

# Raising the Bar: Love, the Community of Inquiry, and the Flourishing Life

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I've been working at the same elementary school in Hawai'i for nearly twenty years. First I was the school's philosophy for children (p4c Hawai'i) teacher, then I was a reading and special education teacher, and for the past decade I've been doing counseling. Throughout these years much has stayed the same. Some things, however, have changed dramatically.

A decade ago a lot was left to the individual judgment, initiative, and creativity of each teacher. "We may smile and nod our heads at what you say," I remember one teacher explaining to me in my moment of frustration as I struggled to convince a couple of her peers that philosophy for children was a really good thing, "but sometimes we just take what you give us and stick it in the bottom desk drawer." Back in those days each teacher had a fair amount of discretion about what to embrace and what to politely file away (never again to see the light of day).

The teacher's freedom to do such things has, to a considerable extent, been curtailed. Many things, nowadays, cannot be stuck in the bottom desk drawer. A set of state standards have been created and are not to be ignored. Nor can one simply file away the calls for "accountability," the demands that our school must "raise the bar," or the consequences of the high-stakes tests which define our success. The educational climate at our school, and I suspect at many others, has indeed changed.

Nearly ten years ago, I argued in my doctoral dissertation that philosophy for children and its pedagogy of the community of inquiry is good for kids. I spoke a lot about Vygotsky, philosophical inquiry, and how empowering children to think well is vital to the essential task of cultivating good judgment.<sup>1</sup>

In some ways I think I got it right. I still whole-heartedly believe in the power of philosophical inquiry. But I've also come to realize that there is a very important something else that makes the "community of inquiry" approach so valuable. What's so important about the idea of community of inquiry,

especially in this day and age, isn't just the *inquiry* part, it's the *community* part.

My thesis is this: In today's American educational climate, with its laser-sharp focus on "accountability" and "raising the bar," the *community* aspect of "community of inquiry" is more important than ever. It is so important because it purposefully cultivates what many of today's schools are unwisely leaving too far on the fringe: the loving, caring, fun-filled human relationships which are at the core of human flourishing.

In order to support this thesis I will endeavor to establish four points. First, I will argue that loving human relationships are at the heart of a well-lived life. Second, I will contend that schools properly ought to concern themselves with the cultivation of such relationships. Third, I will propose the controversial claim that schools aren't doing a good enough job of addressing this concern. And finally, I will assert that P4C's "community of inquiry" approach is an effective means for cultivating such relationships.

## **BELIEF #1: Loving human relationships are essential to a flourishing life.**

Oftentimes I begin my college ethics course with a single quote: "It is remarkable how many people sacrifice the really good stuff for that which is not as important."<sup>2</sup> Do you think, I ask the students, that this is true? Most of them believe that it is. Then I raise another question: But what do you mean by "the really good stuff"? What is at the heart of a well-lived, flourishing human life?

I have, over the course of the past years, heard numerous answers to this question. Many of them are very wise responses, for nearly all of my college students are military folks who not only have overcome substantial hardships in life but have also gained the nearly unimaginable insight that comes from facing death in war. There is, of course, considerable variety in the answers that I hear from so many voices. But there is a common thread; a single, pivotal

answer which arises again and again and again. What is the really good stuff? Quite simply, most of my students respond, it is *love*.

By “love” the students do not simply mean a sort of romantic or sexual love. Rather, more broadly, they mean the caring sort of love that a parent shares with a child, a spouse shares with his or her partner, buddies share over a beer, or even the kindness that is exchanged by near strangers. Sometimes they cite Morrie Schwartz: “Love,” he says, “is so supremely important... Without love, we are birds with broken wings” (Albom, 1997, pp. 91, 92). Knowing how to give love and, so too, knowing how to receive love, they contend, is among the very best of stuff.

