

# John Dewey and the Philosophy For Children Program

*The case is of Child. It is his present powers which are to assert themselves; his present capacities which are to be exercised; his present attitudes which are to be realized. But save as the teacher knows, knows wisely and thoroughly, the race-expression which is embodied in that thing we call the Curriculum, the teacher knows neither what the present power, capacity or attitude is, nor yet how it is to be asserted, exercised, and realized.*

— John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*

## Introduction

The philosophy of education proposed by John Dewey, in works which spanned the course of his life, seemed revolutionary at the time, but profoundly influenced the course of American education since then. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a subject or a school in America whose operations cannot be traced directly to Dewey. Unfortunately, for the most part it was the trees of Dewey's philosophy, rather than the forest, which have had the most influence; and since the trees were never intended to stand in isolation, the appearance of American education has become more Deweyian, but the essence has not changed at all.

of his earlier works, *The School and Society*, Dewey gives an example of a possible elementary history curriculum which begins with a study of people and their jobs, moves out to study the community, then inventions, and so on. It is clearly intended just as an example, not as a mandate. Across America today, one will find children in the elementary school studying social studies textbooks which begin with units on Careers, Community, and Inventions. Most schools today use this method. But Dewey gave this example as part of a larger work which spoke in the strongest and clearest terms against the use of a textbook approach to learning. This larger and more important message has not been heard.

The Philosophy for Children (P4C) Program developed by Matthew Lipman, on the other hand, follows fundamental principles laid out by Dewey in all of his works on education. In this paper we will examine how well and how successfully the P4C program follows those principles.

## Meaning

*The relationship between education and meaning should be considered inviolable. Wherever meaning accrues, there is education.*

— Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy in the Classroom*

One of the chief tendencies in American education which Dewey speaks against is Dualism; the tendency to separate mind from body and school from life, to see them as unrelated and contradictory forces. Schools deal with facts which must be learned and skills which must be acquired, in a conceptual vacuum, divorced from any real meaning.

In this environment mind is treated as if the body does not exist, and a great deal of teacher energy goes into suppressing the normal activities of young and restless bodies.

But it is only when connections are made that experience takes on meaning. Day after day the child participates in and witnesses experiences which are in themselves meaningless. He sees a rainbow spread across a puddle in the gutter, he hears through an open window a mother berating her child, he feels a shiver up his back when he walks past a certain house, he sees an older boy and girl laughing on the streetcorner or a flag at half-mast. But when the intellectual aspect of the experience is reinforced, relationships become clear, consequences are observed and considered, the experience is considered in the light of past experiences and extrapolated into future ones, and the experience becomes meaningful. Dewey sees all of life as a search for meaning, and that the human need is often unfulfilled in school. But school is the one place where a child ought to be able to find meaning; outside of school experiences are only secondarily educational, but in school that is supposed to be their primary function. In order for an experience to be educational it must have meaning, and that is precisely what is lacking.

Fulfilling this need for meaning is one of the primary thrusts of the P4C program. It enables children to discover meaning in their lives in three ways. First, the philosophy discussions themselves are attempts to discover meanings in the student novels by reasoning about the experiences of the characters. In the process, experiences which the students have had, ideas which have occurred to them, and skills which they have learned are all brought out into the open and reconsidered in the light of the present discussion. Beyond helping to gain perspective and make connections relating to the issue under discussion, this often enables the children to make sense of their own experiences, often for the first time. It is adding that intellectual component which Dewey pointed out is so often missing from experience; it is making connections, perceiving relationships, reviewing consequences, all of the activities which make an experience valuable and educational.

Second, when the students are trained in the methods of philosophical inquiry and given the tools for rational discourse, they do not reserve the use of these tools and methods for those classes which are specifically labeled as 'philosophy class.' The philosophical orientation permeates every other subject in school, and by so doing, adds meaning to subjects that might have lacked it before. No longer are the children content merely to accept the facts and spit them back, if indeed they ever were. Suddenly they want to inquire into the intellectual aspects of each subject; what is the nature of infinity in math, what is a hero in literature, where is space in science, what analogies can be drawn between the actions and passions of historical figures and those of today, and, most importantly, how does this relate to what was learned last period or to life outside of school.

Third, the philosophical bend also extends beyond the school to all of the other aspects of the child's life. He becomes more able and more inclined to search for and find the meaning of his everyday experiences, often to the surprise, and sometimes to the consternation of his parents

and friends. He begins to challenge unquestioned assumptions, both his own and others'. He begins to see questions and thoughts as valuable, and he begins to search for his own answers. Thus in all three ways the P4C program helps the child to begin getting what Dewey sees as a true education — meaningful experience.

