceleration through Science Education, but certainly what attracted me was that this was all to be done, essentially, through discussion.

I next had a job nearer home. This was at the other end of the social spectrum. When I was interviewed, one of the panel said: 'Don't think that this will be easy just because it is outside London, Mr Brett Some of the children can be quite short with you.' Meaning, I deduced, that they sometimes neglected to say 'Good Morning'. Gosh! This still made a welcome change from disarming boys with chisels and Stanley knives.

Philosophy in our school grew out of discussion groups. I was still thinking about 'Cognitive Acceleration', and the University of London ideas but also about the far older 'Socratic' tradition of stimulating ideas through questioning and open debate. In any case, I started using discussion topic books in school - especially Martin Cohen's *101 Philosophy Problems* and recently the *101 Ethical Dilemmas* [No really, he was! - *Ed.*] as well as texts like *Introducing Plato*. This last, for example, has Plato's main ideas laid out in comic strip and was immediately very popular. The children liked the approach, and seemed to sense that it was helping them in other areas. Soon I had two classes that started before regular school, from eight to eight-thirty on Wednesday and Friday mornings, and an hours session in the 'graveyard slot', the one hour after the end of school at 3.45 on a Friday.

It's a loose translation from the Attic

Greek, but I recalled before coming back after the break- a journalist on History Channel had said, 'Plato thought that people only used their brains when they were in trouble. He wanted people to think for the pleasure of it.' (Then a cartoon elephant tried to sell me cheap car insurance.) I wanted to disprove that.

So one day I brought up the idea of Plato's Forms, and would 2 plus 2 still equal 4 if the Universe ceased to exist? Children like big ideas and they like unusual ones. There is a kind of fantasy novel element to Plato- especially the idea of the perfect Chair: everyone enjoyed the concept of chairness, calculatormess, and so forth. Perhaps surprisingly, this became a source of lively interest, so much so that I went off to look for a Philosophy exam for which we could aim. This would help me teach, as wiser heads would have devised a suitable curriculum, and my BA is in English.

There was no such thing as a Philosophy GCSE for sixteen year olds, and there still isn't. But I found the AQA exam board did an A/S level (normally taken at 17 prior to the final school exams at 18) that was broken into three main chunks. Nowadays too, the good news is the new International Baccalaureate, that is beginning to replace A-levels in some (predominantly but not exclusively private) schools, contains a whacking 144 hours of taught philosophy.

I remember thinking that the Marx and Engels component would have made the basis of a brilliant film, where children study the AQA materials, then seize control of the school, and imprison the head, telling him its nothing personal but just an aspect of a process that is historically inevitable. However, to avoid parental problems we went with Plato's *Republic*- a book that advocates society being run by a narrow elite. Well that avoids controversy.

And Plato's Theories of Knowledge, his

cosmology and ideas about transmigration excite a lot of interest with 11 year olds, every year. It also made a big hit with one of the Hindu kids.

In *101 Philosophy Problems*, there are several scenarios concerned essentially with 'economic values', and the mysteries of how things come to have them. This is the theme that made Adam Smith's famous book the *Wealth of Nations* not only popular with Mrs Thatcher, but the biggest selling book of its time. Anyway, the middle class kids I was teaching were very interested in the concepts of what might be called 'valorisation' (although it is a horrible word) stamps and potatoes. What gives anything value... and rudimentary economics.

The awareness and discovery of other ways of thinking, and the other worlds they represent can be one of the most exciting aspects of a philosophy course. The children often comment on the science fiction, fantasy nature of some of the ideas, and how interesting they are. For some time, they were interested in 'modal realism' and the idea of a plurality of other worlds. Plato's Forms, however, gained the most admiration, I would say. One of the most academic boys I have had in my philosophy classes, who gained a scholarship to an elite fee-paying school later on, hotly defended the idea of the Forms existing, something which caught me somewhat by surprise.

But children, both middle class English and less privileged Turkish Cypriot kids are interested in ethics - like all children. They just sometimes have difficulty accepting the possibility that sometimes bad things just happen - and no-one's responsible, in even the broadest sense. Teasing the issue, I asked one group whether, if a meteorite hit me right now, through the window - would that also be someone's fault? If so, would it be the builder's ...or mine? A

bright Cypriot girl was more adamant about this need for someone to be at fault than anyone I have ever taught. Amazingly so. Perhaps this is because it is reassuring to think that the world could be perfect if everyone just did the right thing...

Young people are more idealistic than ignorant. Martin Cohen gives an account of a 'Modern Day Good Samaritan', as one of his *Ethical Dilemmas*. The Samaritan in this case is a driver who gets set upon by thieves as he stops on a deserted road to help someone in a broken down car. The Cypriot teenagers identified - at once - that the issues were 'divided' by a sense of risk to the second person that wasn't immediately apparent in the Bible version.... or if it is there, we don't recognise it as the society is so alien.

