

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ROEPER CITY AND COUNTRY SCHOOL

George & Annemarie Roeper, 1981

- Making equal human rights for all people a priority.
- A complete commitment to justice rather than power.
- A willingness to allow the child to participate in the shaping of his own destiny and to consciously prepare him for it.
- To prepare this future generation to deal with the unknown.
- To view the needs of each child independently.

Our Philosophy of Education is a Philosophy of Life.

We are concerned with the whole impact of life on the young person and the impact he will make on society. Ours is a philosophy of basic human rights for all. We expect him to learn to control and direct himself rather than depend on adults only. As he develops controls from within, outer controls must recede. He must learn the process of decision-making along with the academic skills and concepts. We cannot teach subject matter separate from life.

The Philosophy is a Way of Life.

This philosophy is a universal one. It is a way of life. It is not limited to the school or the children in it. It is based on a concept of human rights, not in theory only, but in daily living. It embraces a principle of responsibility and support for each other, a principle of helping those who are in need because they are entitled to it, not because of charity. It includes the notion that even a little bit more love and mercy would make this world a better place to live in. It is a goal, which although it can never be quite realized, is only as good and as real as its honest attempts at implementation. It does not exist for the school only, but the school exists because of it. It is the framework for living and learning within the school.

It represents a basic departure from the usual.

If we look at it carefully, we find that it represents a basic departure from the usual view of human interaction and the approach that usually governs human affairs, yet it is not at all unique to this school. Examples of it and striving toward it can be found in many institutions and theories in history and in the present. There are a number of schools, colleges, and other organizations, which today function under the same principle.

It originates from a combination of idealism and realism.

This philosophy originates from a combination of an idealistic commitment to justice and a realistic view of the limitation of power by our mutual interdependence. It provides a unifying principle. It is based on the following realization: there is neither absolute power nor complete dependence or independence. The moment a child is born, he becomes part of the network of interdependence. Although it appears as though children are powerless, they bring with them power

over our lives; they change it. And of course we have power over theirs. As they grow, they continue to be part of this network forever. We are all caught in it, although it is invisible and easy to forget.

Actually, the fact of interdependence, of human ecology, becomes more and more apparent in today's world. All parts of the globe depend on each other economically, culturally, and emotionally. All this, if followed through logically, translates into the compelling need for cooperative action. Yet most of our skills and beliefs are based on confrontation and competition. Most people function as though there were a hierarchy of human rights and human life-structures. There is a top to be reached by the few, built on a hierarchy supported by the many. Therefore, people feel justified and safe to use each other as stepping stones to success. Their value is measured in terms of their usefulness to those in apparent power. This state of affairs soon becomes intolerable to those at the bottom and they become aware of the bottom power of the many as opposed to the tower power of the few. And so the battle never ends.

We live in a dog-eat-dog world, where might makes right. It is obvious to all that this has brought us to the brink of destruction. We are teetering at the edge of it and yet we continue to teach children to live in the same way. We are raising children to function in a manner that has created our present state of life. Why? Because we use our real ability of cooperation only in certain areas of endeavor. We have not yet incorporated in our emotions and thoughts a belief in mutual responsibility or a concept of human interdependence or ecology. We believe in victory and our perceptions are short term. We are aware of the consequences of the moment, not the long-range chain reaction of our behavior. We do not remember that if we accept stealing as a way of life we have to guard against others stealing from us. If we kill, we create the possibility of being killed, even if we do it for justice or revenge. All of this is obvious and yet we have not found other methods of dealing with each other.

A philosophy which tries to develop the skills of cooperation and looks at this as the ultimate moral and realistic, not illusionary, goal, may be the only true approach that might keep the world from destruction. Of course, we are aware that we will not be able to change the world but we might make a slight impact and at least help the members of this community to live a different life. It may also serve as a model for others. It shows that it can be done.

Its implementation requires an appropriate governance structure.

To implement this philosophy in our school community, which is a society in microcosm, requires the creation of a living and learning environment, which proves both that it is possible and also teaches how to do it.

It requires a structure of administration, an educational program and attitude which is in every respect based on the philosophy, not separate from it. It requires a structure which protects the rights of each individual, a structure which is truly based on a concept of justice and interdependence. It requires a structure which tries to pursue the following goals:

Specific Goals

1. To protect the equal rights of each member within our specific community: children, maintenance and all support persons, teachers, administrators, parents, board, etc. To find ways to do this in times of conflict, in times of change, in times of stress and in the face of human frailty. To find ways to do this even in the face of failure and guilt of the individual. To find ways to protect the rights of those who have no spokesman and those who are no longer useful to the community. To accept this as our mutual responsibility and to find a balance to all rights which is just and acceptable.
2. To create opportunities to develop the skills, attitudes, techniques and emotional acceptance of the concepts of cooperation and interdependence. To realize that these are radically different from those of competition and power to which we are accustomed. To make this part of the process of education.
3. To keep the unspoken promise made by teachers and parents to their children and to fulfill their unspoken expectations of us. And in order to do this, to create a living and learning environment which supports their inner strength to cope with the world and to make an impact on it.

