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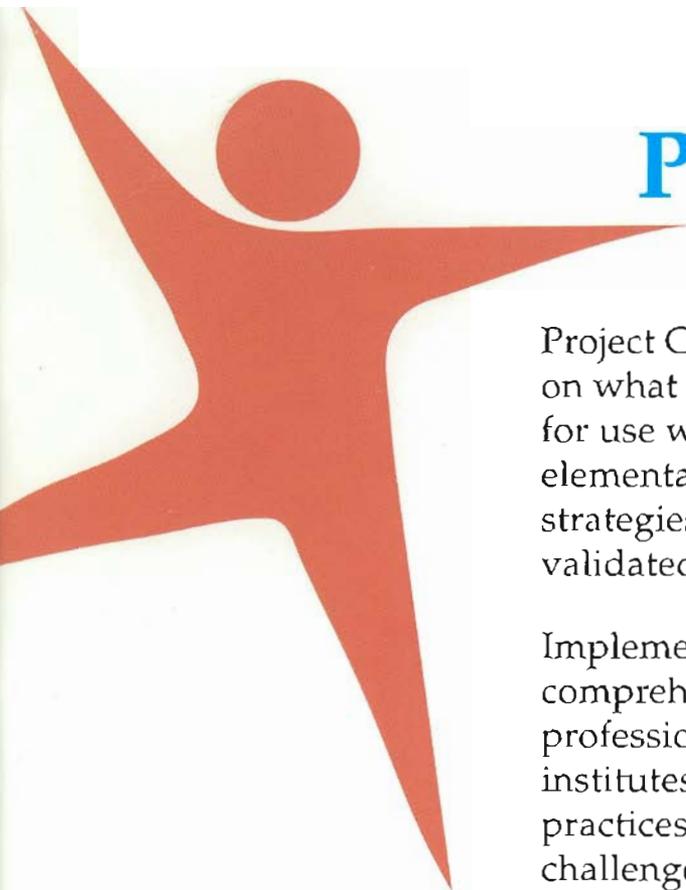
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Special Issue on Affective Development



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Special Issue on Affective Development

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Publication Staff

Catherine Twomey Fosnot
Executive Editor

Sharon Ford Schattgen
Managing Editor

Theresa A. Foltz
Graphic Designer and
Publication Coordinator

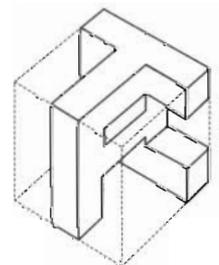
Tracy Jensen
Advertising Coordinator

Julie Brogno
Distribution Coordinator

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A Letter from the President of the Association for



Dear Members:

Writing this letter is my first official task as your new president of ACT. I take pride in following in the footsteps of Paul Ammon, my predecessor, who led this organization through its recent period of growth and change. It is an honor and privilege to have the opportunity to work with an esteemed Board of

Directors and a membership that shares our enthusiasm and interest in identifying and disseminating effective constructivist practices in both the professional

cultures of teachers and the learning environments of children. On behalf of the Board and membership, I want to thank Cathy Twomey Fosnot, Herbert Seignoret, and their wonderful staff and volunteers for organizing a terrific ACT Conference in New York. Despite terrible weather conditions, there was strong attendance, and the conference succeeded in offering lively presentations and dialogue. The evaluations indicate that participants were impressed by the incredible line-up of keynote speakers and found their presentations both rich and provocative. Conferees enjoyed the wine and cheese reception and jazz band performance as well as the poster sessions showing studies of children's work in mathematics.

The Board members and I will continue to reflect on evaluation comments as we move on to the planning for next year's conference. If any of you have suggestions in that regard, now is the time to contact me or any of the Board members with your ideas. The Call for Proposals and an announcement about the dates and location of the next conference are forthcoming.

Let me back up for a minute to briefly introduce myself and express some concerns that I believe our organization must address in the years to come. I am Professor of Education at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri. My field of specialty is early childhood education. If you have been reading the latest issues of *The Constructivist*, you know that I come from a state where there is a strong movement of constructivist education known as Project Construct. I am fortunate to have been involved in the history and development of this statewide reform initiative and in another constructivist education project in St. Louis that supports teachers in the study and adaptation of the Reggio Emilia approach to early education. I cannot help but marvel at the growth of such movements over the past decade, in both my home state and across the country. Constructivism is no longer an obscure term known only to a few. In some ways, this is both good news and bad news. As the term becomes more familiar in

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educational circles and as constructivist teaching practices are being adopted, adapted, and re-invented from preschool through higher education, there is growing potential for misrepresentation, oversimplification, and distortion of principles and practices. Dolk, Uittenbogaard, and Fosnot share this concern in their article published in the summer 1996 issue of *The Constructivist*, "As constructivism has begun to inform pedagogy, often only surface pedagogical principles have been employed, such as collaborative learning, the use of manipulatives, real world contexts, or questioning rather than lecture" (p. 14). William Damon (1995) paints an even grimmer picture of the distorted representations of constructivist teaching as he discusses misconceptions of modern times in his recent book, *Greater Expectations*. He laments that "current educational applications of these ideas look more like the passionate, one-sided sentiments of Jean Jacques Rousseau than the careful and complex science of Jean Piaget and his developmental followers" (p. 103). Clearly, our organization must take initiative to counter such perceptions by refuting the misrepresentations that contribute to them and by continuing to promote and articulate practices that are grounded in serious study of cognitive learning theory and informed by ongoing observation and study of learners.

The Association for Constructivist Teaching is dedicated to promoting dialogue and debate among educators

who seek in-depth understanding of cognitive learning theory. The quality of the articles that have been published in *The Constructivist* certainly attest to this dedication. Our annual conference offers face-to-face opportunities for our membership to learn and exchange views with some of the best minds in the country. One of my hopes for the future is for ACT to promote more interactive opportunities for our membership to share and coordinate perspectives, challenge each other's thinking, identify and disseminate effective constructivist practices. I encourage you to check out our website (<http://www.users.interport.net/~roots/act.html>) and help the Board to consider its possible uses for promoting communication and active participation among members. We are in the process of exploring ways to develop more interactive uses of the website and may announce some of these in the next issue of *The Constructivist*. In the meantime, we welcome your contributions and suggestions about new directions for the use of this technology as well as additions and updates to the resources that are currently listed.

—Brenda Fyfe

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- Damon, W. (1995). *Greater expectations: Overcoming the culture of indulgence in our homes and schools*. New York: Free Press.
- Dolk, M., Uittenbogaard, W., & Fosnot, C. T. (1996). Teaching to facilitate progressive schematization. *The Constructivist*, 11(1), 10–14.

A Letter from the Guest Editor of this issue

Dear Readers,

I am pleased to have the opportunity to assemble and edit this special issue of *The Constructivist*, which focuses on affective development and touches on the related issues of emotional, social, and moral development. For a number of years, I have been concerned that we as constructivists have focused primarily on the cognitive aspects of children's intellectual development and paid less attention to the affective aspects. In my view, this

runs the risk of leaving us incomplete in our construction of constructivism. We all know that affectivity (feelings, interests, and values) and emotions are terribly important.

Piaget, one of our early beacons, claimed throughout his career that intellectual development had a cognitive as well as an affective component. Though Piaget studied primarily the cognitive aspects of development, he asserted the importance of affectivity as well as cognition in intellectual development and came to conceptualize affect in a way that was novel. Rather than viewing feeling and values as somehow fixed or given, he came to view affectivity as developed and in continuous construction by the individual. In his theory, the cognitive and affective aspects are

interwoven; they inform and influence the other and are both necessary for what we call intellectual development. To constructivists, this tenet should make perfect sense. We take Piaget's formulation as a starting point for both understanding the role of affective construction in children's lives and for the opportunities this understanding affords us as teachers and parents, which we might otherwise overlook.

