READER *RESPONSE TO*

# «Children, Philosophy and Democracy»

*The following article is a written response to* **Children, Philosophy and Democracy edited** *by John Portelli and Ronald Reed. This article was originally a panel presentation at the Learneds Congress held at Brock University in Ontario in June of 1996.*

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There is much more in this work than originally meets the eye. The authors state in the introduction: *Children, philosophy and democracy* represents an attempt to deal with the evolution of a leading critical thinking movement to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, and some issues (primarily ethical, political, and pedagogical) that arise from this evolution» (Portelli & Reed, 1995, p. ix). The book is organized around these themes, but each author is left to develop her thinking about the topics on her own, and no attempt is made to pull these very diverse essays together. While this in someway represents the current state of the Philosophy for Children movement, it also represents a lost opportunity for presenting the common elements of this diverse movement. I address each section of the book by themes and connections (articulated and unarticulated), and then move on to make some comments on some individual articles. A final (short) section of my remarks will restate some common themes across sections of this edited volume. Some themes are stated declaratively, while other potential themes must be stated as questions.

### SECTION 1: CHARACTER OF PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

#### *Themes and Connection*

Five essays make up section one. I begin by looking for the way these essays are organized. There appears to be an order, or perhaps better, a nesting of themes that can be recognized by a series of questions. The first question is: What does Philosophy for Children assume about the nature of children? - the central question of this section. All of the essays address this question to some extent. Both Pritchard's essay and Matthews' essays address this question quite directly; though focusing on different elements of philosophy, both argue for considerable continuity between adult thinkers and younger thinkers.

The next question addressed in this section is: What is the «So What?» question, or Why Philosophy for Children?/ What is its value?/ What does it contribute? Both the MacColl essay and the Portelli & Church dialogue address this question specifically. MacColl states the role of philosophy in developing a valued self-esteem, while Portelli and Church show how whole language and philosophy help to increase thoughtful reading and writing through discussion. Pritchard, by looking at the goals of ethical

inquiry and exploring children dialogues, shows that children can inquire ethically. Matthews shows the ability of children to ask and explore complex philosophical issues. The answer to the «So What?» question from Pritchard is to continue the development of ethical thinking in children. The answer from Matthews is that philosophy is something that needs attention if children's natural inquisitiveness is to continue into adulthood.

The next question addressed is: What is the role of narrative in philosophy? Reed's essay most directly addresses this question by comparing two types of characters: text characters and lump characters. Reed sees narrative not only as part of a pedagogy of Philosophy for Children, but more importantly as a transforming vehicle. The other essays in this section deal with narrative but none address philosophy as a transforming narrative, that is, none of the other articles look directly to the Deweyan tradition of pragmatism - what Cornel West (1989) calls the «evasion of philosophy» that places narrative descriptions of power and personhood at the center of the pragmatist's agenda. Reed clearly writes in that tradition when he states:

> *Just as Oates and Burroughs, through their literature, have transformed the lump-world (the «real» world) by giving silent characters a voice, it may be argued that Philosophy for Children, in addition to its pedagogic mission, has this transforming function. It is not just for the generation of children to come. It is, just as much, for the generation of children who have been, and this may, in the long run, be the key to educational reform. Just as feminism in philosophy and art and education has unearthed whole schools, whole traditions within disciplines which have been ignored and which now give contemporary feminists traditions of their own on which to build, so too may Philosophy for Children be said to be in the process of «unearthing» traditions of child scholarship on which children might build. (p. 62-3).*

Reed's essay points to what needs to be articulated. In order to show how these essays contribute of an understanding of the «Character of Philosophy for Children,» the editors need to identify the «glue» of Philosophy for Children which hold these essays together. I would suggest that the «glue» or the superstructure is Dewey's pragmatism as pedagogy, as transforming philosophy, and as practice of democracy. These elements are all represented to some degree within this section of essays. They are not specifically stated and, therefore, may be lost to many readers, especially readers not familiar with Philosophy for Children.

### Comments on Selected Articles

Now, I would like to briefly address a few essays that caught my attention. I will revisit these essays later to further present connections within this work and within community of inquiry as an educational movement.