Specific skills and attitudes

What are the attitudes and skills required?

- To develop a vision of the whole, not just a part of it.
- To develop an understanding of one's rights and obligations within the community.
- To see the community as a circle of interdependence rather than a hierarchy of dependency.
- To see peers and other community members as cooperators rather than competitors.
- This includes trusting and supporting the expertise of others.
- To see one's self as a member of the community in four important ways: to have a stake, to have a voice, to have responsibility, and to fulfill a specific task: to see the participation in the community as a whole, indeed, as a part of this task.
- To see one's self as a valuable and valued member of the community.

This also means an obligation to make responsible judgment openly and honestly, not secretly and anonymously. Anonymous opinions tend to be irresponsible because they do not have to be defended.

It means on the one hand an identification with the needs of others, an expectation of mutual goodwill, and on the other hand a realization of human limitations and that even though one should strive for it, there can be no perfection of judgment, expertise, behavior, and action.

It means a realization that the individual's protection becomes increased by cooperation, but also that no individual or community can provide absolute protection without risk. One attraction of the hierarchical structure is the illusion of absolute protection to be given by those in power to those under them.

It means daring to take risks for one's own convictions.

It means that the concept of obedience is replaced by a concept of responsibility.

It means that the end does not justify the means.

It means a commitment to trust in others, rather than distrust.

It means the realization that we can go far in learning these skills and attitudes but that we will never be perfect, and therefore never be satisfied.

It means an understanding that the processes of cooperation are complex and difficult, time-consuming, emotionally taxing, but allows the individual more freedom to grow in all directions, and at the same time have more real awareness and commitment to his immediate community and the world community of people.

The Role of Leadership

Within this structure not only the role of the members of the community but also that of the leadership (board of trustees, administrators) becomes differently defined. The trustees are the guardians of the philosophy, the administrators its chief implementers. This also requires different types of skills and attitudes on the part of the leadership. For this leadership is not based on the authority vested in the power on the top of the hierarchy but rather on the confidence of the community in the expertise and goodwill of the leaders. It requires the skills to establish open communication and respect in the constituency, as well as their legitimate participation in decision-making. Only those who are affected by a decision experience its consequences and therefore should participate in reaching it in some form and to the extent that they are able. It includes the obligation to be continually aware of the rights of each individual and maintain a balance between all of those individual rights.

It requires leadership which sees the members of the community as models for the children and sees the living environment and the overall atmosphere as part of the educational program for the child. It includes a commitment to mutual responsibility and therefore a realistic system of mutual accountability and evaluation. Such a philosophy can only function if it is expressed in the attitudes and feelings of the members of the community. These can only grow and develop if the governmental structure represents the philosophy. It includes a commitment to a pluralistic society, which means that the constituency, the leadership and the staff represent all racial, religious, and economic groups. It means carefully working toward a goal, which diminishes economic restrictions as far as realistically possible.

Our promise to children

The philosophy is a universal one but in our community it is applied specifically to the education of children and among them the gifted. What are the reasons for this?

A. Children are in many ways underprivileged because they are not able to speak for themselves and therefore need advocates. Such advocacy is an integral part of the philosophy of the school. This means a concern for the unconscious misuse of children by society, by certain educational approaches and within this imposed structure, by teachers and parents. In other words, society's expectations of children are not prompted by the child's real abilities and needs but by arbitrary goals set by the outside. Our school tries to set goals appropriate to the individual. Advocacy also includes awareness that the child is not an island, that bridges and connections need to be rebuilt without hurting his/her individuality.

B. It is even easier to misunderstand gifted children and to take advantage of them.

C. Children are our only hope for a brighter future and the future depends on them. Gifted children, who have a global point of view, might make even more of an impact on the

future. Every educator, every parent makes an unspoken promise to children and every child has unspoken expectations. The promise and the expectations are to give and receive the help to learn to cope with life, to learn to support and respect their environment and to enter a world which supports and respects them. Yet, as we look at the child and the world, we wonder about the future of both. How can they help each other survive? And the outlook is overwhelming for each is too complex for us to really understand. Do we leave to fate the unpredictable happenings of life? How can we prepare them for the unknown future? The future which will not be anything like the future which is now our present and past and for which we were so woefully unprepared in many ways.

Fulfilling the promise

How can we really fulfill our promise? How can we keep it when confronted with such complexity? We must be aware that all we can do is to make the honest attempt to give it the best we can and never to forget either the complexities or the extent of our promise. That promise means that we can never separate education and life; that we are always aware of their interdependence.