The book also includes a series of dilemmas based on murder cases, such as the teenagers who plotted a 'motiveless' killing, because, or so their attorney said, they had been misled by Nietzsche books. (They got off with 'manslaughter'.) All the children were very interested in that!

A spin off from our discussion - somehow from the Good Samaritan. though I don't know how we got there - was sexual ethics: would you marry someone for money - or would you marry someone who was less intelligent than you... or taller/ shorter/ older (depending on what sex you are) - or another race or ...? That kept us going for hours

Across the age ranges -and social groups- the length of examples and size of vocabulary can be a problem, and I find I need to simplify the English - and *precis* examples, even in relatively short 'one pagers' such as in the *101* books. No great surprises there.

Parents said that Freddie was coming home full of new ideas, talking in a much more

grown up - and enthusiastic way- and noted improvements across the curriculum.

This kind of all-round improvement resulting from active discussion had been something Phillip Adey had told me to expect, from the evidence of his project. But for me there were many further benefits, for instance, when children learn about Plato, Aristotle and philosophy in the wider sense, they are also being reconnected to their cultural *milieu*. I would argue one of the problems of schools today is the alienation of children not only from the education system, their homes, and families, but from their broader social and cultural context. Philosophy and discussion works in the opposite way - it connects you to other people and streams of ideas that have influenced cultural life for some time. It connects children to their own history and culture.

The Turkish Cypriot school is quite militant about this. Any philosophy taught there has to be secular and Western - in the Ataturkist tradition. When I showed them some Islamic texts that seemed to presage ideas of Forms that otherwise are generally assumed to originate with Plato, (my aim being to show that an advanced level Philosophy course need not have a narrowly Western flavour) they were on the contrary very keen that I should stress the Western and secular nature of philosophy and discussion.

But another gain from Philosophy in Schools is in the use and understanding of language itself. Indeed, the understandings are quite deep. Children are introduced to the sociology of ideas, they consider not only what people think, but what influences what them. For example, that Shakespeare lived in a world where God talked to people through dreams and omens, and people believed in ghosts. This presents quite a different Shakespeare, to the one unreflectively presumed otherwise.

In fact, Neo-Platonism was enormously influential in the same period, and knowing about this enables quite young children to identify with people from such a different epoch. They can begin to empathise with what might otherwise seem quite a strange and alien world of unfathomable thoughts and acts. Philosophy in this way broadens them as people, and makes them aware of 'parallel worlds' where not everyone drives to supermarkets in 4-wheel drive Jeeps or watches telly.

Of course, I should say there is a certain amount of snobbery here, which was quite helpful, in that Philosophy as a word raised the status of the discussion groups, particularly when there was an examination at the end of it, and a qualification that could well assist someone's career.

In any case, I was enormously pleased when two of my class that I had entered for the exam - both aged 13- passed with a D. It is normal for seventeen year olds to get a C.

The following year, I entered a further twelve candidates, and this September I'm intending to start teaching the entire two year A/S course on a rolling basis. This will include Epistemology and Ethics. In other words, you can leave our school aged 12 or 13 with an A/S level, which makes you look pretty good. You know how to discuss, you have a much wider vocabulary, you know how to write a formal essay - you know the Greek roots of many English words. You enjoy talking and thinking!

This last paragraph looks like these children are being crammed. Nothing could be further from the truth. Philosophy is an enormously popular option with these classes. They come up to me, and say how much they are looking forward to getting to school half an hour early - in the winter! To

do this course, I don't have to chase anyone.

Students email me at home, regularly. They ask me intelligent questions about thought and knowledge in general, and Plato in particular. On the day of the exam, a mother commented how wonderful and unusual it was to see a crowd of a dozen boys energetically discussing Plato, rather than Warhammer or some other computer game.

And this is not just for clever children - not just for the gifted and talented. School students of average ability - or less - who pass a section of this exam, gain self-respect and confidence as a result. I have taught some who have excelled at nothing at school, yet blossomed as a result of discovering and manipulating new concepts - and the experience of walking into an exam hall with kids who are years older than themselves. It gives them a real lift and sense of achievement. It seems as if they discover a new interest in the power of language and the imagination, in looking at strange other worlds - like Plato's *Republic*. One boy said Plato's Realm of Forms reminded him of *Discworld*.

If any other teachers would like to know more about introducing Philosophy in school please contact me. But if you are already teaching philosophy, and have some great resources I can plunder, please also get in touch - and send them to me!

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*and experiences of 'Philosophy in Skool' to  
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