My article attempts to outline aspects of Piaget's theory of affective development sufficiently to create a little "disequilibrium" and lend some validity to the notion that affectivity develops and is always under construction. I also explore some of the ways in which I feel an understanding of affectivity can be utilized by educators. The interview with Alfie Kohn, a keynote speaker at the 1997 ACT conference, while not explicitly about affectivity and emotions, touches on vital topics such as character education, moral development, autonomy, interests, community, and interpersonal relations, which are all, at their cores, more affective than cognitive. I anticipate that you will find this conversation lively and provocative. Kohn is one of the very best at stating the case for constructivism and not shying away from tough questions. Henry Dupont is a teacher, clinical psychologist, author, and long-time



of *The Constructivist*

constructivist. His excellent book, *Emotional Development, Theory and Application: A Neo-Piagetian Perspective*, is a major constructivist interpretation of both affective and emotional development. Dupont's article in this issue, "Feelings and Emotions at School," illustrates, through the story of one child, construction of affect and emotions as part of successfully working with a "difficult" child.

We are pleased to be able to share some of our ideas with you and hopefully contribute to the discussion of what constructivism and responsible education are. We encourage readers to share their ideas, questions, and experiences by writing articles or letters and sending them to the Executive Editor: Catherine Twomey Fosnot, The City College of New York, NAC 3/209a, 138th Street and Convent Avenue, New York, New York 10031.

—Barry Wadsworth

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Is There a Logic to Feelings?

Barry Wadsworth

Guest editor and ACT founding board member Barry Wadsworth sets the tone for this special issue with a thorough explication of the role of affect in intellectual development, addressing theory as well as practice.

Without appropriate concern for the affective aspects of school life, the intellectual growth we seek for students will continue all too often to bear bitter fruit.

One of the things I do with every group of students, teachers, or parents that I work with is to ask them to describe, in a few words, the characteristics of the very best teacher they ever had, and, similarly, the characteristics of the very worst teacher they have ever had. We share these lists as a group. The results are always remarkably uniform. Best teachers are frequently characterized by terms such as these: caring, patient, expected a lot of me, likes, respects, listens to, and helps students. Worst teachers are most frequently characterized like this: is harsh and uncaring, is incompetent, is unfair, does not like or respect students, and belittles students. It is rare that best teachers are identified primarily by their own knowledge and learning or expertise in their subject matter. Best teachers are reported to be those who establish positive relations, mutual-respect relations, with students and demonstrate to them concern for their welfare. Worst teachers are just the opposite, and subject matter expertise, if present, does not help them. The moral of the story seems clear: caring for, respecting, and nurturing students is important. How students feel about their teachers impacts their development. Relationships count. Expectations, in a respectful context,

count. While none of this is shockingly new, this simple exercise of listening to peers' descriptions of best and worst teachers usually gets the attention of a group of pre-service teachers, teachers, or parents.

To me it is remarkable how strongly and uniformly people feel their most profitable educational experiences are attributable primarily to affective characteristics and not cognitive ones. In this age of educational reform, emphasis is most frequently placed on curriculum revision, technology, and testing. I would suggest that without appropriate concern for the affective aspects of school life, the intellectual growth we seek for students will continue all too often to bear bitter fruit. Constructivists who are concerned exclusively about cognition are not immune on this issue.

I became a fledgling constructivist in graduate school in the middle 1960s, when, as a middle-school teacher, I began to see a match between what I had observed about children and what Piaget seemed to be saying about intellectual development and children's learning. From that moment, Piaget's theory has provided me with an evolving guide through the thicket of thinking about educational practice. While I have many valued guides through which I

filter my thinking about regular and special education, Piaget's theory has been and remains the most powerful and useful.

Needless to say, my construction of Piaget's theory today is quite different than it was in the 1960s. Over the years, I have continued to read and re-read Piaget's writings, those of other Piagetians, and those of critics and other educational pundits. Construction is never at a true endpoint. A few years ago, I became mindful of Piaget's repeated comment that all intellectual development had cognitive and affective components. For some time, I had read those statements and wondered why he talked about affectivity in relation to intellectual development, when it seemed that he treated the cognitive aspects of intellectual development as the focus of his work. It finally dawned on me, slow that I was, that Piaget really meant that affectivity played a co-equal role with the cognitive in intellectual development and learning. Piaget had restricted his research and writing primarily to the cognitive aspects of development, and I had incorrectly taken this to mean that the cognitive alone was worthy of my attention. Do we ever fully escape egocentrism? My concern is that many, if not most, constructivists still harbor some egocentrism of this sort.

The purpose here is to attempt to bring some focus to affectivity and to suggest why it might benefit our practice to pay

more attention to it—in short, to create some disequilibrium (affective), which I believe is always a good thing. Affectivity and emotions are closely linked, though different. All emotions are feelings, and feelings play a primary role in the development of one's emotions. The relationship between affective development and emotional development is clearly important, though it is not my focus here (see Dupont, 1994, for this discussion).

The Role of Affectivity in Intellectual Development

For Piaget, affectivity includes needs, feelings, interests, and values. Piaget has continuously argued that intellectual development has both cognitive and affective components—that both are always present in every intellectual act and that they are not separable in their functioning. Piaget (1981) viewed affectivity as playing two primary roles in development. It is the gas in the car, so to speak. Feelings, interests, and values activate and power the system and are the source of energy that fuels intellectual activity, development, and knowledge construction. It can speed up or slow down the rate of development and influence its contents, but it cannot modify its structures.

Intellectual development has both cognitive and affective components—both are always present in every intellectual act.

The second function of affect (interests, feelings, etc.) in Piaget's view is selection of what becomes grist for the mill of intellectual development. It is not the case that all experiences we have are automatically incorporated into knowledge construction and acted on and assimilated. That is, we and our students find many experiences non-engaging or painful, and we seek to avoid them. They are not assimilated into intellectual functioning. There necessarily is evaluation and selection of what we let in; there is a gate, so to speak, and there is a gatekeeper. The gatekeeper decides what experiences get acted on, are assimilated, and become part of the process and product of knowledge construction. The primary tools for the affective evaluation of the gatekeeper are those related to one's constructed values. Values are experienced in consciousness as feelings. Thus, feelings and values, along with interests, are seen as the aspects of affectivity that are most central to construction of knowledge and adapted action.

Piaget (1981, p. 1) stated that "more than half of those students who are weak in math-

ematics probably owe their weakness to an affective block.” For those students who hate math and experience great anxiety when confronted with numbers, not to mention a math test, the gate is usually closed. When the gatekeeper sees numbers, the gate is not only closed, but for those who hate math with a real passion, the gate is padlocked multiple times, and, in the worst cases, is welded shut. The internal affective selection device works most effectively. The content of intellectual development is clearly influenced. It is the feelings about mathematics that, for too many, bar the way to further construction of knowledge in mathematics (pick your content area). At the selection of behavior level, it’s not just an issue of what we know, it’s an issue of how we feel.

