

PHILOSOPHY is a RIGHT



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Philosophy has an image problem. When we think of philosophy we may think of stuffy old men with elbow patches pontificating about Platonic metaphysics. Philosophy, we may think, is abstruse, technical, dry. If any subject has a right to reside (and confine itself to) the ivory tower, we may muse, it is philosophy (and if any academics ought to dwell there day and night) they are surely philosophers.

This may be a prevalent attitude about philosophy among the public, including educationalists. And the truth is that philosophy's image problem isn't helped by philosophers. Philosophers give philosophy a bad name (since I am academically branded as one, perhaps I am better equipped than most to admit to this). Philosophers tend to think philosophy is *cosa nostra* – our thing. That way we remain comfortably within the academic cloisters, better able to undertake our prestigious, self-appointed investiture as the nation's thinkers. Somebody has to toil at the intellectual coalface, so why not let us philosophers do all the toiling. This 'highbrow martyrdom' on behalf of the masses might serve universities quite well but it is also narcissistic – worse still it is intellectually bankrupt. Philosophy is not just for philosophers (university-appointed, or otherwise).

Philosophy is for all. It is also a human right.

But what is philosophy? Philosophy means love of wisdom. Philosophers enquire into big, juicy, questions that *every one of us* has asked. Examples: What makes something right or wrong? Do we have free will? Is beauty in the eye of the beholder? What is justice? Does science give us all the answers?

On the face of it these questions are rather basic. They have the character of naivety. And children, like adults, ponder these questions too. As someone who has experience of teaching philosophy to children and adult learners of all ages, I know very well that, given the space to think and to enquire in an open, collaborative way, people love to talk ideas.

Yet philosophy in the classroom is often considered too adult, too esoteric for kids. This is a mistake. Philosophy is a way of seeing the world rather than a body of knowledge. It is about thinking and having the confidence to do so. Indeed Philosophy for Children is also a form of pedagogy. It was started in the 1970s by a disenfranchised Professor of Philosophy from Columbia University called Matthew Lipman. Lipman felt that philosophy students

were afraid to think. Philosophy for children (and indeed, for adults) is not the history of ideas or a form of passive dissemination or class dictation about grand theorists, from Plato to Patricia Churchland. Philosophy is not about hooking your ideas onto eminent figures of the past. It is not about deference to grand old men in ancient Greek garb. Rather it is about actively getting young people to think, and to challenge each other, in respectful ways. It is a form of classroom enquiry that encourages kids to be comfortable asking questions and recognizing that we may not have the right answer to all these questions. (Maybe there are no answers to be had; maybe the question was a bad one!)

Philosophy for Children has much to offer us. We need to get past Philosophy's PR problem – something that President Higgins has acknowledged in his Ethics Initiative: philosophy needs to be brought out of the ivory tower and into the marketplace. Philosophy ought not to be the preserve of the few. If we value a thoughtful citizenry and an actively questioning democratic society, we need philosophy.

On Your Behalf

Since the last issue of Leadership⁺, IPPN has continued our advocacy and representative role on behalf of principals, through meetings, events and submissions in relation to the following:

MARCH

- (ATECI) 2015 AGM

- Launch of a report from the Children's Mental Health Coalition, entitled *Meeting the mental health support needs of children and adolescents: a Children's Mental Health Coalition view*
- 1916 centenary plans for the 'Ireland 2016' programme - Department of Education

- Education Matters Editorial Advisory Group - Oatlands College, Dublin.

APRIL

- INTO Congress, Ennis, Co Clare
- NAPD Symposium, Dublin.