

Page Scholarship Visit to Montclair University on Philosophy for Children.

What is philosophy and how can it be done with very young children?

Philosophy is the cultivation of excellent thinking and enquiry into the meaning of puzzling and contestable concepts. Considering reasons, developing criteria and making sound ethical judgments all play a part, as does searching for evidence, building argument and counter argument. The interactive involvement of children in dialogue at this level is captivating and something every child deserves to experience.

I have been practicing it for several years in Kirkcaldy West Primary School in Fife and, more recently, have built a network of teachers, most predominantly primary-based who also use it. Inextricably linked to formative assessment, it has inspired colleagues and motivated whole school development, not to mention the multiple and numerous benefits for children.

Through the Page Scholarship, it was my privilege to travel to the IAPC (The Institute for the Advancement for Philosophy for Children), the home of philosophy, at Montclair State University.

Montclair State University is a big, sprawling campus with the IAPC located, almost fittingly, in a small fairy-tale like house just on the outskirts. Here, Matthew Lipman, the creator of the Philosophy for Children movement, by his own admission, still comes into work seven days a week. The programme director, Professor Maughn Gregory and his dedicated team work tirelessly in promoting a programme that has been translated into 40 languages and is used in 60 countries across the world. Even more so in this 30th Anniversary year it would seem, which will be celebrated at Mendham early in November.

Here other people, who have contributed so largely to the creation of the programme, continue to write, create, teach and inspire. Doctorate students, whilst majoring in philosophy for children approach with either specialism in philosophy itself or pedagogy, go out to work with classes of school children in neighbouring communities or teach it within Gifted and Talented programmes. A busy schedule of visiting scholars is also underway and a large contingent from England is due to collaborate with Livingston schools in spring next year. Class teachers can undertake specific training in philosophy and follow this through to Masters level.

The IAPC philosophy for children programme was of interest because its approach is different to that used in Britain. Written materials have philosophical issues cleverly interwoven, relating to the age and life experiences of the children within a specifically created text. These readers engage children in exploring the philosophical dimensions of their experience, paying particular

attention to logical, ethical and aesthetic aspects through a series of novels and accompanying teacher manuals. The manuals highlight relevant themes, giving the facilitator ideas for further development and exploration. The earliest reader, written specifically for six year olds, is 'Elfie', which helps children formulate questions, explore language and enquire about puzzling or problematic aspects of their lives. Other readers follow, each one having a specific developmental focus, all the way through to secondary school materials using 'Mark', which develops reasoning in social studies. Materials for nursery age children are at the draft stage and being trialed in neighbouring schools and although I was unable to observe this first hand, I was fortunate enough to speak to staff about to use them. Another resource, written by Ann Margaret Sharp, who I was lucky enough to have for a Value Enquiry Class, is 'Doll Hospital'. This is written for the equivalent of our Primary 1 and in Ann's class we had a fascinating exploration of the book and potential issues that could arise.

I was fortunate enough to visit five classes in schools all about to start philosophy for the new session. Variations in form of delivery was observed: whole classes involvement, in other schools, children expressed a desire to do philosophy, opting out of regular classes and in yet another instance, children were gathered by virtue of their involvement with the gifted and talented programme. In each case a graduate philosophy student supported the facilitator or class teacher. All sessions started with discussion: sometimes about what philosophy is, about ground rules or the adventure lying ahead, but all with enthusiasm and vitality. Some groups progressed to the reader itself and, with everyone having been issued with a copy, each person in the obligatory circle, reads a sentence to complete a short extract of text. Children then are encouraged to develop individual questions about concepts embedded in the text. You know, the stuff that inspires wonder and curiosity that many of us feel well into adulthood, but feel obliged to repress in the speed of today's existence. And so the adventure begins. . . .

Even children embarking on such a journey for the first time, as these all were, showed such astounding depth of thought, worked respectfully together and were able to give reasons for their thinking.

Truly awe-inspiring.

The programme is not as dramatically different as expected and Maughn Gregory sees it as a structure for good practice with sufficient leeway for using other stimuli. Certainly the materials provide a very strong framework for anyone new to philosophy and a plethora of exercises for skill development. Working alongside a graduate student also seems another way of providing and incorporating philosophical support.

One thing does strike me as being pretty different - the smaller number of children participating in philosophy groups. Two of the observed classes were located in a private school, which had much smaller numbers anyway and the

others were either self selected or by virtue of inclusion in a gifted and talented programme. Here in Scotland, all children in a class participate, which doing a quick PMI (Positive, Minus, Interesting) appears to work in our favour, in my opinion. My reasons are that despite larger numbers rendering it more problematic to have enough time to hear everyone, it does expose all children to appropriate strategies, very often with startling results, as it can reveal children who are capable of high order thinking and reasoning who would previously have gone unnoticed. Everyone involved does have opportunities to internalise strategies and exposure to such a wide range of opinion is beneficial. Recent knowledge about the plasticity and potential for growth every brain has, surely means that every child in school deserves to be exposed to the type of mental gymnastics that philosophy brings, not just those in Gifted and Talented programmes, although they most definitely have specific needs.

This leaves me quite heartened at the place we find ourselves in Scotland. In many respects, certainly in terms of teacher training, we are doing really well and as for school implementation, we remain outstandingly good, especially when we bear in mind that our exposure has only been over a minimal time scale.

Whilst at Montclair, I was also lucky enough to join a Socrates Café adult philosophy session with Chris Phillips. Chris studied both philosophy and philosophy for children at Montclair and has gone on to promote it all over the world, through Socrates Café. These are held in various venues and provide the homeless, the repressed and deprived, among others, with a forum for expressing their views. There are 250 branches of Socrates Café worldwide and Chris hopes to come to Scotland soon.

A doctoral literature review class was also useful and reminded me what lies in store through my scholarship with Strathclyde University. I now know the difference between social and cognitive constructivism and am reading 'Is Epistemology consistent Across Disciplines?' Watch this space for conclusions!!

Certainly the visit has helped me return with new ideas and renewed enthusiasm for philosophy. The people who will ultimately benefit are the children I work with in my own school and beyond. Also those inspirational people in the network who already work with philosophy in schools across Fife. I do hope this is all somewhat reassuring too for SAPERE in Britain to know that we are doing a great job, which will only increase as philosophy gains greater credibility in increasing the caring, creative, collaborative and critical thinking that is so essential for lifelong learning and in adapting to the challenges and changes that may lie ahead.

I owe a debt of gratitude not only to the EIS, but also to Fife and, of course, my school for making the visit possible. The friends I made at the IAPC I can never repay in terms of their kindness and sincerity. Maughn Gregory and Megan

Laverty for being impeccable hosts, doctoral students, Maria and Nathan, for ferrying me to and from schools and having the grace to let me be in their classes. Ann Margaret Sharp for her playful reasoning and allowing me to participate in her Masters class, Maughn for the doctoral work, Joanne for fixing me up with resources - none of this would have been possible without you.

If there's something of interest to you in America, I encourage you to apply for the Page scholarship. It's a fabulous opportunity that can open doors and see you return to Scotland brimming with enthusiasm.

Morag MacInnes
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