

Understanding Community of Inquiry in P4C through Petersian Lens of Education as Initiation

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Abstract

The present paper argues that R. S. Peters' concept of *education as initiation*, although not directly but indirectly influenced the 1970s pedagogical movement called Philosophy for Children (P4C). This conceptual indirect conformity of approaches between Peters and P4C lies in their shared analytic commitments. Both these approaches share the vision of education as cultivating rational autonomous individuals through procedures which are morally unobjectionable. Peters' philosophy of education provides the conceptual architecture, that is, education as initiation and the *criteria of education*, where P4C's pedagogical manifestation seems to rest. The paper argues that both frameworks share a foundational commitment to transmission of *worthwhile activity*, *rationality* and *cognitive element*, and the *ethical integrity of educational procedures*. The paper emphasises Peters' educational framework as the conceptual backdrop against which P4C can be understood. Although P4C does not draw direct influence from Peters, but both approaches carry the spirit of analytic revolution of philosophy.

In his seminal work *Ethics and Education* (1966), Peters lays down tripartite *criteria of education*, which are, the *normative criterion*: that education must involve the transmission of something *worthwhile*; the *cognitive criterion*: that education must involve *knowledge* and *understanding*, along with some *cognitive perspective* and not just *inert* facts; and the *procedural criterion*: that education must exclude the procedures which lacks the learner's *wittingness* and *voluntariness* and thereby rules out *indoctrination*. These three criteria serve as standard for deciding what activity should be considered as education. Further, Peters' philosophy of education advocates a general understanding of education as initiation into public traditions enshrined in the language, beliefs, concepts, rules and knowledge of a society. According to Peters, education as initiation is crucial for the development of the differentiated mind, for initiation into the existing worthwhile forms of knowledge provides children a platform to raise questions of genuine concern. A careful observation regarding Peters' account here evidently reveals its indirect influence on P4C. Philosophy for children (P4C), a pedagogical movement developed by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp in the United States in 1970s aimed at the development of *critical thinking* and *reasoning* in children by introducing philosophy in elementary school education.

The paper contends that reading P4C through a Petersian lens reveals substantial common grounds between the two influential educational approaches of the twentieth century. First, this paper observes that *conceptual clarity* as an educational aim is present in both P4C and Peters'



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educational philosophy. Peters put stress on the point that getting clearer on the meanings and usages of various educational terms and concepts such as 'education', 'teaching', 'indoctrination', and 'authority', before addressing the problems of education, is the primary task of philosophy of education. This very analytic concern for conceptual clarity is operationalised by P4C in the classroom. The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC), put forth a curriculum for the students from kindergarten to class 12, comprising of a series of books which consider discussions and analysis on various philosophical concepts. Second, drawing on Deweyan pragmatism and tools from analytic philosophy, P4C reconstructs the classroom as a *community of inquiry* where children collaboratively explore philosophical questions, dialogue and lived experiences. Conceptual clarity here is fostered by P4C's community of inquiry where children are free to ask and discuss their queries. P4C's community of inquiry is a reflection of Petersian concept of education as initiation. For Peters, to be educated is to be initiated into public traditions of inquiry. Similarly, a community of inquiry is a prerequisite of P4C programme which initiates children into the practice of inquiry. The community of inquiry functions as a public, rule-governed practice with standards of evidence and reasoning that children learn to share. Without initiating children into the community, P4C cannot proceed. Thus, both Peters and P4C hold that learning is not an atomistic individual experience, rather children's thinking and reasoning occur within traditions and languages that precede the child. Third, community in P4C emphasises the worthwhileness criterion of Peters' normative account. One primary condition for building a community of inquiry is the commitment to philosophical inquiry. The community must be committed to the procedures of inquiry and responsible search techniques, supported by evidence and reason. Peters sees education as transmission of worthwhile activity. However, he does not directly indicate any such worthwhile activity, which is philosophical inquiry in case of P4C. The community of inquiry deals with worthwhile activities in the form of raising *metaphysical*, *logical* and *ethical* questions. Therefore, with respect to Peters' normative criterion, the paper observes that the community of inquiry in P4C embodies Peters' notion of initiation into worthwhile activities, arguing on the ground that philosophical dialogue carries intrinsic value, cultivating capacities for rational autonomy which Peters regarded as constitutive of 'who an educated man' is. Fourth, the improvement of reasoning ability as one of the primary goals of P4C programme reflects Peters' cognitive criterion in it. The main purpose of P4C programme, as mentioned by Lipman, is to enable children to think for themselves. The paper shows that rational autonomy being a fundamental aim in P4C's educational redesign, along with its emphasis on critical thinking and conceptual exploration, philosophy for children programme parallels Peters' insistence that education must involve a broad cognitive perspective and understanding of how a given inquiry relates to wider domains of human knowledge and experience, rather than inert factual knowledge. Fifth, the paper argues that P4C's dialogical method operationalises Peters' procedural criterion by maintaining *avoidance of indoctrination* and *respect for children's opinion* as conditions for building a community of inquiry. Where Peters argued that education must rule out procedures which lack respect towards learners' understanding and voluntary assent, P4C formulates a concrete pedagogical framework, the community of inquiry, through which respect shown towards children's inquisitiveness, reason, and views, by treating them as rational agents capable of self-directed thoughts rather than as passive recipients of predetermined conclusions.



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Based on the current observations and discussions, the paper argues that from the perspective of Peters' philosophy of education, P4C programme can be considered as *initiation into community of inquiry* which satisfies all the three criteria of education given by Peters. This study has implications for cotemporary debates about critical thinking, curricula design, teacher education, ethical manner of pedagogical method, and the place of philosophical dialogue within formal schooling.

Keywords: Peters, P4C, education as initiation, criteria of education, community of inquiry