This view is certainly widely accepted. It is also an idea that enjoys a long and varied history of philosophical support. Buddha speaks much of the ideal of cultivating loving-kindness (*Mettā*). The Christian Bible commands: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>3</sup> Kant speaks of treating others never as means but always as ends. And even Sartre tells us that others are subjects and never objects. Many philosophers, like most other people, tell us that treating others with love—be it a passionate love or at least a less intense good-willed respect—is essentially connected to the business of living well.

## **BELIEF #2: Our schools ought to purposefully cultivate loving human relationships.**

“We parents,” a father once told a gathering of counselors, “want our children to be smart.” “But even more than this,” he continued, “we want them to be good.” This dad, I think, has got it right. Our schools should help our children to *be* good. They should also help our children to *live* good lives. They should equip and empower our children not just to live, but to *live well*.

Love, we argued, is inextricably bound up with living well. This being the case, then, schools should—if they are to follow this father’s advice—strive to purposefully cultivate loving human relationships.

But not everyone would agree with this contention. Many people believe that, while there are certainly some children who do not experience enough love, it shouldn’t be the job of the school to address this emotional deficit. Let the family, the church, and the social services people deal with that; the proper business of the schools ought to be simply to teach kids the facts and empower them with academic skills.

I agree, to a certain extent, with this counter-argument. Giving love is a global responsibility. It ought not, by any means, be the responsibility of the school alone. But from this fact it does not follow that our schools should have *no* responsibility in this area. Indeed, I see three compelling reasons why our schools ought to be seriously concerned with the cultivation of loving relationships.

The first reason is because cultivating such relationships will help schools to achieve their academic goals. Abraham Maslow theorized that there exists a hierarchy of human needs. If an individual’s underlying physical, social, and emotional needs are not met, she will not be fully ready to grow, learn, and actualize herself.

Oftentimes these underlying needs of students are not met. One such student who I’ve encountered in my counseling work is Carolyn. “Carolyn,” as I’ll call her here, was a curious, intelligent, and strong-willed kindergartener. She had, it was readily apparent to anyone who met her, a world of talent. Unfortunately, however, she also had a big problem. The adults in her life were a mess. Struggling with the effects of violence, homelessness, addiction, and not being loved themselves, Carolyn’s caregivers were in no position to give Carolyn the full dose of love that she so desperately needed. I’ll never forget Carolyn’s eyes gazing into mine and her words, too full of significance to be coming from a five-year old, to me: “We need help.”

Carolyn felt stressed out, worried, scared, and unloved. How, in such a condition, could she keep her mind on her studies and be fully ready to learn? She couldn’t. Academic success rests, in no small part, upon a firm social and emotional foundation. Wishing that schools didn’t have to work on this foundation won’t change the facts; many children are not loved enough and structures built on shoddy foundations will eventually topple. The purposeful cultivation of loving relationships is a patch that should be liberally used.

The second reason why our schools ought to be concerned with the cultivation of loving relationships is because it contributes to the creation of a safe and harmonious society. There’s a name for very intelligent, very well-taught, but unloving people: clever criminals. Angry, hurting, unloved, and unloving people who have been armed with the power to act effectively are not good for society. Such individuals, as Jackson puts it, are likely to employ what they’ve learned not as useful *tools* but rather as harmful

*weapons*. Our schools have a societal obligation to try, as best as they can, to ensure that this does not happen.

The third reason why our schools ought to be concerned with cultivating loving relationships is because we owe it to each individual child. I put a lot of time and energy into helping Carolyn. After some months, one of my co-workers said to me, not unkindly, that I was spending *too* much time and energy trying to help her. You need to move on, he said. She's a lost cause. I certainly see the logic in his point; when there are limited resources, you have to make hard choices. But ultimately I'm more convinced by the counter-point. What if Carolyn was *your* daughter? What if she was *you*? Behind the No Child Left Behind policy, whatever its faults, is the admirable notion that you should never give up on an individual. Never mind the calls for accountability and high test scores, the bottom line is this: Regardless of whether the problem is a broken heart or an uninformed mind, our responsibility is still to help children to live flourishing lives. Our duty to cherish others demands that we meet each child where he or she is at.