This then is a basic departure from the usual goal of education. Even though they profess otherwise, in most educational institutions life and education are considered two completely different things. This has limited the goals of education. Parents educate for entrance into school, first grade teachers educate for second grade, high school for college, and colleges for careers. In order to do this, educators have long ago created a curriculum separate from life. As the child moves through school, certain aspects of this curriculum have been designated to be appropriate for preparation for the “next step.” These have been lifted out and taught and tested and the child becomes defined in terms of his achievement in these areas. We are aware of his learning. Yet, while he learns he lives and life becomes the hidden curriculum. Does traditional education help him deal with these dilemmas? No. The priorities are elsewhere and in the meantime we break our promises and truly disappoint the children. How can we keep the promise? By taking the curriculum of life out of hiding.

The best preparation for life is living. Therefore the child should live in an environment where he can learn the skills of cooperation; where he can participate in decision-making and become aware of his complexities, where his point of view is respected, where he can take a risk, where there are channels of interaction, where he becomes aware of his power within the chain of interdependence. He also needs to be able to trust in the goodwill and expertise of the adults. He needs adults who can be his models and show him how to live in the world. And again, in order to do this the adults around him need to provide him with a well thought out philosophy of life and a living-learning environment which reflects it.

The child also needs adults who are experts in their field; who know how to help him learn the skills necessary to live in this world and stimulate him to develop his potential and interest in any direction for his future. They need a flexible learning environment which allows them to grow in their own style and manner within a framework of expectations adequate to their individual needs; they need open communications with the adults. Children need adults who are sensitive to the needs and interests of the individual, who value creative expression and physical development as much as academic and intellectual pursuits, adults who are informed and knowledgeable about child

developmental phases, adults who help him cope with the world as it is and equip him with skills, self-esteem, and motivation to change it.

Among many other typical traits, many gifted children have a strong sense of justice. They often have an unexpectedly accurate perception of life situations, but great difficulties dealing with them. They react to limitations, secretiveness, and deception. They need to learn in an atmosphere which is open and supportive. This means a realization of the fact that the individual teacher does not educate the child only, but by the impact of the whole environment. It can be called milieu education.

The Philosophy reflected in the program

- A. By the creation of the opportunities for the child to participate in his destiny to the extent he is developmentally able.
- B. Seeing the child as a valid member of the community and respecting his rights and responsibilities, perceptions and thoughts.
- C. Emphasizing all aspects of learning and growing, by not lifting out certain areas as more important and thus making others less important. If, for example, evaluation is indicated, all areas of growth should be evaluated, not only academic, because that immediately gives them priority, for they are being measured.
- D. By creating a program rich in opportunities for all kinds of growth: academic, creative, physical, social, moral, and opportunities for joy.
- E. By using an approach which stresses a global point of view and mutual responsibilities.
- F. By building into all subject matters an emphasis on complexities of life and the fact that every experience, every action, every perception has many causes and many effects; that in truth life is not a linear progression but an all-encompassing development in all directions.
- G. By including in all subject matter confrontations with moral decisions which grow out of out increased technical knowledge and our commitment to humanism.
- H. By emphasizing that the future is theirs to create.
- I. By emphasizing all areas of communication: openness, mutual understanding, verbal (language, literature, writing), non-verbal (dance, art, music), first-hand experience (travel, contact with people from different walks of life, off-campus jobs and instruction for older students, etc.). By involvement in the events of the moment: political, social, and cultural.
- J. By looking at the school as the world in microcosm where all of the conflicts, problems, solutions, interdependence, and chain reactions exist in a small way that one finds in the world at large. To use these opportunities to create learning experiences for the children and to enhance the scope of the community by letting students make an impact through student government structures and other channels.

One might argue that living in our community does not prepare for the so-called real world which is in most part competitive and not cooperative. However, a person who grows up in a cooperative world where he or she feels supported and respected develops a positive self-image and an understanding of who he is and his own strengths and potential as well as weaknesses. He develops an understanding that even though he lives in a competitive world he will not be defined by it. This person will be able to cope with it better, bring with him more internal resources than anyone who has never had a chance to make an impact and whose self-image depends only on climbing the ladder of success.

In conclusion

This philosophy is not a vague and sentimental idea of warmth and understanding. It represents not just a desire for happiness and a good life, although in a much broader sense these hopes are part of it. It actually is a relentlessly demanding concept, for its consequences are most complex, intellectually, emotionally, and practically. One is always in danger of contradicting it or losing it altogether without realizing it, by making small compromises which have a tendency to grow and yet may only solve the problem apparent at the moment. They may exclude more difficult solutions within the philosophy which are not found because they are not looked for. Built into this philosophy are both constancy and change. Its inherent goals remain constant while the implementation may change as life and times require. If constancy is not maintained or change is not occurring, it will result in a philosophy that is either mere lip service, irrelevant, or non-existent.