Affective Development

Most of us are familiar with Piaget’s cognitive stages along the continuum of development. In Piaget’s view, affectivity develops, and its path of development parallels and is intertwined with that of cognitive development. Piaget (1963) wrote:

... let us note that there are stages of affective development. They are less well characterized than the stages of intelligence [cognitive

stages], but from the point of view of major developmental periods, there is a correspondence between the two evolutions because they are in

Feelings, interests, and values are the source of energy that fuels intellectual activity, development, and knowledge construction.

part solidary with one another. (p. 16)

As there is cognitive knowledge and it is constructed, so there is affective knowledge and it is constructed. Each new advance on each plane allows new possibilities. For example, we know that children typically begin to become cognitively capable of internal representation around the age of two. Spoken language and other forms of representation are under construction. By the age of five, we typically see evidence that children are beginning to construct the notion of conservation, coming to understand that quantities do not change when their arrangement changes. These two constructed cognitive capabilities, internal representation and conservation, dramatically alter the possibilities for development of affect. Piaget (1981) writes:

From the affective point of view, ... transformations are seen. Representation and language allow feelings to

acquire a stability and duration they have not had before. Affects, by being represented, last beyond the presence of the object that excites them. This ability to conserve feelings, so to speak, makes interpersonal and moral feelings possible and allows the latter [moral feelings] to be organized into normative scales of values. (p. 44)

Past feelings are represented and remembered. Thus, subsequent encounters with objects and persons evoke affective reactions based not solely on the immediate encounter itself, but they also involve the remembered feelings of prior encounters. Current feelings are constructed from past remembered feelings as well as current experience. Representation of prior affects thus allows for continuation or continuity of affective reactions over time. In addition, conserved feelings begin to take on the characteristics of values, more or less permanent feelings. For Piaget, construction and reconstruction of values are derived from feelings. Feelings are derived from fundamental needs (Dupont, 1994; Piaget, 1981; Wadsworth, 1996). This advance in affect also opens up new possibilities for increasingly stable interpersonal and social relations.

Moral Feelings

For Piaget, moral feelings are “... a particular instance of the construction of affective schemes” (1981, p. 52). Moral

feelings and moral values begin to emerge in construction after the child's conservation of feelings. Piaget conceived of morality in its most developed form as based on respect for persons rather than respect for rules. On the other hand, children's moral reasoning moves from an initial respect for rules and authority toward a morality based on respect for people; from unilateral respect to mutual respect.

Relations Among Children: Cooperation

Piaget attached clear importance to the social life and social relations among children for cognitive and affective development, particularly after representation and conservation emerge. Because children's relations are among equals (or at least potentially so), cooperation among peers and valuing of cooperation become real possibilities. While partially socialized behavior is evident earlier, Piaget believed that around ages seven or eight, with preoperational egocentrism well in retreat, there is usually systematic progress in (or at least the possibility of) cooperation. With cooperation emerging, there is the opportunity for development of real mutual-respect relations among peers. Mutual-respect relations are characterized by reciprocity of thought and constructed values between people who view each other as equals. These relations are freely

chosen (autonomous), and they require construction of shared values, particularly with regard to interpersonal exchanges. Each evaluates the other by these commonly held values. There is a willingness and ability to take the other's point of view (Piaget, 1963). Values engender a sense of obligation to one's values. To act in opposition to one's constructed values is a contradiction. Similarly, mutual-respect relations, because they always involve shared values among equals, engender a sense of obligation and openness to those one respects and with whom one shares values. Mutual-respect relations allow for children to reflect on the views of others they respect and potentially alter their own constructions and values as a consequence of the disequilibrium that these interactions evoke. This may be what cooperative learning seeks.

While young (concrete operational) children develop relations of respect with peers, they typically are not able to do so at the same time with adults. Because children do not yet feel equal to adults, their interactions and relations with adults typically continue for some time to be based on unilateral respect. Later, when children come to feel equal to adults, relations with adults (including teachers) that are based on mutual respect become possible (and desirable).

During preoperational development, values and feelings begin to be conserved and thus remem-

bered from event to event and come to take on increased permanence and the quality of values. One's constructed values are the source of moral feelings in Piaget's construction. During concrete-operational development, values, including moral feelings, become coordinated and come to constitute a system that parallels logical reasoning (operations). This affective system of conserved values *implies a logic of feelings* (Piaget, 1981), such that feelings can be viewed rationally—a system of coherent values. The system of values is comprised further by the development of what Piaget called the will, autonomy, and mutual-respect relations.

Will. One has two free hours and one has the choice of going to see a movie one has been dying to see or visit one's invalid aunt in a nursing home. The choice is to be freely made. One chooses to pay a visit to one's aunt in the nursing home and forego the anticipated pleasure of seeing the movie. This is an example of an act of will in Piaget's formulation. One is confronted with a choice between what one may prefer to do (desire) and what one feels one should do or feels obligated to do morally. Piaget (1981) says:

... in order to speak of will, a conflict between two impulses or tendencies must be present. Second, the impulse that is initially weaker must become the stronger of the two in the course of the act of will. (p. 61)

One's decision, part of the logic of feelings, subordinates a given situation to one's permanent scale of constructed values and is an act of will. Development of the will may be one of the things character education seeks.

Autonomy. Autonomy is self-regulation of both the cognitive and affective aspects of intellectual development. On the cognitive level, autonomy is about making decisions for oneself, along with learning how to make choices which effect the path of one's own knowledge construction. It is like following your nose—determining a direction to go next in solving a problem or question at hand. It involves paying attention to one's interests, hunches, best guesses, and, most importantly, deciding for oneself what avenue to pursue next. It is about learning how to learn and become a self-directed problem solver. On the moral/social level, autonomy is the acquired disposition to reason about moral and ethical questions according to one's own constructed set of values. To make one's own decisions about what is right and wrong based on reflective evaluation, rather than only accepting heteronomously the direction of others. Autonomy is self-regulation.

Mutual-respect relations with adults. We have seen that young children can begin to

develop cooperative relations and shared values with peers as they work through sources of conflict or disagreement. Relations among peers can emerge as true mutual-respect relations among equals. Simultaneously, children continue to maintain relations

Our ongoing affective, emotional, interpersonal, and moral responses to the world are based on our constructions.

with adults that are based on principles of obedience and unilateral respect. Children typically begin to establish mutual-respect relations with adults after the emergence of autonomy. Autonomous feelings in children are seen as a necessary prerequisite to the formation of mutual-respect relations with adults (Piaget, 1981). Mutual-respect relations are characterized by reciprocity between people as equals and require shared values. Each person evaluates the other by these commonly held values. There is a willingness and ability to take the other's point of view and consider it fully. In the case of child-adult relations, the child is treated interpersonally as equal (and feeling equal) when the relations are not equal, as adults typically have more power than children.

Summary

In Piaget's formulation, affectivity arises out of needs and the

feelings that needs produce. Feelings, once conserved, begin increasingly to take on the characteristics of values and are reflected in interests. Conserved feelings and values are seen as necessary for social behavior based on true cooperation to emerge, initially among peers (equals) and later with adults. In addition, feelings and values form the basis for moral feelings. These aspects of affective development and construction influence and are continuously influenced by cognitive constructions. Continued development sees the construction of the will (which acts to regulate behavior according to conserved values), autonomy (a disposition towards self-regulation), and mutual-respect relations, initially with peers and later with adults (Piaget, 1981; Wadsworth, 1996).

Implications for Educational Practice

The major goal of this too brief presentation is to suggest that our affectivity is constructed and plays crucial roles in intellectual development. For me, understanding this is as significant as understanding that cognitive knowledge is a construction. Our ongoing affective, emotional, interpersonal, and moral responses to the world are based on our constructions. We all recognize that the implications of constructivism for educational practice are enormous. I have chosen to outline aspects of

affective development in the context of Piaget's general theory of intellectual development, not because Piaget got it all right, nor because theory is superior necessarily to pragmatics, but because it can be argued that the roots of constructivism emanate from the work of Piaget more than any other modern theorist. And my feeling is that Piaget did get a lot of it right. His view requires the inclusion not only of the cognitive, but the affective, moral, and social aspects of life (though he is oft incorrectly criticized as not including the latter). That he never reached an endpoint in his own construction, nor that he never explored affectivity as deeply as he explored the cognitive (as we might wish), can be understood.