For these reasons, then, I contend that one of the first and most important aims of our schools ought to be to deliberately create environments which are splendidly replete in caring, loving interpersonal relationships. We ought to purposefully strive—especially for those children who suffer from a deficit of love—to fill each student's school day with numerous opportunities to receive and, so too, to give love.

### **Belief #3: Our schools are not focusing enough on the cultivation of loving human relationships.**

There is, at my elementary school, considerable discussion about the high-stakes test scores. The scores, broken down by grade, and even by teacher, are projected up onto the screen. We take note of where the scores are high and where they are low. We wonder why one grade, or teacher, has higher scores and another has lower scores. We brainstorm about what we can do to get the borderline students to pass.

This recurring exercise saddens me. I look around the room and I see so many smart, caring individuals. Couldn't we be applying all this talent, I wonder, to other things? Yes, I get it; it is important for students to develop the sorts of literacy and mathematical skills that these tests measure. But isn't there much more to living the flourishing life than just this? Aren't we focusing all of our energy on a very narrow

set of skills and, in the process of doing so, ignoring much of the really good stuff?

Admittedly, my experience and knowledge is largely limited to my school. But, based on what I've read and who I've talked to, it seems to me that this narrowing that I'm observing is a typical consequence of our nation's emphasis on high-stakes tests. It seems to me, to evoke Freud and to recall a peculiar condition which once plagued philosophy, that the American educational system has developed an acute case of "physics envy." Wanting to satisfy the increasingly deafening cries for accountability and measurable progress, educators have turned to high-stakes exams and the "hard," pseudo-scientific data which such tests provide. Validation, then, becomes largely dependent on good test scores. Fueled by the oftentimes immense pressure to be "successful," the desire for this validation influences, often heavily so, educators' choices about what to teach and how to teach. It is, as Jackson puts it, a classic case of the tail wagging the dog; the means of assessment determine the content and form of instruction.

The problem with all of this, of course, is that many of the most important virtues—such as being able to give and to receive love—cannot be measured by a standardized test. And so the search for validation becomes an exercise in *narrowing*. As I have observed at my school, educators focus with laser-like precision on certain skills and, precisely in so doing, leave much of what is really important out on the fringe.

In saying this I am not claiming that educators teach only to the test. Being good and caring people, most educators naturally take time to address the broader set of skills and dispositions which are essential to human flourishing.

Nor am I claiming that educators have no awareness that there is more to life than what shows up on a high-stakes test. I remember attending a complex-wide training. The theme for the day, we were told, was to consider the importance of "rigor, relevance, and relationships."<sup>4</sup> Then a half dozen high school students stood up to address the hundreds of gathered teachers. Each spoke, in his or her own way, about the importance of their relationships with caring teachers; this, to them, was at the core of education. But there was one problem: I'm not sure if anyone really heard them. Throughout the rest of the day I heard *a lot* more about rigor and relevance. I didn't, however, hear another single

word uttered about the importance of relationships. We make mention of the good stuff, but then, in our preoccupation, we forget about it.

What I am claiming, then, is that our preoccupation with accountability, validation, and test scores distracts us from many of the most important ingredients of the flourishing life. It narrows the scope of our moral imagination and leads us to ignore much of what matters most. Ironically enough, by trying so hard to “raise the bar” we are, in fact, lowering it; we’re doing a really good job of shooting at a lesser target.

This needs to change. We need to aim ambitiously and squarely at equipping our students to live love-filled, flourishing lives. This is a moral imperative because, as I observe most every day, our current state of preoccupation is causing significant pain to both teachers and their students.

Even if they can’t always articulate it, I think many teachers, in their hearts, are aware of this gap between what our schools are doing and what they should be doing. One day a veteran teacher looked at me, gave a weary sigh, and said “I got into teaching because I care about kids, but now I feel like I don’t have time to do that.” Many teachers would like to aim higher, but they lack the freedom to do so. Depersonalized by expectations that they do what everyone else is doing and harried by too many tasks, they feel discouraged because they’re being pulled away from what they were called to do.

