

## THINKING ABOUT CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING: PHILOSOPHY, EDUCATION AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Ruth Cigman, Senior Research Fellow in Philosophy of Education,  
University College London Institute of Education

May 2015

The best way to describe my approach to this topic is by outlining the book I am currently working on, *Enhancing Children: Ethics and Upbringing in the Modern World*. A key aim of the book is to distinguish between *agendas* that aim scientifically to enhance the happiness, well-being or resilience of children through national interventions; and *practices* that aim non-scientifically to guide children towards better lives. The first aim (appealing to politicians) focuses successively on concepts (for many years it was self-esteem; recently happiness, resilience and character came to the fore) believed to be the 'magic bullet' of well-being and learning. These concepts come in and out of fashion, and the book argues that scientific enhancement is not the way to go. Its focus on *statistical success* means that some individuals will fall through the net; indeed the undermining of *some* children's well-being, and the failure to acknowledge this disturbing fact, has been identified by certain experts (e.g. Carol Craig) as a corollary of enhancement agendas. (I have also written about this.)

The book raises questions – seen as irreducibly ethical – about what it means *responsibly* to guide children towards better lives. The answer I explore is this: the *primary site* of ethical enhancement is intimate and conversational. Instead of focusing on the third person (how can we make *them*, the children, more resilient?), it is bound up with first/second person exchanges, exchanges between 'I' and 'you (singular)'. The book explores many such exchanges, particularly with children seen as difficult or disabled, and in urgent need (so many believe) of enhancement. The field of special education is about the diversity of human needs, and I argue that this should be understood primarily as a diversity of *conversational* needs.

In case these ideas seem messy and untheoretical, the book explores a distinction between two styles of thinking. The i.e. style – considered by many as the only objective way to think – is abstract and impersonal. It is exemplified by science and most philosophy. Personal observations and literary nuances are kept to a minimum, considered irrelevant or incidental. This is contrasted with the e.g. style, which sees stories and examples of human beings and their lives as essential. E.g. thinkers use these to draw their readers or listeners towards a deeper understanding.

***Defining terms* is a form of i.e. thinking. Consider (for example) David Cameron's 2008 announcement that the concept of GWB (general well-being) should replace GNP (gross national product) at the heart of public policy. The question then became: how is GWB (sometimes referred to as happiness) *to be defined*? There was a public debate; many opinions were expressed but the project became arid and unconvincing. Eventually it was quietly dropped.**

**There is nothing wrong with trying to 'define our terms' as long as we understand the ways in which i.e. thinking and e.g. thinking are and must be complementary. We need to *think with examples*, collectively focusing our attention on *both* ideas/definitions and human stories. Philosophy can be helpful here, as long as it understands the need for a deep connection between words and everyday life. The philosopher Wittgenstein put this well when he said that much philosophy *idles*, in rather the way a machine idles when it is detached from the cog that drives it. The same is true (I suggest) of much social science. Idle thinking, thinking rigidly and exclusively in the i.e. style, is a hazard in education.**

**Many educationalists are drawn towards i.e. styles of thinking. I was recently at a conference on outdoor education (also at Edinburgh, as it happens) where one presenter after another tried to theorise the experience of nature. After a few hours I commented that no-one at the conference had mentioned a child who was frightened, excited, anxious or anything else. Indeed there weren't any children at this conference! There were only ideas.**

**The Pinkie Resilience Project aims to "determine how schools best support wellbeing and nurture development". This is an excellent aim but my question is: what kind of theoretical framework does it use – i.e. or e.g.? Does it aim to give convincing evidence to politicians by proceeding impersonally/ third personally? Is it looking for reassuring statistics that neglect individual children, relegating them to a minority? How will it absorb (and measure?) powerful interventions that are conversational and intimate, like those practised at the Rafael Centre in Denmark? Does it have the confidence to embrace a thoroughly e.g. style of thinking that refers to I/you interactions and the hard-to-record achievements of dedicated practitioners within intimate, ethical settings? Does it avoid such thinking on the assumption that it is 'merely' subjective? If so, the Pinkie Resilience Project may need theoretical support from a philosopher who**

believes that e.g. thinking may be as robust as i.e. thinking, and a good deal more practical and ethical.

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