A major implication, in my view, is that the energy one puts into intellectual development is regulated by affect, and what experiences and content gets into our construction of knowledge process is internally regulated (self-regulation) by feelings, interests, and values. Contents for which we have positive feelings keep gates open. Contents for which we have negative feelings keep gates closed, for they feel "hopeless." Passion counts! It is frequently easy to spot kids with closed gates, and the causes are almost always affective in nature. Priscilla Vail (1987), a special educator, says that children must be available for learning before learning is possible. When gates are closed, children are not

available for learning, regardless of how seductive we may think the curriculum may be. A question is whether we can help persuade students to open closed gates and, if so, how? The answer, of course, is yes, a lot of the time. The mechanism that, with patience, can help engender hope for the hopeless is, I believe, mutual-respect relations. Those who really work successfully with "special-education" children with closed gates know that success in opening closed gates starts with establishing genuine trust and mutual respect. Only then, sometimes, will closed gates open a crack (Howe, 1991), allowing the toe-hold necessary for intellectual and ethical growth to restart. This is the resurrection of hope. Educational environments that are caring communities, which foster trust and relations of respect, allow more positive possibilities for children's (and teachers') intellectual development. Relations of care and mutual respect, which engender trust and potentially hope, are no less important for regular-education students than special-education students, though with them, they are more easily overlooked or ignored.

In one sense, we can think about facilitating children's construction of knowledge as finding their disequilibrium. Constructivist teachers who design curriculum and classroom experiences with this in mind recognize that it is typically a hit-or-miss ap-

proach. Another way to think about this, one too little considered in my view, is how to find and capture the child's disequilibrium for our purposes as well as for the child's. Children "know" what is provoking them intellectually. Feelings, interests, and values are the indicators. Piaget attributed supreme importance to interests. In his wonderful little book, *The Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child*, Piaget wrote:

The traditional school imposes . . . work on the student: it makes him work. And it is doubtless true that the child is free to put a greater or lesser degree of interest and personal effort into the work, so that insofar as the teacher is a good one the collaboration that takes place between his students and himself will leave an appreciable margin for genuine activity. But in the logic of the system the student's intellectual and moral activity remains heteronomous [not autonomous] because it is inseparable from a continual constraint exercised by the teacher, even though the constraint may remain unperceived by the student or be accepted by him of his own free will. The new

Contents for which we have positive feelings keep gates open.

school [constructivist school], on the contrary, appeals to real activity, to spontaneous work based upon personal need and interest. This does not mean . . . that active education requires that children should do anything that they want, . . . it requires above all that they should *will* (my emphasis) what they do; that they should act, not that they should be acted upon. Need, the interest that is the resultant of need, . . . that is the factor that will make a reaction into an authentic act . . . The law of interest is thus . . . the sole pivot around which the whole system should turn . . . (1970, pp. 151–152)

It seems to me that a question worth considering is how to capture children's interests (and thus disequilibrium) and make use of them in serving children's development and, at the same time, legitimately serve educational goals. Ann Renninger (1992) concludes that interests may be more important than prior knowledge, informal knowledge, experience, meaningfulness, and familiarity of task contents for the accessibility of school tasks and their completion. We know that when we are enabled to pursue our own interests, we do so with a power and energy, and we construct with an effectiveness which vastly exceeds the usual classroom learning. Do we educators believe it's any different with children? The reasons

are, I believe, that interests reflect disequilibrium and, from the point of view of learning, it's the right or optimum place to be. Gates are always open when interests are pursued. Kids are super-available for learning. Affective energy is fully available. Self-regulated (autonomous) pursuit of interests maximizes what we seek whether students are working alone, in pairs, or in larger groups (Wadsworth, 1996). (Interested readers are encouraged to read John Dewey's brief book, *Interest and Effort in Education*, published in 1913.)

Fixated as we can become with teaching methods, curriculum, and curriculum reform as solutions for fixing the child, and in sundry ways to get kids to abandon disequilibrium and autonomy, we are only by chance able to activate anywhere near the power of interest-generated learning. Fortunately, if we want to capitalize on children's interests, encourage autonomy, and if we have relations of mutual respect with children, we are in the best position to negotiate with them regarding the value of educational goals (reading, writing, math, etc.), which they may not spontaneously value as we do. Any area of children's interest can potentially be shaped to incorporate content and skill development without compromising the child's autonomy. Mutual-respect relations and a sense of obligation to shared values and to

those we respect form the basis for negotiation.

Piaget has been most heavily criticized for what many have interpreted as not doing sufficient justice to the role of social factors in individual development. In most ways, this is unfair (or uninformed), as Piaget, while focusing his research primarily on the cognitive aspects of individual intellectual development, regularly spoke to the importance of the affective, moral, and social ingredients in intellectual development. Those that doubt this claim need only consult the recently translated version of his book, *Sociological Studies* (Piaget, 1995), originally published in 1967 (see also Piaget, 1970, 1974). While Piaget viewed development as occurring in the child, he certainly attributed a major role in individual development to social interaction with children and adults and interpersonal relations. Indeed, Piaget claimed the ultimate *goal or stage* of individual development as "adaptation" to one's society, as taking one's place as a member of society while still maintaining one's autonomy and constructed values (Piaget, 1981; Wadsworth, 1996). Ultimately, we hope our children learn how to learn, have confidence in themselves, are empathetic and respectful of others, and feel an affection towards ideas, objects, and people. For constructivists, it is not just a matter of each new generation recapitulating the prior generation, but moving beyond

Any area of children's interest can potentially be shaped to incorporate content and skill development without compromising the child's autonomy.

the prior generation to a hopefully more adequate societal adaptation—an equilibrium between societal change and societal stability. Meacham (1993), in discussing this issue, made the case for constructivism this way:

The solution, of course, is entirely consistent with Piaget's structural-developmental [constructivist] theory, namely, the strength of what the individual knows about society comes from the fact of children having constructed society for themselves, so that the child believes firmly in, desires, even loves his or her society . . . In short, society reproduces itself not by transmission from one generation to the next, but instead by each new generation constructing a new society for itself. Because the child and subsequently the adult firmly believes in his or her own construction, the danger inherent in knowing structures as the fragile basis for society can be substantially contained, for the individual will act . . . to maintain and

defend his or her own construction. (p. 259)□

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Barry Wadsworth is Professor of Psychology and Education at Mt. Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts. He is also a founding member of the Board of Directors of ACT.

A Conversation with Alfie Kohn

Barry Wadsworth



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Barry Wadsworth talked with Alfie Kohn at the Association's 1997 conference, where Kohn was a keynote speaker. Kohn is a former teacher turned author and lecturer. His five books and dozens of articles on human behavior, education, and social theory raise stimulating and challenging issues for all constructivist educators.

On the issue of character education, a lot of the conversation has to do with values and development of values and so forth. I would be interested in having you talk a little bit about how you see values developing in kids.

My expertise in the developmental aspect of this is severely limited, I am afraid, but I am persuaded by people from a constructivist tradition more than I am by those who represent an orthodox psychoanalytic perspective and certainly more than by behaviorists. It [development of values] seems to me a different facet of the same gem of meaning-making, an active process by which kids come to decide not just what is, but what is right. Obviously, there is some truth to other accounts of moral development that include what one sees modeled. I think another part of this story is the extent to which a child's own emotional and other psychological needs are met so as to give a child the psychological freedom to be able to focus on other people's needs. The absence of that process can cause one's own needs to echo so loudly that one becomes deaf to the cries of others, and, in any case, less inclined or able to meet other people's needs. Ed Deci and Rich Ryan have synthesized the work of a lot of psychological theory

and research in identifying three fundamental needs that all people have: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. And meeting those needs as well as engaging children in an ongoing discussion about how others ought to be treated seems to me likely to help children grow into good people. This is the sort of question that one could just rattle on about forever, or at least I could.

Right. One of the concepts that you mentioned is the notion of autonomy. Maybe you could talk a little bit about what you see autonomy as and how you see it as being important in education.