Students, I’ve found, have less trouble articulating their distress. Their problem, however, is getting anybody to listen them. “You have no idea,” a student recently wrote to me, “how hard my life is.” She’s right; we oftentimes, in the hustle and bustle of the day, see children as objects to be instructed rather than subjects to be heard. But if you listen carefully, you’ll hear their voices, surprisingly unified and loud: “It’s very nice that you want to teach us all of these things. But you grown-ups are so busy preparing us for tomorrow that you’re forgetting that we need your help to make it through today.” In our preoccupation, in our quest to “raise the bar,” we are failing to hear the cries of those, like Carolyn, whose concerns go far beyond higher test scores: “We need help,” they say.

#### **BELIEF #4: Philosophy for Children is an effective means to cultivate loving human relationships.**

I think that our approach *should* change. I also think that it *can* change. We can broaden our focus and teach in a way that deliberately cultivates not only loving relationships

but also the other virtues that are essential to living well. *How* can we do this? Once again, my answer arises from an experience with a student.

“Ann,” as I’ll call her here, was a fourth grader who is one of the most talented people I’ve ever met. She was a top-notch student and was good at just about everything. Except, she too, had a problem: She felt so sad and alone because she was surrounded by family members who were altogether preoccupied by their own anger, grief, and pain. One day, as we sat talking, I observed that, for all her strengths, she wasn’t a very kind person. She looked at me and said with a quiet and thoughtful voice: “How am I supposed to be kind if I don’t even know what kindness is?”

Ann raises the million dollar question. How do you cultivate skills and dispositions in an environment—be it a home or a school—that is at odds with such an effort? The answer, quite simply, is to change the environment. Ann will learn kindness not by us telling her to be kind, but by being immersed in an environment where love is consistently practiced, expressed, modeled, and thereby learned. It’s the idea of the hidden curriculum: Children learn not only from *what* we tell them, but, perhaps even more significantly, from *how* we relate with them.

Now I loop back to where I began a decade ago. Thinking, Vygotsky argued, is internalized speech (1978, pp. 56,57). You can cultivate intellectual skills and dispositions, P4C founder Matthew Lipman realized, by creating a community of inquiry where these skills and dispositions are consistently expressed and modeled through speech.<sup>5</sup> The same thing, I now argue, goes for social, emotional, and ethical capacities. As the generations-old advice to choose your friends carefully attests to, one can create a culture which leads children not only to be smart but also to be kind, loving, happy, and good.

The implications of this point are both simple and profound. You can prepare a child to live well tomorrow by living well with them today. Certainly, if the good life sometimes calls, as it seems to do, for diligently buckling-down and doing what you don’t want to do, then we should put students in an environment where this sometimes happens. But just as surely, and this is the part that we seem to be forgetting, if being able to give and to receive love is part of the flourishing life, then children need to spend time in loving, laughter-filled places. We need to purposefully create loving places—with the same amount of forethought and care that

we devote to designing other instructional strategies—for all children and especially for children who do not experience love often enough.

There are, to be sure, a variety of ways to craft such an environment. Perhaps the simplest and most effective strategy would be to provide teachers with the freedom to be true to themselves. I do believe, however, that an exemplary example of such a way is P4C's Community of Inquiry. The Community of Inquiry is, as Jackson puts it, "a safe place" "where people care about each other and show that they do" (1998).

That the Community of Inquiry can be a place that not only sharpens the mind but purposefully cultivates loving relationships is a truth that my experience has repeatedly affirmed. Certain, as we say in Hawaii, "chicken-skin" moments stand out in my mind; times when I witnessed, in awe, the loving power of the community of inquiry.

