

# PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN, COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

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## Abstract

The Community of Inquiry (COI) is a unique discourse model that brings adults and children together in collaborative discussions of philosophical and ethical topics. The model deepens children's higher order cognitive skills as they address complex dilemmas. This paper examines the potential for COI to deepen children's moral and intellectual understanding through recursive discourse that encourages them to transcend traditional and cultural limitations, confront their own moral predispositions, and increase inter-cultural understanding. As children become familiar with normative values couched in ethical dialogue, they are immersed in ideals of reciprocity and empathy in ways that transcend narrow self-interest. The technique plays upon children's freedom of thought and freedom of conscience as they learn to express their views and to listen to the perspectives of others. COI is a functional practice enhancing a deep and practical education of character. Such dialogues can become effective vehicles for introducing children to discussions of human dignity and rights that also challenge traditional power relationships between adults and children. The uncritical assumption underlying such power differentials often contests the *de facto* rights and dignity of children. COI is a valuable tool for human rights education as it encourages children's sensitivity to the rights and dignities of others and, simultaneously, honors children's own rights and dignities as participating citizens in the global community.

Keywords: Human Rights Education; Community of Inquiry; Inter-cultural Education; Philosophy for Children; Ethnocentrism.

## Filosofia para Crianças, Comunidade de Investigação, e direitos humanos

### Resumo

A Comunidade de Investigação (CoI) é um singular modelo de discurso que reúne adultos e crianças em torno de discussões colaborativas a respeito de temas filosóficos e éticos. Este artigo examina o potencial para CoI para aprofundar o entendimento moral e intelectual por meio do discurso recorrente que encoraja as crianças a transcenderem suas limitações culturais, confrontar suas próprias predisposições morais, e aumentar a compreensão intercultural. Na medida em que as crianças se familiarizam com valores normativos formulados no diálogo ético, elas são imersas em ideais de reciprocidade e empatia em forma que transcendem um estreito auto-interesse. A técnica sustenta a liberdade de pensamento e de consciência das crianças em tanto elas aprendem a expressar suas visões e a escutar as

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<sup>2</sup> Selya Benhabib. "Another Universalism: On the Unity and Diversity of Human Rights" in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*. 80(2), Nov. 2007. p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Marian Koren. "Human Rights of Children: An Emerging Story". *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25(2001), p. 248.

perspectivas dos outros. A comunidade de investigação é uma prática funcional que expande uma profunda e prática educação da personalidade. Tais diálogos podem tornar-se efetivos veículos para introduzir crianças nas discussões de dignidade humana e direitos, e também desafiam as tradicionais relações de poder entre adultos e crianças. O pressuposto acrítico subjacente a tais disparidades de poder frequentemente contesta com os direitos e a dignidade das crianças. A CoI é uma ferramenta valiosa para educação em direitos humanos, já que incentiva a sensibilidade das crianças para os direitos e dignidade de outros e, simultaneamente, honra os direitos e a dignidade das próprias crianças como cidadãs participantes da comunidade global.

Palavras chave: Educação em Direitos Humanos; Comunidade de Investigação; Educação Intercultural; Filosofia para Crianças; Etnocentrismo

### **Filosofía para Niños, Comunidad de Investigación y Educación de los Derechos Humanos**

#### Resumen

La Comunidad de Indagación es un modelo de discurso único que ofrece conjuntamente a los adultos y a los niños de forma colaborativa discusiones sobre temas filosóficos y éticos. El modelo profundiza habilidades cognitivas de orden superior en los niños frente a dilemas complejos. Este trabajo examina el potencial de la Comunidad de Indagación para profundizar en la moral de los niños y en su entendimiento intelectual a través del discurso recursivo que los anima a superar limitaciones culturales, enfrentarse a sus propias predisposiciones morales y aumentar la comprensión inter-cultural. En cuanto los niños llegan a familiarizarse con valores normativos expresados en el diálogo ético, están inmersos en ideales de reciprocidad y empatía en formas que trasciendan la estrechez del interés individual. La técnica apunta a la libertad de pensamiento y conciencia de los niños a medida que aprenden a expresar sus puntos de vista y a escuchar otras perspectivas. La Comunidad de Indagación es una práctica funcional que mejora y profundiza la educación de la personalidad. Tales diálogos pueden ser un medio efectivo para introducir a los niños en discusiones sobre la dignidad humana y los derechos que también pueden desafiar formas tradicionales de poder y relacionamiento entre los adultos y los niños. La aceptación acrítica subyacente de estas diferencias de poder a menudo se opone a los derechos de facto y la dignidad de los niños. La Comunidad de Indagación es una herramienta valiosa para la educación en los derechos humanos, como también estimula la sensibilidad de los niños respecto de los derechos y dignidad de los otros y, simultáneamente, honra sus propios derechos y dignidades como ciudadanos integrantes de una comunidad global.