Autonomy is a slippery word because it sometimes implies privacy or a highly individualistic conception, which I think it need not. I think it's closer to what Richard de Charms said some years ago—the experience of being an origin in one's life rather than a pawn. Other terms come to mind, such as self-determination. I think human beings need to feel that they have some control over what happens to them. And I also think, incidentally, it is important not to collapse that into a behavioristic notion of merely being able to choose the reinforcers or something along those lines. We need to have a say, we need our voices to be heard. And there's research that demonstrates this all

along the life span . . . a study showing that 12-month-old infants are delighted by a toy when they control its action as opposed to being scared or uninterested when it is done to them. And then, of course, there is Langer and Rodin's research from the 1970s about residents of nursing homes who actually lived longer when they had a felt sense of autonomy, when they had some choice over their routine. Very rarely in the social sciences do you find longer life as a dependent variable, as an outcome of any sort of experimental manipulation.

We need not to be controlled. This is why I like to say that if you want children to learn how to make good decisions, they have to make decisions, not follow directions. That's true with respect to intellectual development as surely as it is with social and moral development. We know what happens from international politics, that countries that are the greatest victimizers typically see themselves as being the most powerless, the most victimized. One crosses levels of analysis with some caution, but it really does seem remarkably parallel to individuals who are aggressive, or at least indifferent to others' pain, precisely as a function of the extent to which they experience themselves as powerless in the world.

Now all of that sounds relatively unobjectionable until you start tracing its logical implications for classrooms and

families, which would completely overturn our traditional practices. It takes only a bit of common sense or a couple of eyes to acknowledge the need that kids have to make decisions about what they are learning or what's happening in their lives at school. But it apparently takes some extraordinary effort, structural change, or willingness to give up authority on the part of adults to make even the slightest move in this direction in practice. Kids in this country have almost nothing to say about what goes on during the day, what goes up on the walls of their classrooms, what field trips they take, how their learning will be assessed, and on and on. What is remarkable is not how many kids are burnt out in American schools; given how little say they have over their environment and their lives, what's remarkable is that any of them *aren't*. This need is not being met. And when kids predictably try to reclaim their autonomy in exaggerated and often vicious ways, the adult's response is to take away more of their autonomy, and respond with more control, tougher punitive consequences, less trust, tighter regulation, and the circle spins on, ever faster.

I assume that you think there's a connection between kids having autonomy and self-discipline. There is a lot of lip-service paid to self-discipline, but it seems it is viewed as something kids ought to do because teachers or parents tell them to do it.

Rich Ryan's work has especially influenced me here. Some of his empirical work has shown the difference between intrinsic and internal. One need only look at a workaholic to see that internal motivation can be simply joyless, control from within. When adults aim principally at getting kids to be self-disciplined so there doesn't have to be a grown-up around threatening punishment or offering rewards, I don't think that's nearly ambitious enough. I think in practice that often means controlling a child with remote control. There's no sense of a child's having integrated the values or developed a genuine commitment to what he or she is doing—or, for that matter, a sense of flexibility and freedom about those actions. We have to look at whether our ultimate goal is for kids to be autonomous decision makers, among other things, or whether we're just interested in a more efficient mode of compliance.

Do you think that a lot of teachers and parents are reluctant to give up control of the direction of learning—that is, where the kid goes next in the learning? There are two things that I'm interested in that relate to that. I'm interested in what happens if kids are permitted to follow their interests and whether that's a legitimate thing and how that relates to the notion of autonomy.

For the child to be—pick your occupational metaphor—an archaeologist, a composer,

someone who discovers ideas and solves problems in novel ways, it's virtually a prerequisite that the child have some serious degree of discretion over what she's doing and when and how and why. One reason we've shied away from that is because we tend to think in dichotomous terms. False dichotomies are popular because they make choosing easy. The alternative to our having control over kids' learning and their actions is utter chaos. Those are your two choices. Do you want chaos? Do you want kids hanging from the fluorescent lights and setting the textbooks on fire and giving us the finger? Of course not; therefore, the teacher has to be in control of everything. So one impediment to authentic and exciting learning is the false belief that there is no middle ground, no third or fourth alternative to control or chaos. In an article I wrote for *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1993 called "Choices for Children," I tried to specify some of the ways that choices can be circumscribed, especially as developmentally appropriate where teachers and students can negotiate choices together and where, in short, it isn't a matter of "do anything you want" versus "do exactly what I say."

A second serious impediment to giving kids the choice they need and on which they thrive is some secular unconscious version of original sin—the belief, in short, that kids will choose badly whenever given even a modicum of

freedom. We don't trust kids. We weren't trusted, most of us, and we faithfully reproduce that as parents or teachers. The field of character education, for the most part, is built on a dreadfully dark, though happily inaccurate, view of kids and, by extension, of our species. The same view holds with respect to classroom management. Look at standard classroom management texts and pre-service courses. Almost without exception, they say that the teacher must take control of the classroom, though in a nice way—the teacher should lay out his or her expectations along with the consequences for failing to meet them. Not only does that stifle creativity, not only does that poison any chance for a democratic community to get started, not only is it inimical to learning, but it's built on a fundamentally pessimistic view of children and an assumption that they are simply incapable of making decent decisions and of being concerned about each other without that kind of explicit control.

In Piaget's theory, there is the notion of disequilibrium. One of the things I think about is how do you tell when a child is experiencing disequilibrium? When a kid is telling us what he or she is interested in right now, even if only for today, the moment, or an hour, that's kind of signaling something, which I suspect is a disequilibrium signal. I wonder whether you can comment on that. I guess

the other thing is that when kids are able to follow a route in terms of their own learning or their own problem solving, which is the route that they select, then, them being the detective, them figuring out the route they want to go to solve a problem or a mystery—that has the potential for more effective learning and better comprehension.

There's a very impressive collection of evidence showing that from preschool up into high school and college, when young children are able to make decisions about what art products they will use when designing a collage or, in the case of a high school chemistry experiment, how they're going to design the experiment—that they tend to learn more effectively. It's very important for teachers and academicians to make this research available to a much wider public. There are key studies that ought to be in the hands of our school board members and our state legislators and others indicating that we're not just saying give kids more choice because then we have a nice, touchy-feely, self-esteem-boosting classroom, but that bottom-line performance on learning tasks is enhanced when teachers give up control.

The next step in this chain of reasoning is to recognize that teachers become, as one writer put it, drill sergeants, when their own autonomy is compromised

by being held accountable, particularly for raising test scores. The studies are there, and the experience is there, too, for most perceptive observers of the scene. But I would also expect that choice doesn't only directly affect the quality of the learning; I think an intermediate variable here is interest. And a separate collection of research suggests that the interest that a child has in a text or a task is a far more powerful predictor of success at the task or of comprehension of the text than is familiarity with it, or even knowledge of the subject going in. Though here one has to distinguish sometimes between a kind of transient interest in a particular aspect of what's going on and a more deeply rooted interest in the whole topic.

That's the conclusion Ann Renninger reaches. She says that interest is more powerful than prior learning.

Right. There's actually a lot of research on that. So, if that's true, and if we take that finding seriously, that turns upside-down what you do in a classroom on a given Tuesday morning, and it turns inside-out our notion of school reform on a macro-level, because if we are constantly trying to ratchet up standards without paying attention to the extent to which kids are interested in what they're doing, and to variables like continuing motivation to learn, we are killing the goose that laid the golden

egg. Even if you can get the short-term achievement boosts that you are looking for, which appears to be doubtful in many cases, you've got kids who now view the test as a chore. I like to say that we should stop asking how motivated kids are, and start asking *how* kids are motivated.

After I wrote *Punished by Rewards*, I came to realize that a lot of the reason well-meaning and reasonably bright teachers and parents are doing demonstrably harmful things like offering pizzas for reading books, or praise for sharing, or A's for learning a concept, that the reason that they are doing this in large part is because of the simple myth that there is a single entity called motivation, such that you can have more of it or less of it. These artificial inducements will produce more of it; therefore, they seem to be logical. We need to get the word out that there are qualitatively different kinds of motivations, and they're not equally good. Moreover, they tend to vary inversely, such that the more you use these extrinsic reinforcers, the more the intrinsic interest that we care about so much declines.