The presentation of these observations is in the order that they garnered my attention, not necessarily in order of importance. I found Gareth Matthews' reflections of Piaget extremely provocative. Matthews has an unusually sensitive philosophical ear and an uncanny ability to extend

the initial philosophical questions of children into elaborate conversations of substance and depth. His insights provide inspiration to all. His questions, regarding the findings of Piaget, continue a growing body of work that understands children as more capable of high levels of thinking than Piaget's research had shown. This is an important contribution, but his apparent representation of children's thinking as synonymous with the thinking of philosophers is a disservice to philosophers and, in some sense, anti-educational; it leaves the role of the teacher undefined and the status of the teacher undervalued.

While Matthews clearly invites parents and teachers to hear children's question and to engage them in «doing philosophy,» he, at least implicitly, presents a position that children's philosophy is as good as any philosophy. At the very least, he says that children can be as good as anyone in asking philosophical questions. But, for me at least, it is important to ask if there is a difference between the naive question of a philosopher and the naive question of a child. Is it not possible that there might be something akin to depth of ignorance in the question of a seasoned philosopher that is different in kind from the puzzlement of a thoughtful but naive child? I will return to this concern during the constructivist critique of essays (to foreshadow my argument, Pritchard's idea of children as agents, Lipman's criteria for Peace education, and Reed's comments [p. 194-5] on communication, critical theory and postmod-ernism presents part of my concern about the role of teachers and philosophers inquiring along with children to build the underpinning for the unarticulated structure of this work).

Portelli and Church's conversation shows the strengths and weaknesses of the work as a whole. I chose this essay in part because it reflects a personal agenda regarding Philosophy for Children and other like-minded approaches to education, namely that we have failed to articulate a common ground with other compatible education approaches and programs (cf. Morehouse, 1994; Morehouse, 1993) and to state what I think that common ground might be. The conversation between Portelli and Church is stimulating, wide ranging and informative. Much that Philosophy for Children and whole language share is discussed and presented in ways that are assessable to teachers and teacher educators. Both approaches to education share a concern for meaning making. Both approaches are student-centered, but teacher-involved in their approach to content and process. Philosophy for Children and whole language share a concern about what is learned and how it is learned. This common approach, however, remains unnamed, unarticulated.

This unarticulated commonality I would name constructivist pedagogy. It is important to state specifically this underlying commonality as it allows not only for a richer understanding of the two approaches to teaching and learning but also provides a mechanism for broadening the conversation to other like-minded teachers and educational approaches. The importance of this articulation can be seen in the «what's hot now» nature of educational reform (at least in the USA). My sense is that there are only two or three basic educational frameworks. If these frameworks could be fully profiled, new strategies, materials, programs in education could be evaluated as to how they fit into one of these frameworks. The goodness of fit within its framework would thus allow for more informed efforts to introduce the new material into the curriculum, the appropriate methods for evaluation, and ways to inform teachers about the approach would be all follow from the larger framework. The conversation between Portelli and Church comes tantalizingly close to that outcome, so it is disappointing that they did not take what I see as the next step.

SECTION 2: THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY AS AN EXPRESSION OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES

*Themes and Connection*

This section lives up to its title. Every article in this section examines democracy in the classroom community of inquiry very explicitly. Because of this unity of theme it is the strongest section of the book, though I still maintain that even this section could be strengthened by an introduction by the authors that make the themes easier to detect and more assessable to challenge and criticism, and magnification and extension.

Perhaps a major theme of this section is best stated in the title of the section: community of inquiry as an expression of democratic values. Violence reduction, feminist and children's philosophy, school reform, multiculturalism and communicative rationality all inform and are informed by community of inquiry. What is particularly striking about these essays is how each in its own way shows how community of inquiry is shaped by what the particular topic the individual community of inquiry is about, and how community of inquiry provides a method for addressing the issues of that topic. To give an example, peace education, if conducted within a community of inquiry, takes on a particular orientation, moves in a unique way, selects specific topics for discussion. Likewise, an inquiry into peace because it has an orientation toward the subject of peace will proceed differently from a community of inquiry about equality, although questions of equality may also become a part of an inquiry into peace.

«Philosophy for Children and school reform» provides another excellent example of how this section effectively develops and connects the theme of democracy and community of inquiry. Community of inquiry becomes, in Kennedy's hands, a tool, perhaps the tool, for educational reform; a tool consistent in means and end continuity. This continuity is the hallmark of a community of inquiry and ethical behavior in a democracy. Something similar could be said about each chapter in this section.