Palabras claves: Educación en Los Derechos Humanos; Comunidad de Indagación; Educación Inter-cultural; Filosofía para Niños; Etnocentrismos.

## PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN, COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

In this paper, I would like to briefly explore the possibility for children who participate in a Community of Inquiry to develop their intercultural and moral understanding of human rights issues. The “Community of Inquiry” (COI) model is a pedagogical tool emphasized by the Philosophy with/for Children (P4C) movement that promotes inquiry while stressing higher order cognitive functions, reflection, mutual respect among participants, and reasoned dialogue. It is a vehicle which challenges conventional thinking about the place of children in education by allowing adults and children to come together as participants in philosophical discourse.

COI reveals a discourse relationship that emphasizes children’s rights to develop and to participate in shared relationships. Ideally, it establishes rational standards of discourse that are mutually beneficial for all participants. Such a model obviates abuses of power and advances values of freedom, dignity, reciprocity, equality, and respect.

As a discourse-theoretic model that puts children and adults on an equal participatory footing where all parties must respect and take each other seriously, COI serves the capacity for children to freely discuss and reason together on many important philosophical concerns. Moral issues form a subset of these issues, which might include fairness, lying, respect, identity, ethics, and human rights. COI is grounded on the fundamental assertion that children, as human beings, have rational views and perspectives of their own which can be fostered as they mature into adult participants in the moral community.

Predicated upon the Socratic notion of dialogic relationships, COI is an instrument that brings children and adults together to deepen their moral and intellectual understanding in recursive relationships. Antithetical to the blunt instrument of indoctrination, those who participate in a COI encourage children to express their views, while maintaining an attitude of respect and trust among all

participants, including adults. As children develop their capacity to become people who think for themselves, they develop a principle of practical reason through reason itself.

Discourse is not merely a linguistic entity, but a complex dialogue that is distinguished from bargaining, cajoling, brain washing, or coercive manipulation...<sup>2</sup> Some preliminary assumptions are embedded in the creation of a discourse community. Parity, reciprocity, and symmetry in the communicative roles are fundamental preconditions of an effective discourse. For most adults, this requires a change in attitude when children participate, since they must be trusted to express their views, but also share responsibility for the dialogue.

When framed in this way, COI becomes more than an open community entertaining hypothetical thought experiments. Children become part of a reflexive dialogue in which the child has a right to express her views in matters that affect her, placing an obligation upon all who treat of issues in the child's environment to welcome the participation of children.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Nagel in *What Does It All Mean*,<sup>4</sup> identified developmental and intrinsic effects of participating in such reflexive discourse as each participant undergoes a metamorphosis, developing new values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and beliefs. As participants in the COI engage in discursive conversation, they learn about their differences and how to transcend their own narrow self-interests. They also exercise a right to make up their own minds about moral beliefs, something they will have to do as full participants in the moral community.<sup>5</sup> As participants engage with one another, they develop a greater capacity to appreciate the viewpoints of the others and a greater level of commitment to the process of inquiry. Moreover, as Selya Benhabib observes, when thoughtful participants in reflexive dialogues assume reflective and critical stances, often their everyday convictions disappear and focus

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<sup>2</sup> Selya Benhabib. "Another Universalism: On the Unity and Diversity of Human Rights" in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*. 80(2), Nov. 2007. p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Marian Koren. "Human Rights of Children: An Emerging Story". *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25(2001), p. 248.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Nagel. *What Does It All Mean?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952. Chapter 4.

on reason-giving and rational justification becomes important. When such normative values appear in discourse, what emerges is mutual respect for the others as free, rational beings entitled to respect.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, through the Community of Inquiry, P4C can be viewed as a continuing dialogue which challenges the untried assumptions of each participant's cultural and traditional views, making it possible for participants to take on the perspectives of the others to view themselves. A consequence of this exercise of the moral imagination is that it introduces children to the range of competing viewpoints, leading them to critique and confront moral positions, whatever their content. It may also familiarize them with the range of acceptable variations in the interpretation and contextualization of human rights.