I remember doing p4c with a class of sixth graders. Whenever they had p4c, the students would close all the windows and doors. "Philosophy time is our time," they would say, "we don't want anyone to bother us." One week the students decided to talk about the following question: Should you hang out with your boy/girlfriend or your friends? Of course, they laughed, you should hang out with your boyfriend or girlfriend. That is, most everyone agreed, the cool thing to do. Then a girl who hardly ever spoke raised her hand. "I think that you're better off hanging out with your friends," she quietly said, "because of domestic violence and stuff."

You could have heard a pin drop. "Uncle," the other students perhaps knew, beat up the girl's mom. Maybe he beat her too. The tone of the inquiry changed. No more joking. No more trying to seem cool. You could feel their love and support wrapping around the quiet girl like a warm blanket. In a genuine community people care about each other and show that they do.

I vividly remember another discussion. This one was a college class full of military folks. It was the last class and we were nearing the climax of a movie that the students had been eagerly anticipating. Then one of my students walked to the back of the darkened room and sat down next to me. "Sorry I've been absent," he whispered. "Do you know," he said, "the tsunami that hit American Samoa?" Yes, I said with a sinking feeling because I knew that the soldier was from there. "Well," he continued, "my 5 year-old niece was

killed by it." Then his voice cracked: "Dr. Yos, I have a question: Why would God let such a beautiful, innocent child die? Can we talk about it in our community of inquiry?"

We stopped the movie. We got in our circle and got out our community ball. The soldier, his voice again cracking with pain, asked his question. Some students were quiet. Some gently cried. And then, one by one, they began to give their answers. Some talked about God having a plan, some talked about heaven needing a new angel, some said that, sadly enough, is just what life dealt us, and some said they simply didn't know.

*What* the community answered, in each of these cases, wasn't necessarily clear. The students didn't arrive at definitive solutions as to why men beat women or innocent children have to die. But there was no doubt about *how* the community members were relating to one another. The giving and receiving of love was being lived, experienced, modeled, and most powerfully taught. "This class," one of my university students wrote on her evaluation, "is my salvation." She understood what many of us forget: Education is, in large part, about relationships.

Fun, it sometimes seems, has become a dirty word in today's schools. Spending time caring for one another and appreciating each other's company is oftentimes considered to be "off-task" time. But it is only "off-task" if we define the task too narrowly. Giving love to one another, receiving love from one another, having fun together, and the rest of the really good stuff: These are not superfluous things but are, indeed, essential pieces of the flourishing life. If we are to take seriously our task of preparing our children for such a life and to truly "raise the bar," then we must purposefully strive to create environments, like P4C's Community of Inquiry, where these valuable qualities are lived and, so, taught.

A decade ago I argued that the "community" in the Community of Inquiry has tremendous instrumental value. Community precedes inquiry. Far from being at odds with intellectual rigor, the genuine relationships of the community make such rigor possible. Now, what I realize is that this aspect of community is not only of instrumental value. It is, in and of itself, of great intrinsic value. Indeed, forming caring and loving relationships with people does not merely *lead to* the good life; it, in part, *is constitutive* of the good life. As Mahatma Gandhi said: you must be

the change you want to see in the world. If our children are to live well, if our society is to be harmonious, then our schools, most definitely, ought to be places full of love, joy, and laughter.

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- Jackson, T. (1998). *Philosophy in the Schools Project: A Guide for Teachers*. Unpublished Manuscript.

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Yos, Thomas. *Educating for Good Judgment*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI, 2002.
  - <sup>2</sup> This is my modification of a quote that I heard on Todd Wilson's *Help! I'm Married to a Homeschooling Mom* (audio book). [www.familymanweb.com](http://www.familymanweb.com), 2007.
  - <sup>3</sup> See James 2:8. *The Holy Bible (New King James Version)*, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1982.
  - <sup>4</sup> These terms, it seems, originate from the research of the International Center for Leadership in Education. See <http://www.leadered.com/trr.html>.
  - <sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Lipman, Matthew. *Natasha: Vygotskian Dialogues*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996. pp. 104–105.
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