

Philosophical enquiry and citizenship education: putting thinking back into practice

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Background

In this paper, we argue for the re-introduction of philosophical enquiry to the process and pedagogy of education. Our argument is set against the perceived decline in interest of young people in matters of social and political significance. We employ the often publicised and much maligned crisis in political literacy to argue in favour of the development of philosophy and general thinking skills, to improve social and political awareness in the young. This, we suggest, will usefully serve to promote a disposition of the mind that is critical of the status of knowledge and further enhance the ability of young people to make responsibly informed judgements on social affairs that directly affect their lives. We argue that previous approaches to the teaching and learning of citizenship education have been largely sterile and ineffective. We contend that productive engagement with philosophy will help to develop a critical, creative and caring mind, as well as foster an empathic disposition in young people and in their relationships with those around them. Thus, we suggest that citizenship education recast as philosophical enquiry may be usefully appropriated to (re)formulate the character of young people and further promote their freedom to think rationally and autonomously as critically informed citizens.

Research Questions

Our ideas build upon the introduction to the National Curriculum of 'the systematic teaching of thinking skills' (DfES, 1997: 39) and more recent initiatives that focus on the development of critical thinking in primary education (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/thinkingskills/guidance/). Here we focus on developing thinking that more explicitly addresses the value of philosophical enquiry in the secondary phase (Burden and Nichols, 2000), and suggest that opportunities for improved dialogue and reciprocal questioning (and most importantly - listening) may usefully promote engagement with contemporary issues of citizenship, identity and diversity (Ajegbo et al., 2007). Through philosophical reasoning, we suggest that current affairs may be linked more robustly to the existing framework of citizenship education, as a relevant context for development. Following Leat and Higgins' (2002: 72) notion that 'there is no curriculum development without teacher development', a central aspect of our argument is that teachers must be open to embrace risk in the process of improving their own philosophical skills and propensity to reason cognitively. Indeed, this may require teachers giving up some of their ability to predict and control (Leat and Higgins, 2002: 80) in the process of recognising that 'reciprocal questioning promotes high quality talk and interaction'. Thus, learning should become a two-way process.

Methods

The re-introduction of philosophical enquiry to the context of citizenship education draws its inspiration from the early work of Lipman (1991: 15), in which philosophy for children (P4C) was seen as a way of 'converting the classroom into a community of enquiry', to develop different modes of thinking: critical, creative and caring. The notion of philosophical enquiry as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) may be usefully applied to the context of learning conceived as social practice (Hodkinson and James, 2003). Thus, in contrast with policy notions of performativity and human capital theory (Walker, 2008), we suggest that a move to develop a whole school approach to philosophy will serve to enhance teachers' and students' recognition of the value of individual growth and human development in the widest sense. In Dewey's (1916) terms this will usefully facilitate a form of democracy, not as a top-down form of government per se, but as a way of life that is intrinsic to the process of learning as a social endeavour. Inspired from the bottom-up, we suggest this further allows the process of learning and teaching to develop as a form of critical pedagogy (Friere, 1970;

hooks, 1994), where philosophical enquiry becomes a means to developing critical, caring and creative human beings (Lipman, 1991).

Frame

Our paper will not present empirical research but rather the first stage in our preparation of a research proposal. In this paper our analytical frame can be broadly defined as philosophical (we intend practising what we preach) and in our future proposal we will adopt a form of 'action research' which relies heavily on the continued process of reflection which is again compatible with philosophising. Reflecting allows us and others to consider how our methodology has been implemented and allows for ongoing change so as to ensure the process is in fact democratic. Our starting point is that philosophy is something everyone can do and there are no right answers.

Practically, we suggest that the development of critical thinking skills, along with a caring disposition, is central to the process of encouraging young people to engage actively with citizenship education. Noting the call of Ajegbo et al (2007: 7-8) that 'issues of identity and diversity are more often than not neglected in Citizenship education ... [and] tend not to be linked explicitly enough to political understanding', we suggest that the purpose of philosophical enquiry is not to 'do' philosophy per se, but rather 'enable the learner to think philosophically' (McGuinness, 1993: 309), in relation to real-life situations. Therefore, an explicit aim is to argue for a dual process of thinking, in which forms of 'meta' and socially shared cognition are fostered in relation to student engagement. At heart, this process aims to promote exploratory talk (Mercer et al, 1999), recognising the need for initial teacher scaffolding (Topping and Tricky, 2007), whilst acknowledging that teachers may also require support to improve their own critical thinking skills and 'confidence to use enquiry in the classroom' (ibid.: 286). Many young people are often considered vulnerable and at risk - in contrast our methodology and analytical frame is distinctly respectful and concerned with a pro-social encounter.

Research findings

We aim to produce a synthesis of previous work in the area of philosophical enquiry and general thinking skills, to examine a range of contemporary social issues, especially those which articulate closely with the fourth strand of citizenship education: identity and diversity. The paper, will appeal to a range of audiences - policy makers, curriculum planners and teaching professionals, to encourage a return to a comprehensive philosophical and political education.