Empowering young minds of the future

Dr Charlotte Blease from Queen's University Belfast argues the case for introducing philosophy more widely into schools – even for the youngest pupils.

WHEN I'm asked what my job is and reply "I'm a philosopher", this is usually met in two ways.

Firstly, people tend to say something along the lines of, "is philosophy when you ask, 'Is a tree really a tree?'", or occasionally, they enquire "you're not going to read my mind are you?"

Perhaps it's my diction in this case but they've confused philosophy with psychology.

Nearly always, however, it's apparent that people think 'doing philosophy' is something of an unnecessary indulgence to be contrasted with 'real' work.

Given that I don't occupy an ivory tower and since I have always strongly believed that everyone should 'do' some philosophy in their lifetime, I'd like to put the record straight.

Recently I decided to take action. I took philosophy outside the university cloister, into school classrooms and adult learning centres. What I discovered only served to reinforce my conviction.

Before I explain, let me clear up the matter of what philosophy is all about. Philosophy means love of wisdom. It is a subject devoted to asking and trying to answer all the big, basic questions.

Philosophers ask: Does God exist? What is the right way to live? Do animals have minds? And how could we know? Is the mind just the brain or is the mind some sort of 'soul' stuff? Does the mind survive after death? What, if anything, is special about science? Is the state ever justified in punishing those who break its laws? What is the nature of a 'just' state?

I could go on. But ask yourself: Are these sorts of questions unnecessary or indulgent? Isn't our ability to reflect on them central to our very knowledge of who we are? In fact, hasn't every one of us dabbled in, or attempted to give an answer to such questions, at one time or another?

Perhaps the problem is that – more often than not – we simply assume answers to these fundamental ques-

French Enlightenment philosopher, Voltaire: "Doubt is not a pleasant condition but certainty is absurd."

Put like this, shouldn't everyone be trained in philosophy? We do a lot of talking in Northern Ireland but not much thinking.

In light of our penchant for partiality, shouldn't philosophy be an educational requisite in NI?

In the last few months I took philosophy into secondary school classrooms and into the adult learning community. During this time I taught (among others) restless teenagers, housewives, school teachers, the unemployed, retired solicitors, a former Presbyterian minister, a former ex-Sinn Fein MLA and even a neuroscientist.

What they all shared was what they all lacked: an appetite for philosophical questions that not been fed before. One retired solicitor bemoaned "the law is just rote learning, as a lawyer I was never trained to ask whether the law is moral or what moral even means".

One school boy hoping to study physics confessed to me he had "no idea what gravity was" and "hadn't realised you could ask such questions".

Yet philosophy is still not a mainstream subject in British and Irish schools. Only those who are lucky

parable on deception.

The children are then encouraged to think about questions that the stimulus provokes.

When they have selected what they consider the most interesting question, the class, as a group, engages in an open-ended discussion.

For example, the topic might be 'do animals feel pain the way we do?' or 'is lying sometimes acceptable?'

Under the teacher's guidance kids are given the chance to put forward their views and to challenge each other; the teacher helps the pupils to spot contradictions, see connections, and understand the deeper implications of their views.

So what? An extensive psychological study run of these weekly class enquiries, run by the University of Dundee, found some truly astonishing results.

After only one hour per week of philosophy over a period of sixteen months, there were highly significant gains in pupils' verbal and even numerical skills.

The percentage of time that pupils spoke in class discussions rose from 41 per cent to 66 per cent.

After only six months there was a doubling in the rate of pupils supporting their views with reasons in class discussion and significant improvements in pupil self-esteem and concentration.

More than this, pupils' emotional and social development was enhanced: psychologists discovered that kids learned to manage their feelings and impulsivity more appropriately. They enjoyed the process of collaborative enquiry.

Perhaps most strikingly of all,

adult open access class, one my regulars declared that "philosophy had changed his life".

Isn't it about time we all indulged in philosophy?

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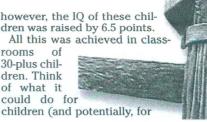
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enough to have been introduced to the subject, or have been curious enough to have discovered it, pursue it at university. Why should philosophy be the preserve of these privileged few?

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however, the IQ of these children was raised by 6.5 points.

All this was achieved in classrooms of 30-plus children. Think of what it could do for children (and potentially, for

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In some ways philosophy is less a body of knowledge than a way of viewing the world. What makes someone a philosopher is the way that individual thinks about such big questions and tries to answer them.

Philosophical thinking is an ability to put aside all bias and preconceptions, to criticise intensely and to provide justification for all one's beliefs. In philosophy, good argumentation – including the ability to spot flaws in one's own reasoning – is everything.

And if we don't arrive at a definitive answer to a question – so much the worse for us: in the words of the

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One school boy hoping to study physics confessed to me he had "no idea what gravity was" and "hadn't realised you could ask such questions".

Yet philosophy is still not a mainstream subject in British and Irish schools. Only those who are lucky enough to have been introduced to the subject, or have been curious enough to have discovered it, pursue it at university. Why should philosophy be the preserve of these privileged few?

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In Clackmannanshire – an area of Scotland with some of the highest levels of unemployment – the council has introduced philosophical enquiry in primary schools since 2002.

In weekly, one hour sessions in Clackmannanshire schoolrooms, 10-11 year olds are provided with a picture, short story or video: it might be a photo of a man hunting a deer, or a

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All this was achieved in classrooms of 30-plus children. Think of what it could do for children (and potentially, for societies) everywhere.

The esteemed philosopher Bertrand Russell said: "Most people would rather die than think; in fact they do so."

In my (albeit) modest experience, this has not been the case. People enjoy thinking and engaging in philosophical debate when they are given the tools and the social space to do so.

At the final session of an

■ **RECOGNISED:** A general view of the world's first public monument to Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith on the Royal Mile, Edinburgh. A study run by the University of Dundee found that after a weekly one hour period of philosophy for 16 weeks, there were highly significant gains in pupils' verbal and numerical skills