

QUARTZ

DEEP THOUGHTS

Teaching kids philosophy makes them smarter in math and English

Jenny Anderson | March 09, 2016



📷 The power of pondering. (Reuters/Kim Kyung)

Schools face relentless pressure to up their offerings in the STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and math. Few are making the case for philosophy.

Maybe they should.

Nine- and 10-year-old children in England who participated in a philosophy class once a week over the course of a year significantly boosted their math and literacy skills, with disadvantaged students showing the most significant gains, according to a [large and well-designed study](#) (pdf).

More than 3,000 kids in 48 schools across England [participated in weekly discussions](#) about concepts such as truth, justice, friendship, and knowledge, with time carved out for silent reflection, question making, question airing, and building on one another's thoughts and ideas.

Kids who took the course increased math and reading scores by the equivalent of two extra months of teaching, even though the course was not designed to improve literacy or numeracy. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds saw an even bigger leap in performance: reading skills increased by four months, math by three months, and writing by two months. Teachers also reported a beneficial impact on students' confidence and ability to listen to others.

The study was conducted by the [Education Endowment Foundation](#) (EEF), a non-profit group that wants to close the gap between family income and educational attainment. The EEF tested the effectiveness of the philosophy intervention through a randomized controlled trial, similar to the way many drugs are tested.

Twenty-two schools acted as a control group, while students at the other 26 took the philosophy class (which met once a week for 40 minutes). The researchers tried to control for school quality: in each one, at least a quarter of students received free lunch and many had significant populations performing below grade level.

The beneficial effects of philosophy lasted for two years, with the intervention group continuing to outperform the control group long after the classes had finished. "They had been given new ways of thinking and expressing themselves," said Kevan Collins, chief executive of the EEF. "They had been thinking with more logic and more connected ideas."

England is not the first country to experiment with teaching kids philosophy. The program the EEF used, called P4C (philosophy for children), was designed by professor Matthew Lippman in New Jersey in the 1970s to [teach thinking skills through philosophical dialog](#). In 1992, the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education ([SAPERE](#)) was set up in the UK to emulate that work. P4C has been adopted by schools in 60 countries.

SAPERE's program does not focus on reading the texts of Plato and Kant, but rather stories, poems, or film clips that prompt discussions about philosophical issues. The goal is to help children reason, formulate and ask questions, engage in constructive conversation, and develop arguments.

Collins hopes the latest evidence will convince heads of schools, who have significantly more power in the UK than in the US, to make room for philosophy in their budgets. The program costs schools £16 (\$23) per student to run.

Programs like this "push you toward teaching up, not down, to disadvantaged children," Collins told Quartz. "It's not a reductionist, narrow curriculum, but an expansionist broad curriculum."

According to the EEF, 63% of British 15-year-olds achieve good results on exams, compared with 37% of disadvantaged students. The group hopes that by using evidence-based research and randomized controlled trials, schools will adopt the most effective policies to address the disparity.

Socrates said that “true knowledge exists in knowing that you know nothing.” But to close the gap in education outcomes, some teachers seem to believe that philosophy has an important role to play.

One of the world’s largest cemeteries is expanding faster than ever

Nushmia Khan | 51 mins ago



"Valley of Peace"

REUTERS

For centuries, Shi’ite Muslims from across the globe have requested to be buried in the Wadi as-Salaam cemetery in Najaf, Iraq. The cemetery holds the grave of Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, who Shi’ite Muslims consider to be the prophet’s rightful successor.

It’s estimated that Wadi as-Salaam now contains up to five million graves. With an upsurge in deaths from ISIL, the number of bodies being buried in the cemetery daily has increased. Space is becoming scarce, and the price of a grave at the cemetery has doubled since 2014.