One of the greatest accolades I ever received happened when an excited year 1 child shouted: ‘Here comes the philosophy man!’ as I approached his classroom for a weekly philosophy session. It is the inspiration behind the approach described in this article.

Children are born philosophical – their pre-school years are bathed in wonder. They have an inquisitive approach to their surroundings. As they start school, they bring all this with them. The Foundation stage provides a fantastic platform for children’s inquisitiveness to be nurtured and developed. There are three main components to the approach I am suggesting.

Marcelo Staricoff argues for a philosophical approach to the primary curriculum

Here comes the philosophy man!
Philosophising the learning environment
The learning environment is very important. Children should be encouraged to feel that they are all working within and helping to create a philosophical classroom. Permanent displays of children’s questions, MindMaps and lists of positive dispositions are always prominent. A table of children’s own thinking skills books, including a wonderful collection of philosophical texts, are freely available for them to access at all times.

As soon as the children enter my classroom in the morning, they are greeted by classical music and a ‘thinking skills starter’ (Staricoff and Rees, 2003; Staricoff and Rees, 2005). The ‘starter’ is presented in different ways according to the age of the children. It may be on the board or on cards for children to write about. With young children, starters are introduced verbally and then discussed, rather than written about. The starters are designed to inspire thinking and allow children to philosophise and play with their thoughts, feelings and opinions. Starters cover a range of curriculum areas and are presented as fun, challenging, appealing and accessible to all.

As part of their thinking skills toolbox, all children are given a pack of Post-it notes at the beginning of the year. Every time a child has a thought or a question, instead of interrupting the teaching and learning process, they place their Post-it with their thoughts on the dedicated area on the whiteboard, knowing that it will be addressed at the nearest convenient time. These have ranged from ‘Do we exist?’ to ‘How do babies happen?’ The former one led to a wonderful collection of philosophical texts, are freely available for them to access at all times.

Philosophising the curriculum
I aim to deliver the curriculum in a classroom atmosphere based upon discussion, open dialogue, critical thinking and questioning – all representing transferable skills promoted and developed during philosophical enquiry. Written work is preceded by the date, the title and the lesson objective or TLP (Today’s Learning Point). The TLP is generated in conjunction with the children and takes the form of a question, very often a philosophical one: ‘What is time?’ (Connected to learning to tell the time.) ‘Do shadows exist?’ (Connected to learning about light.) These questions invariably lead to purposeful discussion and dialogue even before the main body of the lesson is presented, giving children the feeling that they have a say in driving and personalising the teaching and learning process and the teacher the opportunity to explore unexpected but relevant avenues. Success criteria for the TLP are then discussed and negotiated as a whole class, making sure that everyone feels able to succeed. Once the work is completed, the children add a TIL (Today I Learnt) comment, which gives them the opportunity to reflect upon their learning, make connections in their learning, or discuss any difficulties on a one-to-one basis with the teacher. TILs are also very often philosophical: ‘Today I learnt to tell the time, but I am not sure it exists.’ or ‘Today I learnt the names and properties of 2-D shapes, but I don’t think they exist.’ Enrichment is a key component of all lessons and this can take the form of an open-ended task designed to motivate the children by applying the TLP of the lesson in a different context. Alternatively, children are given the opportunity to act as ‘teachers’. I believe that being able to explain a concept to a friend is a very powerful means of ensuring that one has grasped a particular concept.

Philosophy also equips children with a means of structuring their thinking by allowing them to construct coherent arguments in their minds. This process can be mediated to children using tools such as MindMaps and Concept Lines (Murris and Haynes, 2000). Once explained, these become tools children can use to direct their own learning.

Through MindMapping, the children are able to organise their thinking about a topic, a person, a place, or a concept in a visual way. This invariably leads them to make connections that they wouldn’t have otherwise made. The hierarchical nature of the branches of the MindMaps also allows children to rank and question their connections. MindMapping is a useful tool for note taking, story planning and character sketching.

Concept Lines are actual lines (often pieces of string) that represent a continuum and have opposite attributes at either end. Concept Lines are excellent vehicles for taking away the worry of being right or wrong and for allowing personal opinions and feelings to be expressed – as long as children are able to justify why they have placed their characters, thoughts, feelings or opinions in particular places on the line. For example, one could have children place the character of Little Red Riding Hood on a line with very intelligent at one extreme and not at all intelligent at the other. It is fascinating listening to children justifying their choices.

Philosophising the extra-curriculum
I really like expressing my feelings in philosophy and trying to change other people’s points of views. (Eva) I really like philosophy as it is the only time that people feel they can say what they really think. (Marianne) I love the philosophical homework – it lets me present it in any way I like. (Bonnie)

I feel that it is very important to develop a culture in schools where the staff and the children are encouraged to take risks. Nothing illustrates this better than the hourly
sessions that I devote to philosophical enquiry, based on the structure described by the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement, so wonderfully promoted by the work of the charity, SAPERE. These sessions generate a unique classroom atmosphere and produce an immense range of thought, reasoning and original ways of looking at the world around us. The children are often placed in positions that require moral judgements to be made, problems to be solved and consequences to be considered. The repercussions are widespread, often spilling over into breaktimes and most importantly their homes.