Identification and justification of human rights is implicit in the COI. Because COI depends upon communicative freedom, fundamental human rights are ascribed to children as they participate in rational, reflexive discourse. For one to engage in such dialogue implies a recognition of the rights of the other to participate, accept, challenge, critique, or contest the content of the discussion. Such recognition further implies basic rights of being and communicative rights that undergird the equality and mutuality of participation in dialogue. Thus, in practice, COI depends upon open dialogue and respect for the basic rights of persons.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), an Archimedean point in the world's professed attitudes toward children's rights, explicitly refers to the rights to: self-determination (Article 12), freedom of expression (Article 13), access to information (Article 17), participation in the vital experience of their cultures and in their cultural heritage (Article 31), and to education and information about their rights (Article 42). While there is much debate, both philosophical and political about the nature of rights with even more ongoing discussion about implementing the CRC, it is clear that the global Philosophy with/for Children movement is, in many respects, a practical effort that honors the spirit of the document.

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<sup>6</sup> Benhabib, p. 18.

The freedom of children to express their views and to exercise freedom of thought and conscience are values promoted by the COI model. Members of the Baha'i International Community, who consider "education as the most important means of improving the human condition, safeguarding human rights, and establishing peace and justice..."<sup>7</sup> proposed what became Article 29 of the CRC. The Baha'i community assert that education "cannot simply be academic education, or book-learning. The kind of education that is required is education of the character. It is not sufficient, for example, simply to tell a child that he has a duty to respect human rights. What is required is guidance and training that will develop in the child qualities that are indispensable if the child is to become a promoter and protector of human rights."<sup>8</sup>

All too often, guidance and training to develop certain qualities in the child become coercive efforts to impose beliefs and values on children, especially moral views, without discussion. Such authoritarian moves that reward uncritical conformity fail to acknowledge the value of rational justification for life choices and positions. Children, thus indoctrinated, are expected to accept authority, moral beliefs, and traditions without questions or critical evaluation. Moreover, as Marian Koren says, "Coercive, degrading and abusive treatment is contrary to the notion of human dignity. This inherent dignity applies to all members of the human community as an inalienable right. Children are often called the touchstone of human dignity. It is only when we take the child seriously that we realize the importance of human dignity as the prerequisite of human rights."<sup>9</sup>

The discourse that characterizes COI is distinct from interventionist rhetoric that is the result of authoritarian and coercive attitudes on the part of adults toward children. Interventionist rhetoric is characteristic of teachers and parents who differentiate moral roles to grant adults special powers and privileges, and, in a sense, exempt them from moral rules that apply to children. It implies an executive privilege

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<sup>7</sup> Koren, p. 247

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 247-248.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 244.

that invests authority in the adult, with expectations that the child register unquestioning obedience to the adult's will. In a paternalistic model such as this, formal reciprocity and equality are casualties of the relationship. Adults who teach children by commanding, ground the relationship on a power differential. Such a relationship demands undeviating obedience to their authority and stresses power rather than mutual respect and a common quest for understanding. Teachers and parents who adopt an executive model deny the child's ability to challenge their authority and to question their reasons and conclusions. This model fails to respect children as intelligent participants in the human conversation.

Rearing a child to take her place in the moral community as a self-determining, autonomous adult requires a kind of reflective meta-cognition, in which the child learns to reflect, deliberate, and argue about. This goes beyond the commonly accepted educational project which teaches children to acquire knowledge about themselves and their world. Skills acquired in dialogue with other reflective individuals enhance a child's autonomy by expanding their perceptions of options and choices available. To participate in such discourse establishes a recognition of commonalities that transcend differences, conflicts, and difficulties.