### Unity

*With respect to subject matter, philosophy is an attempt to comprehend - that is, to gather together the varied details of the world and of life into a single inclusive whole . . . [it] is the endeavor to attain as unified, consistent, and complete an outlook upon experience as is possible.*

— John Dewey, Democracy and Education

One of the fundamental precepts of education is that in order for the child to learn, he must start with what he already knows and use that as a springboard into new material and ideas. Yet, as Dewey points out, schools are organized in a way which is totally different from the child's way of organizing and perceiving. The child sees reality as a whole; he does not see breaks or distinctions between different aspects of his life. He moves from one activity to another, from one place to another, from one thought to another in smooth transitions, hardly aware that there has been a transition at all. Life is fluid and ever changing for them, but not into abrupt, distinct units.

But when he enters school he finds that school represents a completely antithetical point of view. Learning is broken into discrete subjects, taught at different times, sometimes by different teachers, each having little or no relation to the others. Each subject is further broken down into units, again unrelated to each other, and each unit is made up of distinct facts which must be learned and recited, but which are presented as if they existed in a vacuum. The facts are organized according to logical classifications which are clear to adults, or at least clear to the writers of the textbooks, but arcane to the children, and it is unusual for any attempt to be made to teach the children to understand the organizational criteria. And the school itself is divorced from the rest of the child's life as if the two had no relation, as if schooling had no purpose and no importance outside itself.

P4C provides the glue with which to rebind all of these loose parts into a coherent whole again. The program emphasizes the ability and importance of searching for and recognizing relations and connections. It teaches children to inquire into the underlying principles which form the bedrock of all of the disciplines. Philosophy is the subject out of which all of the other subjects grew, and it still unites them. At the root of all of them lie the same fundamental questions; what is real, what is good, what is beautiful, what is true. We learn the facts of each individual subject in order better to deal with these and other questions, and to increase our understanding of our world and our lives. The facts of each discipline are the means, not the ends. Philosophy provides children with the method for using them as means. The connections are made among the subjects and facts, and between school and the rest of the world.

*The integration of thinking skills into every aspect of the curriculum would sharpen children's capacity to make connections and draw distinctions, to define and to classify, to assess factual information objectively and critically, to deal reflectively with the relationship between facts and values, and to differentiate their beliefs and what is true from their understanding of what is logically possible. These specific skills help children to listen better, study better, learn better, and express themselves better.*

— Matthew Lipman, Philosophy in the Classroom

The most fundamental aspect of Dewey's philosophy of education is his concept of experience. In his system, the only true education is that drawn from and related to the experiences of the child. But he sees experience as more than mere activity; it is *connected* activity. Only when thinking is added to experience does it become valuable, because it is only by thinking that the connections can be made. True educational experience is a two-way relationship; we do something and something is done to us in return. We act, and there are consequences. We anticipate some of the consequences on the basis of past experiences. New consequences are filed for reference in future experiences. In this way we grow and develop and learn. But if the consequences are not recognized, if the connections are not made, if the relationships are not made explicit and the inferences drawn, the experience has no meaning and no value; it is mere blind activity.

The P4C program is organized to teach and provide practice in precisely these and other thinking skills. The child learns to draw inferences, recognize and anticipate consequences, make connections, see relationships, and to apply these skills to his experiences, thus making them meaningful and educational. In the community of inquiry, the child's experiences are brought in and used as tools to further the discussion and provide concrete examples of the point the child is trying to make. This too is a two-way process; the experiences illuminate the topic under discussion, and the discussion serves to help the child to make those connections which Dewey sees as essential to making the experience meaningful and truly educational. Often this is the first time the child has really thought about these experiences. The program is, first and foremost, a thinking skills program, but it teaches the child not only to think, but to think clearly, to think critically, and to think for himself.

Dewey makes some lovely analogies regarding the relations between thinking, learning, and teaching. He capsulizes each process in a series of five steps, diagrammed below along with the process of inquiry outlined in the P4C program.

Thinking	Learning	Teaching	P4C Inquiry
felt difficulty	experience	preparation	frustration
definition	problem	presentation	formulation
suggestion	information	comparison	hypothesis
development	solution	generalization	test, revise
testing	testing	application	application

Clearly, Dewey is saying, there are some fundamental similarities between thinking, learning teaching, inquiry.

### *Impulse*

*Since really to satisfy an impulse or interest means to work it out, and working it out involves running up against obstacles, becoming acquainted with materials, exercising ingenuity, patience, persistence, alertness, it of necessity involves discipline - ordering of power - and supplies knowledge.*

— John Dewey, *The School and Society*

The impulses of a child are a powerful force; in school they can either be used or stifled. In most schools they are stifled, because the teachers see them as leading in unprofitable or undisciplined directions. Dewey maintains that it is the teacher's business to give direction to the child's impulses, to use them as the starting point and motivating force for the class activities and inquiries. But the teacher must be able to see the goal in the distance and to keep the children moving towards that goal. Being able to see those goals, of course, requires that the teachers be much more expert in their subjects than most are now. Dewey decries the fallacy of thinking that teachers need only know as much of the subject as they will teach. Unless their knowledge goes far beyond the level of the students, they will never be able to see the long-term ends towards which the students' studies should be leading them, and thus will not be able to keep their activities moving in the proper direction.