On many occasions I have been approached by parents in the morning who wanted to inform me about the philosophical discussions they’d had with their children the night before! Philosophy provides the children with something original which they can introduce to their home environment, making them feel very special. Children often come in with suggestions for discussions. Philosophy as a distinct timetabled lesson is a unique motivator, promoter of values and self-esteem and is also enormously helpful as a means of developing and promoting children’s speaking and listening skills (Staricoff, 2002).

In order to foster the parent-child-school triangle even further, I have also developed a thinking skills and philosophical approach to our homework. We set a range of interesting open-ended tasks that the children view as mini projects. It has become very popular for the children to use the homework tasks to invent their own ‘games’ based on particular topics. These games are not only extremely professional but have also become the games the children want to play in their free time.

I have also started sending a philosophy notebook home with a different child every day. The book has a philosophical question at the beginning, for example: ‘Is it ever right to do something wrong?’ Children and parents are encouraged to comment on this together or individually and also to comment on what other children and parents have contributed (Stanley and Bowkett, 2005). It is difficult to express how satisfying it is to read and share with the class and how it has strengthened the home-school partnership. Playing improvisation games whenever we have a spare few minutes has also contributed enormously to giving children the chance to shine in a fun and respectful atmosphere. These games are based on Whose Line is it Anyway, or De Bono’s Six Thinking Hats (De Bono, 1985), or adapted from Robert Fisher’s Games for Thinking (Fisher, 2003).

**Effects in a new school**

I started work as a deputy head at St. Bartholomew’s CE Primary School last year. Philosophy is having a very significant impact amongst the children and amongst the school’s wider community. Last term we decided to introduce the children into the concept of philosophical thinking and used Foundation, KS1 and KS2 assemblies as our vehicle. We used folktales as our initial catalyst and complemented these by role playing some of the various scenarios that are so wonderfully posed by Stephen Law’s Philosophy Files. Children became hooked on the idea of considering events from everyday life from a philosophical point of view and were soon heard arguing their case to friends and staff at playtimes, lunchtimes, in their classrooms and with their families at home.
Children in my year 2 class now experience a weekly philosophy session and it has become their favourite lesson. Through philosophy, the children are experiencing a learning environment based on mutual respect, structured thought and patience. They have three favourite ways of beginning their contribution:

- I agree with you but have you thought of?
- I don’t agree with because…
- I am starting a new branch (which they associate with Mind Mapping)

The repercussions of having introduced a philosophical approach to our day are being felt by all the children in class. Together, we are creating a culture based on questioning, debate and discussion. This ethos is enabling us to discuss all issues much more openly, and is paying particular dividends when dealing with matters related to our school values. The improvement in behaviour is very evident both in the classroom and throughout the school. Philosophy is also beginning to infiltrate the rest of the curriculum. For example, this term we launched our topic on Electricity by debating whether the discovery of electricity has been beneficial or detrimental to mankind. I could not believe the depth of thought and level of engagement that I observed during this session. When we brought it to an end, several children said that they had changed their views as a result of what another child had said – a truly extraordinary process for children of six and seven to go through.

Philosophy is also helping us to forge much stronger links with our associated church. Father Vic, who has a very deep personal interest in philosophy, is a regular visitor to our philosophy sessions. As a result of these visits, he suggested that the school placed philosophical debate at the heart of the school’s weekly newsletter. These thinking challenges are now a permanent fixture of both the school’s and the church’s newsletter and are promoting great debate amongst the staff, parents and children at school and at home. We have began to disseminate the outcomes of these debates in weekly assemblies, at which church representatives are present. The debates are seen as an integral part of the school community, enriching even further the symbiotic relationship between church and school. I never cease to be amazed by the ability of philosophy to conquer the hearts and minds of all who come into contact with it.

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Quotes from year 2 pupils at St Bartholomew’s

Philip: I think philosophy is fun and nice. We learn from it.
Harry: It helps me to think.
Theo: Philosophy is a good and fun thing.
Gabriel: Philosophy helps me with my learning.
Sanjana: Philosophy helps me think a lot. I like starting new branches.
Oscar: Philosophy is fun because we can say our own words.
Daniel: It is fun because we get to chat.
Leyla: I like philosophy because we listen to each other’s stories.
Jack and William: I like to disagree with my friends.
Tsandvo: Philosophy is relaxing.
Imogen: I like philosophy because I get to know what people are thinking and I like to tell other people what I’m thinking.
Elia: Philosophy is very thinkable!
Sadie: Philosophy is fun.
Jody: Philosophy is listening, fun, learning and gives you advice.
Zahraa: I like philosophy because it is interesting and it keeps me thinking.
Jozif: I like philosophy because we do it in all the subjects.
Jevon: I like philosophy and it is a fun way to think.
Luiza: I like it so much that I bought my own philosophy files. I like to disagree with my friends and it makes me think.
Joe: Philosophy is exciting.
Kitty: I like philosophy because it answers great questions.

References
- De Bono, E. (1985) Six Thinking Hats, MICA Management Resources Inc, USA.
- G&T Conference (2005), Enriching Provision for All, Proceedings, North West Bristol Cluster G&T Coordinator Team, Westbury Park Primary School, UK.
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