Now, all of this is true not merely for academic learning but also for social and moral development. Two recent studies found that kids who are rewarded or praised frequently, particularly for being helpful and cooperative, tend to become less helpful and cooperative. These studies were published in journals with a total

circulation of maybe 38, and meanwhile even educated and caring people continue to treat kids like pets. But what really interests me, and what may be especially relevant to the ACT membership, is the extent to which the same basic constructivist principles about how kids learn apply to how they act. And here I acknowledge my debt to Rheta DeVries as well as to Marilyn Watson and others. How many teachers do we know who understand that you can't take a math fact and shove it down a kid's throat and expect any real understanding to result? And yet, they think they can force fairness or honesty down a kid's throat in precisely the same way. Connie Kamii has been saying this for awhile, too, but the message is not getting out, even to people who are doing learner-centered multi-age cooperative constructivist kinds of lessons around learning to read or learning scientific principles. I have been in classrooms where they have breathtaking lessons in quantitative principles or whole-language units polished to a shine, and then when it comes to how the kids act together in a classroom, they are using public praise to set one kid up as an example in front of his peers. They have a list of punitive consequences on the wall ranging from "verbal reprimand" down to "get your leg sawed off." They are using class meetings that scarcely deserve the label because the teacher is running the whole show and is fishing for the right

answers. They know better than just to fish for right answers when they're looking at why a character in a story acted in a particular way, but there's only one right answer and the teacher's got to elicit it from the kid when it comes time to ask, "How do we act, boys and girls, when we march to the lunch room?" This is not original with me. I just go around saying it in a more aggrieved tone to more people.

What should the nature of the relationship between students and teachers be? The relationship obviously is important, and so why is that? How should we be thinking about student-teacher relationships?

The teacher before anything else has to be a human being, not a crisply competent, always-in-control leader. The teacher has to make herself or himself vulnerable to children and speak to them without sounding as if he or she is bending way over, if you see what I mean, without a tone that is patronizing or condescending. The teacher has to express a genuine care and concern about kids' well-being. You can't fake that, but I don't think all teachers manifest it as openly or as often as they should. I'm talking about something as simple as saying, "Hey Josh, you said your mother was going to take you to the zoo during the weekend. How did that go?" Teachers need to remember details about kids' lives and ask about them. These strong caring

dyads where children feel needed and important form the building blocks for the construction of a caring community, although I think the latter requires additional structural changes in the way classes are going on. The teacher is a modeler, not just when she is acutely conscious of setting an example, but with what she did ten minutes before in the way she spoke to the custodian. Or in whether she erased something from the blackboard that a child had written without asking permission first. Whether we deal with very young children or teenagers with nose rings whose favorite word is 'whatever,' we are constantly showing them how to be a human being by the way we are.

What else? Teachers are fellow learners and investigators; they are people who offer guidelines and respectfully offer limits. They are, as Montessori taught us, shrewd observers of who kids are and what they're doing, so that they're better able to help. This is, next to being a parent, probably the hardest job I know of to do right. And all of these things require the psychological courage to give up control. Alas, there are teachers we have met who go into this profession precisely because they have control. They slather kids with praise because it feels good on some level to have a whole bunch of people, even very short people, looking to them to see whether they've done something right. We have

to get past that, and how are you supposed to get past that when some administrator or state legislator has a gun to your head saying you've got to raise the test scores, or else? You've got to cover this amount of curriculum, however superficially, by such-and-such a date. You've got to have a quiet classroom, with kids in orderly lines. How are we supposed to do constructivist learning, when even a well-meaning principal comes in and sees a wonderful constructivist classroom and says, "I'll come back when you're teaching." How are you supposed to help kids solve problems together when parents say, "What are you going to do to the kid who did this to my kid?" How are you supposed to give kids the slack to figure their way into an idea that's unfamiliar to them if somebody is telling you that the point is to drill them until they can fill in the right bubbles with their number-2 pencils? I prefer to speak to the decision makers about this because they have the power to change the system. At the same time, more than once in doing workshops, I have had a teacher say, "I can't do what you're talking about. I'm not allowed," only to have someone sitting next to her say, "Um, but I do something like this, and I work at your school." So that within a highly controlled framework, there is often more latitude, more wiggle room, than we care to acknowledge.

In the chapter on community in your book *Beyond Discipline*, you say that autonomy is not enough, that we need autonomy plus community. Maybe you can talk a little bit about what you mean by community and why that's so important.

Well, I mean a place where kids come to think in the plural a lot of the time. It's not just about taking responsibility for one's own behavior, it's not just about being assessed on one's own learning, it's not just about self-esteem, it's not just about why I'm special. It's about *us*. It's a place where we feel connected and cared about and are encouraged to care about others. It's a place where kids experience a sense of belonging. Hey, if they don't get it in our classrooms, they'll get it somewhere else—in a gang, for example. This is a human need. If you were trying to design an environment that did not meet this need and was as dysfunctional as possible, you would come up with something very similar to the typical American high school, where there is no real connection to any adults, each of whom may have 150 kids to take care of, and where each group of kids you're with is together for 45 minutes until a Pavlovian bell sounds.

Imagine the opposite of a typical American high school, and you have some sense of our conditions for community—time together, not too many people, a deliberate effort to foster relation-

ships with peers and adults. I have to say that another precondition for the creation of community is the absence of any competitive structure. Competition by definition means mutually exclusive goal attainment—that is, I can succeed only if other people fail. This is set up overtly, with awards assemblies, spelling bees, grades on a curve, and covertly, with practices like, “I like the way Susan is sitting, so nice and quiet and ready to start.” Whenever there is a contest, explicit or implicit, you have the very opposite of what is required for kids to care about each other—rationally speaking, in a competitive environment they care about others' performance only to the extent of wanting someone else to fail because the structure demands that to happen in order for them to be able to succeed themselves. Community has been shown in recent research by the Developmental Studies Center and elsewhere to promote not only social and moral growth, but also the kind of interest in learning that in turn helps the quality of academic learning. So the most traditional observer or critic of schools who is concerned that kids don't understand mathematical principles or are not reading should demand the structural changes in American schools necessary to create a sense of community. Principals brag to me sometimes about how empathic and warm their teachers are, and my first response is, “Great, but do you have awards

assemblies?” In other words, we have to attend to the systemic features of the school that make it hard to develop a sense of community. What does the teacher do when a child says, “Oh, that's easy . . .” upon being asked a question? This makes the child for whom this question is not easy feel miserable. This is where I think creating the conditions for autonomy or community requires a very active, though skillful and autonomy-enhancing, model for the teacher.

That's why I have real problems with the *laissez-faire* model, although I have to add quickly that the *laissez-faire* model I think exists primarily in the polemics of traditionalists, who use it as a straw-man to discredit anything Dewey, Piaget, or anybody else remotely pro-child has to say. I mean, even A. S. Neill, creator of Summerhill, which is regarded as the outer-fringes of permitted discussion, wrote a book called *Freedom not License*. When you see respected mainstream writers in education equate Piaget and Kohlberg with Values Clarification and relativism, you want to just lose your lunch. You don't know if this is pure ignorance or a willful misrepresentation so as to discredit a progressive vision. I have seen schools that give kids a lot of liberty (though there aren't many of them), but some of them are virtually libertarian in their outlook and overlook the need for community.

Similarly I have seen schools that talk about community, but it's community of a very particular and adult-directed kind. I'm thinking in particular of a popular book and program that has the word "care" in the title, where basically kids are *made* to act in caring ways—the promiscuous use of time-outs and public praise and adult-controlled class meetings toward wonderful ends, but as Dewey said, you can't plaster it on, you can't hammer it in and expect it to be part of who kids are. A caring community is one where a lot of the behavior problems that teachers complain about are less likely to happen because kids don't need to act out in exaggerated ways, to make a stand and say here I am. They know they matter not because the teacher has marinated them in praise, but because they've helped to make decisions about what's going on all day and because they know they matter to the other people around them. That, of course, requires time and care and talent and skill and courage on the part of the teacher to help kids create/construct such an environment. Whereas traditional discipline, like traditional skill-based instruction, requires much less talent, skill, care, or courage.

