



Talking more, behaving better

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The year is 2007. The Celtic Tiger still has all its teeth. Across the water – in Scotland’s smallest county, Clackmannanshire – the economic bite is tamer. Here unemployment and social deprivation are ranked among the worst in the UK. But against this privation, local authorities are initiating an unusual educational experiment. It would lead to striking educational outcomes: the IQ of over 100 randomly selected children would rise by an average of 6.5 points. The children would experience gains in literacy, numeracy, and non-verbal skills compared to their peers. Even the kids’ pro-social behaviour would improve. And what’s more, in a follow-up study two years later, the results would be sustained.

The experiment didn’t depend on flashy school extensions, IT suites or even mounds of art and sports equipment. (The class sizes in which these remarkable results were achieved averaged 30 pupils). Nor were there handsome cheques for stacks of uncreased library books. The study didn’t even rely on time-consuming teacher training. The investment was as modest as the local purse strings. The study was literally as cheap as chips at a cost per child of just £9 (€13).

So what accounted for these educational attainments? The intervention was as humble as it was effective. Every week the pupils (aged 10 years old) arranged their chairs in a collective circle. And every week – for just one hour, over a 16 month period – the pupils would vote on a philosophical question. Today – by unanimous choice, they have selected ‘Is it ever acceptable to lie?’ ‘Lying is acceptable in some circumstances,’ says one 10 year old girl. ‘For example, what if a bully wanted to pick on a younger boy who was hiding and he asked ‘Where is he?’ I think it would be better to lie than tell the truth’. Another pupil puts his hand up, ‘But what if everyone was to tell the truth – and to report the bully – wouldn’t that stop him from bullying? So, wouldn’t it *always* be better if *nobody* lied?’

The pupils are engaged in a game of verbal volleyball – passing ideas, suggestions, examples and counter-

examples back and forward as a group. Like any game, there are certain rules: there is no place for showmanship or shouting anyone down; bossiness or bluster will not be tolerated. Instead, in these *collaborative enquiries* the kids are encouraged to listen, to share their ideas, and to build as a group on previous points. They can be creative in their criticisms – and changing one’s mind is fine, even encouraged. At the end of the discussion the pupils ask: ‘What answers did we arrive at?’ ‘Did we get lost at any point?’ ‘How could we improve the discussion next time?’

It is a simple exercise in analysis, reflection, and collaboration. Such class

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enquiries don’t involve the teacher providing all of the answers. Rather, the conversation exposes the messiness of difficult questions. The balance of power shifts from the teacher imparting knowledge to the children forging their own solutions.

The kids in Clackmannanshire were doing philosophy. Not because they had won some elite educational lottery. This was no Home Counties prep school or South Dublin boarding department. These kids weren’t selected for their special abilities. Nor were their educators put through costly training regimes. Their teachers were modestly coached in short ‘philosophy for children’ courses. The result? The kids were learning to articulate complex ideas, to justify their views, and to perceive (and tolerate) the grey rainbow of ambiguity. What better training for the world beyond the classroom?

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