Acknowledging the place of children in the P4C relationship signifies the child's claim to be heard and considered, implicit as an acknowledgment of their moral standing. COI is a discourse model that models alliances between adults and children. Although skeptics debate the notion of an *ethos* of shared values that cross cultural and linguistic boundaries, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brings with it a global acknowledgment that skepticism about justice and rights is no longer morally acceptable. Relativism and sociocentric thinking about basic human rights recedes in the face of atrocities in Rwanda, Myanmar, and Sudan. No longer can any of us as members of an increasingly shrinking global community fail to distinguish the universality of ethics from relativistic cultural requirements and taboos.<sup>10</sup>

Unique to the transactional characteristics of dialogue in the COI, is the

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword," in *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 80-87

understanding that children develop their moral selves and moral imaginations in conversation with others. Rational conceptions of meaning and value are developed in the context of the shared understanding of all parties in the community. Intercultural understanding is an evolving process in this respect. Engaging in the COI allows children to share their views about culture and to gain an understanding of the vantage point of individuals from other cultures.

Importantly, the COI model has the potential to enable children to transcend a tendency to uncritically place their own cultures, nations, or religions above all others. They learn to reject a tendency to privilege self-serving positive descriptions of their own beliefs and traditions, while offering negative descriptions of those who think differently. COI allows participants to experience other perspectives beyond the traditional prejudices of their own culture and to internalize the insights of other cultures. Challenging children to consider human rights issues across cultures thus requires children to go beyond simply treating others' beliefs with respect and sensitivity. Children must also be stimulated to develop their moral imagination to not only consider and critique viewpoints that differ from their own and to critically assess their own traditions and beliefs.

Philosophy for/with Children literature is rife with accounts of children who engage with children of other socio-economic positions, other cultural traditions, or other nationalities.<sup>11</sup> In these accounts, we find children who reflexively discuss ideas about themselves and about the other. They face challenges to traditional ways of thinking and are sometimes persuaded that their viewpoints, traditions, and societies violate basic universal moral demands. When given the chance to share moral understanding, children are adept at recognizing the moral generalizations that lurk beneath their respective individual experiences.

They also recognize that insofar as they are entitled to certain rights and considerations, they are morally bound to ascriptions of such rights and

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Michael Pritchard's *Philosophical Adventures with Children*; Gareth Matthews' *Dialogues with Children*; Liz Doup's account of children from Northern Ireland living together in a neutral home in the United States.

considerations to others as well. This is done well in dialogue with other participants. As they respect the individuality and difference of other participants, they also become aware of the material and affective needs of the other that may differ from their own. They learn that we are complemented rather than excluded through our differences. COI establishes a norm of respect and, as such, children may expect to encounter COI as a unique space that allows, sometimes encourages, a change of perspective and increase in their ability to bridge perspectives. COI establishes a norm of respect and, as such, children regard for one another's interests, with heightened moral and intellectual solidarity.

COI is an ideal instrument for human rights education. Human rights has become the language of global politics, but is grounded on constitutively ethical demands. As children are engaged in the normative values conveyed through dialogue, and more particularly through the paradigm of COI, they are introduced to the universal values of expression, reciprocity, and empathy. Freedom of expression, recognized in Article 12 of the CRC, is a basic right accorded children. Its essence is a challenge to imperialistic attitudes concerning human dignity. If children are expected to take their place in the moral community, children as well as adults benefit from learning what rights are and to learn about them as participants of the moral community through COI.

CRC Articles 12, 13, and 14 recognize the child's right to freedom of expression, freedom of information, and freedom of thought. One immediately thinks of COI as a heuristic that models such rights to the child and establishes the expectation that these rights will be honored in others.

That the child has such rights denotes a form of moral standing for himself and recognition of the universality of those rights constitutes a mutual recognition of the other in the moral community. Conversely, to deprive children of their standing in the moral community, of their capacity to engage in rational discourse, is a depredation of those basic human rights.

In a world with much variation in culture, a non-indoctrinational human

rights education that indeed models respect for those rights, becomes ever more critical. The mode of COI models moral content for a child who is immersed in the reality of his culture and his world. As children develop a sense of their own moral autonomy along with a robust moral empathy, they are capable of genuine moral understanding and respect for the rights of others, as well as themselves. In such a setting, children can develop shared beliefs about human rights that are real and humane as opposed to doctrinal and adult-induced.

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