In thinking about values and the issue of what values should the school be fostering, I was interested in your identification

of the ones that Deborah Meier suggests: empathy and skepticism. That's really interesting.

Anybody, by the way, who says there's just a bunch of values we all agree on, core values on which there's broad consensus, should think for a moment about how a school would look where the principle values are skepticism and empathy, as opposed to what a school would look like if its principle values were loyalty, obedience, patriotism, and the like.

One of the interesting experiences I had in my life was when I went to a two-room school house on the north shore of Long Island (Cold Spring Harbor). I'm sure it was the last two-room school-house on Long Island, but it was a great school. It was fairly traditional in terms of how education proceeded, but we had a very caring teacher, a lot of autonomy, and kids went through eighth grade in the same room with kids of all ages. It was a real community. For me, as I've looked at different educational programs, this was one of the best educational situations I've ever seen in my life. I'm very interested in the school-size issue and why many one-room (small) schoolhouses worked reasonably well. It seems to me that one of the worst things we ever did in education was segregate kids by age. Do you

have any thoughts about school size? I have a notion that small is good and big is bad, generally.

Yes. Deborah Meier has opened my eyes to the importance of school size, not just class size.

Right. Community size?

Yes. It doesn't become a community if it's not small enough, but the class-size debate is so revealing for what it says about the way we judge things. What are our criteria? There's some debate about whether class size is really important, but what do they mean by important? The outcome variables are all standardized-test scores or at least just academic achievement. If you are looking at issues of caring communities, there's no debate. Case closed! In other words, if it's beyond a certain size it's harder to cultivate those relationships. But, there are these accepted assumptions throughout the educational literature, and nobody stops to look at what is meant by "effective." I point out in the discipline book [*Beyond Discipline*] that there is a consensus among researchers on classroom management that when the teacher knows what's going on in the classroom and makes clear that she knows what's going on, which has been cutely called "withitness," and if the teacher takes control of all the lessons, then that's more "effective."

Absolutely right, but what do you mean by effective? You mean mindless obedience, not learning, not caring. Likewise, the class-size debate is a perfect example, and the news media, who cover education, don't look beyond this. They say, well, there are arguments for and against small schools.

What's interesting about the age segregation of graded classrooms that started in the mid-19th century, which was in fact brought over from Prussia (as Frank Smith said), is that the alternative that's offered by a number of so-called reformers is to stop creating purely age-homogeneous classes, since kids of the same age may not have the same achievement records—and thus, it is inferred, ability. They propose ability homogeneity in place of age homogeneity. Now, I think it's important to recognize that that's the logical next step from sorting kids just by age and it's equally important to rebel against that, too, and to affirm and celebrate heterogeneity that goes beyond just age. I think that's what the multi-age folks are trying to do, but a lot of people are looking at homogeneity only in one respect, or they see heterogeneity of other sorts as a necessary evil or something we can't completely eradicate as opposed to something beneficial.

What do you worry about in regard to education?

I worry that the best teachers are getting fired or tired. I worry that the people who know least about how kids learn have the most power to determine what happens in schools. I worry that my grandchildren are going to be fighting the same [darn] battles I'm fighting. I worry that even my energy isn't going to last. I worry that even the kids who are supposed to be the success stories of contemporary education don't really give a [darn] about learning, that they play the game and jump through the hoops and are, as Montaigne put it, "mules laden with books," who are carefully trained to ask, "Is this going to be on the test?" They will get into the best schools and make a lot of money and not read (even though they can) and may not even be able to think deeply—and the vast majority of kids aren't even *that* successful. They go to schools where they have forty kids in a room and books published before the Carter administration. I worry about the same stuff that other people worry about, I'm sure, but I don't worry that our test scores aren't high enough, I'll tell you that. I tell parents that if an administrator speaks proudly of how high that district's scores are, they should respond by saying, "If this is what you are primarily concerned about, then I am worried about the quality of education my kid is going to get here." Which of course is a complete inversion of the way parents are

trained to respond. I'll tell you something else I worry about. I worry that there aren't enough visible, articulate proponents of a constructivist and progressive vision in the mainstream of American culture, or even in the mainstream of American intellectual culture, such as on the *New York Times* op-ed page, and so on. I worry that there aren't people stepping up who have the credibility, the authority, and the ability to offer a challenge to the Chester Finns and the Diane Ravitches and the E. D. Hirsches, so that an ultra-conservative ideology has now become by default the mainstream wisdom about what schools ought to look like. All of these things keep me up nights.

What are you working on now, and what's your next project?

I just finished another long article for *Phi Delta Kappan* that should be published in April [1998]. It's tentatively titled, "Only for *My Kid*: How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform." When this is published, I will have no friends left. And I am also starting a book on education for non-educators that challenges traditional assumptions about higher standards and traditional classroom models of instruction. I wouldn't exactly call it constructivism made easy, but the point is to take some of the ideas that I think

we are concerned about in this organization and make them more accessible to a much broader public. □

Alfie Kohn lives in Belmont, Massachusetts. Barry Wadsworth, Professor of Psychology and Education at Mt. Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, is a founding member of the Board of Directors of the Association for Constructivist Teaching.

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Feelings and Emotions at School

Henry Dupont

Psychologist and writer Henry Dupont uses a detailed case history of a third-grade student to illustrate a social-constructivist view of feelings and emotions and offers suggestions for promoting emotional development.

We should help children discover more effective ways of dealing with the objects of their feelings, thus constructing emotions that are more personally and socially adaptive.

“In truth, there is as much construction in the affective domain as there is in the cognitive” (Piaget, 1981, p. 12).

How Ralph Discovered He Can Learn

Ralph was almost nine years old. He was in third grade, but not reading well at all, and he was also doing poorly in math. He could recognize only a few words, but his oral language was good.

Ralph had a brother, two years older, who was doing well in school, both in academics and in sports. They got along, but his brother teased him a lot; mostly he made fun of Ralph because he couldn't do sports well.

Ralph's teacher described him as the most disturbing and disruptive student she had ever had in her classroom. It seemed like he was angry all the time. He resisted being tested by the school psychologist. He didn't want to answer her questions, and he threw some of her test materials on the floor.

With his parents' permission, the teacher referred him to the Child Study Center. There he was placed in a remedial reading group and assigned to an advanced graduate student for play therapy.

Ralph liked his therapist and the playroom. However, he didn't

like remedial reading and the remedial-reading teacher. He was very disruptive in this situation, and he resisted her efforts to help him learn to read.

In the playroom, Ralph went immediately to the punching bag and punched it vigorously. For the next eight weekly sessions, he punched the bag the entire time he was in the playroom. He said he was learning to defend himself from the mean kids in his classroom.

One day, Ralph showed his therapist a knife he had inside his belt hidden under his shirt. They talked about the knife. Wasn't there a school rule against bringing knives to school? His therapist was empathic. He understood that Ralph felt threatened and insecure, but wasn't having the knife just going to get him into trouble? Ralph decided not to bring it to school or the Child Study Center any more.

One day, Ralph had a very bad experience after school on the playground. His class was playing baseball against another class. They put him in the outfield. At one point in the game, a player on the other team hit a ball into Ralph's part of the outfield. He wasn't able to catch it. He did get to it on the ground, but when he tried to throw it in he couldn't do it. Everyone was yelling at him to throw it, but he couldn't. Someone came out and got it. He was very embarrassed,

and he got angry when they yelled at him some more and said some nasty things to him, like “Dummy!” and “You can’t play baseball at all! You can’t even throw!” Ralph couldn’t hit the ball, either. He struck out every time he was up to bat.