*Comments on Selected Articles*

«Critical theory, post-modernism, and communicative rationality» is a good essay to look at in some depth as it more specially articulates a theme present in the other essays but that is not quite as clearly drawn in other chapters. The theme stated specifically is: there is a path between relativism and absolutism; that path is the pragmatist public assertion of a warrant, validated in public discourse, or in other word, a community of inquiry. Reed writes:

*We understand ... that education must be active. It is something that is not done to students but done by them in consort with their colleagues. It occurs when inquirers have an adequate knowledge base and know how to inquire in such a way as to extend the base. It occurs when, in effect, the community of inquiry is effective, when individuals are in a position where they can inquire well. As ... the preceding assumption strongly suggests, inquiry (which if successful) yields com-*

*municative competence, which in turn yields validity and the success of inquiry is always context dependent (p. 194-5).*

Each essay, in its own way, supports a position that democracy is built on and sustained by a pragmatism that recognizes the fallible position of its various constituent groups working out within public conversation a common but contingent understanding of problems and solutions. Like community of inquiry, pragmatism, when applied to democracy writ large, is a method and a model that is never complete as it is a means driven end.

## SECTION 3: PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES IN PHILOSOPHY FOR/WITH CHIL-DREN

### *Themes and Connection*

The final section of the book, with the excep-tion of «Creating a meaning-centered environ-ment» can be characterized as a «how to» application of Philosophy for Children to differ-ent class-rooms and/or academic subjects. This section with its rich and teacher-friendly exam-ples, though likely valuable to classroom teachers as they look for ways to improve instruction and to better understand community of inquiry, will be less useful to teachers familiar with the Philos-ophy for Children corpus. Another strength of this section is that each chapter presents a new ap-plication and thus shows community of inquiry as a wider application than the specific teacher mate-rials and novels of the Lipman corpus.

### *Conclusion and Summary*

«Creating a meaning-centered environment» has been singled out for comment as it is the one article that in some ways does not seem to fit into this section, and therefore will provide a bridge to my final comments. Nowells' reflection on her classroom experience shows her concern for means/ends criteria for achieving a democratic society - whether within the classroom, the community, or the nation. «Yet, what interferes with [democracy as a process], even in existing democracies, and can ultimately halt the process, is when the «means» become the «end,» when society fixates on the gains, whether they are economic, political, or social, which are already at-tained» (p. 207). This concern for means and ends, for process and product of democracy that self-correct and remain open-ended make a community of inquiry democratic, and what provides the method for democratic discourse inside and outside the classroom. Cornelius Castoriadis (1991) makes a similar critique arguing that philosophers have risen above the «polis» to tell citizens what to think and what to believe, instead of being civic philosophers, that is, citizens who are necessar-ily a part of the problem and the solution. Nowell's article, like Castoriadis' book, provides a cri-tique for our practice in the communities that we inherit and create.

*Comments on Selected Articles*

The title of this collection of essays promises to be, not about Philosophy for Children, or critical thinking, but Children, Philosophy and Democracy. The title itself reminds one of John Dewey. At the center of Dewey's work and this volume of essays is a discernment of democracy in action. Dewey, as no other philosopher, articulated a connection between children, school, and a democratic society. The elements of Dewey's philosophy presented in this collection of essays are: (1) A concern for articulating power relations within and outside the classroom, (2) a focus on the contextual nature of knowledge as constructed, tentative, and fallible, and (3) a focus on the transformational power of education. My hope is that the reader will see, in the selections chosen for comment (as well as in the book as a whole), the strong voice of Dewey; that the reader will see both a constructive and a transformative pedagogy.

One final word: I have alternately stated the themes or supporting superstructure of these essays as Deweyan and constructivist. This is partly by design and partly by default. It is my contention that there is considerable overlap between Dewey's project for education and democracy, Vygotsky social constructivist theory of education, and Merleau-Ponty's existential-phenomen-ological understanding of knowing. These authors further agree that ways of knowing affect the con-duct of political discourse. It is the connection be-tween and among these philosophers and psychologists that most piques my interest, and which must be left for a later discussion.

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