Dewey sees four basic types of impulses at work in school, under which all other impulses may be grouped. The first is the social instinct, the desire of children to engage in conversation with other children and adults, to develop relationships with them, to communicate and exchange ideas. The second is the desire to find things out, a desire which ironically the children often feel more comfortable pursuing outside of school. Everyone has heard more comfortable pursuing outside of school. Everyone has heard children asking 'why' over and over, we have all see a child spend great lengths of time watching the bugs in puddle or taking things apart and trying to figure out how they work. But often they are taught that school is not the place to look for answers to their questions; it is only the place to try to answer the questions of the teacher. The third is the constructive impulse; children like to make things. The fourth is the drive for artistic expression. These impulses, if used, are the raw materials of a successful education. If ignored, they are the driving force behind rebellion and discontent.

A curriculum which makes use of these impulses by giving them direction will naturally provide more real discipline than any program which is designed for the sake of discipline alone. In order to achieve ends which are genuinely his, the student will learn to impose better and more useful discipline on himself than anyone could possibly impose upon him. Anyone who thinks that children are not, naturally and at a very young age, capable of long attention spans, perserverance and persistence, attention to detail, concern for quality, extended reflection, innovativeness, and a host of other qualities of self-discipline which we seek to impose

upon them, need only spend some time observing them engaged in constructive play. Watching them building a fort or arranging a dollhouse, often for hours on end with no break, is all that is necessary to be convinced that their impulses lead naturally to discipline.

The common objection that this is only play, and that they must still be externally controlled in work, is countered by Dewey in his unique interpretation of the difference between work and play. First of all, he does not see play as idle amusement and work as drudgery. He sees true play and true work as essentially similar activities; the difference is that work is activity which is done in order to achieve some positive result, which includes that result as part of itself. When work retains the attitude of play it produces art. When the results are divorced from the activity, when it is done merely for the sake of some external compulsion, when the end is neither seen nor motivating, it becomes drudgery. Work, in and of itself, is not inherently unpleasant or something to be avoided at all costs. It is only when the student does not participate in the consequences and the task is externally imposed that his need for the exercise of imagination and emotion causes him to try to escape in aimless and disruptive activity.

Because of the child's innate need to know, question, and understand, Lipman sees the child and the study of philosophy as natural allies. The beginning of every discussion in the P4C program is the questions of the children about what they have read. The rest of the class is spent in pursuing answers to those questions, in a joint seeking after truth through discussion. The children put forward ideas, defend them against objections, revise or abandon them as needed, recognize their own and each other's assumptions and faulty reasoning, all in a cooperative effort to find answers to their own questions. Thus two of Dewey's impulses are utilized right away; the need for social interaction and the desire to find out the nature of things. Further, constructive and artistic activities are suggested which are related to the children's inquiry, and which can allow them to express their questions and thoughts in esthetic and satisfying ways. This is most true at the high school level of the program where the philosophy of esthetics is the focus, but it is also true to a more limited degree in the other levels.

### *Real Life*

*The purpose of school education is to insure the continuance of education by organizing the powers that insure growth. The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling.*

— John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*

Both Dewey and Lipman would agree that schooling must extend beyond itself. It must not be some sort of inbred experience which affects nothing but itself. It must begin and end in the child's real life, that is, his life outside the school. The whole force and motivating energy of the child is directed toward growing and developing in his ability to deal with life effectively and happily. When education begins with the child's real-life experience, it harnesses the full

energy of the child. When it trains that energy towards productive ends, it makes the most efficient use of the child's own impulses to produce beneficial results. When the ends improve the quality of life, then the education is successful.

It should be clear by now that training a child in critical thinking skills has beneficial results both in and out of school. But training a child in philosophy is much like training him in karate; he is strengthened and disciplined, but he must also be taught to use his new-found skills and abilities constructively and intelligently. The potential for misuse is always there; the tools of logical argument can be used just as easily to bully and humiliate as to search for truth.

In the final analysis, Dewey's philosophy of education boils down to two major points. 1. Schooling has little reason to justify it if it doesn't affect the quality of the student's life, both now and in the future. The purpose of schooling is to give the student the tools and understandings necessary to living and functioning as a happy and productive member of society. 2. Life is made up of experience, the quality of an experience is proportional to the thought involved, therefore the quality of a person's life is directly affected by his capacity to think and to think well. When these two points are combined, it becomes clear that Dewey's and Lipman's conceptions of education are much the same; if the purpose of education is to improve the quality of life, and if the quality of life is improved by thinking, then the best education will teach a child to think, to think well, to think clearly and critically, and to think for himself.

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