Ralph was still upset about this experience when he got to the playroom. He told his therapist about what happened. His therapist recognized that he was upset and encouraged him to describe how he felt about the experience and himself, but Ralph had the feeling that his therapist didn’t really understand just how bad it was. It was just awful!

About this time, Ralph tired of hitting the punching bag, and he looked around the playroom for something else to do. He spotted the darts and the dart board. The therapist suggested a game of darts and Ralph said, “Sure, you go first.” He said he had never played darts before, and he wanted to see how to do it. The therapist threw his darts and hit the dart board with all three of his darts.

It was Ralph’s turn, but to his embarrassment—there it was again—he couldn’t do it! His darts didn’t even reach the wall! The therapist offered to show him how to do it. No way! He turned away and refused to try. No urging would change his mind. He knew he couldn’t do it, and he didn’t want anything more to do with darts!

Puzzled, but beginning to form a hypothesis about Ralph’s

behavior, the therapist found a ball among the toys in the playroom and tried to play catch with him. Ralph couldn’t catch the ball or throw it! And, he didn’t want to try that any more, either.

His therapist now understood what that baseball game after school was all about. Ralph had allowed himself to be chosen to play even though he couldn’t do it. It was a real embarrassment for him. But why wouldn’t he try anymore? His therapist knew he had discovered something important to think about.

It seemed clear to his therapist that somehow, perhaps with his brother’s teasing encouragement, Ralph had decided that he just wasn’t any good at doing a number of things. Maybe this notion had generalized into the idea that he couldn’t learn a whole host of things, i.e., sports, reading, arithmetic, and other things, too. Maybe, just maybe, he felt that if he couldn’t immediately do things as well as his brother, that meant that he couldn’t do them at all or ever learn to do them. His behavior certainly suggested that this was his belief, and he certainly showed embarrassment, which suggested a well developed shame construction.

Ralph believed he was flawed, that he was not like the other kids—he couldn’t learn, he felt threatened, and he was, therefore, angry when anyone tried to force him to do it. Shame is an uncomfortable feeling, and Ralph developed the pattern of

avoiding things that left him feeling ashamed, and he did so with great energy.

It was just before Christmas vacation, so his therapist, first making sure that he had Ralph’s attention, said the following:

Ralph, do you know there are some kids, especially those with older brothers and sisters, who try to do things like their older brothers and sisters do, only they aren’t old enough, they aren’t ready, and they can’t do them? But because they can’t do these things then, before they’re ready, they think they’ll never be able to do them, and they refuse to even try anymore.

Nobody ever does things the first time. Even when you’re ready to do something, you have to try a lot before you do it right. But these kids think that because they don’t get it right the first time, it means what they thought—that they won’t ever do it! And that’s a shame because as they get older they are ready, and they could learn. Isn’t that something?

After listening carefully, Ralph said, “Yeah.” His therapist wished him a Merry Christmas and asked him to think about all this over vacation. Ralph said he would.

He did, and he told his therapist first thing in their next session after vacation that he was one of those kids the therapist had described just before their vacation. His therapist was very

pleased and asked Ralph if he would like to learn how to catch and throw a ball. Ralph said he sure would, so that's what they did. His therapist taught and coached, and Ralph tried to learn to do it. His therapist-coach explained that almost no one gets it right the first time, but that with continual effort, they get better and better. He had also confronted Ralph with a contradiction to his belief that he couldn't learn.

In just two months, Ralph became very good at throwing and catching a ball. He was very pleased with himself, and he had a new belief about himself: "I can learn."

Was he trying to learn to read now? "Yes," he said, with a shy smile. He was, and by the end of the school year, he was reading at the third-grade level. Both his therapist and his remedial-reading teacher were pleased with what he had accomplished, and they told him so. Ralph had discovered that he could learn when he tried. He was no longer ashamed all the time, and he was almost never angry any more.

About Feelings and Emotions

This story, which is based on a real case history, illustrates the basic elements in a social-constructivist approach to feelings and emotions. Children construct many of their feeling-action patterns in their families, and they will often construct them in school, as Ralph did.

There is an interesting phenomenon. If you ask children from a number of different grade levels in the same school why they feel afraid, angry, ashamed, guilty, sad, proud, or happy, as I did, you will discover something remarkable. In the lower grades, they will suggest an extensive number of events or situations as the cause of these feelings, and they will mention a number of actions as the thing to do when feeling as they do. In the higher grades, the number of events or situations that are suggested as causes for their feelings is much smaller, and the actions they mention as the thing to do become smaller and more consistently linked to a particular feeling (Dupont, 1989, 1994).

How are we to understand this phenomenon? Does this mean that the feelings were always there—that the children are just learning to recognize them and that there is an objective world of feelings and emotions for them to learn about? Many educators will ascribe to this explanation. It is the objectivist-belief system.

There is a viable alternative belief system, the constructivist-belief system. In the constructivist perspective, we do not assume that the feelings and emotions are already there to be simply recognized and learned; rather, we assume that they are constructed by each child as he or she participates in the creation of those

systems of shared meaning we call the family and the classroom.

The child who is actively participating in the creation of that meaning in the classroom will be a happy, well socialized child. On the other hand, unhappy children are typically not active participants in the shared meaning-making of the classroom. They are the alienated students whose behavior often troubles us.

The child who is actively participating in the creation of meaning in the classroom will be a happy, well socialized child.

We do want to recognize, of course, that children do have different styles of participating—some are always active, while others are active watchers and only sporadic participants. But social experience and active participation in classroom discussion, especially discussion about feelings and relationships, are essential for emotional development. Chisholm (1980) found this to be true for junior-high students. It is almost certainly true for students at all grade levels. This phenomenon was anticipated by Piaget (1981), given credence by Harre and his associates (1986), and described at some length by Averill (1980, 1982) and Dupont (1989, 1994).

Creating opportunities for discussion of feelings and rela-

Social experience and active participation in classroom discussion are essential for emotional development.

tionships is essential for emotional development. This is what child therapists do, but it can also be done by counselors and teachers. It can be done by the teacher alone in small classroom groups, by the teacher and the counselor working together, or by the counselor working alone. I like to see the teacher and counselor share this part of the curriculum whenever possible.

The discussion can start with feelings or with real-life emotional issues. The task is to take real-life experiences and discuss them. There are no predetermined answers. We help children decide how they feel and what they want to do in response to life's emotional problems. We can depend on the discussion to take children to solutions that are both personally satisfying and socially appropriate. Their religious beliefs and moral convictions will guide them to ethical and moral solutions, if we will just trust the process. We pose the topic and guide the discussion with our questions. The children construct the meaning.

I've found the following sequence of questions to be helpful in the discussion of some event or problem situation. (When starting with a feeling,

questions three through seven are helpful.)

1. What happened?
2. How did you feel about it?
3. Why that feeling?
4. Feeling that way then, what did you do?
5. How did it turn out?
6. Is that what you wanted?
7. What action might have produced a better result?

Then, too, children experience and create meaning for themselves in stories. Engel (1995) has described how having children create and, when possible, write stories contributes to the construction of the self. By asking them to create stories about their feelings and about how they respond to some of life's emotional issues, we can be assured that the self they construct will be a feeling self.

Engel (1995) also describes how the creation and sharing of stories can be an integral part of the school's language curriculum. I recommend it highly.

But please notice something that I am not saying. I am not saying that we should help children learn to deal with or manage their emotions. I am saying that we should help children discover more effective ways of dealing with the objects of their feelings, thus constructing emotions that are more personally and socially adaptive. □

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Henry Dupont is a retired Professor of Psychology and Special Education at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. He is currently a licensed psychologist in private practice in Blairsville, Georgia.

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Breakout-Session Presenters

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Gary Benenson, City College of New York
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